

# Federal Disaster

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Summary: Lois and Clark are about to get married. Things have never been better. Except for one thing...Lois is terrified. All of her past intimate relationships have been, well...Federal Disasters. Before she can voice her fears to Clark, not one, but two of her past disasters come back to haunt her in ways she never could have expected. Throw in a threat against the President of the United States and it's just a typical day for Lois and Clark.

Story Size: 92,467 words (502Kb as text)

**Author's Note:** This started out as a simple idea. A short "what would happen if Lois had to confront part of her past"? But then of course nothing ever goes as simply as I intend for it and what began as a relatively small idea ballooned into...well, this.

An absolutely MASSIVE thank you to my beta reader, twinnie, and partner in crime, ksarasara. She supported me every step of the way on this story. She collaborated with me. She poked me when necessary. She poked holes in my plot when necessary. She made sure every slot A fit into Slot B and helped me to get un-stalled when I got stalled. Every bit of feedback that this story gets belongs just as much to her because without her this story would have lingered in fanfiction limbo. I cannot put into words how grateful I am to have her as a beta, as a writing partner and friend. THANK YOU.

Thank you to Carrie Rene for making awesome banners for the story!! And a huge thanks to AnnaBtG, who GE'd this behemoth of a story!

I used the Taylor Swift song "The Archer" as a key source of inspiration for this story as well so it's worth listening to.

Three "Federal Disaster" banners by CarrieRene: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)

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## Chapter 1

Lois didn't want to leave. She never wanted to leave. Clark's lips were on her neck, gently making their way down to her collar bone, softly, teeth grazing her skin just lightly enough to send bolts of heat throughout her body. She bit back a whimper of pleasure and closed her eyes allowing herself to enjoy the feeling of being in her

fiance's arms after a hard day of work on the couch in his apartment.

They'd barely been able to keep their hands off each other as they'd gotten into the elevator at work. It had been that way ever since they had officially gotten engaged. Something about seeing that ring on her finger had emboldened both of them — had made them feel as if they didn't want to waste a single moment learning what it felt like to be fully and completely in love.

And they hadn't. Lois had driven Clark back to his apartment and they had all but tumbled through the door, his lips on hers the moment they crossed the threshold. She'd melted into the embrace, threading her hands through his hair and allowing him to guide her — stumbling as they went — down the stairs and over to the couch where they'd proceeded to get lost in each other for a torturous hour now.

He felt so good. He always felt so good. It was like he knew just how to touch her...just where to touch her. And right now one of his hands was caressing her cheek while the other rested on her hip, his mouth still trailing gentle but extremely electrifying kisses on her collarbone, his body pressing forward — urging her to lie down.

"Lois," he said, his voice a husky whisper against her skin. The hand on her hip gripped her tighter. "I love you."

"I love you too," she told him, after he captured her lips for a slow, tantalising kiss. His body pressed against hers again and she reached out to grab hold of him as she found herself sinking into his couch. He repositioned himself so that he was able to lay atop her, which caused her heart to race.

She placed her hands on his chest, marvelling at how solid he was. His kisses deepened and she found herself undoing the buttons on his shirt, opening it and touching the warm expanse of his chest underneath. The sharp intake of breath told her more than words could.

It also told her that if she didn't leave soon, things were going to get out of hand, and as tempting as it was, she knew if that happened, they would be pouring gasoline onto an already pretty intense fire. They had agreed to wait. She wanted to wait.

But the way he was making her feel...

"Clark," she managed to make out between increasingly ardent kisses. "I should...I should go...home, I mean. I should..."

He kissed her again and she forgot the world existed. They were getting carried away. Lately, it felt like they were always getting carried away. It almost felt as if their decision to wait made moments like this far more intense — like they were doing something they shouldn't be.

It felt...dangerous and yet incredibly safe at the same time.

“You were saying?” His voice was a low rumble in her ear that almost made her gasp out loud.

“I was saying...” *I need to go*, she told herself. *We both wanted to wait...wanted...* “I want you...”

And she did. The way he was touching her, kissing her, nibbling gently on her ear had every single sense tingling. She was so absorbed in the way he was touching her she almost didn’t hear him say “I want you too...”

She gave in to the feelings he was invoking in her, allowing his hand to move to the other breast and murmuring words of encouragement as he touched her. It wasn’t until he tried to remove the entire shirt that the phone rang, startling both of them and causing Lois to push him back in surprise as if they were teenagers who had just been caught making out.

“You...you should answer that,” she said, running her hands through her hair to make sure it wasn’t a total mess.

“It’s probably my parents,” Clark said and she could tell by the way he said it — so tightly controlled — that he was trying to calm himself down. “I don’t have to...”

“No, you should,” Lois said, scrambling off the couch and hastily reaching back to hook her bra back up. “I should go...I’ll see you tomorrow for work?”

“Yeah,” he said and they shared one more look of heated understanding before he reached for the phone, answering it as he buttoned up his shirt again.

“Hello? Hi, Mom...no, you’re not disturbing anything, Lois and I were just...yes, she’s here but she’s leaving. Okay, okay, I’ll tell her.”

He covered his hand over the receiver as she put on her coat and grabbed her bag. “My mom says hi.”

“Goodnight, Clark,” Lois murmured as she opened the door to leave. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

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Lois let out a whoosh of air as she put the key in the ignition of her Jeep, trying desperately to banish the feeling of his hands on her, his lips on her neck, the deep warm rumble of his voice in her ear.

She had almost given in, almost allowed those incredible feelings to take over and...

She shook her head, put the car into drive and pulled out onto the road. She had no idea why this was such a big deal in the first place — making love to her fiancée, that is. It wasn’t as if they were children. They were grown adults who loved each other.

They were engaged to be married — on the cusp of making the biggest commitment two people could make to one another. And she wasn’t frightened of that at all. She was looking forward to the idea of being able to call him her husband — of being able to take the final step in their partnership. Not just a writing team, but partners in life and every other sense of the word.

If she was that certain that she was ready to spend her life with him, why did it matter when they made love? Now or two months from now, what was the difference? It was a question she couldn’t answer, and one she’d been asking herself ever since she and Clark had discussed it during their most recent story in which Lex Luthor’s illegitimate son had tried to kill her by trapping her in a virtual reality simulation.

She flushed as she turned the car left into the parking garage of her apartment building, remembering how she and Clark had discussed the most intimate details of their sex lives (or lack thereof) under the watchful eyes of the son of a man she’d almost married. A man who had turned out to be a psychopath just like his father.

She exited the Jeep and headed upstairs to her apartment, locking her door and going straight to the bedroom to change into her comfiest pair of pyjamas. Tonight was a night for flannels and ice cream, she decided. Between her extra hot make-out session with Clark and the direction her thoughts were taking, a microwave dinner and a cup of tea was not going to be enough.

To this day, having been taken in by Lex was one of her greatest regrets. She’d tried her best to forget, to move on, but it wasn’t easy when your ex’s name was still plastered across multiple city buildings, still mentioned now and then in nightly newscasts and late night shows and when she was continuously recognised on the street by strangers as the woman who had almost married Lex Luthor...or worse, the woman who had caused Lex to fall to his death—at least before his untimely resurrection.

Despite the excellent and sensitive reporting of the incident done by the *Daily Planet*, there was no way to put a stop to the endless tabloid stories being pumped out almost monthly — even now two years later — with a different spin every time on what had happened between her and Lex.

What was worse was that nobody knew the real story — not even Perry and Jimmy. They didn’t know that Clark had told her he loved her back then in a desperate attempt to convince her not to marry Luthor, nor did they know she’d thrown herself at Superman almost immediately afterwards. They certainly didn’t know that Clark Kent was Superman and how by throwing herself at Superman she’d broken his heart twice over.

He’d assured her that it was all in the past — that they had made a fresh start and they were both deliriously in love.

And they were. She was. She most definitely was. So why was the thought of intimacy — true physical intimacy — absolutely terrifying? Why, when she was away from

Clark and the intoxicating nature of his kisses did she become filled with doubts, insecurities and fears?

It was the strangest thing. She hadn't felt that way half an hour ago when she'd been on the couch with Clark's body on top of her giving her the most deeply passionate kisses she had ever experienced. It was as if her body had the ability to shut off her thoughts, preventing her worries and doubts from surfacing as long as his lips and hands were on her, touching her, caressing her.

She wondered if she should just give in and tell him there was no use in waiting. After all, nearly every time they were together her body seemed to be sending the message that all systems were 'go'. It was her mind that was the problem. What happened if they got married and those doubts and fears never went away? What if she was never able to fully satisfy him?

She'd tried to tell herself these fears were mainly pre-wedding jitters combined with the fact that Lex Luthor had come back to life and been subsequently sent to jail, not to mention the recent revelation that he'd had a son.

Dr. Friskin would have told her that all of these events put together might trigger unresolved issues having to do with Lex and her almost-wedding, but Lois wasn't sure that was the only issue at play.

Lex might have been the most publicly visible of her long line of federal disasters, but he hadn't been the first to hurt her. And while almost marrying a psychopath had certainly done the most emotional damage, her trust had been shattered long before that by someone else. That honour belonged to a man Lois had worked with, trusted, and who had betrayed that trust by sleeping with her, and leaving her, but not before he stole a story she'd written that had earned him a Kerth award.

She sighed and put down the pint of ice cream she'd been spooning into a bowl. Placing it back in the freezer, she padded over to the wine rack and popped the cork open on a merlot that she'd intended to share with Clark one night when they had time for dinner together. Dinner would have to wait. Tonight was now a red wine and ice cream kind of night.

It had been a long time since she'd thought about Claude and the damage he'd done. Though she was completely in love with Clark, the ghost of that old wound lingered even still. She had been hurt when she had woken up alone and even more devastated when he'd informed her via a note on her desk that he'd returned to France. When she'd noticed her story was no longer on her hard drive and it had popped up in the next day's edition of the paper with his byline on it, she had been furious.

It had been a harsh lesson but one Lois had learned and learned well — that men could not be trusted. It was possibly the only thing that helped her get through the Lex

Luthor situation — the fact that she'd hardened her heart to a point where Lex's betrayal hadn't made as much of a dent as it could have.

She hadn't loved Lex after all — not the way she'd thought she loved Claude and certainly not the way she loved Clark.

And it hadn't been love with Claude — not really. She knew that now. Her feelings for Claude felt like they belonged in another lifetime to another woman — a woman who wore her heart on her sleeve, trusted too readily and hadn't been able to see the very glaring warning signs that were right in front of her. It had been a muted sort of feeling, like being under water.

Loving Clark was like being dragged into the light after years in darkness. Everything around her was bright and vivid, vibrant and alive. She wanted to hold onto this feeling forever and trust that it would never leave her — never go away.

But she'd thought she'd found forever before this. And though she trusted Clark with all her heart and soul, she didn't trust herself not to somehow sabotage what she had found with him. She was her own worst enemy at times.

Case in point: she was eating ice cream and drinking red wine on her own instead of at Clark's apartment right now making love with him.

She gave one more frustrated sigh before dropping the bowl and spoon into the sink, giving her dishes a quick wash and popping a movie into her VCR with the full intention of zoning out as she watched it.

She knew it would only take one phone call and he'd be here watching the movie with her but she didn't trust herself around him. She would see him tomorrow. He'd give her that incredible smile that always turned her to goo and she would kiss him good morning and all would be right with the world.

Plus, they were getting married in two months. What could possibly go wrong?

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## Chapter 2

Lois was nervous when she saw Clark the following morning at the *Planet*. She wasn't used to being nervous around him and she wasn't sure she liked the feeling. She'd been nervous when he'd first asked her out on a date, but that had been a different kind of nervous. The kind where you're scared, but also excited...there was a delicious sort of anticipation that accompanied the fear, making it worth it.

This was different. She felt unsure of herself — as if the world had tilted slightly on its axis and she was struggling to balance.

He was waiting for her at her desk with a single red rose. He'd been doing things like this lately — flowers, chocolates, little notes in her bag or pockets telling her he

loved her or he couldn't wait to see her. It normally made her beyond happy to know that he cared for her so deeply.

Today, it made her stomach churn with uncertainty.

"Good morning," he said with a gentle kiss on her cheek. She smiled half-heartedly and took the offered rose. "I enjoyed last night."

"Me too," she said, surprised at the slight tremor in her voice. Where did that come from? She looked down at the rose she still held and placed it on her desk. She almost wished he wasn't so thoughtful. It only made her worry more.

Sure, he was eager to show his love via small gifts and notes now, but what about once they were married? Would he be as devoted once he'd gotten the one thing their relationship currently lacked? Was the anticipation of what was to come the inspiration for all the displays of affection?

"Good," he said and the relief in his voice was palpable. "I thought...well I was a bit worried especially since you ran off when my mom called. I didn't want you to think that I was pushing for...well, I know we agreed to wait."

"It's fine," she said, waving it away as if to banish the anxiety swirling around in her head. "I just...it was a good time for me to go before..."

"Before things got out of hand?" he said, and the low suggestive tone of his voice sent shivers through her entire body. Suddenly, she felt as if she were unable to breathe. The way he was looking at her felt almost indecent.

"Yes..." was all she could manage to get out. Oh God, he was really looking forward to this. His first time. With her.

What if she didn't live up to the hype? After all, when you built something up in your head, more often than not you came up disappointed. What if that happened with Clark?

She looked back at him, feeling almost panicked. He clearly noticed because he took both of her hands and covered them with his large ones. She felt instantly grounded and protected.

"I will be honest with you...part of me wanted things to get out of hand," he said in a quiet voice. She swallowed heavily. "I want you. Sometimes so much I can't think straight. I look at you and it's all I can think about. *You* are all I can think about. But I know it's important to you to wait. And I understand. It will make things far more special to make love to you as husband and wife."

He kissed her softly, lovingly and stood back, his dark eyes searching hers for understanding.

Her emotions swirled around. She was terrified. His first time. Their first time. A first like that should be

incredible — life altering. At least that's what music and movies told you. But it wasn't always so.

She thought back to her own first time in high school.

She'd been a senior and had been dating a boy named Jason Mackenzie. He'd taken her to her prom and she had decided she was ready. She had convinced herself she loved him, and because of it, she had built it up in her head to be the most powerful and magical experience of her life.

Instead, Jason had lasted all of five minutes and fallen asleep, leaving her frustrated and hugely disappointed. He'd then broken up with her a week later claiming that going to different universities would make it too difficult to maintain a long distance relationship. She'd been crushed at the time but she had also learned an important lesson — you shouldn't get your hopes up.

She didn't want to get Clark's hopes up. Not when he was being as attentive as he was.

"Lois?"

She still hadn't responded. She shook herself out of her anxious thoughts. She must be panicking...finding faults where there were none. She loved Clark and he loved her. She would not talk herself out of this. She wanted it too much.

"I understand that feeling," she admitted to him, flushing slightly with embarrassment. Despite how comfortable she was with him in every other circumstance, talking to him about sex made her feel like a teenager all over again.

"What feeling?" he asked her, running his thumb gently over her knuckles and causing her to shiver. Maybe she had nothing to worry about. After all, if his thumb could cause her to feel this way with just a touch...well, they did have amazing chemistry together so far.

"Wanting it to get out of hand," she breathed. "Last night, I wanted..."

"Lane! Kent!" The familiar bark of Perry White, Editor In Chief of the *Daily Planet* startled both of them out of the intimate moment they had somehow managed to create for themselves. Lois even saw Clark visibly jump a little bit, which caused her to giggle slightly. He looked like a kid who had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Perry made his way over to the two of them with long purposeful strides. Lois could tell by the look in his eyes that something was up — something that required the specific talents of Lane and Kent.

"What's up, Chief?" Lois asked as she surreptitiously extricated her hands from Clark's. Perry had recently split with his wife, Alice, and she knew it had been hard on him, despite his claims that he was okay. It caused her to be more conscious of public displays of affection around him — even small ones.

“You remember that trade agreement our government was working on with the French government? Well, the President of France has sent a delegation to Metropolis which includes their prime minister. Our president is expected to meet with them at the Lexor hotel over the course of the next two weeks to hammer out the details. There will be a small amount of press allowed daily for updates on their progress. I want you two on this.”

“Why here?” Clark wondered, “why not Washington?”

“The French president requested it. Seems his prime minister took quite a shine to this city a few years back when they visited.”

“I remember that,” Lois said, softly. That had been before Clark had come to the *Planet*. When she’d worked with...

“Oh, that’s right!” Perry said, his face lighting up. “Well, I am glad you remember that, Lois, because that’s when we had that young man from France working here for a few months on exchange... Claude Dupont. You remember him?”

Lois felt her heart lurch in her chest and the colour drain from her face. With trembling hands, she found her office chair and sank down into it. Perry didn’t seem to notice her reaction, but Clark certainly did. She could feel the concern in his eyes burning into her as she spoke.

“I remember.”

Perry continued speaking, oblivious to both their reactions.

“That’s good, because his paper is sending him down here as well to cover the talks. They’ve already asked that he work with the *Planet* on this one as a show of unity. And you two got along so well the last time, well... it was a no brainer. You okay with that?”

No. No, she was not okay. She was the furthest from okay that she could get. Okay was in Alaska. But what on Earth could she possibly say to Perry? She’d been new to the paper when she’d fallen for Claude. She hadn’t told anybody about their relationship and neither had he. He’d told her he wanted to keep it a secret — to keep things professional at work. Lois had been so desperate to prove herself to Perry that she hadn’t wanted to do anything that would hurt her chances of rising up the ranks. It wasn’t until far later with the hindsight of experience that she’d realised his true motivation had been to take what he wanted physically and emotionally while helping himself to her work as well.

“Sounds good, Perry,” Clark replied, leaping to her rescue for the millionth time. He must have noticed her distress because he reached over and squeezed her hand. She gave him a grateful smile. She’d told him about Claude when he’d joined the *Planet* in a rare moment of vulnerability when she thought they were about to die, and

while she hadn’t mentioned him since, Clark knew that her past relationships were part of the reason it had taken her so long to trust him. He must know the impact this was having on her.

“Excellent,” Perry replied, pleased with the arrangements. “His flight is due to arrive in Metropolis at two. He should be here by three, which should give you just enough time to have a little tete-a-tete. Clark, you’re going to like this man. He was a good writer when he was here with us. I think he won an award for his piece on corruption in the police department. You remember that?”

“I remember,” Lois said tightly. It should have been her first Kerth.

“Right,” Perry said, finally sensing some tension. “Well, I’ll let you two uh... get some brainstorming done. I have to find Jimmy. That fool kid is trying to set me up again and I... well, I’ll see you later.”

Lois let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding as Perry made his way towards his office. Clark sat down on the corner of her desk and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. She noticed that his jawline was firm. He didn’t like this either, but was trying to control his reaction for her sake.

“You okay?”

She wished everyone would stop asking that question.

“I’m fine,” she lied, looking anywhere but the face of her partner. A lead ball had formed in the pit of her stomach and she felt slightly nauseous. She wasn’t supposed to see him again. It was the only positive thing about getting her heart broken and her story stolen. He was supposed to have gone off to France never to be seen again.

And now he was coming back. Just when she felt like the pieces of her life were falling into place. She looked back up to see that Clark was looking at her — searching her expression for reassurance. But it was reassurance she couldn’t give.

“Are you sure? I bet I can get Perry to assign us to something else...”

“No,” she said sharply — too sharply. His concerned frown deepened and she had to look away again.

“Lois, you told me what happened with him,” he said and for some reason the gentleness in his tone bothered her. She wasn’t some fragile thing that could fall apart so easily. She was Lois Lane.

“It was a long time ago,” she replied, softening her tone ever so slightly in the hopes that he would believe her. She let some of the tension drain from her shoulders as she tried to convince herself it would be okay. She wasn’t that same scared novice reporter she’d been all those years ago. Things were different now. She had her reputation, her

awards...and she had Clark. "I was a very different person. Whatever happened back then...it's in the past. I promise."

"Okay," he said and she knew that he would drop it for her sake.

"Thank you," she said, reaching up and touching his cheek gently with her finger. "For being so understanding. Promise me you won't say anything about...that you'll be polite. For my sake?"

"I promise," he replied, giving her a soft kiss on the forehead. "I'll be the picture of professional courtesy. However, I reserve the right to daydream about punching him in the face. Deal?"

She laughed her first real laugh of the morning.

"Deal."

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### Chapter 3

Lois went through the rest of the morning and afternoon on auto pilot. Desperate to avoid dealing with any of the complicated feelings that inevitably accompanied thoughts about Claude or what had happened with him, she forced herself to think about the upcoming trade talks and bounced ideas off of Clark on what kind of angle they might take and how they should cover it as a team. He didn't say anything further to her about Claude, but she was extremely aware of the way he watched her — cautiously but without pity. She was grateful. The last thing she wanted was to be pitied by the man she admired most.

By the time two thirty rolled around, they had brainstormed all they could. Lois found herself pushing her chair away from her computer, blinking and standing up to stretch. Clark did the same, placing a hand on her shoulder and giving it a short but very satisfying rub. She let out a soft groan of appreciation.

"You are so good at that. Where did you learn it?" she asked. "No, wait...don't tell me...a buddhist monk in Tibet taught you."

Clark laughed.

"No monks," he said quietly. "Maybe I just know how to touch you." Lois allowed his voice to wash over her and gave into the host of fantasies that suddenly flashed through her mind. Was he right? Was it really that simple? God, she hoped so.

She checked her watch and frowned.

"He should be here soon," she said heavily. Clark nodded and took a deep breath.

"We can still ask Perry to re-assign us," he offered, though she could tell from his tone of voice that he knew the effort was futile. "If not for you, for me. I mean, working with the guy who...did that to you isn't exactly top of my career highlights list."

"That's nice, Clark, but I think I need to face this," she replied and something inside her knew that much, at least,

was true. "Besides, I don't want Perry asking too many questions. He doesn't know what happened."

"Maybe he should," Clark said. The hard edge his voice had taken on told Lois he was trying to control the anger he was feeling. She understood. She'd been angry over having her work stolen, not to mention her heart broken for a long time. "The man took credit for your work — got an award for *your* work. Perry should know that. I mean why didn't *you* tell him when it happened?"

"It's complicated," Lois replied, feeling slightly defensive now. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me," he said, his voice softening slightly. He pulled her close and trailed a finger down the line of her jaw. She closed her eyes and savoured the feeling of it. "You're right, I wasn't there. But I want to understand. You're Lois Lane. Why would you protect him then? Or now?"

"Because," she said, feeling exasperation creeping into her voice once more. Sometimes his naivete was extremely charming and other times it was downright grating. "I wasn't *Lois Lane* then!"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? You went by a different name? Had a secret identity perhaps?"

He was lucky his tone was light — their normal, familiar banter.

"Ha-ha," she retorted, slightly amused at his attempt to lighten her mood. But he still wasn't getting it. "I mean, I was a young female reporter who had yet to make a name for myself. He was seasoned — a pro. People knew him, they liked him! Perry liked him."

She shook herself out of Clark's embrace and paced back and forth a bit, keeping her eye on the elevator, lest it open and reveal the object of their conversation.

"I get that," Clark said with a small smile. "I know what it's like to be a hack from Nowheresville."

"It's different than that," she said, feeling frustrated at having to explain what was painfully obvious to every professional career woman. "As a man you don't have to automatically fight for basic respect. That's a given. Perry respected you the moment you walked in the door, even if he didn't think you were cut out for the *Planet* yet. You didn't have to prove yourself like I did."

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice genuinely contrite. "I guess I didn't think of that."

Lois sighed and shook her head, grateful at least that he wasn't the type of guy to argue that casual sexism didn't exist when it was pointed out to him.

"If something like that happened now, I would know what to do," she admitted. "And Perry would have my back, no questions asked, but back then...it was different. And I don't want Perry to know that I was manipulated

like that. Don't you understand? I may have three Kerths under my belt, but his approval still means the world to me."

She spoke the last sentence with a tremor in her voice. She looked down at her shoes and tried to control the tears that suddenly threatened to fall. She hated going back to that time in her life. That time when she was so new and everything was so uncertain and she took people at their word rather than by their actions. She'd never quite forgiven that version of herself for being so willing to trust those who hadn't proven themselves worthy of it. After all, if she'd been just a little more street-wise, maybe she wouldn't have kept Clark at bay for so long.

She hadn't realised his arms were around her until she was leaning her head against the solid comfort of his chest. She swallowed heavily and composed herself.

"People are probably staring," she murmured into the fabric of his jacket.

He tipped her chin up to meet his loving gaze and brought her lips to his, whispering, "Then let's give them something to stare at."

When they parted, she touched the side of his face tenderly and marvelled at the depth of love she could see in his eyes.

"How did I get so lucky?" she asked. He chuckled.

"I ask myself the same question every day." He stood back and picked up the notes they had written on the trade talks in preparation for Claude's arrival. Lois watched him quietly, knowing he didn't need a tenth of the time it was taking him to read those notes. When he looked up, he gave her a thin smile.

"I promised I wouldn't say anything, and I promised I would behave," he assured her. "And I will. But...for the record...you could never disappoint Perry. Or me. I hope you know that."

"I do," she said, trying to ignore the pit in her stomach that felt she wasn't being truthful. She wanted to believe that there was nothing to worry about — but life had spent a long time teaching her otherwise. She couldn't help but always feel as if the other shoe was about to drop.

And drop it did as the chime of the elevator caused both of their heads to turn and watch as Claude Dupont stepped into the newsroom. It didn't take him long to spot Lois. A sideways glance at Clark, who stood as rigid as a statue, told her that he'd also figured out who he was. She took a deep breath. This could get interesting.

As he walked towards them, Lois took him in. He looked the same and yet somehow completely different. He was a tall, lean man with sharp cheekbones and an aristocratic nose. He had deep blue eyes and wore an impeccably tailored suit that made Clark's look shabby by comparison. There were creases around his eyes that

hadn't been there before — he'd been older than her when she had known him almost ten years ago. He was still handsome. And Lois hated herself for noticing.

"Lois!" he exclaimed as he reached the two of them. "It's been so long. You look...incredible. Absolutely incredible. Time has been very good to you."

"And to you," she replied coolly, not wanting to sound eager or rude.

"And you must be Mr. Kent," he said, turning to Clark with a smile and offering his hand. "I saw the billboards as I came in. The hottest writing team in town. It is my absolute pleasure to meet you."

"The...pleasure...is all mine," Clark said. On the surface he sounded perfectly polite, but Lois knew the current of anger that simmered below the surface.

Claude looked back at Lois and she stood up a little straighter. She would not be intimidated. She was not a novice anymore; she was an equal.

"I can't believe it's been so long," he said again with a shake of his head. "I've followed your career, you know."

"You have?" Lois said, mildly surprised. She hadn't followed his. "I...didn't realise."

"You've covered some great stories," he continued. "Some of the best. I even saw that you've won three Kerths!"

"Four," Lois couldn't help but blurt. Claude had the good grace to look away, but said nothing. Clark broke the tension by clearing his throat. He spoke, a friendly mild mannered expression plastered across his normally expressive face.

"We should probably get to work."

He handed Claude the notepad that they'd been using to brainstorm on and he busied himself for a moment reading their notes. Lois felt herself relax slightly. Despite the feelings cascading through her, she also couldn't help but feel a sense of normalcy at the sight in front of her. She could recall numerous occasions where she'd made notes on something she thought could be a story only to run it by Claude first in the hopes that he would offer his approval or advice.

This time however, she didn't feel the need for him to validate her work. She and Clark knew how good they were — the billboards proved it.

He turned back to them and handed her the notepad.

"This is good," was all he said. "I like where you want to go with this. But there's more that you should know about these talks. In fact...it's the reason I asked to be assigned to work with you again."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked, noticing that the mask Clark had plastered on his face was slowly being replaced by a curiosity that matched her own.

Claude hesitated, looking between her and Clark for a moment as if trying to decide something.

“I...would prefer to talk to you about it alone, Lois,” he said, and Lois was reminded of all the times that gentle French accent had completely blinded her, leading her to agree with whatever he asked. Not this time.

“Anything you have to say, you can say in front of Clark,” she replied firmly, not missing the small smile that flitted across his mouth. “He’s my fiance and my partner and I would trust him with my life.”

“What about the life of your president?” Claude asked, his voice suddenly deadly serious.

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#### Chapter 4

Lois and Clark quickly ushered Claude into the conference room. She watched as Clark made a show of closing the blinds and checking the door to make sure it was locked, but knew that it was a cover for an even deeper surveillance — the kind that only Superman could provide. When he was satisfied that nobody was listening, he gave her a small nod and they both turned to face Claude.

“What do you know?” she asked him, cutting straight to the point. She saw him hesitate for a split second, then sit down at the table. He touched a hand to his temples and Lois noticed he was greying there now.

“I shouldn’t know any of this,” he said, his voice heavy.

“Any of what?” Clark asked, no longer masking the irritation in his voice. Lois touched his arm gently and felt him relax.

Claude sighed. “I haven’t had a career as successful as yours, Lois,” he said, and Lois felt a thrill of satisfaction go through her despite the seriousness of the situation. “I don’t cover big stories. Mostly, I just get the press junkets and...what do you call them.... ‘puff pieces’?”

He looked around, his eyes darting back and forth, and Lois noticed for the first time how genuinely distressed he was. She could tell by the look on her partner’s face, that he noticed it too. However complicated her feelings were for him, she knew she needed to put them aside and focus on the matter at hand.

“Go on,” she said softly, sitting down next to him and giving him what she hoped was an encouraging smile.

“I was asked to cover a school program that allows kids to take a tour through the Assemblée Nationale where our parliament meets. It was a simple story, and after I was finished making my notes, I went to find the men’s room. I don’t often get assigned to cover anything in the Palais Bourbon and I got lost in the corridors. I ended up in some kind of cabinet meeting room. I thought I had found the door back to the hallway, but it turned out to be a broom closet instead.”

He looked a little sheepish and Lois found herself fighting the impulse to roll her eyes.

“Then what?” Clark asked, and Lois could tell he still wasn’t convinced that Claude had seen or heard anything that might point to the President being in danger.

“The door accidentally shut behind me. I was about to open it when I heard voices enter the meeting room. They sounded familiar, so I listened in and I overheard them discussing a plot to assassinate the President of the United States during the trade talks. They have men...powerful men in your government who are also involved. They talked about having hired someone — a professional from your country who could make the shot from so far away even Superman couldn’t hear it.”

“Did they say why?” Lois asked, a feeling of ice cold fear overcoming her. This was big. And highly dangerous if what Claude was saying was true. “Or when? Did you get a look at them? Or contact the authorities, or...?”

“Lois,” Clark said softly, placing a hand gently on her shoulder. Too fast. She was going too fast. She took a deep breath and let Claude speak.

“No,” Claude said, shaking his head quickly. “I didn’t hear why or when. And I couldn’t see them. I couldn’t risk opening the door and being caught. All I know is their voices sounded familiar, but given that I was in the Parliament buildings, they could be anyone in government. And no, I didn’t contact the authorities. I didn’t know who to trust or how high it went.”

She watched as he stood up and checked the blinds once more. She noticed his hands were shaking. It was obvious this was the first story he’d covered that involved any real danger. When he was satisfied once more that nobody could see him, he turned back to the two of them.

“When I heard my paper was sending someone to cover the talks, I had to beg, borrow and steal to get assigned to it. I had to see you, Lois. Had to warn you. I told you I’ve followed your career. I know that you know Superman. I thought maybe you could get a message to him...to warn him.”

“We will,” Clark said in that reassuring tone she’d heard him use so often in the past with sources who were stressed or scared.

“What about our government?” Lois wondered though the moment she spoke the fear in Claude’s eyes only grew. “Surely we should warn the President.”

“No!” Claude exclaimed, then immediately looked scared by his own outburst. “We have no idea who we can trust. These weren’t maintenance workers I overheard. My own prime minister might have been in that room for all I know — or at least be in on it, not to mention you have no idea how high this goes on your end. We can’t trust anyone.”



Lois suddenly felt silly. He was right. Unless they could warn the President directly, using official channels might backfire.

“What about cancelling the trade talks?” Claude suggested, and it was Lois’ turn to shake her head.

“We do that, and whoever is behind this will simply find a different time or place — one we don’t already know about.”

“Superman might be able to get a message directly to the President,” Clark said, shooting Lois a meaningful look. “After all, wouldn’t it be a great idea to have Superman officially welcome the President and French Prime Minister to the trade talks?”

“That...that could work,” Claude said, sounding slightly surprised.

“Meanwhile, I think it’s up to us to figure out exactly who is behind this and why they want the President dead,” Lois said, feeling her old familiar rhythm take over. “After all, trade talks between the US and France aren’t exactly controversial. Who would go to these sorts of lengths to stop the deal from going through?”

“Maybe it’s not the deal itself that’s important,” Clark said, snapping his fingers excitedly. *Yes*, Lois thought to herself. *This is what I know how to do*. “Maybe the trade talks are just an excuse. Whoever wants the President dead could have an entirely different reason.”

“Then we need to find out what that reason is,” Lois nodded. “Maybe Bobby Bigmouth could help?”

“This might be above his pay grade,” Clark said with a frown. Claude watched their exchange, his head moving back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match.

“True,” she agreed. She looked at Claude again. “You said that they hired someone from the US to take the shot? Someone so good even Superman couldn’t hear it? Someone that good might have a military background. We should run a check on any known snipers both active and discharged. See who pops up.”

“Good idea,” Clark agreed.

“What should I do?” Claude asked, and Lois shot a look at Clark that seemed to say the same thing.

“You should go to your hotel and get some rest,” Lois said and she didn’t miss the look of relief that came over him. “We’ll let you know if we find anything.”

Claude nodded and stood up. He looked at Lois and gave her a smile that in a different life would have melted her completely. Now she felt nothing.

“I really did miss you, Lois,” he said and he peeked through the blinds one more time before leaving the conference room.

Lois let out a deep breath and found herself being enveloped swiftly in Clark’s arms. He held her there for a while before either of them said anything.

When they parted, she allowed herself a long, lingering look at the face of the man she was going to soon marry. A face that promised unconditional love and support. It was times like this when she looked into his face that she could genuinely believe that everything would be all right.

It was only when she was alone and at the mercy of her own insecurities that she began to doubt herself.

And now this threat. It sent chills up her spine. A threat against the President was bad enough as it was, but she couldn’t help but shake the nagging feeling that it went deeper than they thought. After all, trade talks between the two countries were hardly controversial.

“What’s going on in that brilliant brain of yours?” Clark spoke softly and placed a kiss on her forehead.

“Just worried about this threat, I guess,” she told him.

“You think he’s telling the truth?” Clark asked with a furrowed brow. “I mean you haven’t seen the man in almost ten years and he just walks in and says there is a threat, but what if there isn’t?”

“I don’t think he’d have any reason to lie,” Lois reasoned. “Where would it get him?”

“I don’t know,” Clark admitted. “But you trust him?”

Lois hesitated. Trust was a loaded word for her, after all. And Claude had broken her trust pretty spectacularly when he’d slept with her under false pretenses and stolen her story.

“I trust that he’s scared,” she said finally. “Whether there’s any credibility to his fear is what we have to figure out. I can’t allow how I feel about him to potentially endanger the President. For now, I think we have to take him at his word.”

“I do too,” Clark said heavily. She knew he didn’t like it either. “There’s not much we can do today. Why don’t we head back to my place? I can make us dinner and we can cuddle on the couch...maybe do some more of this...”

He leaned forward to kiss her neck causing her whole body to react to his touch. She let out a soft moan and felt her body press tightly to his. It would be so very easy to just give in to him — after all, she trusted him. He was the one person in her crazy world that made sense to her.

He took her lack of verbal response as further encouragement and cupped her face in his hands pulling her close for a long, deep, sensuous kiss that left her breathless.

“Come home with me, Lois?” he asked, his voice husky and eyes dark.

And she wanted to. Lord knew she wanted to, but something nagged at her — crawled into the back of her mind and refused to leave.

*Come home with me*, he’d said. They hadn’t yet talked about where they would live when they were married. There was still so much they didn’t know about each other

— about what it meant to live with someone and share your life with them. What if he hated the way she chewed? Or he left his dirty capes all over the floor?

Nobody got married expecting the marriage to fail. Her parents certainly hadn't and look what happened to them.

"Lois?" He sounded worried now and she hated herself for being the cause of it.

"I think I had better go home alone tonight," she said reluctantly.

"Oh." She could see the hurt in his eyes even though he tried to hide it.

"It's just...this has been a crazy day and I have a lot to process," she explained, feeling like she was only putting her foot further and further into her mouth with each word she spoke. He looked down, then back at her again. The love she always saw there hadn't wavered.

"Lois, if I made you uncomfortable in any way..." he trailed off nervously, the feeling of the kisses they had shared a moment ago still very much present in both their minds. "I said I will wait if that's what you want. I promise to control myself."

"I know," she said, caressing his face gently. "But I can't promise the same. You kiss me like that, Clark and all I want is to get lost in it...lost in you."

"Is that such a bad thing?" he asked softly. She shook her head.

"No, it's wonderful," she assured him. "But...when it happens, I want it to be because we both need it to for the right reasons. And right now...I'm not myself."

*Please understand*, her mind begged. He nodded and placed a featherlight kiss on her cheek and her whole world shifted back into place. They were okay. Was this what it was like to have total honesty and trust? She could get used to this.

"I love you," he told her. "I'm only a phone call away if you need me."

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## Chapter 5

Lois sank down onto her couch and closed her eyes. She hadn't realised how badly she needed some space until now.

She was so used to compartmentalising or outright denying her emotions that they sometimes took her by surprise. She still wasn't the best at handling the feelings of insecurity or doubt that seemed to creep up on her.

She stood up and made her way into the kitchen, where she pulled the kettle from the cupboard and put it on the stove. Tea would help. Tea always helped. She rustled through the drawer she kept her tea bags in only to come across some of the special loose leaf teas that Clark liked. She'd started keeping them here for him once they'd gotten engaged. It had made her feel as if they were

already combining their lives at least a little. Now it caused a little stab of fear to shoot through her.

It was easier assuming everyone would hurt and disappoint her. But being in a relationship with someone she genuinely believed in was even scarier. She knew what to do when men left. But she had no idea how to handle it when they stayed. And Clark was definitely intent on staying.

The kettle boiled and Lois poured her tea, heading back into the living room. She set the tea down before heading into her bedroom and changing into her pyjamas. It was partly for comfort and partly for self control. She knew she wouldn't cave in and call Clark asking him to come over if she was wearing the most unflattering pair of flannel pjs and her fuzzy bunny slippers.

*He wouldn't care, you know*, her inner voice told her. *You could be wearing a gunny sack and he'd still want you.* She frowned. That should make her feel good. It should make her feel over the moon, and most of the time it did. Ninety-five percent of the time, Lois was walking on a cloud of air knowing that she was well and truly loved by the most amazing man she had ever met. But that five percent was still there. And sometimes it was loud — loud enough to cause her to doubt herself.

Because she didn't doubt him. She was the one who wasn't sure. She was the one who didn't know how to navigate something this good — this healthy. Her past relationships all fell somewhere on a scale between narcissist to psychopath.

And then there was Clark. Wonderful, sweet, sexy, out-of-this-world Clark. A man who could make her forget her own name with just the touch of his hand. A man whose eyes promised forever every time he looked at her. A man who couldn't possibly know what that promise meant to her because he'd grown up in a home filled with unconditional love.

That concept was foreign to Lois. All love had come with conditions for her. All love was transient. At least that's what her parents had taught her. And so she'd held a part of herself back from Clark. She'd told him she wanted to wait — that she wanted it to be special.

She took a sip of her tea, enjoying the taste of the soothing herbal berry fruit concoction that she'd chosen. She couldn't be bothered dealing with milk and sugar tonight. She just wanted to sit and be.

She hadn't lied to him. She did want it to be special. But she also knew that she was scared of what came after. Of what would happen to her if she gave him all of her — for that's what she would be doing when they finally made love. She'd be completely vulnerable with nowhere to hide and nobody to run to if things didn't work out. Could she

risk that? She'd never given herself that fully to anyone — not even the men she'd thought she loved in her past.

In a way, though they had hurt her, having sex with them had been easier. She'd known that she would heal. Even after Claude destroyed her self-esteem and her trust, she had known she would heal. And she had. She'd hardened herself...become stronger...tougher.

Colder.

And then Clark came along and stripped away all armour and pretense. When they finally made love, she'd be at the mercy of the unknown.

And it would be one thing if she thought he had the same fears and doubts, but one look in his eyes told her he didn't. He might be anxious about being with her for the first time, but it wasn't the same thing. He hadn't been hurt the way she had.

She sighed. Thinking about all this was giving her a headache. She was supposed to be relaxing. But relaxing was difficult when she knew that Clark was — as he put it — just a phone call away and tomorrow's work day promised to put her face to face with the man who had been the cause of some of these doubts and fears.

She wasn't looking forward to seeing Claude again, but after hearing about a potential assassination plot, it wasn't like they could very well ask Perry to re-assign them. They were in this now for better or for worse. She winced at the choice of words.

She shook her head and forced herself to focus on work. Work was safer. She and Clark had made a plan of attack to begin by looking at snipers capable of making a shot from far enough away that Superman wouldn't hear it. But that was only half the puzzle. The other half was figuring out who would want to kill the President and why.

That one would be tougher. And Claude's presence would only hinder them. After all, they couldn't speak freely about Superman while he was around.

She took another sip of her tea and glanced over at her phone. She wanted to call Clark. She wanted to invite him over, pop in a movie and lean into his arms. She reached for it and almost made the call but managed to stop herself. Being around him was too dangerous right now.

One kiss would lead to another and before she knew it she would want to take the comfort he offered even if he had promised to behave himself. After all, how much temptation could a v...very patient man like him endure?

She sighed and decided to run the bath instead. She'd order takeout later and watch the movie herself. It occurred to her as she turned the water on that it couldn't hurt to make an appointment with Doctor Friskin. She hadn't had a session with her in a while — not since becoming engaged to Clark, mainly because she hadn't felt she

needed it. Those first few months of their engagement had been a high like no other.

But now as the wedding loomed closer, the realities of an impending marriage were beginning to set in, and Lois was feeling it. It couldn't hurt to have a sounding board to tell her if her fears were real or imagined.

Bathtub filled, she padded back into the kitchen and looked at the calendar on the side of the fridge. She was relieved to see that Monday nights were one of the nights Doctor Friskin stayed later. Lois could still book an appointment.

She grabbed the phone, dialled the number and was automatically connected to the secretary, who asked her in an absent voice to "please hold."

She waited, trying to block out the irritating elevator music the office used, until the secretary eventually came back on and asked how she could help her. Lois informed her she was a patient of Doctor Friskin's and that she would like to make an appointment with her as soon as possible.

"I have something first thing tomorrow morning, would that work?"

Lois thought about it. Clark would have to cover for her, but she knew he wouldn't mind. She did it for him often enough after all.

"That's fine," she told her, not for the first time grateful that her job wasn't a normal nine to five like everyone else's. It wasn't unusual for one of them to arrive later in the day or even the afternoon if they were chasing leads on a story.

Appointment booked, she set the phone down and chewed her lip slightly. This meant she would have to call Clark after all and let him know that she would be late arriving to work. It also meant leaving him alone with Claude.

She took a deep breath and dialled Clark's number. It had barely rang once when she heard him pick up. Had he been waiting by the phone? Her heart sank at the thought.

"Hi," she said, feeling oddly and inexplicably shy.

"Hi, yourself," he said and the warmth in his voice radiated through the phone. "I didn't expect to hear from you. How are you?"

She knew he was trying to sound casual and was failing miserably. Superman notwithstanding, Clark was a terrible liar.

"Uh, fine," she replied, sounding equally awkward. "I was just about to run a bath and I thought I would let you know that I might be a bit late to work tomorrow. I have a...doctor's appointment I forgot about."

"Everything okay?" he asked, switching from hopeful to worried.

“Oh, yeah,” she assured him, wondering why she didn’t just tell him she would be seeing Doctor Friskin. It’s not as if he didn’t know she’d been her patient for a while now. “Nothing special...totally routine.”

“Good.” Now he sounded just as unsure of himself as she did. “It’s just...for a minute I thought you were calling because you changed your mind.”

“No,” she blurted, then backtracking added, “Not that I don’t want to. I do. Want to, I mean. But I got the bath all ready and I’m in my fuzzy bunny slippers and everything...”

Wow. So it *was* possible to fit a size eight shoe entirely into a person’s mouth.

“Okay,” he said after a moment or so of awkward silence. “Well, I should probably let you get back to your bath.”

“Yeah, thanks,” she replied. “I’ll uh...see you tomorrow after my appointment.”

She wanted to add that she was sorry to leave him to work with Claude on his own and to remind him to behave himself, but found herself unable to do it. She also wanted to invite him to join her in the bath.

Nope. Nope. Nope.

She needed to get off the phone.

“I love you,” he told her. “Goodnight.”

“I love you too,” she told him, hanging it up before she could say anything she might regret.

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## Chapter 6

“So, Lois, it’s been a while.” Doctor Friskin’s voice was calm and welcoming — completely at odds with how Lois was feeling.

She wasn’t used to talking about her feelings. She’d grown up being taught that open displays of emotion could be used against you. That had been further reinforced by every unsuccessful relationship she’d been in. And there had been a lot. It had been very difficult for her to come around to the idea that having an objective professional help her sort through those feelings was a good thing. Even then, it always took a certain amount of courage for her to pick up the phone and actually make the appointment.

“I guess I’ve been busy,” Lois said, feeling somewhat flustered under Doctor Friskin’s scrutiny. She also wasn’t used to being at a loss for words.

“Yes, it certainly looks like it.” Doctor Friskin nodded at her engagement ring. Lois blushed and looked down at her hand. “The last time I saw you, you still hadn’t made up your mind. What changed it?”

Lois thought for a moment before speaking.

“I got the chance to see life through his eyes — you know, to really understand the difficulties he faces and the choices he has to make at times. It really put things into perspective.”

Doctor Friskin gave a slow nod and wrote something on her pad. Lois couldn’t help but try to get a glance at it. She hated not knowing what was being written about her.

“It helped you understand his absences, then?” Doctor Friskin asked. “I remember you were conflicted about them.”

“Yes,” Lois replied, thinking about the juggling act that Clark had to balance every day between work, being Superman and their relationship. Having his powers — even for the brief period she’d had them — had been a profound experience. She’d really come to understand just how strong he was. Not because of what he could do, but because of the way he managed to stay positive even when things seemed hopeless.

“That’s good,” Doctor Friskin said, though her face and tone remained the same. Lois couldn’t help but think that she’d make an excellent poker player. “So what would you like to talk about today?”

“I don’t know,” Lois said, suddenly conflicted again. What if she voiced her fears out loud and they sounded stupid? “My career is going well, I am engaged, I have so much that I didn’t have even a year ago...”

She trailed off, not sure of how to say what she wanted to say without sounding ungrateful. Doctor Friskin sensed her discomfort and spoke again, this time her voice a little warmer.

“Lois, do you know why I call that couch you are sitting on my ‘but couch’?”

Lois gave her a curious look.

“No.”

“Because it’s the place where people tell me what they want if only they could get past themselves.” Doctor Friskin chuckled at the obvious confusion still etched over Lois’ face. “The ‘I want to have a baby, but...’ or the ‘I think I need a new car, but...’ or the ‘I want to change jobs, but...’ Now, what’s yours?”

Lois took a deep breath. “I am engaged to marry the man I love, but we haven’t been physically intimate yet, and I am convinced that once we are, I will somehow ruin everything and break his heart, not to mention an ex of mine is also in town...well, I’m not really sure if he counts as an ex...does he count as an ex if he sleeps with you and then leaves you? Anyway, he’s in town and it’s complicating things and there’s a big problem at work that he has to help us with and I don’t know what to do.”

She paused for a breath, took in Doctor Friskin’s deer in headlights look and gave a sheepish smile. “Wow. Big ‘but’.”

Doctor Friskin laughed, and nodded her head in agreement.

“That certainly sounds like a lot,” she agreed and Lois relaxed slightly knowing that Doctor Friskin was taking

her concerns seriously. Ironically, it made her feel less crazy. “Now, let’s talk about this ‘ex who is not an ex’.”

“Claude?” Lois said, blinking slightly. He hadn’t been what she’d thought Doctor Friskin would bring up first. Talk about burying the lead. Still, she played along.

“If that’s his name, yes,” Doctor Friskin replied patiently. “What happened with him?”

Lois took a deep breath and recounted the story that she’d told Clark all those years ago. She found that, although it was still painful to relive those feelings of hurt and abandonment, she no longer felt the same anger that used to simmer in the pit of her stomach. Something about seeing him standing next to Clark the previous day had snuffed that anger out.

“So it sounds like Claude really affected your ability to trust,” Doctor Friskin was saying as she scratched something else down on her pad. *What was she writing?*

“Yes,” Lois replied, but then after some careful thought, added, “but not just him. If I’m honest, Claude wasn’t the first to disappoint me like that. There was my boyfriend in high school, and Paul from college and... well, let’s just say that the men who abandoned me after sleeping with me were the good ones. The other ones, like Lex Luthor, turned out to be murderers and sociopaths.”

“So, is it just the fact that Claude is here that has you conflicted?” Doctor Friskin wondered.

“No,” Lois said after some careful thought. “I was thinking about him before this. Clark and I hadn’t talked about making love until recently. He and I both shared some things about our past. I told him I wanted to wait until our wedding night, and I guess that’s when I started thinking about it...about him.”

“Why do you think that is?” Doctor Friskin asked. Lois resisted the urge to grab the notepad out of her hands. Instead, she forced herself to think about the question... really think about it.

“I think maybe it’s because Claude was the last man I slept with before Clark,” she said quietly. “After I woke up to find Claude gone and my story stolen, I kind of shut down for a few years...I deliberately dated men that I knew wouldn’t last past a few dates. Lex was my first actual relationship after Claude and I didn’t...well, I told him I wanted to wait then too.”

“Interesting,” Doctor Friskin said with a raised eye, and Lois wasn’t sure she liked the way she said it. “You told both Lex Luthor and your current fiance you wanted to wait until after the wedding?”

“Yes,” Lois said, feeling somewhat defensive. After all, she didn’t like to think that Clark and Lex had anything in common and yet she’d unintentionally done just that. “But not for the same reasons.”

“Oh?” Doctor Friskin waved an encouraging hand for Lois to continue. Lois sighed. She hated going back to thinking about how she’d almost married Lex Luthor, but Doctor Friskin seemed to think it was important and she was the professional.

Lois cringed as she spoke her next words.

“With Lex, I knew I didn’t love him...I liked him, respected him...admired him even, but I didn’t love him. And I thought I was okay with that. I thought that was all I needed. Everything in my life was so chaotic. I had lost the *Planet* and Clark was drifting away. I thought if I married him, I could control the other elements that were falling apart.”

She snuck a glance at Doctor Friskin and was relieved to see the other woman didn’t look at her the way she felt she deserved. After all, she’d just admitted to almost marrying one of the wealthiest men in the world so that she could control the things in her life that were out of control. Spoken out loud, it made her sound like a gold digger. When Doctor Friskin said nothing, Lois continued.

“When it came to the topic of sex, well...I asked him to wait because I wanted to put it off. Like a chore you know you have to get to eventually. I know that sounds awful, but...”

“It doesn’t sound awful, Lois,” Doctor Friskin interrupted with a kind smile. “I know enough about Lex Luthor and about what you’re describing to know that he operated the way many abusers do — he isolated you from your friends and the people you cared about in order to try to control you. It’s perfectly normal that you put conditions on your intimate life in order to try to regain some of that control.”

Lois blinked, stunned.

“I...I never thought of it that way,” she admitted.

“You did what you could with the tools you had at the time in a situation that was very traumatic. It is okay to forgive yourself,” Doctor Friskin reminded her and Lois suddenly found herself feeling a lump rise in her throat. She hadn’t realised that she’d never forgiven herself for almost marrying a murderer.

“What about Clark?” Doctor Friskin continued. “It sounds like he’s the first relationship since Claude where you’ve wanted to become intimate. Am I correct?”

“Yes,” Lois admitted. Doctor Friskin smiled.

“Then why ask him to wait?”

“It’s like I said before,” Lois said, realising that her reasons might have gotten lost amidst her babbling earlier. “I’m worried I won’t be...what he’s expecting. Clark is... well he’s very sweet, and he’s loyal and the most wonderful person I’ve ever met.”

“And that scares you?” Doctor Friskin asked. “Why?”

“Because he doesn’t know what he’s getting himself into!” Lois blurted out. “I mean I can be...difficult and quick to anger and I’m stubborn and competitive and...”

“And these are all qualities he already knows you possess, correct?”

Lois frowned. She was right, damn it. Doctor Friskin wrote something else down on the pad.

“He does,” she admitted. “But we’ve never lived together. And he’s looking forward to...well, he doesn’t have the same negative experiences with intimacy that I do, and I am worried he’s expecting too much. He might regret it after. And that scares me to death.”

“Because you’re afraid he might leave like Claude and the others?” Doctor Friskin asked. Lois hated the compassion in her tone. She liked it better when her face was impassive. Seeing the kindness in Doctor Friskin’s eyes only made her want to break down. She would not do that.

“No,” she said quietly. “I know Clark would never leave. That’s the problem.”

“I see,” Doctor Friskin nodded, still writing. Lois finally felt her patience give out. It was easier to get angry than it was to deal with the heavy feeling in her chest.

“No, you don’t see!” she exclaimed. “I have no idea what I’m doing! I have no idea how to be in a healthy relationship, no idea how to be a wife or a mother...I was never taught that!”

She stood up and began pacing while Doctor Friskin watched on, still writing in her notepad.

“And what if we have kids?” she continued, her voice rising as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her. She had no idea she’d been this stressed out until now. “Or he wants a house? Or I become unbearable to live with and our marriage turns into a mess and it’s all my fault?”

Lois looked back and gave a strangled laugh.

“He would stay...even if it became a living hell, he would stay.” She looked down at her shoes, and the air seemed to go out of her. “At least when they left, I knew what to do.”

“I see,” Doctor Friskin said softly. “So you believe that once you become physically intimate, that part of yourself that you’ve been holding back will be vulnerable. And that if the relationship doesn’t work out, the pain will be prolonged by Clark’s loyalty and devotion to you?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Doctor Friskin seemed to have this ability to explain complex issues in a way that Lois had never considered before.

“I could destroy him,” she admitted, her voice a scared rasp.

“Lois, these are all extremely normal fears for someone who has had the experiences you’ve had,” Doctor Friskin reassured her and Lois sat back down. “And we can work

through those fears one by one. But I think the most important thing you need to keep reminding yourself of is that you are not your parents. You are not doomed to repeat the mistakes they made. The fact that you are with a man like Clark helps to show you are breaking free of unhealthy patterns.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her voice much more tentative than she was used to hearing. She wasn’t comfortable with this feeling of insecurity and uncertainty.

“Well,” Doctor Friskin said as she checked her notes, “in the past, you’ve spoken about your parents and their relationship. You’ve also told me about some of your past romantic experiences, and I can see a clear pattern here.”

Now, Lois really wanted to see the notepad, but she also wanted to hear what Doctor Friskin had to say. She needed to know that she and Clark were going to be okay. That she wasn’t a ticking time bomb set to go off the moment they made love for the first time. Doctor Friskin continued speaking.

“Your father left you at a vulnerable point in your development, and as a result, you often sought out relationships with men who were either older than you, in positions of power, or both. Paul, Claude, Lex...even Superman to an extent fits this pattern. But Clark...Clark is your equal. You are partners, with neither one of you holding power over the other. You complement each other and you respect each other. That’s why he scares you. He’s mature, emotionally available and ready to take the next step. The only question is, are you?”

“So, what you’re saying is that I have ‘Daddy issues’?” Lois said, making a joke that was intended to deflect from the feelings coursing through her.

“Well, that’s not the clinical term for it,” Doctor Friskin said softly. “You didn’t answer my question. Are you ready to take the next step?”

“I want to be,” Lois said fervently. “When he looks at me the way he does, it’s all that I have not to just...give in. Should I? Should I just go for it? Bite the bullet? Rip the bandaid off? Jump in the...what are you writing on that pad?”

Doctor Friskin blinked at her momentary outburst and turned the pad around to face Lois.

“Just some ideas for our next session — ways that can help you handle negative thoughts so that they don’t overwhelm you or sabotage your relationship.” She chuckled. “And no, my professional opinion is not that you need to ummm...jump in the pool. In fact, I would say at this point that’s the last thing you want to do. You need to work through these fears. And doing so is going to require honesty — honesty with yourself and with Clark. Have you tried talking to him about your feelings?”

“A little,” she said and even that was stretching the truth. The conversation they’d had inside the virtual reality simulation had been the only real acknowledgment to him and to herself that she was scared to move things forward. Even then, she’d allowed him to reassure her, telling herself she was being ridiculous. But now she realised looking at Doctor Friskin that she wasn’t.

“You need to talk to him,” Doctor Friskin insisted. “If you are going to enter into an intimate relationship, it is crucial that you be able to talk about it with him before and after. The first time might not always be wonderful. Sometimes it takes time. Time to get to know the other person — what they like, what they don’t like. You’ve never really had the chance to learn that, it sounds like. Developing an honest narrative with Clark from the beginning will allow you both to work on it together. If you do that, I promise you that you will both be satisfied.”

“So is that my homework then?” Lois asked, feeling slightly shaky at the idea of talking that openly to Clark about sex. As best friends, she had always felt they could talk about anything, and yet somehow this seemed overwhelmingly difficult. Doctor Friskin stood up.

“That, and I want you to talk to Claude.”

Lois looked at her in surprise.

“You want me to what?” she echoed.

“You said he was back in town, did you not?” Doctor Friskin asked. Lois nodded. “Then I think you owe it to yourself to sit down with him and have a conversation.”

“And tell him what?” Lois said angrily. “That he hurt me? That he destroyed my faith in men? That he is the reason why I can’t make love to my amazing fiancée?”

“Tell him whatever you feel comfortable saying,” Doctor Friskin replied mildly. “Whether you confront him is up to you. For the last few years he has occupied an elevated space in your mind and in your emotions. He’s just a man. The point of having a conversation with him is to see him that way. Can you do that?”

“I suppose,” Lois said, though she was reluctant to do so. She knew Clark wouldn’t be crazy about the idea either, though she also knew he would never say or do anything to prevent it. She thanked Doctor Friskin and headed out to her car.

As she drove back to the *Planet*, she ruminated on the conversation with Doctor Friskin. Both things she’d been asked to do required very real and very scary conversations. Lois wasn’t sure she was up to them yet. But she also knew that she had to be and soon. Her relationship depended on it.

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## Chapter 7

Lois entered the bullpen and scanned the room, looking for Clark. She spotted him eventually, sitting at her desk with Claude having pulled up a chair next to him. He

appeared equal parts weary and irritated – an expression usually reserved for those times when Ralph would corner him at office parties to talk. She suddenly felt bad for leaving him with Claude for this long. It must have taken immense patience.

As she approached the two of them, the look of extreme relief on Clark’s face was hard to miss. She placed a gentle kiss on his head as he stood up and gave her his chair. Claude shifted over, and Clark grabbed another chair from a nearby empty desk.

“Everything okay?” he asked, when he sat down again. She could see there was still a small part of him that worried about this nonspecific doctor’s appointment.

“Fine,” she said brightly. And then, softer so only he could hear her, “Thank you. I *will* make it up to you, I promise.”

“Well, we’ve done some digging here,” Claude piped up, gesturing to some of the printouts on the desk in front of her.

“This our list of snipers?” Lois wondered. Clark nodded.

“We’ve already ruled out a few,” Clark informed her. “The rest we thought we would divide among the three of us.”

“Good idea,” she agreed. She gave him a meaningful look. “What are we going to tell Perry?”

“Nothing yet,” Clark said with a sigh. She could tell he didn’t like the idea of leaving Perry out of the loop. “I...we figured it was best until we have something concrete. Given how dangerous this is, the fewer people who know, the better.”

“That’s logical,” Lois replied. She looked over at Claude and gave Clark another look as if to say ‘*what do we do with him?*’

“The trade talks begin tomorrow,” Claude supplied as if reading their minds. “I thought I would do some research for a piece on the talks themselves. I can use it as an excuse to get into the hotel and speak to anyone willing to talk to me and see if any of the French conspirators are here. I heard voices, after all. I might hear them again and be able to put a face to a name.”

“It’s a good plan,” Clark said and she knew he was right. It also meant Claude would be largely out of their hair, which was also a bonus. Before Lois could reply, however, a familiar look on Clark’s face let Lois know that Superman’s services were required. She could also see that he was having trouble thinking of a reason to leave – he was never very good at that.

“Clark, don’t you have to pick up that thing for me?” she said, her own mind blanking at the last second. Okay, so neither of them were that great at last-minute excuses. Funny, considering all the practice they’d had.

“The thing! Right, the thing!” Clark jumped up and began making quick strides towards the elevator. “For the wedding...I know how much you wanted that thing. I’ll be right back.”

Lois watched as the elevator door almost shut on his tie and heard the tell-tale whoosh of him taking off a couple moments later.

Another few moments passed before Lois realised she’d been left alone with Claude for the first time since his arrival in Metropolis. Doctor Friskin’s advice popped into her head, urging her to use this opportunity to talk to him, but Lois for the life of her had no idea what to say. The Claude in her head and the man in front of her seemed to be two different people, and Lois honestly wasn’t sure which of them she wanted or needed to speak to.

She was, however, acutely aware that Claude seemed to be giving her a look that indicated he was gearing up to say something, and Lois was almost certain that whatever it was, she didn’t want to hear it. She gave him a bright smile and handed him half the list of the names of snipers.

“He shouldn’t be too long,” Lois told him. “We should use this time to look into these guys. Separately. Away from each other. Somewhere else.”

“You know, Lois, I was hoping to get the chance to speak to you privately,” Claude said, his blue eyes serious. Lois inwardly groaned. She didn’t want to do this right now. Not out of any lingering feelings for Claude, but because her own fears and reservations about taking the next step with Clark were so near the surface. She didn’t want to conflate the two.

“I sensed that,” Lois acknowledged, hoping her voice sounded as neutral as possible, “but I really don’t have anything I want to say to you. And there is nothing you could say that would be of any interest to me, so can we just leave the past where it belongs? In the past?”

“I...” Claude blinked, clearly surprised by her words. He’d obviously been expecting a different response. “Yes, of course. If that’s how you feel.”

“It is,” Lois said abruptly, not wanting to encourage the line of conversation any further. She saw him nod and stand up, list in hand.

“I will of course respect your wishes,” he promised. “But if you change your mind, I am here. In the meantime, I’m going to start making some calls and see if we can cross some people off the list.”

Lois nodded, feeling relieved that she hadn’t had to convince him further to leave things be. She knew she would eventually have to discuss what happened between them so many years ago, but when that happened she wanted it to be on her terms, when she knew what she wanted to say to him.

She watched as he retreated to Clark’s desk, and she marvelled at the feeling of utter disconnect she had as she watched him. Looking at him, it was hard to believe they had ever been intimate. And yet the memories of that night they had spent together were as real and as vivid as ever. As were the feelings of hurt and betrayal.

She shook her head and forced herself back to work, telling herself that when it was time to deal with those feelings and the man responsible for them, she would be more prepared.

She picked up the phone and began making calls to try and discover the current whereabouts of the men on the list in front of her. After about half an hour, she’d managed to cross quite a few names off the list as a result of the men in question being deceased, elderly or incarcerated. She was about to give up and take a break for lunch when she decided to investigate one more name — a man named Preston Mills.

Lois thought the name sounded vaguely familiar but couldn’t place it. His last known whereabouts was the Metropolis Maximum Security Penitentiary, so she dialled the number for the prison, feeling that it should be easy enough to cross that name off the list given the fact that inmates of that prison tended to be there for life.

When she was put through to the warden — a man named Mev Thompson, she introduced herself and explained her reason for calling.

“I’m doing a follow-up story on a man named Preston Mills. Do you have an inmate by that name?”

She phrased it in such a way that allowed Warden Thompson to offer her the information she needed rather than requesting it directly.

“We uh...used to,” Warden Thompson said, sounding distinctly uncomfortable. “He was here up until very recently. Apparently, some evidence of his trial came to light that rendered the verdict invalid. He’s been released with a full pardon.”

“He *what?*” Lois exclaimed far louder than she’d realised, for several people around her turned to look at her. “I thought he was serving three consecutive life sentences.”

“He, uh...he was,” Warden Thompson replied, and she could almost hear him sweating on the other end. “Believe me, I wasn’t happy about it, but the decision was made by the higher courts. He must have friends in high places. Given who was in the cell next to him, Ms. Lane, it hardly surprised me. Well, I’m sure you understand, given what happened and all.”

“What do you mean?” Lois asked, feeling a cold chill settle in the pit of her stomach. Before the warden even responded, she knew what he was going to say. She knew



who else was in that prison serving consecutive life sentences. After all, she'd put him there.

"His cell was right next to Lex Luthor's," Warden Thompson told her. "They became quite close. Believe me, if there was anything I could have done..."

"I understand," Lois said, though her voice sounded hollow to her ears. "Thank you for your time."

She hung up the phone, just as Clark came back into the newsroom. The look on her face must have told him that she was upset because he was next to her in a heartbeat, his hand on her shoulder.

"What is it?"

"I think I've found our sniper," Lois said, her voice shaky. "A man named Preston Mills. He was released recently after his conviction was overturned due to faulty evidence."

"What makes you so sure he's our guy?" Clark wondered, though she could tell by the tone of voice he believed her. He was waiting for her to tell him what was wrong. She took a deep breath.

"His cell was next to Lex's," she replied. "They knew each other, which means..."

"Somehow, Lex is behind this," Clark finished for her, his voice hard.

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## Chapter 8

"I'm going to get some lunch," Claude offered, seeing the joint expressions on Lois and Clark's faces. "Does anybody want anything?" Five minutes ago, she'd been thinking of getting lunch herself. Now, the very thought of food made her nauseous. She shook her head, as did Clark and watched as Claude headed towards the elevator. She wasn't sure if he was eager to excuse himself because he knew details of Lois' disastrous almost-marriage (it had made international news, after all) or because he could simply read the room and knew his presence was not wanted. Either way, she was glad he left.

As soon as he was gone, she stood up and found herself pacing quickly back and forth, trying to slow down the onslaught of emotions and feelings that raced through her.

"I can't believe this," Lois said, her voice louder and more distressed than she intended. She could tell that she was drawing the attention of others in the newsroom, but couldn't bring herself to care. Clark sat on her desk watching her pace with a somewhat helpless expression on his face. "Was there an ad in the classifieds? A billboard on the highway? A sign from the Universe saying 'Lois is getting married soon, let's bring back not one but two ex-boyfriends?' And not just exes...exes I could handle, but one is a full blown psychopath! Boy, do I sure know how to pick 'em! Clark, are you sure you don't secretly have a cellar full of dead bodies buried under your parents' farmhouse back in Kansas?"

Clark jumped up and interrupted her mid-pace, to gather her into his arms, kissing her gently. She melted into the kiss almost instantly, the feel of his lips and steady reassuring thump of his heart calming her. When she pulled back she gave him a shaky smile.

"Lois, it's okay, we will figure this out," he promised her softly. "He's still behind bars. We have time."

"I know," she admitted, "it just seems like everywhere I turn lately, I'm reminded of times when I trusted people only to have them turn out to be the complete opposite of who I thought they were."

Clark looked down and fidgeted slightly with this tie. When he spoke, his voice was soft and regretful.

"I'm sorry. I suppose I'm guilty of this too...being the opposite of who you thought I was, I mean."

"I didn't mean you, Clark," Lois replied gently. "You never lied to hurt me. You lied to protect the people you care about. It's just...nothing seems simple anymore, and sometimes I have no idea who to trust."

"Well, you can trust me," Clark said firmly, and she could see the truth in his eyes. "I promise you. No bodies in the cellar. That's where my mom keeps all her art supplies, so they'd never fit anyway."

She gave a soft laugh, and leaned her head against his chest.

"I'm sorry, I'm just...upset," she admitted. He cupped her face with the palm of his hand and kissed her forehead gently.

"I know," he replied, "and you have every right to be. This is a lot, even for us. First Claude and now..."

She noticed that he couldn't seem to even say Lex's name which made her feel a little better. The usually unflappable Clark Kent was well and truly, well...flapped.

"I just wasn't expecting this," she said as she sank down into her chair. "Prison is supposed to mean they're gone...not able to hurt you...safe."

"Out of sight, out of mind?" he said wryly, sitting down next to her and taking her hand in his. "Doesn't always work that way, does it?"

"No," she agreed, exhaling slowly. "It doesn't. But I wish it did."

They were both quiet for a few moments, as Lois processed all the information. Eventually, she sat up and squared her shoulders, trying to force herself to focus on the task at hand.

"Well, now that we know he's behind this, we at least have a better idea of figuring out what this is," she told him, feeling suddenly extremely tired. It wasn't even noon yet, and somehow it felt like her session with Doctor Friskin had occurred a week ago. She looked up at Clark and smiled as a way of reassuring him that the moment of

insecurity had passed and that Lois Lane was back behind the wheel.

“What do you suggest?” he asked. A sea of possibilities raced through her mind, but only one clear choice jumped out at her. Still, she knew just by looking at Clark that he wasn’t going to like it.

“He’ll talk to me if I go down there,” she said, and before Clark could interrupt, rushed ahead with her reasoning. “After all, his obsession with me put him there. I doubt he’s let go of the delusion that I might one day change my mind, so if I could just get him to think that I...”

“Lois, you can’t be serious!” Clark exclaimed, looking at her as if she’d just announced she was going to move to Maine to open a taxidermy studio and candy store. “The man is psychotic and obsessed with you!”

“And locked up,” she argued back, refusing to allow herself to respond to Clark’s obvious distress. “He can’t hurt me. And seeing me might throw him off kilter. He could get sloppy...make a mistake.”

“Or, seeing you is exactly what he wants,” Clark shot back, his eyes hardening ever so slightly. Lois could tell that he would not agree to this easily. Well and truly flapped, indeed. “Think of it, Lois! He’s a genius. He had to have known we would figure out the connection between Mills and himself. He’d be counting on it! He’s probably waiting for you right now.”

“So what if he is?” Lois retorted, finding herself getting irritated after all, despite her resolve not to. “What can he do to me, Clark? How can he hurt me?”

“I don’t know,” Clark replied, frustration lacing every word. “I just know that I don’t want you anywhere near him.”

Lois was about to respond when she noticed Claude approaching quietly in the background with two large takeout bags from the deli down the street in hand. He got to the desk, the tension so thick she could cut it with a knife. She looked right past Claude to Clark, her anger simmering below the surface.

“I, uh, got you both some sandwiches, anyway,” Claude said, pulling them out of the bags. Lois could see that Clark had not budged an inch despite Claude’s mistimed entrance, and her anger only grew.

Fiance or not, he had no right to tell her what to do. It made sense to talk to Luthor. Clark’s emotions were clouding his judgement right now, and he couldn’t see it. He had no right to demand she stay away, and yet she couldn’t say those things in front of Claude. She would not let the man who destroyed her faith in relationships see the cracks that were suddenly forming in hers.

She took out a sandwich and unwrapped it quietly, trying to think of the best way to respond that didn’t look as if she was backing down.

“I think we should do some more research on Preston Mills,” she said finally. “And it’s probably time to bring Perry into the loop. We have a name. He might have contacts that can tell us more about this guy.”

“Fine,” Clark said, his jaw rigid. Lois nodded curtly and turned her attention back to her computer. Clark waited a moment, then stood up. “I’ll go speak to Perry. You dig up what you can. Please don’t go anywhere.”

He was halfway across the newsroom before she could respond, and she felt the tension drain from her as soon as he was out of earshot.

“I’m sorry,” Claude said, and she could tell he’d heard most of the argument. “For what it’s worth, I think he’s just worried about you.”

She was about to tell him to mind his business, that he knew nothing about her, but something in the nature of his tone of voice told her that he genuinely only was trying to help. The impulse passed and Lois touched a tired hand to her forehead. She hadn’t been prepared for Clark to be so stubborn, nor had she been prepared for Claude to exhibit genuine concern. Both made her incredibly weary.

“Lex Luthor might be involved,” she said, running her hand through her hair. “Neither one of us thinks straight where he’s concerned, considering...”

“I know,” Claude replied and she saw a flash of the charming and warm man she’d once thought him to be all those years ago. She was too tired to try to figure out whether it was genuine or a ruse. She simply gave him a small smile.

“Thank you,” she told him. “I should, uh...”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he said, jumping up as well. “I think I might go down to the hotel and see if I can get a representative to speak with me about the talks. I will see you both tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow,” Lois agreed as he stood up and straightened his suit jacket.

“Look, I know you said you didn’t want to talk, and I meant it when I said I would mind my business but if you change your mind at all, I’ll be here,” he said before turning to head back towards the elevator.

Lois focused the rest of her efforts that day on digging up as much as she could with regard to Preston Mills as a way of distracting herself from the golf ball of anxiety that had taken up residence in her chest. Clark made a few attempts to talk to her, but she either gave him short responses or redirected the conversation back to work. Eventually, he seemed to give up and did the same.

By the end of the day, she found herself standing up to get her coat and noticed that Clark had made his way back

to her side. He looked apologetic which helped the anxiety lessen a little bit.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “Hearing Lex Luthor’s name always throws me for a bit of a loop. I handled that badly.”

“Thank you,” she replied, giving herself permission to let go of her anger for the moment. He didn’t bring up Lex again and neither did she. She didn’t want to get into another argument and she was certain that if they tried to talk about it again it would only result in Clark doubling down on not wanting her to go anywhere near the prison. She could tell even now he hoped for her to reassure him that she wouldn’t, and she wanted to, she really did.

But part of her knew that it was a promise she couldn’t keep. So they both pretended his apology was enough as they got ready to head home.

They got into the elevator and she was surprised when he took her hand and pulled her close, kissing both her cheeks softly.

“Do you...” he hesitated and Lois knew what he was about to say before he said it. “Do you want to come home with me? I can make you dinner and we can pretend today never happened.”

“I want to,” she said, and she hoped he could hear the sincerity in her voice. The way his face dropped told her that he either hadn’t, or it wasn’t enough to fight off the disappointment he was obviously feeling. This was the second night in a row she’d told him she wanted to be alone since Claude’s arrival. And now with Lex...well, Lois only felt as if she were proving to herself just how truly bad at relationships she was.

“But you want to be alone,” Clark finished for her, his voice heavy.

“It’s nothing you’ve done wrong, Clark, I promise,” Lois insisted. “I just need some space. Yesterday, I only had Claude to deal with and now Lex...”

The elevator dinged and the two stepped out into the parking garage. Lois fished for her keys, trying to ignore the look on Clark’s face as she reached her Jeep.

“You seem to be pretty okay with Claude being around,” he observed mildly though she could hear the insecurity in his voice.

“That’s not fair,” she said, her voice shaky with hurt. “I just need some space. I need you to understand that it has nothing to do with you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said finally, and he gathered her into his arms. He held her tightly for a moment, and though she wanted to, she couldn’t find it in her to fully return the hug. Instead, after a moment of awkwardness, she shrugged herself out of his arms and stepped back, feeling even more on edge. She got into her Jeep, putting the key in the ignition as Clark placed his hand gently on the

driver’s side door. She’d been about to turn the key when something in his eyes stilled her hand.

“It’s just...” he trailed off and ran a hand nervously through his hair as if he wasn’t sure he should say his next sentence. Her heart plummeted. “In two months, we’re going to be married. You won’t always have an extra apartment to go to everytime you need space.”

Her throat felt tight and she looked away, not wanting him to see that she was near tears. Somehow, without meaning to, he’d managed to hit every insecurity and raw nerve with one sentence. She took a deep breath and turned back towards him.

“I love you,” she said quietly as she turned the key and the Jeep came to life. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

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## Chapter 9

Lois was shaking as she drove home. She had no idea if it was from anger, or from the fact that deep down inside she feared that Clark might be right. Either way, she hadn’t liked hearing it pointed out to her so plainly — not by him. It meant that he was starting to see the thing she feared the most.

She was bad at relationships. She’d desperately hoped that wouldn’t be the case — that because all the other men she’d been with had been liars or worse, that Clark would be the exception. That through sheer force of will and the fact that she loved him, she could stop the cycle of self-sabotage she’d created for herself and others around her. After all, this time she’d picked someone good. Someone who wasn’t going to leave her or steal from her or worse, try to control the free world like some sort of megalomaniacal Bond villain.

She’d picked Clark. A man who was literally a symbol for truth, honesty and goodness. If she couldn’t make it work with him, then something inside her was fundamentally broken.

And if that were true, what did that mean? Was she destined to repeat the mistakes of her parents? Doctor Friskin didn’t think so. She seemed to think that if Lois simply communicated her fears to Clark they could work things out. And oh, she wanted to believe she was right. After all, therapy and healthy communication were tools she’d never seen her parents use. Maybe their relationship hadn’t needed to go the way it did.

But then...Lois had the opportunity to communicate with him tonight. She could have gone back to his place and talked to him — *really* talked to him about what was bothering her. But instead, she’d asked for space, which was really just code for wanting to run away.

One argument, it seemed, had been all it had taken for Lois to want to retreat. And she didn’t know what that meant, but she was certain it wasn’t good.

She arrived home and made her way up the steps to her door. Her hands trembled as she placed the key in the lock and went inside. She dropped her things by the door, locked it for good measure and made her way into the living room, sitting down on her couch and putting her head in her hands. She wanted to cry but for some reason the tears wouldn't come.

She felt more drained than she ever had in her life.

Her conversation with Clark replayed in her head on a loop along with his vehement reaction to Lois wanting to visit Lex Luthor in prison.

It wasn't as if she wanted to see him. Far from it. The idea of looking that monster in the eye and remembering that she'd almost married him almost made her physically ill. She'd never been a poorer judge of character than she had been with Lex, and it still haunted her to this day.

And yet, she also knew that Lex, in his own twisted way, *had* loved her. It was that sick obsession that she knew could be her way in — her way of taking back some of the power that Lex had stolen from her. If she could use him the way he'd used her, she could find out exactly what he was planning and stop him.

She knew it in her bones, and yet when she'd brought it up, Clark had all but forbidden her to go. She'd baulked at that of course and they had fought. And honestly, she wasn't sure who was at fault. She just knew this was something she had to do.

And yet she couldn't forget the look of fear in Clark's eyes when she had suggested going, nor the plea in his voice when he'd told her not to. She knew his response was coming from a place of love, misguided as it was.

She also knew she couldn't enter into a marriage in which anybody told her what she could and couldn't do. Not even Clark.

So where did that leave her?

Alone, for one. Heartsick and so very, very tired. And also, determined to go to the prison in the morning.

The worst part of it was, she wasn't sure if this was yet another method of self-sabotage or if it was the right thing to do. She only knew that there was a threat against the President of the United States, that she was an investigative reporter and that it was her job to pursue all angles, and that Lex Luthor was the key.

She took a deep breath and stood up. Her stomach growled at her and she realised that she hadn't eaten much that day. She couldn't even remember if she'd eaten the sandwich that Claude had delivered.

Claude. There was another fly in the ointment of her life. Where he fit in, she wasn't sure anymore. He'd attempted to be kind to her today. She didn't know if he'd meant it or if he was simply playing another angle. She couldn't be sure, and frankly given her track history, her

own judgement where men were concerned — Clark notwithstanding — was pretty awful. Either way, she couldn't worry about his intentions right now.

She placed a call to the pizza place down the road and sat down to wait. As her food arrived, it occurred to her that between Claude and Lex, only Lex's feelings had been genuine. That thought only made her feel worse. That a psychopath could find it in his heart to love her, but Claude hadn't, brought the hurt back all over again.

How had she managed to find Clark? How had she managed to keep Clark? What would happen to their relationship tomorrow when she went to the prison?

She sighed. Normally, she would share these thoughts and fears with Clark. It surprised her just how close she'd gotten to him — how vulnerable she had allowed herself to be with him. And how much it would hurt if she lost him.

She found her way to the couch and flicked through the channels absentmindedly while she ate slices of a pizza that she didn't remember tasting. She wanted to call Clark. Desperately. But she knew she couldn't do that.

He would ask her to promise him that she wouldn't go to the prison tomorrow. And the one thing she didn't want to do was lie to him. It was better that he didn't know. Once she got the information they needed, she hoped to be able to use it in order to smooth things over with Clark. Whether it would work was anyone's guess, but at this point she was operating under the 'it's better to ask forgiveness than permission' mindset.

She'd never been good at asking permission.

Eventually, she found herself glancing up at the window, surprised to see the sun had set and it was now dark. Looking at the clock confirmed that it was indeed very late. Her whole body suddenly ached with weariness, both from the day and from what tomorrow would inevitably bring.

A visit to Lex Luthor and a confrontation with Clark. Mix in a little Claude and poof. Recipe for a terrible day.

She padded into her bedroom and climbed into bed, pulling the covers over her and wondering what it would be like to go to bed like this with Clark every night — his arms holding her tightly and his kisses banishing all her fears.

Or would it be like her parents — nightly fights with one of them routinely banished to the couch? Lois wanted to believe the former, but she feared the latter.

One thing she was sure of, though, was that she wanted him with her tonight. She wanted him to remind her that she was loved and wanted and that she was worth loving. She knew he would be here in ten seconds if she called.

She fell asleep with that thought in her mind, both reassuring and frightening in equal measure.

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Lois arrived at the prison the following day feeling equally determined and terrified. She had called and left a message with Jimmy as to her whereabouts, which would obviously get back to Clark and Claude eventually. Doing so felt somewhat cowardly, but it had been necessary if she wanted to avoid the argument and/or appearance of Superman that would inevitably follow.

Sometimes it was a pain in the butt having a fiancée that could literally get to your location within seconds.

She entered the prison and showed them her press pass. She tried not to notice the raised eyebrow that followed when she announced that she was there to interview Lex Luthor for a story she was writing. It was no secret what had happened, after all, so she was grateful at least that nothing was said.

She was led into the prison and handed a visitor's pass. A list of rules followed with regards to what she could or couldn't do when speaking with Lex. She was mildly shocked to find out that she hadn't needed to use her press pass at all to get in — he'd apparently put her down on his list of approved visitors. The thought made her nauseous.

The guard eventually stopped in front of a door and told her that Lex had already been moved into the room inside. She'd be allowed to speak with him alone, as long as he was chained to the table. She felt both reassured and terrified at the prospect of facing him even with a guard right outside the door.

"Whenever you're ready, Ms. Lane," the guard said with a gesture towards the door. "A tap on the door will let me know when you're finished."

She nodded, took a deep breath and entered the room.

The man that sat in front of her came as a bit of a shock. Oh, she'd seen him once following his resurrection. He'd lost his hair because of the regeneration process and had looked very much a shabby version of his formerly wealthy and polished self. So much so that part of her had felt sorry for him. That pity had been short lived when he'd attempted to take her hostage and run away with her in order to rebuild his lost empire. He'd been delusional enough to hope that she would eventually fall in love with him, if he kept her captive long enough. It took a double-cross by his personal assistant Nigel, and Superman for him to finally end up in jail.

Now, despite the fact that his hair had grown back, he somehow seemed smaller. The orange jumpsuit and prison number where a three-piece designer suit would normally be somehow diminished him in a way that made her feel safer.

He was just a man.

She allowed her nerves to settle and sat down opposite him. He smiled and something in that twisted smile brought the nerves back tenfold.

"Hello, Lois," he said softly. "I'm so glad you came to see me."

"This isn't a social visit, Lex," she said coldly. "I'm here for information."

"Yes, I know," he replied, that silky smoothness never leaving his voice despite his circumstances. "I've been expecting you."

And it made sense. She hadn't thought anything of it a few moments ago, but the fact that he'd been moved here before she reached the room suggested he'd known she was coming. She felt nauseous again as she realised Clark might have been right after all.

She fervently wished he was sitting here next to her, helping her get the information she needed. She was suddenly not sure she was emotionally capable of thinking straight and worried she would make a mistake somehow.

*Nonsense, she told herself. He's in here, you're out there. He can't hurt you. He's in chains. Ask your questions. Be methodical. You're Lois Lane.*

Her pep talk worked and she forced herself to look at Lex with renewed detachment.

"How could you be expecting me?" she asked, forcing her voice to sound as neutral as possible.

"Oh, come now, don't play stupid," Lex said, the glint in his eyes reminding her what he was fully capable of. She suppressed a shiver. "It doesn't suit you. You're here because you believe there will be an attempt to assassinate the President of the United States. You've discovered that the gentleman who used to reside in the cell next to me is an accomplished sniper, and you believe I had something to do with his release and thus the threat against the President."

*Okay then, she thought to herself. Cards on the table. Fine.*

"Are you behind it?" she asked, allowing a hint of detached curiosity to seep through. She knew that Lex had an ego the size of Canada, and if she could get him thinking she might be impressed, he could let something slip. As it was, she was still mildly unnerved that he seemed totally in control of the conversation despite being the one in prison.

He sat back and smiled a little wider. He was enjoying this. Lois wasn't a violent person by nature, but she suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to punch him in the face. After everything he'd put her through, for him to sit there, smiling as if this was some sort of game...

*It is a game, she reminded herself, and he wins if you play it. Stay calm, and don't play.*

She squared her shoulders and met his smug expression head on.

"You didn't answer my question. Are you behind this?"

“Now how on Earth could I be behind it?” he asked innocently. “After all, I’m in prison.”

Lois suddenly understood the rules of the game. He was giving her clues — daring her to work it out. He knew how much she loved a challenge which meant...

She suppressed another shudder as she realised that this was a form of intimacy for him, like some kind of twisted foreplay — and she had to participate if she wanted her answers. She almost stood up to leave right then and there. To be a part of it, felt like a betrayal to Clark, especially since he hadn’t wanted her to come in the first place. And yet, she wasn’t the one whose life was at stake. Swallowing the bile that threatened to rise in the back of her throat, she plastered a smile on her face and softened her tone.

“Preston Mills’ conviction was overturned by a higher court,” she said, “and I know you once had at least a few judges in your pocket. You could have orchestrated his release.”

“And why would I do that?” he asked, his smile growing wider and his voice deepening the way it used to do in intimate moments when they were dating. “If I had those sorts of connections, why not get myself out of prison instead?”

“Because you clearly need him,” Lois said and she knew she was grasping at straws now. She had no idea why Lex would go to such lengths to get a sniper released but not himself. But it all came back to the President. For some reason, he cared more about the President’s death than he did about his own freedom.

Unless...a horrible thought occurred to her.

“How long have you been planning this?” she asked, a slight tremor of fear sneaking into her voice, unbidden and unwanted. “Have you always been able to...get out if you wanted to?”

“You mean my connections?” he wondered, a hint of pride in his voice. She’d figured out at least part of it, and he wasn’t the least bit worried. On the contrary. It only made her more frightened, and she forced her hands not to shake. “The fact that I could have just as easily gotten that same judge to overturn my own conviction?”

“Then why didn’t you?” she countered, unable to keep the anger out of her voice. He was winning this game, damn it. She never should have come. “Why sit in this prison cell for so long if you could so easily get out?”

“Because,” he replied, sitting forward now. His eyes narrowed and his voice hardened, and there was no mistaking the threat in it now. “I get my conviction overturned and you, your irritating Mr. Kent, and the blue menace in spandex would work tirelessly to find a way to put me back here. And one day, I might run out of judges. My power is limited, I’m not ashamed to admit that. But I

also know that when I do walk out of here, it will be with the full knowledge that nothing and nobody can send me back.”

“How can you possibly be sure of that?” she asked, her mouth dry. The look in his eyes was pure madness, and she couldn’t shake the terror that had settled inside her. She’d almost married him.

“You have the information you need, Lois,” he told her softly. “I think this interview is over. Please let the guard know I am ready to return to my cell.”

He waved a hand as if to dismiss her and Lois felt a surge of rage overtake her. This entire interview had been on his terms and now he was telling her to leave? She might not be able to punch him, but she sure as hell wasn’t about to go quietly.

She leaned forward so that their faces were inches from each other and grabbed his collar. His eyes widened in surprise. He hadn’t been expecting this. Good.

“You like to be in control, Lex,” she said calmly. “But there are some things even you can’t control. And I know what this is all about.”

“Oh?” He sounded confident but there was a short flicker in his eyes that told her she’d gotten under his skin.

“You’re still under the delusion that someday I might have feelings for you. That I might love you. You think that you need to rebuild your empire and then you’ll win me back.”

“It’s possible,” Lex said, his voice finally wavering. “After all, you loved me once.”

“No, I didn’t,” she said flatly. “I never loved you. I couldn’t love you. You had me fooled into thinking you were a good person for a while, but even then I didn’t love you. But you know who I do love? Clark. And there is nothing that you can do that will ever change that. Even if you get out of here, even if all your plans succeed, the one thing you can’t control is me. And until the day I die, I will always see you as a vile, pathetic, cowardly little worm.”

She let go of his collar and stood up. Lex looked shaken for a moment, then pulled himself back together, the mask slipping into place like a familiar piece of clothing.

“I’ll get the guard now,” she said softly. “Thanks for the information.”

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## Chapter 10

Lois exited the prison trembling and shaken. She’d only managed to get ten feet from it before she heard a familiar whoosh behind her. She turned to see Clark, still in the suit as he ducked into an alleyway and exited it dressed in his work clothes. He took several large steps towards her, his expression unreadable but intense.

Before she had a chance to say anything, he grasped her shoulders, his voice laced with fear.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

Surprised by his arrival, and still heavily affected by what had happened in the prison, she shifted away from him and took a step back. She hadn't meant to, but the anger at having been duped by Lex Luthor, coupled with the fact that he'd all but begged her not to go there in the first place, was all sorts of confusing.

She didn't know who she was angrier with — herself for allowing Lex to make her feel vulnerable, Clark for being right about him, or Lex for still having the ability to terrify her. It was perhaps a combination of all three, but looking into Clark's worried brown eyes, she could feel herself unable to stop the tidal wave that she was about to unleash on him despite the fact that she knew it wasn't fair.

“I'm fine,” she snapped. “I didn't need a rescue. You shouldn't be here.”

“Neither should you!” he shot back, and she could see he was trying to control his emotions, which for some reason only made her angrier. He *should* be mad at her! He had every right to be mad at her! He'd told her not to come here. “But since you are, I thought you might want some back up from your partner.”

“Oh come off it, Clark,” she retorted, wanting to get a rise out of him for reasons she didn't fully understand. “You wanted to say I told you so. You wanted to...”

“What?” he interrupted, and the expression on his face — a mixture of anger and terror — froze her in her tracks. “See you get hurt? Is that what you think?”

“I was perfectly safe in there,” she responded, choosing to ignore the look in his eyes. She turned instead and began to walk quickly towards the parking lot, knowing she couldn't walk faster than him but determined to make a show of it anyway.

“There are other ways he can hurt you, Lois, and we both know it,” he said slowly. She swallowed and refused to look at him. If she did she might fall apart and she didn't want to fall apart. If she fell apart, it would mean Lex Luthor had won. She wouldn't let him win.

“Yeah, well I'm not that fragile and I would appreciate it if you would stop treating me like I'm made of glass.”

“And I would appreciate it if you would actually treat me like your partner and take my concerns seriously,” he replied and the hurt in his voice felt like a knife to her own heart. “I would have backed you up in there, even if I didn't want you going. We're supposed to be a team. I mean we're talking about you going all by yourself to see...”

She rounded on him, unable to handle the fact that she'd managed to hurt him this way on top of everything else.

“What, Clark? My ex-fiance? A mass murderer? What bothers you more?”

“That's not fair,” he said and she knew she'd gone too far but couldn't seem to rein herself in. It was like someone else had taken control of her body and was doing their best to lash out at the one person who was supposed to be there for her at all costs. The sane part of her sat helpless and trapped, unable to stop it.

They reached her Jeep and Lois got inside, unable to look at Clark for fear of what she might say next. She had no idea why she felt this determined to be hurtful. Was she testing him? Pushing him just to see how much he would take before walking away? She didn't like the thought.

Clark opened the door of the passenger side and got in. Lois still couldn't look at him but she knew he was looking at her, and the feeling caused a lump to form in her throat, though she knew she wouldn't cry in front of him. Not right now.

They drove to the *Planet* in silence, Lois keeping her eyes firmly on the road and pretending to listen to the radio, which was stuck on some oldies station. She could almost feel Clark's desire to reach out to her and she silently begged him not to. She needed her anger right now. She needed it to prevent herself from collapsing entirely. She needed it to stay strong.

As they pulled into the parking lot of the *Planet*, Clark spoke, his voice sad and resigned.

“Are you going to tell me what you learned?” he asked tentatively. “I'm assuming he told you something.”

“Nothing useful,” she muttered, though somehow deep inside she knew that wasn't true. Lex had controlled the conversation, that was true, but somehow she knew that if she thought about it rationally, she'd be able to figure out where he'd slipped up. Rational thinking where Lex was concerned, however, would require help from her partner and she wasn't ready to ask for that yet. She wasn't sure she would ever be ready for that.

They lapsed back into silence as they rode the elevator up, and Lois could feel keenly the absence of his touch. She suddenly realised that apart from when he'd grabbed her outside the jail, he hadn't touched her once.

Once inside the bullpen, Lois was able to school her expression into one of businesslike indifference. Clark, however, did not have the same talent at hiding his feelings. She felt a strong urge to protect him especially since Claude had likely noticed his upset. He sat waiting for them at her desk.

“Did you discover anything while speaking to Mr. Luthor?”

Lois shook her head, making a show of tidying some papers at her desk. When she was alone and had some time to think she would go over the conversation with Lex in her head again. Something he'd said *had* been helpful even if he didn't know it, she just couldn't figure out what it

was. Especially with Clark and Claude in the same room in front of her. She felt like she was stuck in some kind of bizarre twisted parody of *A Christmas Carol* with the ghosts of her relationships past, present and future all in one day.

“Perry knows what’s going on,” Clark supplied. “He thinks we should loop in the police. I managed to talk him out of that, but I think that maybe we should talk to someone. I don’t want to go to the President with this just yet until we know something more definitive.”

“Is there anyone in the police force you trust?” Claude asked. Lois thought for a moment, then she and Clark looked at one another at the same time. Clearly, they were still in sync as far as work was concerned.

“I’ll speak to Inspector Henderson today,” he agreed with a nod. “I’ll make sure he knows only to involve those he feels can be trusted. With Luthor involved, we have to assume anybody can be corrupted.”

Lois winced at his words, though she was certain that it hadn’t been an intentional dig. Anyone can be corrupted indeed. *Focus*, she reminded herself. Then, looking at Claude, something dawned on her.

“Why France?” she wondered. He looked a bit surprised and she suddenly felt a whole new suspicion overtake her. Claude was the one who came here with news there was a plan to assassinate the President. What if he was somehow working with Luthor? It seemed awfully odd that high levels of the French government had an interest in seeing the President gone.

“I beg your pardon?” Claude’s confusion looked genuine but Lois no longer trusted her ability to read people. Lex had that effect on her.

“Why did he choose to bring the French government in on his plans?” she pointed out. “The assassin is from the United States.”

“Well the trade talks are the perfect opportunity to...”

“But he could have organised that without your government knowing,” Clark interrupted, and Lois could tell he was thinking along the same lines. “So what does your government stand to gain?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” Claude admitted. “I don’t know Mr. Luthor as well as...well, perhaps you could help me discover that, Lois.”

Clark frowned and took a step forward shaking his head. She could tell he was about to object and normally she would agree with him, but suddenly the thought of spending time with Claude wasn’t all that horrible. After all, if Claude did have something to do with whatever this was, she was the best person to sniff it out. She would need to gain his trust in order to do that. And for that to happen, she needed Clark out of the way.

“That sounds like a great idea,” she said hastily before Clark could speak. He gave her a surprised look, then saw his expression turn to sadness, which he tried to cover up quickly. “Clark, you liaise with Inspector Henderson. Let him know everything we do, including Luthor’s involvement, such as it is. Claude and I will look into a potential connection between Lex and the French government.”

“I don’t think this is such a good...”

“Did he ever mention any business ties with France?” Claude asked her, already in the swing of things. Lois tried to remember.

“It’s been a while,” she admitted. “I know he mentioned...honeymooning in Paris, but that could have just been him trying to be...romantic.”

She could see Clark flinch at her words and then begin to gather his things to leave. She felt terrible but she knew this was the best way to make Claude think that she believed him completely. Still, as he grabbed his coat and began to leave, Lois stood up and chased after him.

“Clark, wait...” she said, touching him gently on the arm. He turned and she was shocked at the anger she now saw in his eyes. It was the same anger she’d been trying to provoke in him outside the jail. *Oh, God, what have I done?*

“It’s okay,” he said, though the coldness in his voice told her it was anything but. “Go back to Claude. There’s work to do.”

“But Clark, I...”

“Lois, please,” he said, and her heart broke just a little bit. “I...I need some space.”

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Lois went through the rest of the day in a complete daze. Though she’d gotten what she wanted, she feared it had come at a terrible price. Clark was gone for four torturous hours briefing Inspector Henderson, and when he did return he barely spoke to her. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he pretended to write his notes down. At one point he’d had to leave for a rescue and didn’t even bother to come with an excuse. Why would he? It’s not as if they’d been behaving like partners at all that day.

In the meantime, Lois and Claude had made no progress. It was looking less and less as if he were some sort of diabolical plant and more and more like there was a legitimate connection between Lex and the French government that they had yet to discover. That sort of research was going to take time and the talks had already begun.

Given that they had no idea on what day of the talks the assassination was supposed to happen, nor did they have any reason to arrest or hold Preston Mills beyond their word, Lois was feeling the pressure. She desperately



wished Clark was next to her to bounce ideas off of. It was turning out that she and Claude had almost zero working chemistry now that she was no longer infatuated with him. She remembered thinking at the time how well they worked together, but now she understood that they had never had the magic that seemed to exist between her and Clark. And though Claude was intelligent and a good thinker, what she thought had been magic had simply been her naivete in thinking that he saw her as an equal.

Towards the end of the day, they had agreed to split up and go their separate ways. It was going to take some digging to figure out whether Lex's former business partners had ties to the French authorities.

She realised with a start that she'd had the chance to do both of the things that Doctor Friskin had asked her to do – talk to Claude and confide her fears to Clark and had done neither. Instead she'd only alienated Clark further and shut Claude down the moment the opportunity for a talk arose.

Should she book another session with Doctor Friskin? No, there wasn't time for her to be sitting on a therapist's couch when the President's life was at risk. At least, that's what she told herself. In reality she didn't want to admit to her that she had failed so utterly and completely.

Eventually, the day came to a close and Lois hoped she could try to repair the damage she'd created with Clark. She got up, and looked around, expecting to see him. He'd left his desk a few minutes ago, she assumed, to go to the bathroom. She waited and eventually after about fifteen minutes went by, she realised he wasn't coming back. Either he'd gone out on another rescue, or....

No, she didn't want to think that. She didn't want to think that he'd given up. She needed to be able to fix this. Clark was supposed to be the one who stayed.

And yet, she had tried to push him away. Maybe he'd simply taken the hint. Damn it!

She pulled her coat on and headed for the elevator. She felt tears threaten and didn't want to fall apart in the middle of the bullpen.

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## Chapter 11

Lois arrived home and tried to forget the day ever existed. She immediately threw off her pantsuit and blouse, stuffing them angrily in the laundry hamper as if they were to blame for her mood. She put on a pair of sweatpants and a tank top, and headed back into the kitchen. If she was going to be miserable, she would at least be comfortable.

She grabbed a ready-made frozen dinner from the freezer and shoved it in the microwave without even looking to see what it was. She set the timer and then found herself falling down into the chair. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to drown out the panic she felt bubbling up inside.

He'd left. He'd walked out without even saying goodbye. She'd pushed and pushed and pushed and finally he'd just...

What had she done?

She'd told Doctor Friskin that Clark would never leave her. She'd believed it. But surely that was naive. She couldn't expect him to stay and be treated the way she'd treated him, could she? What would that say about him?

And what did it say about her that she had single-handedly ruined the first healthy relationship she'd ever had?

No, she wouldn't cry. She wouldn't...

The microwave beeped and she opened the door, pulling the meal out and burning her hand in the process. She yelped and went over to the sink to run some cold water on it. Her hand trembled and she didn't know whether it was from the burn or the...the...

She needed to call him. She needed to at least try to fix things. She needed to tell him she loved him, that she hadn't meant any of it, that she...

She turned the water off and went over to the phone, picking it up and dialling his number with shaking fingers. She almost didn't hear the sound of him landing on her balcony as the phone rang, but she hadn't been able to miss the way her curtains flared out as he stepped tentatively into her apartment.

He hadn't asked to come in, but he hadn't needed to. There had always been an unspoken agreement between them that if the window was open, he was welcome. She hadn't even realised she'd opened it, but she was suddenly beyond grateful that she had.

His eyes met hers and he spun quickly out of the suit and into a t-shirt and jeans. Her entire body tensed until she noticed the look in his eyes — tender and worried but so full of love it made her heart ache.

"Hi," he said and she could hear the fear in his voice... the uncertainty.

"Hi," she said back, not knowing what else to say. There was so much it felt almost overwhelming.

"Who are you..." he cleared his throat and pointed to the phone she forgot was still in her hand. "Who are you calling?"

"You!" she blurted out, her voice shaky as her shoulders sagged with relief. "I was calling..."

"I'm here," he rasped, taking a small step towards her. The worry, combined with the tenderness and sheer love in his tone caused the walls she'd built around her to dissolve like quicksand.

Before she knew it, she was sobbing — great big gulping sobs. She dropped the phone and began to sink to the floor, only to find he was there, pulling her against him, holding her up as she clutched the fabric of his t-shirt.

She hung on for dear life as a tidal wave of emotion ripped through her, soaking his shirt with her tears in the process. It was okay. He was warm and solid and sturdy.

And he was here.

His hand was rubbing gentle circles on her back, and he placed soft, frequent kisses on the top of her head. In between kisses, he murmured words of reassurance, though for the life of her she couldn't make out what he was saying. All she knew was the love in his voice was unmistakable. It was all she cared about.

"Oh, Clark, I'm sorry," she managed to say as her sobs began to subside. "I didn't mean to push you away, I didn't mean to..."

"Ssssh," he whispered softly, his lips a gentle tickle against the top of her head. "I know. I'm sorry too. I'm here."

It was a few more minutes before she was in any shape to look at him. When she'd finally stopped shaking and the tremble in her hands had all but disappeared, she allowed him to reach down and kiss her so softly she barely felt it, but it left a ripple through her body she felt down to her toes.

"I love you," he said, his dark eyes so intense she shivered involuntarily. "I need you to know that."

"I know," she replied, taking a shaky breath. "Do you want to...sit down?"

Why was she nervous? They were engaged. He'd just proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that he loved her, so why did she still feel so unsettled?

He nodded and they both went over to the couch. Clark sat, but Lois still felt full of nervous energy. She also realised she probably looked like a wreck. She gestured towards the bathroom.

"I'm going to uh...freshen up," she told him. He nodded, and she entered the bathroom almost gasping aloud when she saw how red and puffy her face was from crying. There were some women who could cry so delicately they never even ruined their makeup. Lois was not one of those women.

She grabbed a tissue and immediately went about removing the mascara that had already left dark tear tracks down her cheeks. Once finished, she splashed her face a few times with some water to try to get rid of the puffiness.

Upon re-entering the living room, she noticed the couch empty and a thrill of fear ran through her. The sound of dishes being moved around the kitchen reassured her and when she turned, she saw that Clark was hard at work moving things around, until eventually he placed a frying pan on the top of the oven.

"Oh, Clark, you don't have to..."

"We've had a hard day and we both have to eat," he told her with a smile. Somehow his smile could banish all

her worries, at least temporarily. She wondered if he knew it was her favourite superpower. "Unless you wanted to eat your microwave dinner..."

She glanced at the dinner she'd been prepared to eat before he arrived and noticed it was charred beyond all recognition. No wonder it had burned her. She'd likely not even noticed she'd put the setting on the microwave that high. It was a wonder she hadn't burned the place down.

Cooking had never been something she was very skilled at, but this was a new personal worst. She grimaced and tossed it in the trash, moving towards Clark and touching his arm gently.

"What are you making?"

"Just some scrambled eggs and bacon," he said, dropping a brief but tantalising kiss on her lips before going over to the fridge and getting out the eggs. "I hope you don't mind breakfast for dinner? It's all you have in your fridge...do you ever actually shop for groceries?"

She laughed, relieved that they were back to banter. Banter she could do.

"I love breakfast for dinner," she replied. Then, with mock annoyance, "And I will have you know tomorrow was supposed to be grocery day."

"We still have a lot to learn about each other, don't we?" he asked. The question was innocent enough, but it left an undercurrent of uncertainty — the same undercurrent that had led to Lois' reaction and subsequent attempt to push him away. She took a deep breath.

"You're right," she agreed and watched with fascination as he used his heat vision to heat up the eggs and bacon. Did she know he could do that? "I guess...there's a lot we need to talk about before we..."

"Yeah," he agreed, as he set the table. "For example, me cooking you dinner. We've done it a few times, but..."

"It still feels strange," she finished. "Like we're playing house."

They sat down and the conversation seemed to pause itself as they ate their dinner. Lois found she was suddenly ravenous, her previously non-existent appetite returning with a vengeance. When she finished, Clark chuckled slightly and she suddenly felt shy.

"What?"

"Nothing," he replied, but the mischievous glint in his eyes only spread to his smile. "Just that you inhaled that faster than me...and I have superpowers."

"I guess I was hungry," she admitted. They went back into the living room and he sat down on her couch, gesturing for her to curl up next to him. She did, and he wound his arms around her, lacing his fingers through hers.

This was where she belonged. In his arms.

Eventually she sat up again, reluctant to leave his embrace, but knowing she needed to talk to him before she lost her nerve. Doctor Friskin had given her homework, and she knew if she didn't do it now, she never would.

"I think I owe you an explanation," she said. Clark attempted to speak — likely to tell her she didn't, but she held up a hand and he got the message. "I haven't been myself these last few days. Actually...I haven't been myself ever since we got trapped in that virtual reality simulation. I've been...scared. Anxious, really, about what the future holds between us."

"I don't understand," he said, his brow furrowing with worry. "Are you having second thoughts about marrying me?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "At least...not the way you think. I want to marry you. It's all I want, but...I'm scared. I'm scared of what it will be like to live together...day to day. I've never done this, and I don't trust myself not to ruin it. I'm afraid...I'm afraid of turning into my parents."

"Honey," Clark said softly, leaning forward and brushing a tendril of hair away from her face. His chocolate brown eyes were so deep she could get lost in them. "We are not your parents. Not even close."

"Are you sure?" she asked, feeling the anxiety rise within her again. "I mean look at the past couple of days. I almost destroyed us, Clark! I pushed you away and we argued and..."

"Lois, we always argue," he pointed out with a wry smile. "Arguing for us is like breathing. Arguing doesn't mean the end of a relationship. It's about how you argue. Every relationship has ups and downs. We're going to fight. But we're also going to kiss each other good morning, go to sleep in each other's arms, eat breakfast for dinner...make love..."

The last part caused a shiver to go through her entire body, and she bit her lip reflexively. His eyes darted towards her mouth and darkened ever so slightly.

She shook her head, trying to banish the suddenly very intense images that were flooding her brain. Making love to Clark was an entirely different conversation and one that she knew she wasn't ready to deal with. She forced herself back to the conversation at hand.

"I understand what you're saying," Lois replied slowly, trying to piece together all her anxieties so they made sense as a coherent whole. "But I'm scared. Fighting scares me. I didn't grow up in a house where two people fought and still respected each other. I grew up in a house where each person hit as far below the belt as they could, and the winner was the one who could hurt the other person the most. It's all I know."

"It's not all you know," Clark insisted, running his hands over her shoulders and down her arms. She didn't

think she would ever tire of his touch. "You and I...we fight, but we don't deliberately hurt each other. We don't intend to be cruel. You weren't trying to hurt me tonight or the past few days. I know that. Sometimes we are both going to make mistakes."

"I know," she whispered, feeling as if she were on the verge of tears all over again. "And I know we're not my parents, it's just...we're taking such a huge step. And I want to take it, I just...I feel like I'm jumping out of a plane without a parachute or even lessons on how to jump out of a plane. Does that make any sense?"

He nodded and she could see the same terrified understanding in his eyes. It was that understanding that caused her to lean forward and kiss him, softly at first and then with an intensity that surprised her. He deepened the kiss, his tongue delving into her mouth as his arms tightened around her.

She whimpered against him as his hands gripped her hips and pulled her into his lap. She gasped in surprise. He felt so good, smelled so good. He kissed her with a need bordering on desperation and she returned that feeling in kind. They hadn't been together like this in days — hadn't kissed like this in days. She hadn't realised just how much she needed to feel him, needed to touch him.

"Clark," she whispered as his lips trailed down her neck with soft kisses leaving absolute fire in their wake. "Oh God, Clark..."

"Missed you," he mumbled as he nibbled gently at her collar bone. "Missed you so much..."

She wanted him to keep going. Her body was responding to him in such a way that she knew if she didn't put the brakes on things soon, that restraint would disappear on both their parts. Part of her wanted that — to lose control and see what happened.

But the saner part — the part that knew there was still so much to resolve — prevailed. Reluctantly, she broke away from his embrace, panting heavily. Clark looked somewhat confused as she did so, but didn't stop her. As he struggled to get his physical response under control, Lois stood up and started to pace slightly.

"I'm sorry," he said finally when his own breathing returned to normal. "I just...it's been a few days and..."

"Yeah," she replied with a nervous laugh. "And I want to. I want *you*. I want you so much it's all I think about at times, but..."

"I know," he replied, his voice gruff with emotion. "I love you. And I want to make love to you, but that's not all I want. I can wait. We have forever, after all."

"So how do we get to forever?" Lois wondered. "I'm so scared I'm going to be bad at this...that I'm going to fail...we're going to fail."

"I think I have an idea," Clark said, sitting forward a little. Lois sat back down on the sofa, though she didn't get too close to him. Touching him right now was definitely playing with fire. "A way for us to jump out of the plane with a parachute...like you said. What if...what if I moved in?"

"To this apartment?" she asked, "before the wedding?"

"Yeah," he replied, smiling as he warmed to the idea. "I know we weren't planning on living together before the wedding, but what if we did? To see how hard it is?"

"So you want to practice living together?" she guessed.

"Yeah," he said, his voice now sounding excited. "Like how we had an 'almost first-date'. This would be a practice first place."

"Why not have me move into your place?" Lois wondered, feeling a thrill of excitement at the idea of what he was suggesting.

"Well, we could," he acknowledged, "but I think you'd be more comfortable here since it's your space. It would help ease your nerves about what things are going to be like as a married couple."

"What about..." she hesitated, "making love? I mean if you're here...well..."

"If you still want to wait, we'll wait," he promised her firmly. "And if you change your mind...then we could practice that too."

A lick of fire coiled in her stomach at his words.

"Would you be able to do that?" she asked him breathlessly as she looked into his eyes. "Sleep next to me, without..."

"If that's what you want," he vowed, his own voice deepening into the tone she was beginning to recognise as his when he was...affected by her.

"I don't want to fall asleep without you," she admitted. "It's all I've been able to think about. And there are other things I want to talk to you about. Fears I have about... making love for the first time."

"We'd have time," he pointed out gently. "We'd have as much time as we need."

"Alright," she agreed, feeling as if she was about to bubble over with excitement. When she'd come home from work that day, it had felt as if her world was crumbling around her. Now, all she could think about was the fact that she and Clark were going to sleep in the same bed for the first time — that she was going to fall asleep with his arms wrapped tightly around her. "Let's do it."

"Yeah?" He looked equally excited and a silly grin broke out on both their faces. He stood up. "I should go back to my place and get a toothbrush and some clothes and..."

"Go," Lois said, waving him towards the window. "Get what you need. I'll be here. We can watch a movie and then..."

"Go to bed," he finished for her. She suddenly felt short of breath and could only manage a nod.

He returned with enough of his things to get him through the next week. He'd told her he would get more of his stuff as the need arose, but being Superman, it didn't take him that long.

Both agreed not to talk about the story, or Claude, or Lex Luthor that night. She knew they would have to go over what happened in the jail tomorrow, and Lois was fine with that.

But tonight was their first night together and she didn't want it marred by talk about Lex. And so they settled in on the couch and put on a movie both of them had seen a million times. She was more emotionally exhausted than she realised because she fell asleep almost immediately after the movie started.

It wasn't until she felt herself being lifted off the ground that she opened her eyes to find that she was being carried to bed. His arms held her tightly and he gazed at her with a kind of innocent wonder that made her heart swell. All her fears melted away as he kissed her tenderly, and climbed into bed next to her.

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## Chapter 12

Lois woke the following morning knowing two things: the first was that her heart had never felt lighter than it did waking up in Clark's arms and the second was that she had to pee. And she knew that in order to deal with the second, she would have to disrupt the first. And she was loath to disrupt the first.

Still, her bladder waited for nobody, it seemed, so she gently managed to move his arm off of her and slid out from under him, padding her way into the bathroom. After washing her hands, she took her time running a brush through her hair and brushing her teeth. She knew it was silly. After all, Clark was going to see her first thing in the morning with morning breath and messy hair every day for the rest of their lives and yet for some reason she wanted the first morning they woke up together to be perfect. She wanted him to see her as perfect. Or at least as close as she could get.

She opened the door to the bathroom only to jump back in surprise to find him standing there. He looked rather sheepish.

"Sorry," he said softly, "didn't mean to scare you. Can I...?"

He gestured behind her and she realised that he too needed to use the facilities. She blushed slightly and moved aside as he entered. Unsure of what to do next (did she wait for him in the bed? Go make some tea?), she

found herself sitting awkwardly on the edge of the bed as she listened to the toilet flush, then the sound of the sink. The water ran a bit longer than was strictly necessary and Lois wondered if he also was freshening up a bit. The thought of it was reassuring. It meant she wasn't the only one with nerves.

When he finally exited the bathroom she felt a silly smile spread across her face as she looked at him standing there. She also felt a bolt of heat shoot through her as she took in the sight of him shirtless and wearing only a pair of cotton shorts.

"What?" he said, and she realised she must have been staring too much. She looked down and played absently with the duvet cover.

"Nothing, just..." She looked up and gestured vaguely. "You, and me...waking up together. It's nice. More than nice. Perfect."

"Yes, you are," he murmured softly. Her heart gave a gentle flutter at the love in his tone. She smiled as he made his way over to her and sat down on the bed next to her, taking her hand in his. He leaned down and kissed her softly, but thoroughly, caressing her face as he did so. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she replied, realising that the silly grin must still be plastered all over her face. "Uhh, what comes now? Do we snuggle some more? Get breakfast? How does this work?"

"You tell me," he replied, looking equally flustered. "I've never woken up with anybody before. You've at least got some experience."

"Going to bed? Yes. Waking up and having them still be there the next day? Not so much." She noticed him wince and forgave him for his accidental faux pas.

"Sorry," he apologised, squeezing her hand. "As for what we do next, I'm thinking breakfast and getting ready for work. Though it's not what I'd prefer to do."

"Work...right," she said with a sigh as she stood up. "I uh...don't have any breakfast food left. You used it all up last night, and today is..."

"Grocery day, I know," he grinned and she could see the mischievous glint in his eye that told her he was teasing her. "Not a problem. I'll be back in a minute or two."

Before she could respond, he'd spun into the suit and flown out the window. She barely had any time to even think about getting changed before he returned with a couple of bags in his hands from a cafe that looked to be... French? Had he flown to...

"There's a cafe in Paris that has the best croissants," he explained as he got the food out on the table. He spun out of the suit and back into a t-shirt and shorts. "I thought you'd like..."

"Are you kidding me?" she exclaimed as she followed him to the table, "carbs are my soulmate! Next to you, of course. Do you want me to make us some coffee?"

"Yes, please," he said and she wondered how long it would take for this odd veneer of politeness to drop away and just let them be themselves. She put a coffee filter in and scooped a few tablespoons in, all while watching him. Once the coffee was brewing, she made her way back out to the kitchen and sat down at the table, spreading some butter on her croissant. Her mind went over their conversation in the bedroom, replaying every moment in detail as they ate. This would only happen once after all. This first morning.

"What would you have preferred to do?" she asked him. He looked at her, confused. "You said that breakfast wasn't what you would prefer to do first thing in the morning. I guess I'm just wondering because we don't know each other's habits yet. So...what would you prefer to do?"

"Oh, ummm..." she noticed he blushed slightly and didn't meet her eyes. She suddenly wondered if the answer was something private. Eventually, he gave her a slightly embarrassed smile before answering. "I just meant that the things I would want to do first thing in the morning we aren't...ummm...doing yet. That is, eventually we will, but for now..."

"Are you saying you want to make love first thing in the morning?" she asked, wondering where the hell this bold version of herself had come from. He blinked, surprised as well, before swallowing heavily. "It doesn't have to be first thing. In the shower would be nice too, but...yeah."

"Saves water too," she replied, refusing to blush. They had to be able to talk about this. Plus, it was kind of sexy. Clark nodded, his hand stilling in mid-air. He'd been lifting his croissant to his mouth and she watched as it hovered there, wondering how long it would take him to remember it existed.

He eventually cleared his throat and took the bite, and Lois felt another flutter go through her as she imagined what it might be like to make love to Clark in the shower. She must have zoned out because eventually Clark got up and went into the kitchen. She turned and watched as he poured them two cups of coffee, heartened to see that he knew where her sweetener was located, in addition to being able to make hers exactly how she liked it.

When he returned, she forced herself to think about the day ahead. As much as she was loving this feeling of domesticity, she knew there were larger things that needed to be dealt with — namely the threat against the President. Despite her visit to the prison and the havoc it had wreaked on their relationship, she was no closer to understanding

what Lex's endgame was or what the French government had to do with it. She knew the only way to figure things out was to talk it over with Clark — something she hadn't wanted to do because it meant admitting to herself (and possibly to him) that she'd been wrong to go to the prison.

Still, there was a chance that if they talked it over together, he might find something she missed. That was, after all, why they worked so well together. They filled in each other's gaps.

She also knew that she didn't want to have this conversation at the *Planet*. She still wasn't entirely convinced Claude's arrival was a coincidence, and even if it was, she didn't want to open a wound like this in front of him. He'd been responsible for enough damage.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Clark said as he sipped his coffee. She shook her head.

"I wish I could say they were still on the two of us in the shower." She got a small thrill out of the look on his face before forging ahead. "Unfortunately, I'm thinking about the conversation I had at the prison yesterday with —"

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," Clark said. "I shouldn't have been so —"

"No, you were right," she said with a sigh. "I should have listened. I couldn't say that to you yesterday. I was too upset. He...well, he upset me. And I should have waited." She looked down at her coffee cup and the light brown liquid inside. "I needed you there."

She hadn't realised she was close to tears until he reached for her hand. The moment her eyes met his, she almost broke down. Instead of seeing judgement, all she saw was compassion and love. If there was any anger inside him, it wasn't at her.

"What did he say?" he asked softly. "Anything useful?"

"I don't know," Lois replied feeling slightly helpless. "You were right about him wanting me there. He knew I would come. He even had me on his list of approved visitors."

She noticed Clark's face darken at that information and wondered if she'd said too much. She knew that Superman did not kill, but she also knew that if anyone could tempt him to break that rule it was Lex Luthor. His jaw tightened and she proceeded to repeat the conversation she had with Lex in excruciating detail. She could tell it was almost as painful for him to hear as it had been for her, and that was saying something.

"So you're saying he's had the ability to bribe his way out of jail this entire time?" Clark asked finally after she was finished.

Lois nodded, feeling a chill run through her once more and suddenly very glad Clark had asked to practice living together. She wasn't sure she wanted to be alone right now.

"I keep thinking that's the key," she admitted. "He said he didn't want to leave jail until he could be certain he would never go back. But I can't see how that could happen. I mean, even if he was acquitted for his past crimes, unless he lived like a saint...well, he'd have to run out of judges he could bribe eventually, right? I mean for him to be untouchable, he'd have to have...oh God..."

It was all so chillingly simple. The entire thing. The reason he'd helped his sniper cellmate get his conviction overturned, the attack on the President. She could tell Clark had worked it out as well because his face looked even more grim.

"He wants a presidential pardon."

"And to do that," she continued, "he'd need the President in his back pocket."

"And if that were the case, he'd be out already," Clark added. "So he doesn't have the President. Which means he must have..."

"The Vice President!" Lois exclaimed with a gasp. "Claude was right, this does go all the way to the top."

"Do you think he's involved?" Clark wondered, voicing aloud what Lois had been turning around in her head ever since the day before. She sighed.

"I don't know," she finally replied, "but you have to admit it's very conveniently coincidental. Then again, this Claude seems like he can barely keep a hamster alive... hardly the type to engage in international assassination plots."

"This Claude?" Clark raised an eyebrow. "Is there more than one?"

"No, it's just..." Lois hesitated, not sure how much she wanted to say to Clark about how she used to see him versus how she saw him now. *No*, she told herself, *don't hide your feelings. This is exactly what Doctor Friskin told you not to do.* Her inner voice was right. She needed to figure out how to communicate with him. "I used to see Claude a certain way and now...well, now I think I see him for who he really is. And it isn't what I thought."

"What do you mean?" Clark asked, and she was relieved not to see any jealousy in his expression.

"Well, when I was infatuated with him, I thought he walked on water," she said with a bitter chuckle. "He could do no wrong. He was French, cultured, wealthy...I guess I just assumed he was a top-notch journalist, and I wanted to work with him. I wanted to be with him. And then he slept with me and stole my story. And instead of seeing him for who he really is, I saw a villain...a man who waited for his moment and took what he wanted when it came."

"Are you saying he didn't?" Clark looked confused and Lois didn't blame him. She wasn't sure she understood her own feelings any more than he did.

"I'm saying that he did all those things. And they were awful. But he's hardly Lex Luthor. Just a man who took advantage of someone who didn't have the experience or the wisdom to see him for who he was." She shrugged and gave a sad smile. "And for all the culture and wealth he appears to have, he's not even half the journalist you are... or me for that matter. I see now that he leeches off my talent as well as my —"

"Sounds like you're saying you don't think he's capable of working with Lex," Clark interrupted, and Lois wondered if it was because he didn't want to hear the rest of her sentence. She didn't blame him.

"No," she said finally after thinking it over one more time. "I don't. But I don't think we should fully trust him either. I've made that mistake before and it cost me a Kerth."

Clark frowned at her words, and she could tell he was tempted to try to convince her to tell Perry what really happened, but thought the better of it. Instead, he set his coffee cup down, stood up, and leaned over to kiss her softly on the cheek.

"What was that for?" she asked, with a slightly surprised smile.

"Because this is how I want to begin every morning," he told her, the warmth of his voice wrapping around her like a cocoon.

"Talking about my exes and how one of them is planning to kill the President?"

She knew exactly what Doctor Friskin would say about that last comment...that she was deflecting. And she was right. Even now, Lois sometimes felt it hard to accept the love that Clark freely offered. Sometimes that fear manifested in harmless jokes, and sometimes it meant pushing him away. Thankfully, this time it was the former. Clark laughed and Lois was reminded of yet another reason he was perfect for her. He understood her need for that humour.

"No," he replied, reaching over to gently cup her face. This time his dark brown eyes pulled her in completely and she found herself unable to look away. "The part where I wake up with you, and we have breakfast while discussing our day at work — bouncing ideas off of each other. It's what we do best, and to be able to do this the rest of our lives...I love you."

"I love you too," she said, surprised by the level of emotion in his tone. He looked so completely open at this moment, sitting at her table in his t-shirt and shorts and the enormity of it hit her full force. He was right. This was it. Forever, between them. And it didn't feel difficult or scary, it felt easy.

Before she could process that realisation, he'd taken her by the hand, pulling her away from the table and

bringing his lips to hers for a kiss that left her breathless. Before he could pull away, she deepened the kiss, wanting more. She'd kissed him in many ways before, but never like this. Never first thing in the morning after breakfast in her tank top and sweatpants with no makeup on after having breakfast with him. Somehow that made it different...more enticing. More real.

His arms wrapped around her as he responded to her kiss, his tongue teasing hers lightly as she pressed her body flush against his. The lack of a bra underneath her tank top caused her to gasp ever so slightly. There was barely anything between them, save for some light cotton, which sent a jolt of heat to all the right places. She'd kissed him last night in this very same top, but somehow this was different...more intimate.

She knew he felt it too, because his hands were clutching her waist more urgently and she was surprised to realise her own hands had drifted down to his butt where she found herself grabbing hold. She whimpered softly into his mouth and forced herself to push back from him.

She was breathing heavily as they separated, face flushed and feeling as if her arousal was just as visible to him as his was to her. And he couldn't hide it from her if he tried. He also seemed short of breath, and she flashed him a satisfied smile. There was no mistaking his attraction to her. It made her feel powerful in a way she didn't normally feel.

"As much as I can't wait to continue that," she said, running a hand through her hair and trying to banish the desire to discard their clothing and throw caution to the wind, "we need to get to work."

"Work...right," he replied as if he'd forgotten what the word meant. "Do you want to shower first? I'll only take a minute...literally."

"I can't wait then to see what happens when we don't have to...rush off to work." How did her voice become that sultry all of a sudden? Was she still talking? She must have been because his eyebrows shot sky high and he gave her a look so full of heat she was certain he was going to pull her to him and make sure neither of them wanted to stop.

The thought of it caused her breath to catch, and she realised she wouldn't stop him if he did.

Oh God, living together was going to be dangerous for both of them.

"I'll uh...just go shower then," she said, as she moved towards the bathroom.

She showered quickly, realising that while breakfast had been nice, they hadn't left much room for the commute if she wanted to take the Jeep. She knew that Clark could easily get them there quickly if they needed to, but for some reason, she liked driving to work in her car.

When she exited the bathroom dressed for work, Clark zipped passed her so fast she barely saw him. By the time she was finished applying her makeup, he was out of the shower, dressed and ready to go. This was definitely going to take some getting used to. She wondered if he always got ready so quickly or if some mornings he took his time.

“You okay?” he asked her. She realised she must have been staring and felt slightly embarrassed.

“Just thinking,” she replied. She suddenly remembered something she’d once said to him in another moment in which she’d been in awe of not only his abilities, but how he chose to use them. “Your life is so strange. And now... now it’s going to be our life. Our strange, wonderful life.”

He kissed her softly and grinned. She found herself smiling back as she grabbed her keys and he followed, hands in his pockets. They headed down to the Jeep while Lois chewed some thoughts over in her mind.

“I think we should continue to investigate Lex’s ties to the French government, but I also think that if he has the Vice President in his pocket, we have to look into him as well.”

“You’re right,” Clark said as she put the key in the ignition and the Jeep roared to life. “And we will have to walk softly. So far nobody knows we’ve made this connection. If they find out...if Lex finds out...”

“He won’t hurt me,” Lois said softly, and though she kept her eyes on the road, she could feel Clark’s stare on her. “At least, not while he’s still convinced there’s a chance I might come back to him. He won’t hurt me.”

“That’s not a risk I’m willing to take,” he replied and something in his tone told her not to argue. Besides, being careful was sound logic, so she nodded.

“Alright. We keep Claude out of it for now then, right?”

“Right,” he agreed.

Lois felt a heaviness descend on her the closer they got to the *Planet*. Waking up with Clark had been heavenly, but the day ahead of them was anything but. And if they couldn’t stop this assassination, not only would the President lose his life, but Lex Luthor would be able to operate without consequence.

It was a heavy responsibility.

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### Chapter 13

They arrived at the *Planet* only to find Claude was nowhere to be seen. A note on Lois’ desk told them he’d gone out for coffee and would be back soon. She double checked her watch. They were right on time.

“He’s been useful so far, at least,” Clark commented mildly. Lois had been thinking the same thing, but hadn’t voiced it out loud. She wasn’t sure what to make of Claude’s actions since he’d arrived. He’d made at least one attempt at a conversation with her, which she had shut

down, and had since gone out of his way to be accommodating.

Lois wanted to continue avoiding the man forever, but she knew that wasn’t possible. She also knew that she couldn’t begin to move forward with Clark until she’d done all the homework that Doctor Friskin had assigned.

“Clark, I think I need to talk to Claude,” she said with a sigh. He gave her a quizzical look, but said nothing which she took as a sign to continue. “That doctor’s appointment I had...it wasn’t for anything physical. I had an appointment with Doctor Friskin, my therapist. She helped me clarify a few things about us, and even though it took me some time to get there, she was right.”

“And she also told you that you should talk to Claude, I am assuming?” Clark asked, though he didn’t seem bothered by the idea.

“Yes,” she told him. “She advised me to talk to you about my fears and to have a conversation with Claude, though she was less specific on how that one should go. I was sceptical at first, but...I think she might be right.”

“Yeah, I think she might be,” Clark agreed. Lois looked at him in surprise. She had expected at least a bit of pushback when it came to Claude, especially after their fight over Lex.

“I...I’m glad you think so,” Lois replied slowly. “I had to admit, I was worried you’d be jealous.”

“Before we started dating, I might have been,” Clark admitted. He took her hands and traced his thumb over one gently. “But things are different now, and this isn’t about me. Lois, this guy was awful to you. When I think of how he hurt you, it makes me angry, but I can’t fight your battles for you. And whether you want to yell at him or forgive him, I’ll be here.”

“I can’t believe I was able to resist having my way with you in the shower this morning,” Lois murmured, leaning forward and kissing his neck softly. She felt him clutch her hand tighter at her words and a small strangled sound escaped his lips. She leaned back and smiled, proud of the reaction she’d gotten.

“You are going to be the death of me,” he murmured happily.

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, farmboy,” she promised. Before Clark could respond, the elevator door opened and Claude stepped out, tray of coffees and various other items in hand.

“I suppose we should get to work,” she said with a resigned sigh. Clark nodded.

“Why don’t I get Jimmy started on compiling a profile on the Vice President. We can tell him it’s for a story we are doing on politicians who inspire us. I can have a look at what he finds and see if anything jumps out that we can



connect to Lex. In the meantime, you can work with Claude on the French authorities angle and...talk."

"Okay," she said with a nod, feeling something restless inside her settle. She and Clark were on the same team no matter what.

"I'm glad she's helping," Clark replied with a soft smile as he gathered his things. "But you don't ever have to hide that you are going to see a therapist. I think it's really brave."

"Coming from you, that means...a lot," she replied as Claude approached. They shared another significant look as he grabbed one of the coffees, turned and headed over to one of the conference rooms to talk to Jimmy.

Claude gave her a tentative smile and looked over at Clark. "He's not my biggest fan, is he?"

"No, he isn't," Lois said bluntly. She was ready for this. No more kid gloves. "Is there any reason he should be?"

"If by that you mean that you told him about our past, then no." He shook his head and had the grace to look down at his feet. Lois resisted the urge to feel sorry for him.

"We're engaged to be married," she pointed out. "I tell him everything."

"I figured," he said, sounding somewhat resigned. "I mean...you make such an incredible team. I've only been here a few days and even I can see that."

"We're lucky to have each other," Lois replied, trying to find a way to steer the conversation away from her relationship with Clark. It just felt too weird to be discussing it with Claude. Claude seemed to have gotten the hint because he cast one more look in Clark's direction before returning his focus to work and handing her the coffee he'd brought her.

"So where do you want to start? I see that he's following up on some lead you don't want to tell me about, so I assume we're continuing to look into Luthor's ties to my government?"

"How did you..."

"I'm not a completely awful journalist," Claude replied with a slight smile. "I did overhear the people involved talking about this plot, after all. Plus, I have eyes."

Lois gave a small chuckle and felt some of the tension drain from her. Somehow, it was reassuring to know that Claude knew exactly where he stood. She took a sip of the coffee and frowned. It was awful.

"Clark is indeed following up a different lead," she said and was relieved when Claude didn't press the issue. "And yes, I wanted to continue to look into your government, but first...is there any way we could have that talk you mentioned? I think there might be some things we both need to say."

"Absolutely," he said, his head quirked slightly to the side. She remembered that gesture. He used to do that whenever he was trying to figure out someone's motivation. "Do you want to go somewhere?"

"How about the other conference room," she replied, not wanting to let things veer too far into any sort of territory that resembled friendship. She still had no idea what she was going to say to him and so moving into the conference room also allowed her to stall a bit. She left the coffee behind and led the way.

Once inside, Claude pulled out a chair for her — something she once found charming, but now found irritating. She could pull out her own chairs, thanks. She sat anyway, and the silence in the room stretched out for a few minutes. Eventually, he broke it.

"I know that you probably didn't want me here," he said. She didn't feel particularly inclined to argue, and since she still wasn't sure exactly how much of her soul she wanted to bare, she let him continue. "And you have good reason for that. But I needed to come. Even if I hadn't heard what I heard...I would have asked to help cover the talks if it meant getting the chance to talk to you."

"Why?" she wondered aloud. It had never occurred to her that he had wanted to come out of any reason beyond what he'd initially told them.

"Because I've never forgiven myself for what happened," he replied, letting out a whoosh of air. She found herself blinking for a moment in surprise. Whatever she'd been expecting, it hadn't been this. "The truth is...I had never been with anyone like you. I was used to relationships that were strictly physical, and then you came along and I was...smitten. And then when we slept together...I got scared, and I ran. It was stupid and cowardly."

"Yes, it was," Lois agreed, keeping her voice neutral, not wanting to give him even an inch of leeway. She wasn't ready to forgive just yet, especially since she wasn't sure she trusted this little mea culpa. "Why now? Did you suddenly grow a conscience you didn't have before?"

"Sort of," he said. She watched as he squirmed uncomfortably and allowed herself to enjoy it. He clearly wasn't the sort of man who was used to apologising, and he definitely wasn't used to not being immediately forgiven after the fact. It was obvious that his charm had gotten him far in life, and to see it fail him now was very satisfying. "I...met someone."

She raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He looked away and she wondered if he was trying to decide just how much he wanted to tell her. Eventually, he looked back.

"She reminded me a lot of you. She was smart and ambitious, and for once I finally felt I was ready to be in a

committed relationship. I wanted to stop running. I told her as much and...well, she broke up with me on the spot. Didn't want anything serious." He laughed but there was no humour in it. "I suppose it's what I deserve."

"If you're looking at me to convince you that you don't, you picked the wrong audience," she said flatly. Her emotions simmered just below the surface, and she struggled to rein them in. She could see there was genuine pain written all over his face, but she wasn't capable of feeling sorry for him. Not yet. He still had one larger thing to atone for that he hadn't even mentioned.

"I know," he acknowledged. "And I've wanted the chance to apologise ever since, but I didn't think you would want to see me especially not after —"

"Not after you stole my story?" she interrupted, her voice coming out a little harsher than she'd intended it. She wasn't sure why, but his apology made her angry. She'd been the wronged party. She'd been the one who had been plagued by an inability to trust ever since he'd so casually discarded her. She'd been the one who had almost lost out on the best thing that had ever happened to her because she'd been too jaded. And now he wanted to waltz in and apologise?

He had the decency to look ashamed and nodded.

"That was probably the lowest moment in my professional career," he said quietly. "I was supposed to be the senior reporter — the one with the instincts and experience, but even then I could see that you were lightyears beyond me."

She resisted the urge to stand up and walk out of the conference room right then. To think that the theft of what would have been the first major award in her career had simply been a matter of his inferiority complex was beyond infuriating.

"So, what...you stole my work and profited off of it because you were cowardly and insecure, is that it?" She fought to keep her voice level, to clamp down on the urge to punch him. To think she'd had to work twice as hard for so long to prove herself because of him had always made her angry. She thought knowing the reasons for it would make it easier somehow but it didn't. It only made it worse in some ways.

"Part of it," he agreed. "The other part was family pressure. I refused to go into the family business like I was expected to. Oldest son and all that. I wanted to be a journalist instead, so I struck out on my own. I knew if I didn't prove myself, then I would be forced into a career I didn't want. And then I saw your story on your computer...well, the rest is history."

There was a long pause between them while Lois tried to sort through her emotions. The anger was still there — white hot and ready to lash out, but there was also

unwanted pity for the man in front of her as well as the realisation that things had worked out for the better in the end. After all, she would never have been happy with a man as weak and insecure as Claude.

Eventually, she took a deep breath, counting to ten in her head like Doctor Friskin had told her to do, and looked Claude in the eye.

"What do you want from me, Claude?" She had trouble keeping the weariness from her voice. "And please don't tell me you've come in the hopes of something happening again between us because —"

"No, no, of course not," he interrupted hastily. "Like I said, I've followed your career. I knew of your engagement to Clark before I came. And even if you hadn't been with someone, I don't feel like what I did would even make me worthy of reconsideration. I just wanted to...clear my conscience. I've been carrying that guilt for years."

"And did you?" Lois asked him tersely. She didn't want to lose her cool in the newsroom, especially when she knew that Clark's super hearing would pick up her voice if it was raised in any sort of distressed way. He'd never listen in on purpose, but she also knew how in tune he was to her due to her penchant for getting herself in trouble. "Is your conscience clear? Do you just have to say sorry for that to happen? Or do you need me to absolve you? Because I would hate for this to be a wasted trip for you."

"I...I didn't mean..." he stammered, looking like a deer in headlights for a moment, and a thrill of satisfaction shot through her. It was petty, but at the moment it was enough. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise how that would sound. I'm not looking for forgiveness, Lois. And I know there are things you need to say to me, which is why I assume you wanted to talk. I know what I did must have hurt you, so whatever you need to do or say...I'm here."

She took another look at him and opened her mouth, ready to give him a piece of her mind. A thousand choice words and phrases filtered through her head, ready to verbally cut him to pieces. She could do it. Part of her even wanted to do it and yet, looking at him in front of her, another realisation came to her. She didn't *need* to.

It was a powerful realisation. One that shook her out of her anger and brought her back to reality. Yelling at Claude would not make her life any better. It might feel good in the moment, but it wouldn't give her the internal satisfaction she'd once thought it would. The fact that she'd achieved everything she'd set out to despite him proved that.

In another life, she would have verbally torn Claude to pieces. But that Lois was gone, and in her place, sat a woman more confident in herself and her future than she'd ever been.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Clark walk past the conference room in deep conversation with Jimmy. Something about the look in his eyes, the sincerity in his voice and the fact that Clark was outside the conference room stopped her. She smiled. Things were better this way indeed.

“You know what?” she said after a moment’s silence. “You did hurt me. At the time, I thought you’d broken me. But, I picked myself up, I made myself stronger, and I won three Kerth Awards on my own. And when I met Clark, I learned how amazing it was to have a partner — a true partner with whom I could share everything with. You’re my past, but he’s my future. I don’t need your apology... but it was nice to hear. Thank you.”

She was surprised to realise that she meant what she said. Before she’d met Clark, she’d had fantasies of Claude coming crawling back, begging for forgiveness, only to be rejected in the cruellest of ways. She’d carried so much anger over the years, she was shocked to find that his apology meant almost nothing.

She wondered if Doctor Friskin had suspected this would happen, or if it was simply a matter of time healing all wounds? Either way, it was nice to know.

“Thank you,” he said back, sounding relieved. “I never wanted to hurt you. And I’m sure you’ve found that living well is the best revenge. After all, it’s not as if my career has gained nearly the amount of prestige yours has...and well deserved, too, I might add.”

She arched an eyebrow and allowed curiosity to get the better of her.

“What happened there?” she asked, “I mean, you had that Kerth...my Kerth. It must have opened so many doors. And you certainly *look* like you’ve been doing well for yourself.”

Once again, he looked slightly embarrassed. After all, he’d been wearing suits that cost a month’s salary almost every day. If his career wasn’t footing that bill, she wondered what was. Especially since there was still a slight chance he was in Lex Luthor’s pocket.

“I’m afraid my standard of living comes from good old fashioned family money,” he said with a shrug. “My parents own the airline company Dupont Airlines. They used to make military jets, but in recent years have branched out into commercial planes. Imagine their rage when I turned out to be merely a mediocre journalist. I am...what do you Americans call it...the black lamb?”

Lois couldn’t help but let out a small laugh and even found herself smiling at him.

“The black sheep,” she corrected him. “So who took over the company? Or do your parents still run it?”

“My younger brother runs it now,” Claude said with an airy wave of his hand. It was clear to her that the company

mattered little to him. “It turns out neither of us have much of a head for business, it seems, because the company has been losing money for years. Ever since they made the switch. Anyway, that’s neither here nor there.”

Things were silent again, but in that uncomfortable way that always accompanied an important conversation between two people. It was compounded by the fact that Lois no longer considered him an enemy, but certainly didn’t see him as a friend. Still, they had to work together, so they had to find some sort of working relationship.

“Wow, this awkward silence, really is awkward, isn’t it?” Claude finally said with a laugh. Lois laughed as well despite herself, and it broke the tension in the room.

“We should get back to work,” she said, standing up. He stood too. She walked towards the door, put her hand on the knob and hesitated. Turning back to Claude, she spoke. “We’re not friends...you and I. We never were. And your apology, while appreciated, doesn’t change that. We will work together because it’s too important for us not to, but —”

“I understand,” he interrupted and she knew that he was telling the truth. She nodded.

“Then let’s get to it.”

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## Chapter 14

The rest of the day went by in a blur, with both Lois and Claude focusing heavily on the task at hand. Clark worked just as diligently with Jimmy, and by the time the end of the day came around, all were exhausted.

Claude was the first to leave, grabbing his coat and heading for his hotel room at bang on five. Lois spent the next few minutes finishing up the notes she was typing before a fairly substantial yawn forced her to save her work and turn the computer off. As much as she had loved falling asleep with Clark for the first time, she still wasn’t used to having another body in the bed next to her and she’d found herself woken a couple of times.

She knew she would eventually get used to it with time, however, and the benefits definitely outweighed the growing pains. Indeed, remembering that they were now ‘practice living together’ was also a challenge.

She even found herself putting on her coat and grabbing her keys to leave, before remembering that Clark was coming home with her. She glanced around the newsroom and found him in conversation with Jimmy. They looked to be laughing, so she guessed it wasn’t work related and was relieved.

Most nights, she didn’t mind staying late if they were working on something big, but tonight she just wanted to go home.

And she couldn’t wait for Clark to come with her. She could see he felt the same way because when she

approached him he looked up and gave her the biggest smile.

“All set to go?” he asked her. She nodded and she was certain that to Jimmy they must have looked like grinning idiots. If he noticed, he didn’t say anything. Instead he simply waved.

“Good night, Lois, good night, CK!”

As they headed down to her Jeep, Lois turned to ask Clark what he wanted for dinner, and just as suddenly remembered there was still no food in the apartment. She sighed.

“Something wrong?” Clark wondered. Her shoulders slumped. She’d been looking forward to a night at home after a hard day of work, making dinner and then finding something to watch on tv. It wasn’t anything major, but for some reason she didn’t want to share it with a mundane task like grocery shopping.

They climbed into the Jeep and Lois put the key into the ignition, and then was backing out of the space while still in a slightly bad mood.

“I just forgot my fridge still looks like that of a first-year college student,” she grumbled. “Guess we need to stop at the supermarket on the way home.”

“No we don’t,” he grinned. She glanced out of the corner of her eye at him in surprise and then shook her head.

“No,” she said adamantly. “It’s too convenient for you to fly off and get food every time we run out. You keep doing that, and I’ll never go shopping. I want to try to do things like a normal couple.”

“Lois, I brought you breakfast from Paris this morning,” he pointed out, “that ship has sailed. Besides, I wasn’t suggesting that I fly somewhere for food. I, uh...emptied what was left in my fridge and brought over what we could use. I also did some grocery shopping earlier when I was called out for a rescue, so your fridge is pretty full. I didn’t think you’d mind, but if you wanted to go shopping together, I apologise.”

“No, Clark it’s fine...great, even!” She smiled, feeling relieved despite her earlier protests that he shouldn’t have to run the errand in question. “One day, I will definitely insist we get groceries like a normal couple, but tonight, I’m glad you did it already. It frees up our evening for one thing.”

“Oh?” he said, sounding slightly intrigued. “And just what would we be freeing our evening up for? Please, don’t say work.”

“God, no,” Lois said as she parked the Jeep outside the apartment. “I thought we could just...” She turned to look at him, and the heat in his gaze caused her entire body to come to life. Here they were, day two, alone together in her apartment and he wasn’t leaving.

“So...” Clark paused, his tone deepening. “Play then?”

She wasn’t going to make it to the wedding.

*Would that be such a bad thing?* her inner voice asked her. And she honestly wasn’t sure of the answer. She wanted to. But there were still fears there that she hadn’t dealt with. Fears that couldn’t just evaporate overnight, regardless of how expertly he touched her.

She found herself being drawn to him, like a magnet. Helpless to stop herself, she kissed him. The seatbelt tugged against her body, a subtle reminder that they were still in the Jeep outside the apartment.

But the moment his tongue met hers, the entire world dropped away and there was only him. And God, how she wanted him. His kisses teased her — light and gentle alternating with deep and urgent. In between kisses, he murmured things, though for the life of her she couldn’t understand them with the way her body was responding.

She wanted to feel his body against hers, to allow his hands to wander more than the restraints of their current position would allow, but in a way she was grateful for it. It kept her grounded. Kept her sane. Allowed her to pull back and remind him that they needed to go inside.

It took him a moment to process where they were and why staying there was not a great idea. He gave her a slightly shy smile and nodded.

The cool air on her face as they exited the Jeep seemed to bring them back to their senses, and the moment evaporated for now. But she knew that simply by kissing him, the spark that had been threatening since that virtual simulation could overwhelm them both. She needed to talk to him before that happened. She knew that was exactly what Doctor Friskin would tell her to do. Get her fears out in the open. And listen to his as well. Surely, after what he’d told her he must have them too.

With that resolve in her mind, they entered the apartment and set their things down. As Clark took their coats, Lois had a quick peek at all the groceries he’d stocked the fridge with. The yogurt wasn’t low fat and he’d gotten a different type of bread than she normally did, but beyond that he’d done a fairly good job.

“Any thoughts for dinner?” he asked, joining her in the kitchen. She smiled and patted his chest affectionately.

“I have to warn you ahead of time that if you want to marry someone with good cooking skills, then you’ll have to find someone else. I have about three things I know how to make and that’s about it.”

He laughed and she loved the way his eyes seemed to twinkle when he did.

“Would you like me to teach you?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her from behind and placing a delicious kiss on her neck. “I certainly don’t want to find anyone else, so this seems like the logical solution.”

“Yes,” she breathed, though she wasn’t sure if she was responding to the way he was kissing her neck or his offer to teach her. Either way, she would enjoy both.

Reluctantly, he stopped what he was doing and moved over to the oven.

“Alright,” he said, holding out his hand, “let’s start with something simple.”

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Lois hadn’t ever imagined a cooking lesson to be such an intimate activity, and yet it was one of the most thrilling date nights she’d had with Clark in a long while. They made a beef stir fry — a fairly simple dish, and yet Lois loved listening to Clark talk about the spices he liked to use and how to make the sauce while keeping the vegetables crisp. She thought back to when they’d first met and she had mocked his knowledge of other foods and cultures. It wasn’t her finest moment, and she knew now that her response to him had come from a place of insecurity — not to mention a growing attraction that she had no idea what to do with.

Now, she found his experiences and world knowledge to be incredibly sexy. And the way he found every excuse to touch her while making the stir fry pretty much ensured this would be her new favourite dish.

Eventually, the ‘lesson’ ended and they were able to sit and enjoy the fruits of their labour. Lois couldn’t remember ever tasting a better meal despite the fact that the cap had come off accidentally and she had poured way too much soy sauce in. Something about the fact that they were able to relax, kiss, cook, then pour a glass of wine and laugh about it, told her that life as a married couple would be even better than she could have imagined.

The fact that they had the following day off only improved Lois’ mood. It had been a hard, gruelling week — one of the hardest weeks she could remember in a long time. Normally they wouldn’t take the day off during a story as big as this, but Lois knew things were only going to get more intense, and it was better to get as much rest as they could when they were able. It wasn’t until now, safely cocooned in her apartment, that she could feel the tension of the week drain from her.

And even though he could easily dry the dishes with his powers, they both took the time to wash and dry them together. She knew eventually chores like this would become mundane, but tonight it was enough to know that once again he didn’t have to leave at the end of the night.

As they readied themselves for bed, Lois watched Clark make himself at home in the smallest of ways while still respecting her space in the ways that mattered. She smiled as he shyly walked over to the bathroom to change.

She reached out a hand and touched his arm before he reached the door, and he looked at her quizzically. She

took a deep breath and it was suddenly crystal clear what she needed to do for them to be ready to take the next step.

“It’s okay,” she said, as she slowly unbuttoned her blouse and hung it back up in the closet. Clark watched her, but said nothing, his eyes darkening in that tell-tale way of his. He’d seen her in a sports bra before when she was working out, but somehow this was different. She rummaged through her drawer and found a long t-shirt, pulled it out and reached around to unclasp her bra.

“Lois?” His voice was hoarse and slightly unsteady.

“I, uh, think it’s time we got over being shy around each other like this,” she said, her own voice quiet but determined. She still hadn’t removed her bra, but the clasp was now undone and the straps had fallen around her shoulders. “Living together means changing in front of one another...doesn’t it?”

“Y...yes,” he stammered and her pulse raced in response to the sound of his voice and the naked desire in his eyes. “At least I think it does. I’ve never...”

“You said we’d start slowly,” she reminded him as she removed her bra. The air was cool against her skin and the look on Clark’s face caused heat to spread throughout her body. “Let’s start with this. We need to stop acting like this is some hotel we’re staying in on assignment. Are you... okay with this?”

“You are stunning,” he murmured, as she unzipped her skirt and let it fall to the floor. She felt her breath catch and her face flush at the love in his eyes before swiftly pulling the long t-shirt down over her head.

“Are you...are you going to get ready too?”

She hoped so. Because right now she was extremely self-conscious, having stripped down almost completely naked in front of him. He stood there, t-shirt and shorts in hand, but completely forgotten.

“I, uh, would like to,” he said, suddenly looking anywhere but directly at her. “But I seem to have...that is...”

She glanced down and felt her breath catch.

“Oh,” she said softly. It had never occurred to her that in this context it would make him self-conscious for her to see him like this. After all, she’d seen him aroused before, but usually during some moment of intimacy between them. “I didn’t realise...I mean...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t!” he exclaimed, and she suddenly wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. She seemed to be messing this up spectacularly. What had started out as a bold step forward had turned into an awkward sitcom on one of those late-night channels. She forced herself to look back at Clark, who thankfully was smiling at her. “It’s okay. I just didn’t want to make *you* uncomfortable. I know it’s no secret how much I want you, but we’ve decided to

wait and I didn't want you to think...that is...I didn't want to push."

"Clark, I just took almost all my clothes off in front of you," she said, her voice affectionate and bemused, "and you're worried about making *me* uncomfortable? You really aren't from this planet. And you're not pushing if we're both just getting ready for bed."

"Taking our clothes off in front of each other isn't just getting ready for bed," he said softly as he undid the buttons of his shirt. He'd shed his suit jacket and tie earlier in the evening, so the dress shirt and trousers were all that was left. Lois wondered why he didn't just spin into his shorts. After all, he didn't need to physically go through the motions of undressing the way she did. Then again, even if she hadn't meant to tease him, she clearly had. Maybe this was just his own version of revenge. If it was, she would happily pay the price.

"You're right," she said, her voice coming out as a squeak. So much for confident. "But you were also right that the two of us living together is the first step. If we want real intimacy, we need to be comfortable with each other. You know...get used to being together."

"I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing you naked," Clark said with a grin. "I think you'll always take my breath away." She felt her throat go dry as he removed his shirt and undid the belt to his trousers. Her hands shook slightly at the sight of him and she wondered how she would survive seeing him fully naked. Oh yeah, they definitely needed practice.

"Even when I'm old and covered in wrinkles?" she asked, trying to banish this feeling of breathlessness as he pulled his trousers down, revealing his black boxer briefs.

"Especially when you're covered in wrinkles," he teased. "Wrinkles are very sexy."

"I learn something new about you every day," she laughed. The feeling of awkwardness seemed to melt away. "Are you sure you're okay with this? I don't know if you've noticed, but I sometimes jump into things without thinking, and after waking up together and our dinner tonight, I thought 'I'm ready for this next step', but I didn't think about the fact that you've waited so long and...well, I don't want you to think I was...teasing you. I mean, it must drive you crazy...when we're close like this, I mean."

She paused in her ramble to notice just how close his body, now naked from the waist up, was to hers. He'd moved closer to her as she spoke, and she suddenly found herself beyond nervous and just as aroused as he was. Whose brilliant idea had it been to get him to take off his clothes? Oh right, hers.

"It does drive me crazy," he admitted, his voice soft and husky. She noticed that he seemed to be opening and

closing his hands — as if he wasn't sure what to do with them. "But it doesn't bother me. It feels nice...just the feel of it. Every new step we take is even more exciting to me because I know where it's heading. I know what I'm waiting for. And you are beyond worth it."

"Okay, you have to stop being so perfect," she murmured. "It's making me look bad."

Unable to help herself, she reached out and took his hand. He held it, looking down at their hands, then up to her, their eyes locking for about five seconds before he pulled her close and kissed her deeply. She felt her body press against the solid expanse of his chest and whimpered as their tongues met, tentatively at first and then more frantically as the heat that had been simmering between them fanned to a roaring flame once more.

Stumbling backwards, they made their way to the bed. Clark sat down on it and Lois climbed into his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Okay," he panted in between hungry kisses, "now you're deliberately teasing me."

"Do you want me to stop?" she breathed.

"No," he said, his voice ragged with need. He pulled away from the kiss and Lois gasped at the mixture of desire and love she saw in his eyes. "But fair warning, I don't know how much more of this my self-control can take."

"I understand," she said and reluctantly moved off him. He smiled reassuringly, and she could see he wasn't angry. She wondered if his continual acceptance of her boundaries was the reason she kept pushing them. She'd never been with anyone who didn't try to push for more even after being told no. It was a brand-new experience and one that ironically had the effect of making her want to take that next step.

"Wow," he said after a moment of companionable silence. "Every time I think that being with you can't get any better...you kiss me like that. When's our wedding again? Can we move up the date?"

Lois laughed and squeezed his hand. She glanced at him one more time and took a deep breath.

"We can't move up the date, but we can move forward," she said, her voice determined but slightly unsteady. He gave her a confused look. "It isn't because of the wedding...the reason I want to wait, I mean. That was a date I chose because I thought that it would help me move past my nerves and fears if we made love for the first time on the happiest day of our lives."

"Oh," Clark said, looking a little bit surprised. "I mean I knew you were a bit nervous. You told me as much when we were in that virtual simulation, but I didn't think...I didn't realise..."

"I didn't tell you," she clarified, "because I was embarrassed. I mean, here you are the guy with zero experience and I'm the nervous wreck? I kept telling myself I was being silly, that I had no right to be scared because we're so good together."

"Everyone has a right to their feelings," he told her, his voice gentle and reassuring. "And I can assure you that having zero experience is terrifying in its own right. Especially with a woman so strong like you. I guess it was silly to think that our talk in the virtual simulation was enough."

"Yeah," she agreed. "But...I want to...talk, I mean. I think I need to. I can't promise you that I still won't want to wait until the wedding, but I think if we both get our fears out in the open, that when we do make love, it will be better."

"We have all day tomorrow," he pointed out. "Let's make a date. We'll have breakfast, I'll make some tea and we'll talk...really talk. Both of us."

"Yes," she said, and for some reason found herself fighting back tears. Something about the way he spoke to her triggered an emotional release that she hadn't anticipated. She looked at him and gave him a tremulous smile. "Will it drive you crazy tonight, if I ask you to hold me?"

"Yes," he said gruffly, brushing a tear away from her cheek and kissing her lips softly. "But I'll do it anyway."

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## Chapter 15

Lois woke up the next morning and was surprised when she reached across and found that Clark wasn't there. She was even more surprised to realise that, despite being only their second night sharing a bed, she didn't like waking up without him. She yawned and rubbed her eyes, trying to clear the foggiest from her brain.

Eventually, the scent of bacon being fried in a pan wafted into the room and Lois found herself climbing out of bed and following it like a child following the pied piper.

She shuffled into the kitchen just in time to see Clark setting the plates on the table.

"Morning, sleepyhead," he said, his voice warm and velvety. He had obviously gotten straight out of bed to make breakfast — his hair was ruffled and unruly, and he had yet to put a shirt on. Okay, she was awake. She was very, very awake.

The coffee maker made a dingy sound, signalling that it was done brewing, and Lois made herself useful by grabbing two mugs and pouring the coffee into them. It took her a minute before she noticed that one of the mugs must belong to Clark, as she had never seen it before. It was an odd shape, with the bottom of the mug curved slightly outwards just enough so that it didn't sit perfectly

flat on the table. It was a hodgepodge of colours and patterns, none of them feeling like they quite made sense. They reminded her of his ties, though not quite as much of an assault on the eyes.

He must have seen her staring at it, as he approached her and wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, placing an extremely tantalising kiss on her neck. She shivered and nearly knocked the mug over. As it was, it rocked back and forth like one of those circus clowns with the large floppy shoes.

"Where on Earth did you get that?" she wondered, her expression both amused and slightly breathless. He was, after all, almost completely naked, save for a pair of shorts, with his arms wrapped around her body, his warm bare skin enveloping her. He smelled like bacon and sleepy man, a scent she decided was beyond intoxicating.

"My mom made it during her ceramic cookware period," he said, placing soft kisses on the back of her neck. She felt herself respond, and decided she needed to move away from him if this breakfast was ever going to get eaten.

"I like it," she said and he grinned at her in a way that told her he knew she was lying. "I also like this whole you making me breakfast in the morning thing...though not so much the waking up alone part."

They both sat down at the table and Clark took a sip of his wobbly mug, and gave her a slightly self-conscious look.

"When I woke up, I felt a bit...restless," he confessed. "I thought it would be a good idea to make breakfast."

A smile played across her lips as her eyes met his. He looked slightly embarrassed, which she found beyond endearing.

"Do you wake up...restless a lot?" she asked, allowing her bold, flirtatious side to take the reins. He looked a tad startled, then gave her a shy smile.

"Lois, I'm a virgin. Just looking at you makes me...restless."

"Oh," she said softly, looking down at her bacon. He reached out and took her hand.

"Then I saw you last night and...well, I haven't been able to think of anything other than how much I want you. Is it okay if I tell you that?"

"Yes!" She hadn't meant to blurt it out that way and gave a nervous laugh to cover her embarrassment. "I mean, that's what we're supposed to be doing this morning, right? Clearing the air?"

"Do you want to start now?" he asked. She was tempted to say yes, but the grumble in her stomach distracted her. They both laughed.

"After bacon," she replied, "bacon first."

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With breakfast finished and cleared away, they both made their way into the living room and sat down on opposite ends of her couch. They sat there for a few moments in what was all of a sudden extremely awkward silence. Lois couldn't remember feeling this nervous around him.

He seemed to be feeling it too — something she could tell just by glancing at him, which was comforting. He was eventually the one to break the stalemate as he gestured to the kitchen.

“Do we, uh...want some tea? Or some more... tension?”

Lois laughed, which made her feel better. This wasn't some scary super villain in front of her. It was Clark, her fiancé.

“No tea,” she said with a shake of her head. “We just had coffee. I just wish this wasn't so...”

“Scary?”

“Yeah,” she replied, relieved he understood. “Although I'm not sure why. I could undress in front of you last night, yet talking to you about making love is nerve wracking.”

“Being naked is different than being vulnerable,” Clark supplied softly.

“Sometimes they're the same, believe me,” she replied with a sad sigh. “I guess...if we want to get anywhere I need to be okay with being vulnerable. So, here it goes.”

She took a deep breath and looked him in the eyes. She knew he wasn't going to want to hear some of what she had to say, given that it meant talking about some of the men she had been with in the past, but it had to be done. She needed him to know.

“I need to start by telling you that I didn't sleep with Lex.” She watched as Clark opened his mouth to say something, but she cut him off before he could. “I realise that you never asked, because neither of us likes to talk about him, but I need you to know that.”

“Why?” he asked, though there wasn't any recrimination in this tone. It was a logical question. She'd been engaged to him as well, and given that she didn't have any particularly strong religious beliefs, he'd likely just assumed they'd had sex and hadn't wanted to know the particulars, which she couldn't blame him for.

“I knew I didn't love him,” she said, cringing as she spoke the words out loud. “I know how that sounds, but I didn't think I was capable of...well, I thought admiration and respect were as good as love. I knew I didn't feel any passion or excitement or anything else they write about in romance novels.”

She fiddled with the bottom of her long t-shirt and was suddenly acutely aware that hadn't gotten dressed. She looked back at Clark, who seemed to understand she

wasn't finished. He waited patiently while she collected her thoughts.

“I understand now, that those things are real. What I feel with you...it's unlike anything I've ever felt. I feel like I need you the way I need water, or air. And when you touch me...”

“I know,” he said, his voice rough and his eyes unreadable. “I feel it too.”

She nodded, her pulse suddenly racing as their eyes met. Oh yeah, passion was real. She focused on what she was trying to say, refusing to let his magnetic eyes and incredible bare chest distract her.

“Anyway...I knew I couldn't feel like that with him, and I'd had enough unpleasant sexual experiences, so I found a way to delay it. I told him...that I wanted to wait until we were married.”

The phrase hung in the air for a moment and Lois waited for the look of disgust she was sure would follow as he realised that he shared something in common with Lex Luthor. Instead, he nodded and looked at his hands for a minute.

“I'm sorry,” he said finally. “I should have tried harder to convince you he was evil. I could have told you my secret...you shouldn't have had to —”

“It's not your fault,” Lois interrupted, “and I don't really want to talk about him, but if we are going to have this conversation, I'm going to have to talk about the men in my past, and I needed you to know that he wasn't one of them.”

“Even if he was,” Clark said, reaching out to touch her cheek gently with the pad of his thumb, “it doesn't change how I see you.”

“I know,” she replied, feeling as if she were about to cry and not really understanding why. “Sometimes it changes how I see myself, though. The experiences I've had with other men...well, for the longest time I thought it was me. Like I wasn't good enough to make them want to stay.”

She took a shuddering breath and gave him a half-hearted smile.

“Logically, I know that's not true, but...” she trailed off trying to find a way to say what she was feeling in a way he would understand.

“Every time I met someone I thought I cared about, it seemed that all it took was one night with me and they were on the next greyhound out of town. It made me wonder if I wasn't any good...sexually.”

“Lois, I'm completely in love with you,” Clark said, sounding more than a little surprised. Whatever he'd been expecting her to say, that wasn't it. He stood up and paced the room for a moment before sitting back down at the end of the couch. “You're all I think about when...I mean



every fantasy I've ever had has been...wow, I am really messing this up, aren't I?"

She laughed softly, which helped relieve some of her fears, but not all. He still didn't seem to understand what she was trying to tell him — at least, not fully.

"I know you love me," she assured him. And she did, that much was never in question. "I just need you to understand some of the reasons that I'm scared."

"I'm scared too! Terrified actually!" he exclaimed. "I've never done this before. What if I can't...I mean, what if I'm not able to...I mean Claude may have been a jerk, but I bet he knew what he was doing when it came to..."

The more he talked, the more the penny dropped, and Lois felt her cheeks flush slightly. It should have occurred to her that he would have these fears, given his inexperience, but for some reason it still surprised her. Perhaps it was because whenever he touched her, it felt as if he knew exactly how to give her pleasure, like an instinct as old as time.

"You're worried about pleasing me?" she asked quietly and found herself floored by the depth of her love for him.

"Of course," he replied. She looked away for a moment, fighting the emotion that swelled within her.

"Well, you'd be the first," she said a bit more sharply than she'd intended. It still stung to have been hurt so many times that she'd come to expect it. She gathered her courage, knowing that if she didn't say what she needed to say, it would eat her alive.

"I've never told anyone this, but I've never...had an orgasm. At least not with a man. I've had one with myself, I mean...oh God, this is the worst time to ramble isn't it? I guess what I am trying to say is that I've always...had to fake it. With men who didn't even care about me. I know, I know...insult, meet injury. But the thing is I don't want to...fake it with you, I mean."

"Lois, you *couldn't* fake it with me," he told her with a slightly amused smile. His tone was light and affectionate and it took some of the heaviness out of the room. She met his smile with one of her own, feeling able to return some of the banter.

"That's an awfully bold statement for a man who just admitted to being terrified," she teased gently.

"No, I wasn't trying to brag," he insisted. Then, his face flushed with embarrassment. "I mean that...I sense when you're... aroused. My powers...they can feel your pulse, hear your heart rate increase or decrease, smell when you're...well, you know. I hope you don't see it as a violation, but I've been using it to figure out what you like...how you want to be touched. In my head, I think of it as my Lois homework. So that I don't make a complete fool of myself when we...are you mad?"

He must have looked up and seen the look on her face, mistaking it for anger. In truth, anger was the last emotion she was feeling. Surprised? Check. Head-over-heels in love? Check. Incredibly aroused at the thought of him paying attention to every aspect of her body while they were together to see what pleased her?

Check. Check. Double check.

"Lois?" he said tentatively, once more.

Her mind raced all of a sudden with images of the two of them together, her in his lap, his lips on her neck, her hands in his hair. She swallowed hard and her breathing was suddenly very shallow. She bit her lip and forced herself to speak.

"Clark, that's the most romantic thing I have ever heard," she breathed. He looked a little surprised by her statement, and somehow it only made her want him more.

"Really?" he said, his voice somewhat hoarse as he attempted levity.

"Clark," she said, her voice a near whimper as she shifted to the other side of the couch once more. "I want you...right now."

"I know," he said, his voice tight with barely contained restraint.

She watched as he slowly moved closer towards her, until he was sitting right beside her, though she noticed he was careful not to touch her. A muscle worked in his jaw.

It was all she could do, not to reach out and touch his leg. She knew that would be all it would take before he would be on top of her, pinning her down in an almost primal way. She knew they were supposed to be talking, but part of her was done talking. Part of her just wanted to feel.

"So what do we do?" she asked.

"What do you want to do, Lois?" he asked, his jaw clenched, hands tightly gripping the sofa.

"I want to make love to you," she told him and it felt like a confession. As she said it out loud, she felt something inside of her unclench. She made a noise that sounded like a half-laugh, half-cry and he gave her a startled look. "I don't know if it means waiting until the wedding, or letting you carry me into the bedroom right now. All I know is I want you."

"I want you too," he said, his voice a ragged whisper. The intensity of the emotion in his voice caught her off guard, but she knew what she was feeling now. Relief. Intense, profound, relief. Well, relief and need. "I...I have an idea."

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## Chapter 16

Lois kept her hands clasped tightly in her lap, trying to clamp down on the desire that was coursing through her. Clark was similarly affected, and though both of them had turned a major corner, she could see on Clark's face that he

understood why she'd been reluctant to make love in the first place. They both had fears.

And they both wanted each other. But now, she understood that it meant more to her that they were on the same page. So she waited as Clark also fought to regain control of himself long enough to explain his idea.

"Okay," she whispered, trying to think about something else — anything else than how badly she wanted to kiss him. "What's your idea?"

"I was thinking, that..." he looked a little shy all of a sudden, which only intrigued her further. "Well, we've only been practice-living-together for two days, and I think it's going well."

She nodded, and let out a breath, willing her heart rate to slow down. His dark eyes were still so intense, so deeply fixed on her that she had trouble letting go of the urge to pull him down on top of her and...nope. Focus. Focus.

"I was thinking there were other things we could... practice," he was saying.

"What do you mean practice?" she asked, feeling breathless all over again. Something told her she was going to like this suggestion.

"There are...uh...other ways to make love that don't include..." He sighed and let out a breath. "There are things we could try...practice...if you wanted to that don't include the *big* threshold. Oh wow, that sounded so much better in my head."

"Trust me, it sounds pretty good from here," she said, feeling her entire body react to his words.

"Do...you want to...do other things?" she asked, her entire face flushed with embarrassment. She wondered if he was talking about what she thought he was talking about.

"More than you know," he said, and his voice was more than husky.

"So you want..." she glanced down at his shorts.

"Oh! No! I mean..." He gestured down at his lap, his entire face suddenly resembling a very handsome beet. "I wouldn't say no if you wanted...but I wasn't asking...I wasn't expecting..."

He took a deep breath. "Ever notice how the Earth never opens up and swallows you when you want it to?"

"Yeah, I'm familiar with the feeling," she replied thinking of all her rambles, too numerous to name. "So what you're saying is —"

"We could..." he ran a hand through his hair, and she could see the frustration he felt trying to get the words out. It was rolling off him in waves. "Get to know each other more fully. Learn what we like, what we don't like. Cross some little thresholds before we cross the *big* threshold. You could help me...teach me."

Oh, God. Was he talking about...

"I could...focus on those other things..." his face was still flushed, but his eyes never left hers. She bit her lip as she realised what he was offering to do. And what surprised her even more was just how badly she wanted him to do it. It was an act she hadn't enjoyed in the past, particularly because she knew deep down that it was ultimately about their egos and never about her pleasure. Looking at the earnest and very hungry expression on Clark's face she knew that he meant every word he said about wanting to learn what pleased her. There was something immensely sexy about the idea of it.

And yet, there was also fear. After all, if Clark genuinely meant it when he said he wanted her to help teach him — and she believed he did — then it meant she had to be honest enough and brave enough to tell him what she liked and what she didn't like. She knew from experience how fragile male ego could be, and while she didn't think Clark was like any of those other men, criticism in the heat of a moment like this couldn't be easy, especially when he was already so inexperienced. Could he handle it if she was truly honest with him?

He must have sensed her hesitation because he reached out and took her hand. Jolts of pleasure shot through her body as they touched, and she fought to keep from gasping out loud.

"It's okay," he said gently. "It was just an idea. If you aren't ready, I'll wait."

"It's not that," she said, trying not to be distracted by the fact that he'd let go of her hand and was now touching her knee. "I like your idea...love it, even. I'm just not sure...well, you know how I hate it when you edit my copy, right? Well, it's because in a way, I often feel my writing is a very personal thing and it's hard not to respond negatively to criticism even when it's well intended and —"

A smile spread across Clark's face, turning into a soft but very affectionate laugh. Lois found herself smiling as well, though she wasn't sure why.

"What?" she said with mock hurt. He grinned and once again her mind reminded her of just how incredibly sexy he was. As well as the fact that he still had no shirt.

"Only you could compare my err...offer, with me editing your copy," he replied and she looked down at her knee where his hand still rested, silently willing him to move it further up her thigh. He continued to speak and his thumb moved gently back and forth, which was intensely distracting in the best way. "I get it, though. And I promise you, that my offer is as much for me as it is for you. When I told you my biggest fear is that I won't please you, I meant it. I also meant what I said about, um...being able to tell when you *are* enjoying things."

She remembered. That knowledge was imprinted in her brain. Ironically, if she thought about it, Clark knowing what excited her was not that different from being able to visibly see evidence of it. It put them on a level playing field in that respect. "You really want to do this?" she asked. He arched his eyebrows and she inadvertently glanced back down at his shorts. "I just meant...you know...me um...editing your copy."

"Yes," he said and there was no mistaking the rasp in his voice or the way his fingers inched ever so slightly up her thigh. She swallowed hard and tried to remember to breathe. "Believe it or not, the idea of you teaching me is...an incredible fantasy. But beyond that, if I'm honest with myself, I would rather you tell me you weren't enjoying it than to know you weren't and have you say nothing. Does that make sense?"

"I love you so much," she said softly, but with a great deal of feeling behind it. She'd never experienced this level of thoughtfulness, love and passion from anyone before. He was almost too good to be real.

"I love you too," he responded and the emotion in his voice took her breath away. He looked at her hopefully. "So does this mean you'd like to —"

"I would very much like to," she replied, both relieved and suddenly very very aware that they were still both half dressed. "Did you mean now, or..."

"Now would work for me," he shot back with lighthearted ease that couldn't quite mask how nervous he suddenly was. "I can check my schedule, but I'm pretty sure I'm free..."

His hand crept a little further up her thigh. Their eyes met and it felt as if the air had been sucked out of the room.

"Oh?" she said innocently, her voice an entire octave higher than normal as his other hand mirrored the first one on her other leg. "So what's step one then?"

"Do you need to see an outline first?" He grinned now and she felt herself surprised at how insanely exciting this was. Well, exciting and utter torture.

"Well, if I'm going to be teaching you, I think it's only right that I see some of your work," she replied, trying to maintain a light teasing tone and failing with how affected she was feeling.

He was about to do just that when the phone rang, startling them both. She heard herself groan out loud with frustration. They both sat there, completely frozen with indecision as it rang a second and third time. In any other situation, she would have ignored it but they both knew it could be Jimmy or Claude calling from the *Planet* with important information on the story. With the trade talks taking place, time was of the essence.

"We *could* ignore it," she said, as he reluctantly pulled his hands away.

"Believe me, I would like nothing more than to throw that phone out the window," he admitted, as he stood up and walked over to answer it. He picked it up with a "Clark Kent here," and she listened to Clark's half of the conversation, trying to put her own frustration aside.

When he hung up, she knew what he was going to say before he said it.

"That was Claude. He found something important."

She nodded. "I guess we had better get dressed?"

"You go first," he said, gesturing towards the bathroom. "I'm going to uh...do a couple laps around the North Pole before I get dressed."

A smile played across her face. "So that's how you deal with frustration? Won't anyone...notice?" she asked, glancing down to note just how affected he still was.

"I'll fly high," he grinned. "See you in a bit."

Lois watched as he spun around and zipped out the window. She shook her head, and headed towards the shower.

"My life is so weird."

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## Chapter 17

Lois took her time showering and getting dressed as she waited for Clark to return. Since she didn't have the option of becoming airborne as a means of dealing with sexual frustration, she opted instead to throw on some music as she dressed, take deep breaths and think of anything other than the way Clark's voice had sounded when he offered to...

Nope. Not thinking about it. Putting on work clothes. Makeup. Things she did every day before she'd shared a bed with Clark Kent. Eventually, the object of her frustration returned, flying in through the window and spinning quickly into his work clothes. As always, she was left slightly in awe as she watched him.

"Just in time," she said softly. She wasn't sure why, but she was suddenly a bit nervous. A moment ago, she was willing to become intimate with him in a way she'd never done with anyone else. She'd done the physical acts of course, but emotionally she felt stripped raw, and though she had just gotten dressed, part of her still felt naked.

"I, uh...took a few extra laps," he said, also sounding slightly flustered. "I didn't want to come back while you were changing."

The last sentence and the nervousness in his eyes caused her to relax. This wasn't like with the men she'd been with before. Those men had been experienced and arrogant, and in her naivete, she'd taken that arrogance for strength of character. They hadn't shown her any flaws, or weaknesses, and she understood now it was because they had been putting on a performance as a means of getting

what they wanted. There was none of that artifice with Clark. What she saw was what she got.

And she saw a man who loved her and who genuinely wanted to please her and was just as terrified of screwing it up as she was. Good. It meant they both understood how much they had to lose.

She shook herself from her thoughts and looked back at Clark, giving him a more confident smile and taking his hands.

“It’s okay, remember?” She kissed him gently on the cheek. “We agreed not to be so skittish around one another. If I want privacy, I’ll go into the bathroom or let you know, but until then...there’s something pretty exciting about the idea of you walking in on me changing.”

She hadn’t meant to say that last part. Especially since they definitely needed to go into the office. However, the reason for that seemed to fly out of her brain as she watched his eyes darken and a flash of lust pass through them. They were supposed to be calming down.

Whoops.

“Lo-is,” he groaned softly, and she could see a slight tick in his jaw. “We have to get to work.”

But even as he said that, he was reaching for her, cupping her face in his hands and pulling her close for a long, lingering kiss. So much for calming down.

“Mmmm, yes,” she said as she slipped her arms around him and pressed her body close to his. “Work...”

She allowed herself to get lost in him once more, surrendering to the way his tongue felt as it expertly teased hers, the way his hands seemed to know exactly where to touch her, the way his breath hitched every time the kiss deepened or their bodies shifted.

Eventually, he broke the kiss, and stepped back from her, his breathing slightly laboured. He gave her an unapologetic smile.

“Sorry, I can’t help myself when I’m near you.”

“I know,” she said, then shook her head. “I mean, I feel the same way.”

A pause stretched out between them before Clark finally spoke again.

“We really should —”

“Get to work, I know.” They both laughed and she grabbed her keys before they headed out the door.

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They were greeted with the usual hum of the newsroom when they arrived. Lois immediately noticed Claude sitting at her desk, with dozens of papers strewn all over them. Instantly, she felt irritated by the way he seemed to have made himself at home, not to mention the way he’d managed to ruin what could have been an amazing experience for her and Clark.

It wasn’t helped by the fact that as they headed to her desk, Clark took her hand, running the pad of his thumb lightly over her knuckles – a gesture that was innocent in every way but caused her breath to quicken nonetheless.

“If you continue to tease me like that, we are going to end up getting fired for public indecency,” she said in a voice so soft she knew only he could hear. In response, he let go of her and placed his hand on the small of her back, causing her to grit her teeth. He was doing it on purpose. Forget getting fired, they might end up getting arrested.

“No intimacy at work,” Clark whispered, his voice a delicious rumble in her ear. “Gotcha.”

Damn him.

When they reached her desk, Claude stood up and moved over as Lois sat down. Both Claude and Clark pulled a chair up to the desk.

“Sorry I had to call you in on your day off,” Claude said. Lois smiled weakly, trying not to feel resentful. It wasn’t Claude’s face she wanted to be looking at right now, but that wasn’t his fault either. Some things were more important. Clark squeezed her hand and she knew he was thinking the same thing. She squared her shoulders and tried to focus on the pile of papers in front of her.

“So, what did you find?”

“Quite a few things, but I’m not sure whether I am understanding them correctly,” Claude admitted. “I rather hope I’m not to be honest.” He shoved a handful of papers in her direction.

Lois picked them up and tilted them in Clark’s direction who pretended to rifle through them while he scanned them. He looked back up with a raised eyebrow.

“This says that your family’s company Dupont Airlines is...”

“About to receive a military contract from the French government, yes,” Claude said with a sigh. For the first time, Lois really looked at him. He looked haggard and anxious. She tried not to, but she felt a slight pang of pity for him.

“I thought you said they had branched out into commercial planes,” she said, looking through the documents in confusion. Claude had managed to get his hands on the list of major shareholders in his family’s company. His brother still did own the company, but only barely. A second major shareholder’s name on the list rang a bell in Lois’ mind, though for the life of her she couldn’t figure out why.

“They had,” Claude replied, his voice laced with frustration. “At least, until the last year or so. I haven’t really paid much attention, to be honest, because I wanted a clean break, but it looks like they were in more trouble than I realised. My father swore he would never go back to building weapons for the military and now...”

“Who is this other shareholder?” Clark asked, pointing to the name that was buzzing inside Lois’ head, demanding she remember. “Rex Alexander? That name sounds familiar. Who is he?”

“I don’t know,” Claude replied, running a tired hand over his face. “I called my brother to ask about him, and all he would tell me was that he was American and he had all but saved the company from bankruptcy a couple of years ago. Bought some shares, invested a bunch of money, but never appeared in person for board meetings and major votes. He always sent someone on his behalf, and then a couple years ago, stopped sending anyone entirely.”

“Is this why you called us?” Lois asked absently, turning the name over and over in her mind, “to tell us about the military contract?”

“Partly,” Claude replied. He fished around for some more papers. “I was looking to see what the tie between our governments could be and I noticed the name Rex Alexander kept popping up. Near as I can figure, whoever he is would benefit greatly if our government had a trade agreement with the United States for various munitions, weapons and military vehicles such as...”

“Planes, trains and automobiles.” Clark finished grimly.

“More like planes, missiles and tanks,” Claude muttered.

“Lex!” Lois suddenly exclaimed as the name suddenly made all too much sense. She immediately felt foolish for not seeing it sooner, especially since they already knew he was responsible. “Rex Alexander was one of the aliases that Lex used for some of his business dealings. Remember, Clark? When you told me to...investigate him?”

She cringed inwardly at the memory. It had been just after she’d turned Clark down and gotten engaged to Lex. She’d been desperate at the time to keep Clark in her life, and so despite their falling out, she’d borrowed one of Lex’s convertibles and offered Clark a ride. Clark had gotten in the car reluctantly, refusing her attempts to repair their friendship. She understood why now, of course, but it still hurt to think about.

*“You’re an investigative reporter, Lois. Investigate!”*

She never realised just how permanently that moment had become seared in her memory, but something in Clark’s challenge had caused her to awaken from whatever haze she’d been in. She’d done what he asked, and begun looking into Lex’s business dealings, albeit a bit halfheartedly. She hadn’t been ready to acknowledge that Clark had been right, nor that she had feelings for him.

“Lois?” Clark’s voice intruded on her thoughts, and she realised she must have zoned out. It was hard to think

about those few weeks after they had lost the *Planet* even now. She swallowed the emotion that suddenly bubbled to the surface and gave him a reassuring smile. She’d deal with these emotions later in the safety of his arms when they didn’t have an audience.

“When I did, uh...investigate him, I found that name showed up a lot. I never got the chance to ask him what it meant before...” she trailed off and Clark nodded.

“Now that you mention it, the name popped up in our investigation too,” Clark mused. Lois remembered him telling her that he, Perry, Jimmy, and Jack had all worked together to find the evidence necessary to bring Lex to justice. She shook her head. It felt like a lifetime ago. So much had changed. “But would he still use that name? I mean, it feels a little...obvious, doesn’t it?”

“Well, if he bought shares in Dupont before he was put in prison, then I think he likely felt untouchable,” Lois said, a leaden feeling in the pit of her stomach. “And using it now...well, he wants us to know. He wants us to know he’s behind this. And that scares me to death.”

She hadn’t meant to say the last part, especially in front of Claude, but it had just slipped out. The look in Clark’s eyes was one of pure reassurance. He didn’t touch her, but she could tell he longed to, and for now that was enough.

“King Lex,” Claude said quietly. They both looked at him. He gave them a sheepish smile. “Rex is Latin for King and Lex can be a shortened form of Alexander.”

“Yes,” Lois said, her lips tight and her body rigid. “That makes sense. His own little idea of a twisted joke. His empire was, after all, like a kingdom.”

“But where’s the money coming from?” Clark exclaimed, standing up and pacing the room in frustration. “He was bankrupt...done! His assets were frozen, so how is he...?”

Lois watched him frown and run a hand through his hair. She could see the effort it was taking him not to put his emotions on full display, but he didn’t need to. She could see. He was angry, and he was scared.

And that scared her.

“Well, if he bought the shares before we put him away, he’d still have some money even if it’s under an alias.” She forced herself to sound logical and methodical. Emotions wouldn’t do them any good here. It was what he was hoping for. “Of course, he would need to have someone to help him access it.”

“Either that, or he has more money somewhere that isn’t traceable to him,” Claude mused.

“Now there’s a thought,” Clark said, turning and looking back at them both. He tensed up even more and gave Lois a look that made her shiver. “What if he did have another account in someone else’s name? Someone who could access the funds without ever having it traced

back to him? Someone who he still thinks he's going to spend the rest of his life with?"

Lois felt her entire body go cold as she realised what he was implying.

"Are you saying that he might have —"

"Opened an account in your name," Clark finished, his jaw tight with suppressed emotion. "Did he say anything to you? Get you to sign anything?"

"I..." Lois' hands started to shake as she thought back to all the paperwork she'd signed when she had joined the Luthor News Network, not to mention the slew of papers she'd signed having to do with the prenuptial agreement as well as other things. She flushed with embarrassment and fought the urge to throw up. "I don't know, Clark, I...I signed so many things and all happened so fast and..."

She swallowed and suddenly felt extremely lightheaded — as if the room was closing in on her. Her face felt hot, and tears pricked at the back of her eyes. Voices in the room faded to a dull roar.

A half second later, Clark was at her side, the reassuring weight of his hand was on her shoulder, pulling her close and anchoring her. She took deep breaths until the feeling passed and she was able to sit up again.

She was surprised to find that she didn't feel embarrassed that Claude had seen her almost break down. With a start, she realised it was because she no longer cared what he thought of her in any capacity. It was as if they had never shared anything more than a casual conversation, and she was grateful for it.

She forced her mind back to the conversation at hand.

"If Lex did open a bank account in my name expecting me to access it, how is it that I don't know about it?"

"When you think about it, It wouldn't be hard," Clark replied, his teeth clenched. "He could have opened an account at any bank in Metropolis."

"That would make sense," Claude replied. "If everything you say about him is true, he's not the type to leave anything to chance. It looks like he has multiple sources of revenue at his disposal. Including my family."

Lois noted that he sounded especially bitter about the last point and was surprised to find that she hadn't even questioned whether he was lying to them. He seemed genuinely shocked to be connected even tangentially to a criminal like Lex Luthor.

"So, here's what we know," Lois said, deciding to lay everything out on the table as objectively as possible. "Lex has paid an assassin whom he knew in prison to assassinate the President. He's apparently talented enough to make the shot so far away that not even Superman will hear it."

She looked at the others and noted they were paying full attention.

"We also know that before he was arrested, he went by the alias Rex Alexander to purchase shares in at least one company that we know of — Dupont Airlines. We know that he invested heavily into Dupont, and somehow managed to convince the French government to offer an exclusive contract to the company to build weapons, which will then be sold to the US as per a trade deal that will take place."

"Which means someone in my government is also involved," Claude added. Lois nodded.

"The Vice President is in Lex's pocket. Jimmy is still working on digging up enough proof to indict him, but it won't be easy, especially if the current President is —"

"We also know his alias," Clark pointed out, "which might make it easier to find a connection between him and the Vice President."

"Good point!" Lois exclaimed. "And we know that somewhere out there, I might have a bank account with a lot of money in it."

"That should be the easiest one to research," Clark said. "We can make some calls later back at the apartment."

"We have to hit him where it hurts," Lois told them. She was suddenly angry. Extremely angry. Furious. She was so tired of feeling helpless and scared and ashamed and every other emotion under the sun when it came to Lex Luthor. Two years ago, he had been determined to tear down her life one good thing at a time, and now he was trying to do it again. Not this time. Not a chance. "We need to find the account and shut it down. Cut off his revenue source and he won't have any leverage."

"I agree," Clark replied, his eyes intense and unreadable. "Finding the account is a priority, but the attack could take place at any time. How can we prevent the actual assassination? If Superman can't track him..."

"Then we will have to rely on old-fashioned techniques," Lois said determinedly. She had an idea. It was a dangerous idea, but if it worked it could save the President's life. "Clark, do you remember when Jimmy had that pen that was supposed to pick up conversations? He got it from that spy shop? What if we got a bug and planted it on the assassin? That way —"

"Superman doesn't have to track him," Clark finished, catching on to her idea. "He would just be waiting for him!"

"The only problem is planting it on him," Lois said with a small frown. "He'll know our faces. Lex would have made sure of it."

"But he won't know mine," Claude said quietly. Both of them turned to him in surprise. He gave a slight shrug. "I admit it, I'm a coward. But I also know that I can't sit back and let this happen. I didn't do the right thing the last

time I was here, but I can do it now. The President is due to make an announcement on the progress of the talks in three days' time."

"I'll bet money that's when Mills will make the attempt," Lois agreed grimly.

"Which means, we have three days to track him down." Claude said. "Once we do, I will pretend to bump into him on the street and plant it on his coat."

"Are you sure?" Lois found herself asking Claude. She knew what he was risking with this offer. She'd taken that risk time and time again.

He nodded.

"Yes, I'm sure," he replied. "My family's company... our legacy has been dragged into this. I want to make sure he doesn't get any more shares of Dupont Airlines. I'll plant the bug. You make sure that Superman is there to take him down."

"That just leaves the Vice President and Luthor's connection to him," Clark said, giving Claude a terse nod. Lois could swear she saw a grudging respect in her fiancé's eyes. "We need proof he's in his pocket or Luthor will just find some other way out."

"Divide and conquer," Lois decided. She looked over at Claude. "Clark and I will go back to my place and find this account. You work on tracking down Preston Mills' current location, and we will need to fully loop Jimmy in on this because he can dig further into any dealings that the Vice President might have had with Rex Alexander."

"I'll call if we find anything," Claude offered. Lois smiled and nodded, trying not to appear as tired as she felt.

"Sounds like a plan," Clark replied, his shoulders relaxing ever so slightly. She stood up and reached for his hand.

"Come on," she said softly, "let's go home."

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## Chapter 18

Lois didn't feel as if she was truly able to exhale until they were safely back inside her apartment. If she'd been asked to describe what she was feeling, she'd have been hard-pressed to do so — something she'd told Clark when he'd checked in on her in the car. She wanted to talk — and she would, but right now she needed to focus on the task at hand. Clark had thankfully accepted that answer and no more was said.

They changed quickly out of their work clothes and Clark immediately went to work by grabbing her phonebook and using his super speed to find every bank in Metropolis that wasn't Metropolis Savings and Loan — Lois' bank.

He wrote them down on a piece of paper, while Lois grabbed a bottle of wine and poured two glasses.

It was hard to believe that this morning they'd been so emotionally intimate with one another. Now that intimacy

felt like it was a mile away, replaced instead by a numb sense of dread that she could only keep at bay by the act of doing something. In this case, pouring wine and phoning banks to find out if she had an account hidden somewhere with an unknown sum of money in it.

She suppressed a shudder at the idea that Lex had somehow managed to get her to sign a document like that without her knowledge. If he could get away with that, what else had she signed? How could she be so naive?

She felt Clark's presence behind her before he wrapped his arms around her and placed a gentle kiss on her neck. She leaned into his arms, closing her eyes briefly while she got lost in the feeling of his body enveloping hers. Though he'd saved her life more times than she could count, it was at these moments when she felt the safest — the most protected.

Still, today even the feeling of his body fully sheltering her couldn't stop the tightness in her chest. She felt brittle and fragile — like glass that could shatter at any moment.

"You okay?" His voice was a soft murmur against her skin.

"Yeah," she said, though her voice shook ever so slightly, betraying the storm of emotions that seemed to swirl within her. She was trying so hard to keep it together, but didn't seem to be doing a very good job of it. "I was just wondering what else Lex might have gotten me to sign while I..."

She couldn't finish the sentence. A dam seemed to break inside her and she pitched forward with a shuddering sob. Clark caught her and turned her towards him, folding her into his arms as she shook against him.

She could hear him speaking to her — gentle words of comfort that she couldn't make out but knew the meaning of. He was here. She was safe. Her shoulders shook as she cried, riding out the wave of emotion that surged through her. It felt like she was grieving, though for what reason she wasn't sure.

The woman she'd once been? The innocence that was taken from her? The way Lex continued to violate her even though he was locked away? All of the above? She didn't know. All she knew was that Clark was safe. He was her anchor in the storm and she could hold onto him until the world seemed right again. And that was all she needed to know as her tears eventually subsided and she sagged against him, spent from emotion and exhaustion.

After a few moments of silence, Clark gently lifted her into his arms and carried her over to the couch. Though not especially comfortable as a piece of furniture, right now that couch was the only place in the world she wanted to be. Because it was where he was. His presence made everything better...made her world better.

It was a profound realisation to come to. She'd always thought she was better off not needing anyone in her life. Disappointment after bitter disappointment had convinced her that the only person she could trust was herself. And she'd clung to that, even as Clark broke down each and every one of her defences with his quiet patience and steadfast determination. He didn't need her to be perfect, and she realised now she wouldn't disappoint him. He wasn't like the others who only wanted to take from her.

Clark only wanted to give. And right now, he understood what she needed and gave without hesitation or thought. And now she knew it was okay to need someone. It wasn't weakness. Clark was her strength. He gave her his when her own was in short supply. And she needed him.

He placed a gentle kiss on the top of her head as she curled up against him, clutching his sweater, now wet with her tears. She gave a sniffing laugh as he lifted her head to look at him.

"You might need to change," she told him with a watery smile. "I...soaked your sweater."

"It's just a sweater," he replied, his voice warm and gentle. "It felt like you...needed that."

"I did," she admitted. It was something she would have found difficult a year ago — admitting that she was human — just as prone to weakness as anyone else. But now it felt good to say to someone else that she was hurting. "I feel like I've needed it for two years now. I don't think I've ever really thought about all the things he took from me. I guess I locked it all up in a box marked the past, put some duct tape over it and thought that was enough."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked, his deep brown eyes offering nothing but understanding and empathy. To this day, it still surprised her that he seemed to bear no grudge. After everything that happened, his love had not wavered. Not one inch.

"Yes," she said, surprising herself. "And...no. I mean what would it accomplish?"

"It might make you feel better," he pointed out. "Or help you to forgive yourself."

"Forgive myself?" she echoed, confused by his wording. "What do you mean? He's the one who —"

"Lex Luthor is evil personified," Clark agreed and there was a hard edge to his voice. "There's nobody else on this planet that I think could drive me to real violence, but...I don't think that's why you're hurting. I think you're angry at yourself for being drawn in. For being a victim."

"I..." She tried to speak but the words she wanted wouldn't leave her lips. A wave washed over her as the truth of his words sunk in. He was right. Fresh tears threatened all over again and she fought to keep them at bay. "I don't know how to. Forgive myself, I mean. I don't

know how you have managed to forgive me. After all that happened."

"It's simple. There was nothing to forgive," he said gently. "At least, not to me. Lois, if you want blame or judgement or for me to hold a grudge, I can't give you that. All you'll get from me is my love and my respect. You've had it from day one and nothing can take that. Especially not him."

"I just feel like that was a different woman, you know? Like he did something to me...hypnotised me or mind melded me or something. I keep thinking I would *never* agree to marry someone like that, but...I did. That was me." She shook her head and wiped a stray tear that had escaped down her cheek.

"He *did* do something to you," Clark said quietly. "He manipulated you. He lied to you. He pulled a rug out from under you, turned your world upside down and stripped away everything that mattered to you piece by piece. It was methodical and it was evil, but it wasn't your fault."

"I know. I've told myself that a hundred times, and yet..." She looked down at her hands, feeling raw and exposed. Her voice was quiet and small. "I guess...I guess I'm just not that strong."

The instant those words left her lips, his hands were cupping her face, and drawing her gaze to him, his thumb softly caressing her cheek as he did so.

"Lois, you are the strongest woman I have ever met," he said fervently. "You stood at that altar, having lost everything that mattered and with hundreds of people watching you and told him you couldn't marry him. That takes tremendous strength and courage."

She gave a self-deprecating, half-hearted laugh. "Says the man who can lift space shuttles into orbit."

"Strength is more than just being able to lift buildings," he reminded her.

"I know...and you're right. It's just..." she trailed off, not even sure what she wanted to say.

He shook his head and briefly looked away, his hands dropping to his sides. He was quiet for a moment before he spoke again.

"I only wish I was that strong." His words were laced with regret and for the first time she saw shame in his expression. "You were all alone. I said I was your friend, and when you needed me the most, I left you alone. I was hurt, but that was no excuse."

"Clark you didn't —"

"Yes, I did," he said sharply, though she knew he wasn't angry with her. "And I have to live with that. But don't you ever tell me you aren't strong. I know differently."

She nodded, and reached out to touch his face the same way he'd done for her.



“You’ll get no blame or judgement from me either,” she whispered. “There’s no room for that between us. Deal?”

He gave a soft smile.

“Deal.”

She gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek and they sat quietly for a few minutes. She turned their conversation over and over in her head as they did so. She hadn’t realised that Clark had harboured so much anger towards himself for not intervening with Lex. Nor had she ever really thought of her refusal to marry him at the last moment as an act of strength. She’d always felt that moment had come at her absolute weakest moment and yet, he was right. Lex had done a lot of things, but he hadn’t broken her. She hadn’t let him. Maybe that was the beginning towards finding that forgiveness that had eluded her for so long.

Eventually, she spoke, her words invading the silence.

“I guess I thought of strength as something you always have with you...like the Superman suit.” She reached for his hands and took them in hers. “But the suit comes off. So maybe strength is something that you reach for when you need it the most. Like I reach for you and you reach for me.”

Clark nodded. “Being with you is stronger than me alone, remember?”

“I do,” she replied. “And I think now that being strong might mean having to do some hard things.”

“Like what?”

She closed her eyes, feeling calmer as she thought of the next steps.

“Face my fears and be vulnerable,” she said with a soft chuckle. “It’s never been my strong suit, I know. But with us practising moving in together and the talk we had this morning, I feel like it’s finally possible to be really honest with myself and to stop being afraid. Forgiving myself... it’s not going to happen overnight. It’s going to take some time, but I need to take the first step. I think I’m going to make another appointment with Doctor Friskin once this is finished with Lex.”

He gazed at her for a moment, his eyes shining with a love so strong it almost blinded her with its power. Eventually, he leaned forward, his lips barely grazing hers but sending a powerful shiver throughout her entire body.

“See? Stronger than Superman for sure.” He kissed her again — a kiss that was longer and full of reverence. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said. And somehow, even though they weren’t married yet, their words felt like a vow.

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## Chapter 19

Although they both knew that calling banks was a top priority, Clark insisted they take some time before diving

into things. Lois was only too happy to oblige, still feeling emotionally raw and exhausted from everything that had happened. Instead, he’d carried her into the bedroom, and — despite the fact that it was only two in the afternoon — pulled the covers back and folded her into his arms.

He gently kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair as she drifted off to sleep, the soothing sound of his heartbeat helping her to sink into peaceful oblivion.

She woke to the feeling of Clark’s arms cocooning her in warmth and her stomach growling insistently. She sat up, rubbing at the last vestiges of sleep as her mind went from foggy to clear.

She didn’t often nap during the day, but when she did it took a while for her to get her bearings again. She yawned and looked over at Clark, who had also sat up and was now staring at her with a bemused and loving expression on his face.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” he said softly.

“Hey, yourself,” she replied, loving the fact that he was here to wake up to, not just when she napped but all the time. “How long did I sleep?”

“A couple hours,” he told her. Her eyes glanced over to the clock and she noticed the time.

“Clark, it’s after five!” she exclaimed in surprise. “We have work to do. Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You looked like you needed the sleep,” was his gentle reply. “I...just didn’t have the heart.”

She wanted to be irritated with him. After all, Lex was a serious threat and time was running out. Just one look at him, however, rendered her completely unable to feel anything but love. The look on his face told her that he would always put her first — no matter what the danger. His love continued to take her breath away.

“I suppose we can call the banks tomorrow,” she relented with a sigh as she slid out of bed and stretched. Her stomach rumbled again, and Clark chuckled.

“I don’t think we can do anything without eating first,” he said with a grin.

“I guess I am a little hungry,” she admitted, realising that neither one of them had eaten since breakfast.

“I could make something,” he offered. “Or, if you’re too hungry to wait, I could just...” he made a flying gesture to which Lois nodded vigorously.

“Yes, please,” she said. “I feel like your cooking would be lost on me tonight anyway. I’m all out of sorts.”

“Any preferences?” he asked, making his way over to her, and running his hand gently down the side of her face. Her body instinctually reacted to his touch.

“You pick,” she replied, resting her forehead against his chest and enjoying the scent of him. “I’m not in the right headspace for decisions tonight.”

He wrapped his arms tightly around her and kissed the top of her head gently.

"I'll be quick," he promised as he stepped back, spun into the suit and flew out the window. She had only just begun to set the table when he zipped back in, laid the food out on the table along with drinks and utensils and spun back into a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants.

The food smelled amazing. He'd brought back some kind of Indian curry with what seemed to be freshly baked naan bread. Her mouth watered as she sat down at the table.

"Where on Earth did you...no, wait, silly question." She flashed him a grin. "You never cease to amaze me."

"That's the plan," he replied. His tone was light but his eyes were serious. She was about to respond, when another gurgle from her stomach told her enough was enough. Making eye contact, they both laughed before eagerly digging into their food. Lois was ravenous as she ate. The food was incredible, and she and Clark managed to make light conversation — something she hadn't thought herself capable of after everything that had happened.

Eventually, the food was finished and dishes and take-out cartons were put away. Lois watched as Clark immediately began to wash the few dishes they had used, using his heat vision to dry them. Without thinking, she walked up behind him as he was setting the last plate in the drying rack and wrapped her arms around his solid torso. She placed a kiss on the back of his shoulder, not being tall enough to reach anything else. The gesture caused him to pause and turn around, capturing her lips in a kiss that surprised both of them.

She gasped as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him, deepening the kiss as he did so. His hands clutched her hips and then made their way around to the small of her back settling just underneath her shirt against her bare skin. His touch caused her to gasp against his lips and she felt a flicker of heat coil in her lower stomach.

They stumbled backwards together towards the couch as his lips captured hers over and over in increasingly passionate kisses. Her entire body seemed to come alive, and she found herself needing to touch him. Her hands found their way under his t-shirt and up the expanse of his back as his tongue swept through her mouth, effortlessly causing heat to spread to all the pleasure points in her body.

They reached the couch and Lois urged him towards it. He took the hint and sat down, pulling her into his lap. She broke the kiss briefly, and placed her hands against his chest. Something about the way his skin seemed to jump whenever she touched him or the way his breathing sped

up every time she shifted in his lap made her feel powerful and alive.

She remembered their conversation from earlier that morning now in all too vivid detail. She remembered his request and the way he'd made her feel with just a look — desired, cherished, and sexy. He was giving her that same look now — and it had the same effect as before.

"Lois," he said tightly. A muscle worked in his jaw and she noticed for the first time just how hard he was trying to maintain control. "You're driving me crazy right now."

"The feeling is mutual," she replied, her voice foreign to her own ears as her hands continued questing and she shifted slightly against his hips again.

His hands were still by his side where they had been ever since he'd pulled her into his lap. Every now and then he would lift them as if to touch her, then place them back on the couch.

"If you keep doing that —" he started to say, but was interrupted as Lois leaned forward to kiss him deeply and soundly, making sure that her tongue teased his in a way that left no room for doubt as to how he was making her feel.

"You were saying?" she said innocently as she pulled back from him. His hands were suddenly on her hips now, and she could tell just how much he wanted her.

"I was saying if you keep doing that, I'm not going to be able to stop," he admitted, his eyes intense as he fought for breath. "And we weren't going to...do this yet, right? I mean, this morning..."

He was right. She knew he was right. She wanted to take things slow and get to know each other's bodies the way they had agreed to. But it was just so easy to get carried away. And she wasn't sure she wanted to stop this time. Not completely.

"This morning you made a promise to me," she said, shocked by how sultry she sounded. "Does the offer still stand?"

She could read his every thought and desire in those brown eyes and yet he hesitated.

"I want to," he told her, his voice rough with need. "But I'm worried that now might not be the right time. Today was rough and I —"

"Today was rough," she agreed as she moved off of him reluctantly. She sat beside him, trying to get her own traitorous body under control. "And that's part of the reason I want you...need you."

"I get that," he told her softly. "But when I first...do this for you, I want it to be for the right reasons, not because you want to forget."

"That's not why I'm asking," she promised, her voice equally serious now. "You make me feel so loved and so safe. But you also make me feel...sexy in a way I've never

felt before and I want to feel that. Tonight brought back some memories and a lot of fear. But being with you... there's no room for fear. And that's what I want to hold onto. The way you love me. Please, Clark. Will you...?"

"Yes," he rasped, turning and capturing her mouth in a deeply possessive kiss. Before she could react, he'd already lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

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Lois had never felt so loved or cherished. Sitting together on the bed afterwards, his arms encircling her, she marvelled at the sense of wholeness she felt when she was with him.

"You were perfect," he told her, still sounding slightly in awe.

"So were you," she replied. He gave a self-conscious laugh and ran a hand through his hair.

"I better, uh...go fly around for a bit," he said. "That was intense. But after...when I come back, I mean...can I hold you?"

"Of course...or I could...help you?" She gave him a meaningful look and the look in his eyes told her he understood and was barely holding it together. "After everything you've done...I mean it doesn't seem fair for you to not..."

"Some other time," he said gently. "You don't owe me anything."

A lump formed in her throat at his simple statement and she fought to hold back tears. So many others she'd known had seen love as a transaction. A give and take that had to be matched or it meant nothing. Not Clark. He gave himself freely and with no conditions. Were all aliens this thoughtful? Or was he this special in more than one solar system?

"I know," she said, surprised to realise that for the first time she genuinely didn't feel as if she needed to do this out of obligation. She wanted to. "I just want to show you..."

"I know," he said, his voice ragged. "And believe me, I can't wait. It's going to be all I can think of for a while. Well, that and what we just did together. But tonight was for you. We have time. I'll be back soon."

Lois nodded, as she understood just what it was he'd been trying to say. She'd asked for something from him — a beautiful memory to replace some of the fear and self-doubt she'd been feeling and he'd given it to her a thousand fold. He was right. There would be time. And when that happened, she'd have the chance to show him just how much he meant to her.

She watched as he spun into the suit and flew out the window, the tell-tale sound of Superman breaking the sound barrier echoing in the night. She let out a deep sigh,

threw on a t-shirt when her legs regained their strength and snuggled under the covers, waiting for Clark to return to her as he always did.

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## Chapter 20

Lois slept well that night, which was a surprise to her. She'd assumed that, given everything that had been stirred up during the day, her sleep would be troubled by nightmares, and yet with Clark's arms around her, it felt like nightmares couldn't touch her. His arms offered nothing but peace and she was grateful for it.

She woke before he did, which she was also grateful for. Any other day she'd have snuggled back against Clark, or better yet, woken him with a kiss — something she was learning that she really enjoyed. But this morning, she opted to slip out of his arms, throw on a robe and pad into the kitchen where the list of banks she needed to call awaited her.

She checked her watch and saw that said banks would not be open for another twenty minutes, so she made herself busy by making coffee and toast.

He couldn't help her. She'd realised that almost seconds after she'd opened her eyes. He would want to help, of course, but he couldn't. Still, that wouldn't stop him from trying. Clark would insist on being right next to her while she called bank after bank, but there was nothing he could actually *do*. He couldn't make the calls for her.

And in realising that, she also realised that she would feel better doing this on her own. It wasn't that she wanted to shut Clark out — far from it. The very thought of picking up the phone to call the first bank on the list caused her hands to shake. But she also knew that Clark still blamed himself for not interceding sooner when it came to Lex. He would want to be able to do something tangible to help her, and not being able to would only cause him pain.

She would spare him that pain if she could a hundred times over. And even though she knew she needed to stop punishing herself, there was a tiny part of her that believed that making these calls on her own constituted a form of penance. Something to discuss with Doctor Friskin for sure. She'd like to be able to jump up and declare that she was all fixed, but she knew she still had a long way to go.

Starting with these phone calls. She finished the last of her toast and coffee and glanced at the clock once more.

The banks were open.

She looked briefly towards the bedroom but didn't need super hearing to know that Clark was still fast asleep. She wasn't sure if the emotional overhang of yesterday's events had affected him as well, making him really tired, but she knew she probably wouldn't have a lot of time before he woke up.

She took a deep breath, and dialled the first number on the list — Metropolis Credit Union.

A perky teller answered her, letting her know her name was Angela and inquiring as to how she could help her this morning. Lois closed her eyes and spoke, her voice wobbling ever so slightly.

“Hello, it’s Lois Lane calling. I just wanted to check the balance of one of my accounts.”

“Absolutely,” Angela said, her perkiness grating on Lois’ nerves already. It was going to be a long morning if they all sounded like this. She heard the faint sound of typing on the other end.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lane,” she said and Lois could almost hear her frowning. “I don’t see an account under that name registered here with us. Are you sure you have one?”

“This is Metropolis Savings and Loan is it not?” Lois asked, playing dumb as a wave of relief washed over her. One down, several more to go.

“No, I’m sorry, this is Metropolis Credit Union,” Angeal replied, taking the bait.

“Oh, my mistake,” Lois replied, trying her best to sound like she was embarrassed about the mix-up. “I must have called the wrong bank. Thanks anyway.”

“No problem,” Angela said, the perky returning to her voice. “You have a lovely day.”

Lois hung up and dialled the number of the next bank. A very similar conversation resulted as Lois asked to check the balance of her account, and then feigned confusion and an honest mistake as she was told that there was no account in her name there. She called three more banks and had the same luck. She was almost halfway down her list and so far nothing. She was beginning to hope that maybe their theory had been just that — a theory.

Calling the First Bank of New Troy, she went through the same routine conversation, this time with a woman named Carol. However, this time Carol didn’t simply tell her that they didn’t have an account listed in her name. The typing stopped and Carol spoke.

“I...see your account here with us Ms. Lane, but your balance is such that I can’t give it to you over the phone. I am sure you understand with a balance this substantial, we need to see some valid identification. You’ll have to come down to the bank, and we will be happy to help you then.”

Lois said nothing. She could hardly breathe. She wasn’t even sure if she had dropped the phone receiver until Carol’s voice came through again on the other line.

“Ms. Lane? Ms. Lane, are you there?”

“Y...yes,” Lois said, feeling suddenly very shaky and lightheaded. She worried that she might pass out and reminded herself to take slow, deep breaths. She’d found the account. It wasn’t a theory. Somehow, Lex had gotten

her to sign a document opening a bank account she knew nothing about with God only knew how much money in it.

“Thank you,” she told Carol, trying to steady herself just enough. She now regretted her decision not to wake Clark and have him near her while she did this. She desperately wished he was holding her hand right now. “I’ll uh...be there sometime this afternoon.”

“With an account this size, it’s best I book you in for an appointment. Mr. Carstairs, our bank manager, will personally help you. Will noon work for you?”

“Yes, that will be fine,” Lois said, her voice hollow. It was then that Clark made his way into the kitchen, hair ruffled from sleep but his eyes noticeably alert. His super hearing must have caught enough of it.

“Wonderful,” Carol said enthusiastically. “You’ll need at least two pieces of government identification. We will see you then.”

Lois heard the click signalling that Carol had hung up the phone but didn’t put her own receiver down until Clark gently took it from her and placed it on the base. She hadn’t even realised she was crying until Clark reached out and gently wiped a tear from her cheek.

“It’s true,” she said, her voice thick with emotion as the tears rolled slowly down her face.

“I know,” Clark replied and his voice cracked ever so slightly. He pulled her tightly to him and she allowed his arms to wrap around her, cocooning her while she cried softly into his chest.

This time there were no body shaking sobs like the night before. That reaction had been born of shock and unresolved trauma. This was different. She’d known this was a possibility — no, a probability, and she’d processed that at least as much as anybody could.

But now it was confirmed and the emotions she was feeling were less about shock and more about grief. And grief was sometimes a much harder emotion. It ebbed and flowed like a tide. She’d been grieving ever since she’d found herself used by Claude and manipulated by Lex.

But time, and Clark, had helped to heal a lot of that grief, and even as she cried, she knew this too would pass. And sure enough, the tears eventually subsided and when they did, Clark tipped her face up to meet hers, leaning down to kiss her.

When they parted, she drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

“I take it you heard all of that?” she asked, though her voice was not accusatory. She knew that he would never listen in on anything truly private. He nodded.

“Not all of it, but enough to know that we have a meeting at the bank at noon.”

Lois loved the way he said ‘we’. She loved the fact that she wouldn’t have to do this alone...that she would never have to do the hard things alone again.

“I need to get dressed,” she said, running a hand through her hair. She knew she must look like a complete mess right now — her face blotchy from crying, and her hair not brushed. Clark must have read her mind because he leaned towards her one more and claimed her lips in a deep searching kiss that left her breathless.

“You’ve never looked more beautiful,” he murmured, his eyes soft and serious. When he looked at her that way, she couldn’t help but believe him.

“Come on, farmboy,” she said as she took his hand and dragged him towards the bedroom, “we have some time before the meeting. I want to spend the morning in bed with my fiance.”

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They did just that, lying in bed as long as they could, kissing and snuggling and pretending the world outside the apartment didn’t exist. It was exactly how Lois would want to spend a day off of work with Clark once they were married. Well, with the addition of morning sex and the subtraction of having to deal with the fall out of her near-marriage to a psychopath.

Eventually, the real world did intrude, however, and Lois found herself reluctantly getting out of bed, showering and putting on her most expensive looking business suit. She didn’t know exactly how much money was in this account, but knowing Lex, it was likely an obscene amount. She would need to look the part as much as possible.

Not that there was any possibility that these people wouldn’t know who she was. Lex’s death and subsequent rise from the dead had been headline fodder for the last three years. Add to that her own personal standing in Metropolis as the other half of ‘Lane and Kent’, and no doubt Carol was gossiping to all her friends at the bank about who was finally coming in to check on her account after three years of nothing.

She had to look as if she knew exactly how much money was in there even if she didn’t. Lex no doubt had people working for him in that bank, and so she had to assume the news of her visit would get back to him somehow. If it did, she wanted him to think she hadn’t been the slightest bit intimidated by him.

She was quiet as they drove to the bank, focusing on the road rather than on the destination. There was so much they didn’t know and so much she was uncertain about. Eventually, when they arrived and Lois had parked, Clark took her hand and gave it a short squeeze.

“It’s going to be okay,” he reassured her. “He can’t get to you and I am right here.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Lois replied, her mouth set in a grim line. “If anything, I am looking forward to how angry this will make him. This will shake him up... scare him. I want him to be afraid.”

“Lois...”

“I won’t do anything reckless, if that’s what you’re worried about,” she replied, knowing that would likely be his primary fear which was, to be fair, more than a little warranted. “In fact, I’m not sure what I’ll do...with the money I mean. We haven’t really talked about it yet. All I know is, regardless of the amount, I don’t want to keep it.”

“I agree,” he said grimly. “No amount is worth the blood that money is steeped in.”

“But that still leaves the question of what to do with it,” she said, frustration lacing her words. “Lex will have spies in that bank reporting back to him. Whatever we do, I don’t want him to be able to access it.”

“So, we transfer it to your account,” Clark suggested, “your *real* account. Withdraw it from this bank completely. That way he won’t know what’s being done with it. You want to scare him? That will do it. We can figure out what to do with it once it’s safe in your account.”

“Yes,” Lois agreed, getting out of the car and taking one last glance at herself in the mirror. “Let’s make him think he’s lost it all.”

The bank employees seemed to fall all over themselves the moment Lois and Clark walked through the door. It was all ‘yes, Miss Lane’ and ‘would you like a water with lemon, Miss Lane’. Briefly, Lois wondered if this was what it was like to be a celebrity. She was used to a certain degree of notoriety given their job and the fact that she had a close public friendship with Superman, but this behaviour was on another level entirely and it made her skin crawl.

They were instructed by a young woman in her early twenties by the name of Tara to follow her, and the two of them were shown to an extremely plush office where a man wearing a suit that would easily have cost Lois two months’ salary waited for them.

The moment they walked through the door he gestured for them to be seated in two extremely plush leather chairs and closed the door behind them. Two glasses of lemon water sat on the desk despite both of them having declined the offer.

“Lois Lane, such a pleasure to meet you,” the man said, with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Lois noticed his nameplate read *Richard Carstairs*. Lois wasn’t sure why but something in her gut told her that this was Lex’s man on the inside — or at least one of them. There could easily be more. Mr. Carstairs looked at Clark and reached out a hand, though Lois noted he wasn’t as eager to shake it. “And you must be the other half of Lane and Kent.

Pleasure to meet you both. I'm Richard Carstairs. What can I do for you today?"

Lois took a deep breath and reminded herself to sound as cool and detached as possible. She was at the bank inquiring about an account. That was all.

"I was hoping to learn the present balance of my account," she said smoothly, meeting Mr. Carstairs' gaze directly. *Go ahead and tell him*, she thought to herself.

"Ahh, yes," Mr. Carstairs said and he sounded a bit nervous. One look at Clark confirmed her assumption. He would likely notice the man's change in heart rate after all. "We can absolutely do that for you. We, of course, will need to see two pieces of identification as well as authenticate your signature. With an account this size, I'm sure you can appreciate the precautions necessary to keeping it safe. Especially, given that this is the first time you've come to...check on it."

And there it was. The tell-tale sign of a spy. Lois smiled, feeling her confidence grow by the moment as she fished her driver's licence and passport out of her wallet. She handed them over to Mr. Carstairs.

"Absolutely," she said brightly. She could feel Clark's eyes boring into her. He'd been surprisingly quiet, but she appreciated him letting her take the lead. "You can't be too careful in Metropolis, after all. I hope this is sufficient."

"Quite," Mr. Carstairs said, clearly uncomfortable now. He handed her a document that Lois realised was the original paperwork she'd signed to open the account. She fought down the urge to be sick and kept the smile plastered to her face. Mr. Carstairs placed a blank piece of paper beside the original paperwork. "I'll also need you to sign your name on that sheet of paper so we can ensure the signatures match."

"Is that...really necessary?" Clark asked with a slight frown. She could hear the suspicion in his voice and didn't blame him. If this man did work for Lex, he might be worried she was signing something she wasn't aware of somehow. Anything was possible where Lex was concerned — even something like invisible ink.

"Unfortunately so," Mr. Carstairs said, his voice full of false sincerity. "After all, she might look like Ms. Lane, but could perhaps be someone else."

"True," Lois replied, her voice outwardly agreeable but with a hard edge to it. "Why, I could be a robot, or someone with a face that looks like mine or even a clone."

She signed the blank paper with a flourish and slid it back towards Mr. Carstairs, never breaking eye contact.

"Excellent," Mr. Carstairs replied, his voice becoming even more silky and fake with every hurdle she overcame. "Now, if you don't mind, there's only one final requirement. If you'll recall when you originally set up this account, you created a personal six digit passcode for extra

security. I'll just need you to tell me what that passcode is before we can proceed."

"This is getting a bit ridiculous," Clark said, sounding more than a little irritated. Neither one of them had counted on Lex setting up a secret passcode, after all. She gave him a meaningful look, her heart feeling like lead as she spoke.

"It's okay, Clark," she said softly. She looked at Mr. Carstairs. "The passcode is 050894."

Mr. Carstairs' face fell and Lois knew immediately she'd gotten it right, though she wished she hadn't. For all his evil, Lex was predictable in many ways, so it was no surprise that he'd chosen their wedding date for her passcode. Clark obviously understood the significance of the date as well because she noticed his expression darken considerably.

She suddenly felt tired. Tired of holding herself together and angry that Clark had to witness yet another reminder that she'd almost married a monster. She was irritated with this song and dance, especially since they both knew it would result in her getting exactly what she wanted. He had no reason not to allow her to see the balance and zero excuses left with which to delay it.

He must have known that as well because he nodded reluctantly and stood up.

"If you'll excuse me, I will go and retrieve the most current statement for this account."

He left the room and Lois felt her shoulders sag. Clark placed his hand gently on the back of her neck and gave it a gentle massage. Neither one of them said anything until Richard Carstairs returned with a piece of paper that he handed to her, his fake smile now replaced with a worried grimace.

"Your statement as requested, Miss Lane."

Lois looked down at the amount and had to refrain from gasping aloud when she saw the number. Two hundred million dollars. It might as well have said a bazillion. She had no frame of reference for that sort of money. She'd expected it to be high but this...

She took a few deep breaths before looking back up at Mr. Carstairs who had a slightly smug smile on his face — as if he'd enjoyed the jolt to her equilibrium. She tried not to let her voice shake as she spoke her next words — words that would effectively wipe the smile off his face for good.

"I would like to withdraw all the money from this account and close it."

"I see." Mr. Carstairs' voice was now as cold as ice. All pretext and civility was gone now. "And might I ask why?"

"I have another account with a different bank," Lois replied, feeling bolstered by the fact that she seemed to have made this man nervous. If he was nervous, Lex

would be furious. “I don’t see any reason to have two accounts and two different banks, and so I wish to consolidate them. I plan to deposit this money into my other account.”

“With all due respect, Miss Lane, we’ve kept this money safe for three years now with no...problems. Why not simply close the account at your other bank?”

“Mr. Carstairs,” Lois said, leaning forward and pretending to take him into her confidence. “I’m sure you are aware that I set this account up while engaged to be married to Lex Luthor, who as we all know turned out to be a soulless killer. I regret ever having anything to do with him and want to disassociate myself from his legacy completely, which means concluding my business with your bank. I am sure you understand.”

“Yes,” he replied softly. “I understand.”

Lois could see by the look in his eyes that he did, and felt a thrill of satisfaction at the fact that this conversation would definitely get back to Lex verbatim and he would be helpless to prevent it.

“How long will it take?” Clark asked, gesturing to the account statement in front of them. “To get the money moved, I mean.”

“Well, it will take some time,” Mr. Carstairs replied, looking flustered. “This kind of money can’t be moved in a day, you understand.”

“I understand,” Lois replied. Then, inspired by an idea, she reached into her purse and pulled out a card from her wallet, handing it over to him.

“What’s this?” Mr. Carstairs asked as he took it from her hand.

“My attorney’s card,” Lois replied smoothly. “I will be informing him that we wish to proceed with the closure of this account and the transfer of funds to my current bank. He will be involved on my behalf in order to ensure that this happens as quickly as possible. But I’m sure it won’t be necessary. You’ve been nothing but co-operative, Mr. Carstairs.”

“You have a lovely day, Miss Lane,” Richard Carstairs replied with a sour expression on his face. He stood up and walked towards the door, opening it for them to leave. She stood up, followed by Clark and headed for the door, resisting the urge to sprint all the way to the parking lot.

She noticed he left the card on the table as they passed Mr. Carstairs.

“We’ll be in touch,” Clark promised.

The moment they were outside, Lois felt her entire body threaten to collapse in on itself. They made it back to the car and Lois sank into the driver’s seat. Her legs felt numb and her hands shook. She worried she might pass out, so she took a few deep breaths, her face in her hands as she attempted to regain control.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked. Then, before she could respond, he gave a bitter laugh. “Of course, you’re not. What a stupid question.”

“I’m...” she wanted to say ‘okay’ but the words wouldn’t leave her lips. “I don’t know what I am. Two hundred million dollars, Clark! How can I...what on Earth are we going to do with that kind of money? How can we even...”

“One thing at a time,” he said gently. His hand was rubbing gentle circles on her back and she could feel the rhythm of it calming her down. “First, we need to get that money out of that bank and into your account. That thing with the lawyer was inspired by the way. I didn’t know you even had a lawyer.”

“I don’t,” she admitted. “Not officially, I mean. The card was a friend’s from college who went into financial law. He gave it to me in case of a rainy day.”

“You’d better call him when we get back to your apartment,” Clark replied. “I’d say it’s pouring now.”

“I think we should stop at the *Planet* first. Claude said he would be there with Jimmy, working to track down Preston Mills and digging up dirt on the Vice President.” Lois felt that the pieces were coming together, but a small part of her was still worried. Lex always had something up his sleeve, after all. “I want to update them.”

“We’ve cut off his revenue stream, which means he won’t be able to pay off a lot of his loyal supporters,” Clark pointed out. “He’s going to want revenge. He might even send Mills after you before he goes for the President.”

“Then it’s a good thing I have you by my side, isn’t it?”

“Always,” he promised.

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## Chapter 21

Lois and Clark found themselves nearly being run over by Jimmy and Claude as they made their way into the bullpen. Both of them looked excited, which caused Lois’ pulse to speed up a little.

“Oh good, CK! Lois! We were just about to call you. That Mills guy you were looking for? We found him!” Jimmy thrust a piece of printer paper at Lois with the address of an apartment in an extremely wealthy area of the city on it.

“Pretty fancy digs for a guy who just got out of prison,” Clark muttered. Lois could tell he was still bothered by the situation at the bank, and while she couldn’t blame him, part of her hadn’t felt this good about things in a while. Lex was still in prison, and now they finally had a plan to keep him there for good.

Not to mention the fact that she was about to cost him two hundred million dollars. That part felt very very good.

“I think his accommodations are going to become a little more modest pretty soon,” Lois reminded him. She looked at Claude and Jimmy. “Did you get the bug?”

Jimmy nodded and raced over to his desk. When he returned, he handed Lois the small surveillance device.

“It was the best they had,” he assured them. “Top of the line. And it comes with this electronic handset so you will be able to track his whereabouts.”

“Thanks Jimmy,” Clark said, setting the handset down. He looked at Claude and Lois was surprised to see a look of understanding pass between the two men. Though Clark might not like him, he recognised what Claude was about to do and respected it. “Are you ready?”

“As I can be,” Claude replied. He sounded nervous and Lois reminded herself that he made his living covering soft news events like sporting events and political conferences. He wasn’t used to doing anything even remotely dangerous, so she had to be grateful he was even willing to try.

“It’s not difficult at all,” Lois said, stepping towards Claude. She showed him the bug in the flat of her palm and picked it up between her fingers. “Stand over there.”

He did as instructed, moving a few feet out of the way to a spot where there weren’t any people. Lois walked towards him making a point of bumping into him ever so slightly as she passed. When she returned to Clark, she picked up the handset and turned it on, giving Clark a triumphant smile.

“It works!”

“How did you...?” Claude sounded slightly amazed and looked down, trying to find where Lois had planted the bug on him.

“Feel inside your jacket pocket,” she told him. He did and looked even more astonished when he pulled out the bug.

“I’m not sure I can do that,” he admitted, heading back over and sitting down on the top of her desk.

“It will take practice,” Lois assured him, “but you’ll get it. Jimmy can help you. He’s the one who showed me how to do it. You want to make sure you get his jacket.”

“Why the jacket?” Claude wondered.

“He’s more likely to wear a jacket more than once,” Clark supplied. “We will keep a constant watch on him once the bug is on him. He will likely do some preliminary surveillance of the spot he will use for the actual assassination, so that even if he wears a different jacket the day of, we should know roughly where he is going to be.”

“That makes sense,” Claude replied, still looking a bit overwhelmed. “I’m going to need some time to...do we have to do this today?”

“Not today, but soon,” Lois said, realising that their time was very quickly running out.

“We need to be able to get a sense of his patterns. Jimmy, how’s the research on Vice President Wilson going?”

“Things are starting to come together,” Jimmy replied. “Ever since you gave us that name Rex Alexander, we’ve been able to tie the Vice President to at least several of his companies via what looks to be substantial campaign donations in return for several bills being pushed through that allowed for these companies to do all sorts of things from buying up land to tax evasion and everything in between. A little more digging and we should be able to...holy crap.”

Jimmy stopped, looking suddenly very much like a deer in headlights. He sank down into a nearby chair and ran a hand through his perpetually floppy hair.

“Jimmy, what is it?” Clark asked, concerned. “Are you alright?”

He shook his head and looked just a tiny bit paler.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I just...is my research about to help expose the Vice President of the United States as a criminal?”

“You bet,” Lois replied firmly. Normally, something like this would have excited her. After all, a story this big could mean the long elusive Pulitzer Prize. And if the story were about anything else, she would be buzzing with energy. But Lex Luthor was tied to this, and Lois didn’t want to win a free cappuccino if he was involved, much less the award that represented everything she’d worked so hard to achieve. She didn’t want him to taint that too.

“Oh God, I think I need to sit down,” Jimmy was saying, still looking a bit green around the gills.

“You are sitting down,” Claude pointed out.

“Oh good,” Jimmy said with a weak smile. “Good for me.”

Lois didn’t blame him for feeling that way. The first time she’d worked a story this major, it had been the one Claude had stolen. She remembered the feeling of adrenaline as well as fear that accompanied a responsibility as huge as reporting the facts accurately and objectively. She’d worried she wouldn’t be up to the task — that she’d miss something major and end up embarrassing the *Planet*. In hindsight, she almost wished she had.

She glanced at Claude out of the corner of her eye, realising for the first time that she needed to do something to correct what had taken place. Claude’s apology could only go so far. Clark was right that this was about more than just a stolen story. It had taken watching Jimmy almost hyperventilate from responsibility for her to see that.

But she would have to let it wait until after the President was safe from harm and Lex was certain to



remain behind bars for the rest of his days. After that, she would deal with it.

“Clark and I have some other things to take care of,” Lois said to Jimmy and Claude. Clark raised his eyebrow but said nothing. “Jimmy, can you teach Claude how to plant the bug on Mills without him knowing?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jimmy replied, recovering a bit of his colour. Lois smiled. She knew how Jimmy operated, and giving him a smaller task was sure to take his mind off of the larger implications of what they were doing. “No problem.”

“Good,” Lois said with a nod. She looked at Claude, who suddenly also looked a bit green around the gills. “The sooner we get this done, the better, so if you think you can be ready to go by tomorrow...”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised.

“We’ll see you tomorrow then,” Clark said as Lois grabbed her keys and the two of them began to leave. As they headed towards the elevator, he leaned over and whispered in her ear in a way that made her pulse race despite everything else going on. “What other things do we have to do today, by the way?”

“You’ll see,” she replied with a small smile.

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Once back inside the apartment, Lois headed straight to the bedroom to change into a more comfortable t-shirt and pair of jeans. Clark followed and she realised she liked the way he watched her intently as she stripped down to her underwear and bra to put on the fresh change of clothes.

She eyed the business suit she’d worn to the bank with a frown, half-tempted to burn the thing. She’d never be able to wear it again without remembering that she’d sat across from that horrible man who worked for Lex Luthor in it.

She pushed the thought aside for the time being and glanced back at Clark, who was still looking at her rather hungrily. She loved the way he could make her feel like the sexiest woman in the world with just a look.

“Are you going to change?” she asked him, surprised at the way she’d seemed to purr the words. “Or did you just come in here to watch?”

“I was going to,” he said, his own voice deepening slightly. She could tell he was having an effect on him already and she loved it. “But the view was just too captivating.”

“Is that so?” she said, making her way towards him, allowing her hips to sway ever so slightly. Though subtle, it caused him to shift his stance in such a way that told her her movement had done the job. When she was close enough, she reached out and grabbed his tie, using it to pull him to her for a deep, searing kiss that seemed to wake up all her senses.

Clark wasted no time, pulling her into his arms and deepening the kiss, their tongues exploring each other thoroughly, causing that familiar tension she’d come to love. She allowed herself to moan into his kiss.

“See what you do to me?” he whispered, his warm breath tickling her ear and causing her breath to come in shallow pants. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. She had a plan. She’d intended to kiss him and then...

“Oh God, Clark, that feels so good,” she breathed as his lips made their way down to her collar bone. He’d gotten more confident since the night before...more sure of himself and of the way their bodies interacted with each other. It was beyond sexy and might be her undoing if she didn’t regain control.

“You like that?” he asked, his voice husky and filled with need. Slowly, reluctantly, she stepped back from him. He looked up, with a slightly dazed expression.

“I liked it,” she promised him, fighting for control of her voice, which at the moment was tremulous and shaky. “I liked it way too much. I wanted...well, I wanted to come back here and...”

God, why couldn’t she say it?

It didn’t seem to matter, though, because the look on his face told her he understood her intentions very clearly. So much so that she watched him take two deep breaths while clenching and unclenching his fists in an attempt to bring himself back under control.

“Lois, I told you last night you don’t have to —”

“I know,” she said, interrupting him. “But that was last night. I realised something at the *Planet* today, Clark. Something you tried to tell me but I wasn’t ready to hear yet.”

“Oh?” He took a step closer. “What’s that?”

“That I need to tell Perry about Claude stealing my story,” she replied softly. “I didn’t fully realise myself why it mattered until I saw Jimmy almost pass out today, but... truth matters and the way we handle it does too. I can’t be afraid to speak up for myself anymore. What we do is too important. So, I...I wanted to thank you.”

Clark shifted uncomfortably and made his way over to the bed where he sat down letting out a slow breath.

“Uhh, I appreciate that, Lois, but...” he shook his head slightly, “I can’t believe I’m saying this...I don’t want you to feel like you owe me any sort of physical intimacy for —”

“I don’t,” she said as she sat down next to him on the bed and took his hand in hers. “Feel like I owe you, I mean. I’ve never felt that way. That’s the point.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” Clark said, looking so adorably confused that Lois had to refrain from kissing him until he couldn’t think straight anymore.

“You’ve never pressured me, Clark,” she told him gently, squeezing his hand. “And I don’t just mean sexually. It’s no secret when we first met that I had all my defences up. I’d been hurt so much before you, that I just stopped trusting people entirely. And even though you might have been aware of your feelings before I was, you never pushed me to get there before I was ready.”

“I just...wanted to be near you,” he admitted. “It wasn’t some noble plan, I just...I needed you in my life like I needed oxygen. However that happened, I knew it would have to be enough.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Lois replied and this time she couldn’t keep herself from kissing him on the cheek. “You supported me in whatever role I needed. You were patient. So very, very patient. Even when I almost married...even when it looked hopeless, you waited. You fought for me. Maybe not the way I wanted you to, but... you never gave up.”

“I couldn’t give up,” he murmured, cupping her face and kissing her once more. Her heart skipped a beat at the feel of his lips. “Oxygen, remember?”

“Will you stop being sweet for a minute and let me get this out?” she exclaimed with a slightly tearful laugh. He laughed too and nodded. “You’ve been so patient. With our relationship both physical and emotional...with me. When we first had that conversation about my past...federal disasters, all I could think about were the ways in which I might potentially disappoint you.”

She could see him opening his mouth to say something, but stopped halfway and sat back. She smiled. Even now, he understood she needed his patience. She drew a shuddering breath.

“I was so scared,” she admitted, feeling so much love for the man in front of her it was hard to put into words. “But I know now that it never even occurred to you to think that way. You understood that I needed space, and you gave that to me. Just like you gave me space when Perry told me that Claude would be working with us.”

She could see that he was starting to understand what she was trying to tell him and felt grateful. She wanted him so badly to know what this meant to her...what he meant to her.

“You urged me to talk to Perry about that story, but I wasn’t ready and again, you didn’t push.” She reached out and caressed his face in a way he’d so often done for her. “You let me get there in my own time. I don’t think you understand just how much that mattered to me.”

“Lois...” he said gruffly, his eyes shining. “I wasn’t trying to do anything but love you.”

“I know,” she replied, her own emotions overwhelming her as well, causing her to wipe a stray tear from her cheek. “That’s what’s so extraordinary to me. And this

whole practice situation with us living together and with our physical intimacy, well it’s only made me love you more. We talked so many times before this but I don’t think we’ve truly communicated on this level before. I honestly never even realised there were so many different ways to communicate. And that’s what I want to do. Not because I owe you, or because I feel like I have to. Because I want to communicate to you just how much I love you.”

She stood up and positioned herself between his legs, kneeling down so that she was just below eye level. She reached out and guided him towards her for a gentle kiss that was full of promise. When they parted, she knew she didn’t need to spell it out for him, which she was grateful for. She reached out and placed her hand on his chest where his heart was, and she could feel his heart racing under her hand.

“So, when you say communicate,” he said, that hungry look reappearing on his face, causing her own desire to flare up. “What you mean is —”

“I mean I want to communicate to you just how much I love you,” she said with a coy smile. She stood up just enough to lean in and whisper her next words in his ear.

He gripped her hips with his hands tightly and pressed her body against the warmth of his chest. His words were a gentle rumble against her body.

“God, yes,” he ground out. She leaned back and settled back on her heels.

“Take your clothes off, Clark.”

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“That was...” Clark looked at her, and gently brushed a strand of hair from her face. She was surprised at how comfortable she felt with this newfound intimacy. She was acutely aware of the fact that this should feel awkward, and yet everything about that felt good. It felt right.

“Good?” she guessed hopefully. A look of pure wonderment and awe passed over his face.

“I can’t even begin to describe it,” he said quietly, gently running his thumb over her hand. “I mean, physically it felt incredible, but it’s more than that. I know there’s still more for us to experience together, but I think I understand now.”

“Understand what?” she asked, feeling overwhelmed by the intense look in his eyes.

“Making love,” he said, his voice gruff with emotion. “I always thought...well, there were definitions of things. But...you and me? Whatever we do....”

“I know,” she said, instantly understanding what he meant. All the terminology in the world couldn’t disguise the fact that they were slowly discovering how to love each other in all the right ways. “I love you too.”

“Do you need me to...” he trailed off and she smiled softly, finding it cute that even now he could still be somewhat bashful. Lois was seeing him in a way that was both casual and for her eyes alone. She couldn’t ask for more.

“No,” she replied, taking a deep breath and snuggling into the crook of his shoulder. “I think...I think I’d like for us to get some tea and watch a movie. Will you do that with me?”

He gave her a soft kiss on the forehead and stood up. Lois allowed herself a beat to admire his backside for a moment.

“I’ll get the tea, you get the movie?” he asked.

She nodded. “Sounds perfect.”

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## Chapter 22

The following day, Lois and Clark found themselves sitting in Lois’ Jeep around the corner from an apartment building with a very nervous Claude Dupont sitting in the back. The preliminary research Jimmy had done on Preston Mills had revealed that he had a meeting with his parole officer that morning, and both Lois and Clark felt the best opportunity for Claude to plant the bug on his jacket was now.

Claude, however, was not as optimistic.

“Do you see him yet?” he asked, fiddling nervously with the seat belt buckle. Clark shook his head. While they had parked close enough for all of them to see the building, Lois knew that Clark would also be using his super vision to zoom in on his apartment specifically. The moment he left, they would know.

“What if he’s not even in there?” Claude suggested. “Maybe he left early to get breakfast? Or stayed the night somewhere else?”

“If you’re going to back out, just say so,” Lois replied, irritated by Claude’s increasing nervousness. “Jimmy can just as easily plant the bug.”

She suddenly realised that, apart from whatever residual hurt still lingered, she was beyond grateful that she’d never had a real relationship with Claude. His cowardice and lack of ambition would have meant a very small life. She didn’t need her partner to be a superhero (though it helped when she ended up captured by super villains), but she did need someone who wasn’t afraid to stand up and do what was right without hesitating.

“I’m sorry,” Claude apologised, somewhat sheepishly. “I’m fine. I’ll be fine. I just have to bump into him, right? What is that American expression...piece of pie?”

“Cake,” Clark said with a slight quirk of his lips. “It’s ‘piece of cake’. And I think he’s coming now.”

Quickly, they climbed out of the Jeep and Lois handed the bug to Claude, whose hand shook ever so slightly as he

took it from her. She pointed towards the entrance of Preston Mills’ upscale apartment building.

“Remember, all you have to do is make sure it sticks. Bump into him, apologise, plant the bug and get back here.”

Claude nodded, his face a bit pale, but determined.

“Got it,” he replied. Lois and Clark watched with mild trepidation as Claude headed towards the man they recognised as Preston Mills as he exited the apartment building. Once he was within a few feet of Preston, Claude pretended to trip, bumping into him just as they had planned.

A tense exchange followed, ending with Claude making his way back towards the Jeep. Lois looked over at Clark, not wanting to wait until Claude was back for full confirmation.

“He got it,” Clark informed her and she felt herself relax.

Claude’s face had almost turned green by the time he’d finally reached the Jeep. Lois watched as he climbed in, took a few gulping breaths and promptly put his head between his knees.

After a moment or so, he sat back up and drew a shaky breath before confirming what Lois already knew.

“It’s done,” he said. Lois shot Clark a slightly bemused expression at the tone in Claude’s voice. He sounded like a character in a bad spy film, but given his current state of nerves, she didn’t comment on it.

Instead, they agreed to drop Claude back off at the *Planet*, where he and Jimmy could monitor everywhere that Mills went. Once they had done so, the two of them went back to Lois’ apartment. They had to put the second phase of their plan into action, and they couldn’t do that without making a phone call — one Lois would prefer not to make in the bullpen.

The moment they entered her kitchen, Lois reached into her purse and pulled out the number of the lawyer Lois knew from college — a man by the name of Steven Williams. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Clark began to make the two of them a sandwich. He was obviously letting her know that he was here for emotional support if she needed it, but didn’t want to listen in on her conversation.

It rang a few times before a female voice answered the phone with that same overly perky tone the bank receptionists had used.

“Steven Williams’ office, Debbie speaking, how may I help you?”

Lois introduced herself as an old friend of Steven’s from college and requested to speak with him. Debbie asked Lois to hold for a moment and before Lois could answer, she heard a beep and some generic soft rock song

playing through the phone. She waited, humming absently to the song until eventually Debbie picked up again.

“Mr. Williams has an appointment in twenty minutes, but he can talk with you until then,” she informed him. “I’ll patch you through now.”

Lois thanked her and waited again, thinking briefly back to college. She didn’t know Steven especially well, but they’d run in the same circles, and he had dated one of her friends for about a year. They had always been on good terms, and Lois was grateful that she hadn’t just tossed his card out when she’d run into him a few months ago while working on a story.

“Lois!” Steven’s open and friendly voice startled her out of her reverie and brought her back to the present. A plate appeared suddenly in front of her with a turkey sandwich on it and Lois’ stomach growled. Clark made a show of heading over to the couch with his. Lois smiled appreciatively. “It’s wonderful to hear from you again so soon. How are you?”

Lois opened her mouth to say she was good or fine, or whatever automatic reply people usually gave to that question and found herself hesitating. She wasn’t fine and that was why she was calling. No use dancing around it.

“Honestly, Steven? I’ve been better,” she admitted.

“So, it isn’t a social call then?” he asked, sounding slightly disappointed.

“Afraid not,” Lois replied with a slight smile. Steven always had a way about him that made everyone around him feel more at ease. Clark had that same effect on people, Lois realised.

“And here I thought you were going to suggest we all go for dinner so I can meet that fiance you were telling me about,” Steven said with an exaggerated sigh. “I have to admit that I am dying to meet the Kent half of Lane and Kent!”

“You will,” Lois promised, surprised to find she really would like to go out to dinner and introduce Clark to Steven. “But right now I have a favour to ask you.”

She was beginning to realise that she’d deliberately avoided having a social life the past few years she’d worked at the *Planet*. She had convinced herself that she was focused on her work, but she knew now that wasn’t true. Relationships were not the only way a person could get hurt, and Lois had been hurt when it came to friendships too. So much so, that over the years she had simply closed herself off. Now she found herself wanting to have a social life beyond the *Planet*. Of course, her timing as usual, was lousy.

“A favour?” he echoed, sounding slightly intrigued.

“Well, I want to hire you,” she amended, “so I guess that’s not a favour. But I’ll warn you, you might not want the job.”

“I’m a struggling attorney, Lois, I’ll take any job,” he said with a laugh. “What do you need me to do?”

Lois took a deep breath and described the situation as dispassionately as she could. Despite her best efforts, she heard, rather than saw, Clark get up from the couch, bring his plate to the sink and lay a reassuring hand on her shoulder as she finished her explanation.

There was a moment’s pause, and she could almost see Steven leaning back in his desk chair and letting out a whoosh as he tried to process it all.

“So, you need me to apply some pressure and legalese on the bank to make sure they close the account properly, correct?”

“That,” Lois said, “and keep an eye out to make sure they don’t try anything funny. I’m almost certain that the bank manager is reporting back to Lex Luthor, and if he is, that could make this potentially dangerous as well, so I will pay you triple your regular rate. After all, it appears I can afford it. Still, I can understand if you don’t want to take the job.”

She inwardly cringed as she spoke those words, hoping Steven wouldn’t back out. She’d already given Carstairs his card, after all, and she suddenly felt very guilty she had endangered him like that without his permission.

“A two hundred million dollar account, are you kidding me?” Steven exclaimed. “I could build my career on that! Especially given that it’s Luthor’s account and...”

Lois winced and though Steven couldn’t see it, she heard him trail off.

“I’m sorry,” he apologised. “That was insensitive.”

She almost told him it was okay, but stopped herself yet again before simply saying. “Thank you.”

“So, you’ve already authenticated the account, correct?” Steven resumed.

“Yes,” she replied. “They didn’t seem in any hurry to release the money, however. I would like to get a cashier’s cheque as soon as possible. I don’t want Lex knowing where the money is going, you understand.”

“I’ll call the bank after my next appointment and let them know I will be visiting later today to make sure the process goes smoothly,” he promised, and Lois felt herself relax.

“Are you sure you want to take this risk, Steven?” she asked one more time. She needed him to understand the gravity of the situation.

“I’m sure,” he promised. “After all, what are casual acquaintances from college for?”

He gave a warm laugh before they said their goodbyes, hung up and Lois found herself standing up and being enfolded into Clark’s arms, her sandwich untouched and forgotten.

He held her there, her head resting against his chest and his arms cocooning her in warmth. He kissed the top of her head ever so softly and she felt all the tension leave her body.

When she finally stepped back, she looked into Clark's warm brown eyes and felt that familiar flutter as he smiled back at her with both fondness and awe.

"What?" she said, slightly self-consciously as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Nothing, it's just...you're amazing, you know that?"

A flush filled her cheeks and she fought the urge to look away from him. Despite her bravado and self-confidence, there were times when Clark's praise truly took her breath away.

"For making a phone call?"

"For making a difficult phone call," Clark replied, reaching out to caress her cheek. She shivered at his touch and leaned her cheek against his hand. "For managing to do so many incredibly hard things. My 'little tornado'."

He grinned at the last part and Lois gave him a playful swat on the chest, which broke some of the tension.

"The hard things aren't over yet," she reminded him. "It might not be a bad idea to call Claude and Jimmy, find out where Mills is and have Superman do some surveillance from up in the air." She lifted her hand and made a swirling motion.

Clark hesitated.

"I don't know if I want to leave you alone right now," he admitted.

"Clark the only person who is a danger to me at the moment is Mills and he can't hurt me if you are following him. We need to know his timetable. The press conference takes place in three days."

"I know you're right," he admitted, but still he hesitated.

"I'll be fine," she insisted, "but if it makes you feel better, I can drive into the *Planet* and help Jimmy and Claude with their research on Vice President Wilson. Safety in numbers. When you're done you can come and pick me up for dinner."

"Okay," he agreed. "And thank you for humouring me. I know sometimes you think that I go overboard worrying about your safety, but —"

"Sometimes you do," Lois agreed. She sighed. "But this time, I think...well, I don't think I want to be alone."

Clark nodded and grabbed their coats.

"I never thought I would feel grateful that you're going to be spending time with Claude," he said with a slightly bemused shake of his head. Lois grabbed the keys and leaned up onto her tiptoes to kiss him gently on the cheek.

"I love you."

"I know."

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## Chapter 23

The *Planet* was the usual level of busy, and Lois was slightly grateful for that. Lots of people meant that it was unlikely anything would happen to her. Still, despite her continued belief that Lex's obsession would keep him from hurting her, at least for now, she had no idea how much control Lex had over Mills. If he got wind that they were working to stop him, he might take matters into his own hands. Lois was not naive enough to believe she was completely safe.

The fact that they had put things in motion to move the money made her even more nervous. And not just for herself. She knew the moment Steven set foot into that bank, Lex would be alerted as to what was happening. She worried for him, and for about the millionth time since she'd made that phone call, regretted ever pulling his card from her pocket.

Clark walked over to her desk with her, lingering as she settled in and scanned the room for Jimmy and Claude. She caught sight of both of them over by the coffee maker and gave them a nod to let them know she was here.

She could sense Clark's reluctance to leave, despite the people around them. Reaching out and touching his hand gently, he met her eyes.

"I couldn't be more safe," she told him. "I won't take any unnecessary risks, I promise."

"I know," he said, his voice heavy with uncertainty. "Just do me a favour, and stay away from the windows, okay?"

"Only if you promise me you will look in on Steven from time to time. He's about 5'11" with sandy blonde hair and blue eyes. He said he was going to the bank this afternoon and I'm worried that —"

"I'll keep an eye out," Clark promised. He sighed. "I should —"

"Go," she finished for him, and he gave her a small smile before heading over to Jimmy and Claude to check the tracker and say his goodbyes.

Once he was gone, Jimmy and Claude headed back to her desk. Jimmy handed her a coffee and Claude pulled up a chair, a stack of papers in his hands. Both looked highly nervous — as if they were both holding a bomb in their hands.

"Is that what I think it is?" Lois asked. Claude nodded.

"Enough to tie the name Rex Alexander AND Vice President Wilson to Lex Luthor," Jimmy said, sounding slightly awestruck.

"We just...weren't sure what to do next," Claude admitted.

"I can call Henderson," Lois said thinking aloud, "but we wouldn't want Wilson arrested right away. It would tip off Mills and by extension, Lex. We need them to think

their plan is on track so they don't switch the date and time."

"But wouldn't that mean putting the President in danger?" Jimmy asked. "I know we trust that Superman is going to save him, but what if something goes wrong?"

"We definitely need to get word to the President about what's going on," Lois agreed. "I'll talk to Superman, and get him to fill the President in. You're right that he should know what's happening now that we have proof. If Superman asks him to keep things quiet, I bet he will listen."

"So what should we do until then?" Jimmy wondered.

"Keep an eye on the tracker," Lois replied. "I'm going to call Inspector Henderson and see if we can coordinate a plan of action with Superman."

Claude and Jimmy nodded and both went back to watching the tracker. Lois dialled the number for the Metropolis Police and punched in Henderson's extension, memorised after so many years spent hounding him for statements. When she got his voice mail, she left a message asking him to call her back as soon as possible and set her phone down, slightly frustrated.

Their plan was coming together. They had their ducks lined up in a row and they were ready to take down Luthor, so why did she feel so unsettled?

She spent the next hour alternating between following the tracker with Jimmy and Claude and staring at the phone, willing Henderson to call her back just so she could feel useful. If this were any other story, she'd have already grabbed her coat and headed out the door to the precinct to see if she could track down Henderson in person. He hated when she did that, insisting that he *did* have other responsibilities, yet always seemed begrudgingly grateful when a tip or hunch she had panned out, so he hadn't yet outright banned her from the station.

But she couldn't do that right now. She'd promised Clark she wouldn't. And, if she was perfectly honest with herself, she didn't want to. Despite the fact that Lex was still in prison, she couldn't remember a time when she'd felt more exposed. Lex would know by now that the money was being moved. How enraged would that make him? Would it be enough to push him over the edge? She didn't think for a second that his obsession with her completely ruled out violence. The moment he truly understood he could never have her, he would turn. And what about Clark? Lex had already gotten his hands on Kryptonite in the past. What if he had more stashed somewhere?

She sighed, hating the way her thoughts were running away with her, and was surprised to find herself feeling grateful when she looked up and saw Claude heading over to her desk.

"I thought I would grab some lunch for all of us at the cafe down the street. You like chicken salad, right?"

Lois nodded and thanked him as he left. She glanced over at Jimmy once more and was about to pick up the phone to call Henderson again when it rang loudly, startling her so badly she jumped, almost spilling her third cup of coffee.

"Lois Lane," she said brusquely, unable to keep the hint of irritation from her voice. She expected to hear Henderson make a dryly sarcastic comment about the amount of messages she'd left on his machine, but instead another voice coldly slithered into her ears — one she hadn't expected to hear from and that made her blood run cold.

"Hello, Lois."

Two simple words. That was all he said — all he had to say, and it felt as if the world had tilted slightly on its axis. Her breathing was suddenly shallow, and she found herself casting about the newsroom looking for...but no, Clark wasn't there. She wasn't sure how, but in her gut she was certain Lex had known.

"What do you want, Luthor?" She used his last name intentionally, creating a barrier between them that she knew Lex would pick up on. Similarly, she forced herself to sound dispassionate, to send the message that his call did not have any effect on her one way or another.

"I think you know what I want," Lex replied, his tone slightly chilly, which betrayed his emotions in a way that told Lois she had gotten to him. Lex prided himself on always being in control, so the fact that his control was slipping, even slightly said a lot. "I want my money."

"I think you'll find that's my money," Lois replied, finding it easier to sound almost casual now that she sensed she had the upper hand. He was in prison. She wasn't sure exactly how much he knew they were up to beyond the money being moved, but it didn't matter. For now anyway, she was safe. He was a voice on a phone, nothing more.

"You're playing a dangerous game, my love," Lex said, his voice low and silky. Though the effect was meant to sound threatening, Lois barely reacted, but for a small cringe at his use of the words 'my love'. The initial shock of the call having worn off, she now saw the conversation as an opportunity.

"I'm not playing at anything," Lois replied firmly. "You manipulated me into creating that account. But you're a fool if you think I would let you get your hands on it now that I know it's there. You'll never see that money again, Luthor, I promise you."

"It's almost cute that you think you're in control here. That you think you can deny me just because you have my money," Lex said with a sinister growl. Despite her

newfound strength, she suppressed a tiny shudder as he spoke. It had never been more clear just how truly insane he was. “The truth is that money comes and goes. What matters is how we feel for each other. You just need to be reminded of how it was. I will remind you. When I see you again, you’ll remember and we —”

“You think it’s that simple?” Lois said, seizing the opportunity to hurt him, to wound him. She needed him angry and desperate. As dangerous as it might be, she needed him to lose control, to get sloppy. Any information he might accidentally give them would make stopping him that much easier. “You think I could ever feel anything for you again other than disgust? Once upon a time I may have deluded myself into thinking that respect was enough, but love? I didn’t feel it then and I certainly couldn’t feel it now. You’re pathetic. A pitiful shell of a man, cowardly phoning me from a prison cell.”

“Don’t —” he warned, and she noticed the way his voice shook ever so slightly.

“Don’t what?” she taunted, lowering her voice when Jimmy shot her a curious look. “You can’t hurt me now. Your money is gone. Your power is gone. Who is going to do your dirty work once you can no longer pay your debts?”

“I still have a trick or two up my sleeve,” Lex growled. *Come on*, she urged him silently. *Slip up. Make a mistake.*

“Then you’d better show your hand,” she replied calmly. “Because you’re running out of time.”

“You think you’re safe, do you?” he asked her, his voice reverting back to the calm and controlled tone she was used to. Her shoulders slumped. Now that he’d regained his composure, he wouldn’t slip again. She was about to say good-bye and hang up the phone, when he spoke again. “Sitting there, at your desk, surrounded by your co-workers, your friends...but not your fiance. Where is he, Lois? Surely he didn’t leave you alone. Not now...”

“How did you —?”

“You must feel very secure,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “Nobody can touch you there, right?”

She should hang up. Just put the phone down and yet for some reason, she couldn’t move her hand. It clutched the phone tightly and pressed it against her ear while she closed her eyes, repeating to herself over and over that he couldn’t hurt her. Not now. Not here.

“You’re not safe, Lois,” he continued, his voice a deep menacing growl. “You will never be safe. I will always be there. And deep down you know it. You know you’ll never be rid of me. You’ll never be free. It’s how I know that there is still a chance I can win you back.”

“How on Earth can you be so deluded?” she breathed, unable to keep the emotion from her voice.

“Because,” and she could hear the smugness in his tone sending shivers up her spine. “You haven’t hung up the phone. You’re still there. Still listening.”

She hung up immediately, hands shaking as she drew a thready breath and took a deep swig of her now-cold coffee.

Was he right? Win or lose, prison or no prison, was there always going to be a small part of her that lived in fear of Lex Luthor? Was her marriage to Clark doomed to be haunted by his ghost?

She shook the thoughts from her head, trying desperately to focus on something other than the phone call. Her salvation came in the form of Claude returning from the deli with her lunch.

“One chicken salad sandwich,” he said, handing it to her.

She took it from him wordlessly and bit into it, chewing almost furiously. She suddenly felt ravenous — as if she hadn’t eaten in months. It must have been noticeable, for Claude raised an eyebrow as he sat down next to her desk and unwrapped his BLT.

“They aren’t going to run out you know,” he told her as she finished the first half of the sandwich. “I promise there will be more tomorrow if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You know, you’re not nearly as funny as you think you are,” she replied dryly, oddly grateful for the banter.

“I’ll make a note of it,” he shot back. He glanced back over to where Jimmy had been monitoring the tracker only a few moments before, and Lois hadn’t realised he’d left until now. “Anything happening?”

“I got a phone call,” Lois replied vaguely. Upon seeing Claude’s curious expression, she felt her mouth twist into a slightly bitter smile. “I’ll tell you about it when Clark gets back.”

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## Chapter 24

Despite Lois’ best attempt at a poker face, Clark wasn’t fooled. The moment he reached her desk, he leaned down and touched her hand gently — a look of worry in the depths of his warm brown eyes.

“I saw you from across the newsroom,” he said quietly, “and I could tell something happened.”

“Not here,” she said, her voice slightly shaky despite the fact that she’d thought she had managed to calm down. He nodded and pulled her to her feet. She gave him a curious look and he gestured to the conference room where she immediately understood and followed him.

The moment the doors were shut, she sank into one of the chairs, drawing a slow breath before looking over at Clark.

“He called me. Here. At the *Planet*.”

There was a moment of tense silence as the enormity of what she said sunk in. A look of pure rage passed across Clark's features and for a moment, Lois was terrified he might actually fly to the prison and tear Luthor apart with his bare hands. As satisfying as it was to imagine, she knew it couldn't happen.

"I never should have left you," Clark said eventually. His breathing was shallow and his fists were clenched shut tightly as if he were willing himself *not* to do anything rash.

"You can't be with me 24/7, Clark," she said suddenly feeling more in control. Somehow seeing Clark go through the same range of emotions helped clarify things for her. "He picked his moment carefully. Somehow, he knew you weren't here. I'm actually grateful it happened here and not at home."

She shivered and Clark's head shot up, his face absolutely stricken at the thought of Lois receiving that call all alone.

"What did he say?" he asked finally.

"The usual," Lois replied with an attempt at indifference she certainly didn't feel. "That someday we would be together, I would change my mind, that I'd never be safe from him —"

"I'm so sorry," Clark interrupted, his voice slightly strangled. She could feel the ferocity of his anger and knew the monumental act of self-control that it took to contain it. It was one of the things that amazed her about him. Here was the most powerful man in the world, and yet he refused to use that power to kill, even if it would rid the world of someone as purely evil as Lex Luthor.

"If you apologise one more time for something that wasn't your fault, I'll..." she trailed off, at a loss for a suitable threat and gave him a weary smile. "I love you. Thank you."

He kissed her gently and they both sat in silence for a moment. Eventually, she felt his hands on her shoulders and realised he had walked around behind her chair to give her a massage. She closed her eyes instinctively and allowed the stress to melt away as his fingers worked their magic.

"Oh, Clark," she finally murmured softly. "That feels..."

She trailed off and gave herself over to the feeling once more. She wasn't sure how much time had passed when he finally stopped, sitting down opposite her in the chair once more and taking her hands in his.

"I know I can't be everywhere," he said, sounding almost as if he needed to say it out loud to absolve himself of the guilt he was undoubtedly feeling. "And I won't smother you, or try to hold you back, but...I'm scared."

He looked away, as if ashamed and Lois drew a sharp breath. She knew the courage it would have taken for him to admit that, especially where Lex Luthor was concerned. She knew how hard he worked to be the shoulder to cry on whenever she needed it, and she was touched he was letting her see this very real, vulnerable moment.

"I know," she replied, not knowing what else to say. She reached out and squeezed his hand in a gesture of comfort. "And it's okay. I mean, it's normal to be scared. He's scary. He's gotten further into our lives, into our psyches than anyone else. The fact that he knew I was here and you were out...well, someone is giving him that information, Clark, and frankly I'd be a bit worried if you weren't scared. But there is one good thing about all this."

"What's that?" he wondered. Lois smiled grimly.

"He's scared too," she told him. "Think about it! It's the only reason he would call! He's never reached out like this before."

Lois was surprised she hadn't realised it earlier, but she'd been so preoccupied by the emotions that had hung around, that her logical mind hadn't had a chance to take over. But it was working now and she was starting to feel slightly more confident.

"Don't you see?" she asked Clark, who looked puzzled but interested. "We've got him rattled. The first thing he mentioned was the money. He knows we're moving it, and there is nothing he can do about it. That call was proof we are getting to him! He's desperate."

"You might be right," Clark said, looking even more troubled than ever. "And if he is desperate, that makes him even more dangerous. Desperate men lash out, Lois. Especially when they think there's nothing left to lose. We need to act quickly, before he..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't have to. Lois nodded.

"I think I have an idea," she said finally. "But we will need to sit down with Inspector Henderson and Superman. I tried calling him a few times today, but got his machine."

"I flew by the precinct," Clark admitted. "He wasn't there. His day off, I guess."

"Is he allowed to have those?" Lois said, only half kidding. Clark gave her a tired smile. "Well, I guess we can't do any more today then. We still have a bit of time, so I think you and I have earned an early night in."

"Sounds perfect," he said, his eyes suddenly very intense. Lois felt her body go still under his expression. "What did you have in mind?"

"Movies," she breathed, though that was suddenly the last thing on her mind. "A couple of glasses of wine... BYOP?"

"BYOP?"



“Bring your own popcorn,” she said with a grin as she leaned forward and kissed him slowly, thoroughly, deeply until she could feel his large hands cupping her face in his and pulling her to her feet so that her body pressed against his.

She could feel his heart hammering against her as the kiss deepened, heat seeming to spread throughout every part of her body. Softly, she breathed his name between kisses, attempting to put a stop to things, but it only came out sounding like a plea to continue — a plea he took very seriously as his hands wrapped tightly around her body, moving down until they firmly cupped her bottom.

“Newsroom,” she finally managed to murmur, which caused him to pause enough for her to step back out of his embrace. “We’re in the newsroom.”

“Conference room, technically,” he said through shallow breaths.

She felt her heart constrict at the sight of him. She’d seen every side of him in the last half hour — from concern, to anger, to worry and finally desire, and she loved every part of him. Ignoring the sudden tightness in her throat, she reached out and took his hand.

“Take me home, Clark.”

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## Chapter 25

They spent the evening lost in each other’s arms. They abandoned any legitimate attempts to watch the movie Lois chose — *Dirty Dancing* — and instead allowed themselves to slowly, and carefully explore one another, taking the time both to give and receive the pleasure and comfort they desperately needed.

The following day, Lois woke with a renewed sense of determination to redouble her efforts to stop Lex Luthor. She could tell Clark felt the same way, which meant both of them dressed and ate quickly so they could get a start on their day.

Once they were at the *Planet*, she called the police precinct early, punched in Henderson’s extension number and was relieved to hear him answer almost immediately.

“I thought I’d be hearing from you,” he said, his voice matter-of-fact. “I got your messages. Is it about Luthor?”

“It is,” Lois replied, thankful that Henderson knew better than to give her a hard time right now. “I spoke with Superman and we might have an idea that could help stop Luthor as well as everyone involved. Will you meet with us? We can be there in twenty minutes.”

“Where?” Henderson asked.

“Not at the precinct,” Lois said, remembering that Lex had people on his payroll almost everywhere. Or he had. She had a feeling those same people would distance themselves very quickly once they realised the money was gone. “Centennial Park. Northwest entrance. Superman will find you.”

“I’m on my way,” Henderson said, and hung up without saying goodbye. She knew she didn’t need to let Clark know that Henderson was coming.

Lois knew that they couldn’t arrive together and yet, after the previous day’s phone call she was not terribly eager to drive there on her own. Clark solved the internal dilemma for her.

“There’s an isolated alley near the northwest entrance I occasionally change in. Drop me off there before you head into the park to meet Henderson. I’ll have my eyes on you at all times.”

She nodded and they wasted no time getting into the Jeep and driving to the park where Lois dropped Clark off before finding a parking spot. Just as she was getting out of the Jeep she heard the familiar sound of Clark taking off and knew he’d be there before she found Henderson.

Sure enough, she spotted Clark almost immediately, standing straight with his arms folded in a stance she’d come to recognise was as much a part of the disguise as the suit, glasses and choice in hairstyle.

“About time, Lane,” Henderson said gruffly as she arrived. To her shock and amazement he handed her a coffee, cream, and a packet of sugar. She glanced over to see that Superman’s hands were empty and Henderson looked slightly embarrassed. “I didn’t know if you drank coffee, Superman, or I would have...”

“It’s fine,” Clark replied with a disarming smile.

“We should probably get down to business,” Lois interrupted. She glanced around and gestured for them to step into a more secluded spot where she knew Clark would be able to have a better view of any potential dangers. “We know Lex’s full plan, including when the President is meant to be assassinated and by whom. We have enough evidence to implicate Vice President Wilson in the scheme as well. We’ve even managed to find Lex’s revenue stream and cut him off from it.”

“Impressive,” Henderson murmured, looking at Lois in a way that made her feel oddly proud of herself. She and Henderson had clashed so often, that earning his admiration felt odd. “How did you manage to do that?”

Lois took a deep breath before explaining the bank account and what she was doing with it. The last thing she wanted was for Henderson to know how badly she’d been duped by Luthor, but it was necessary if she wanted to make sure Steven was safe. After all, she’d brought him into this, and even though he claimed to know the risks, if something happened to him, she felt the fault would lie with her all the same.

Henderson whistled as she revealed the amount of money in the account.

“That’s a big chunk of change,” he observed. “Money like that you could retire on a beach somewhere in Bora Bora.”

“Keep dreaming, Henderson,” she shot back with a small smile. “I just so happen to love my job, so expect me to continue being a thorn in your side for years to come.”

“Fair enough,” Henderson said with a shrug. “So, I’m assuming you want your lawyer given a protection detail until this is all over?”

“Can you do that?” Lois asked hopefully.

“I can spare a few uniforms,” Henderson said with a nod. “Or...do you want me to call in for federal protection? I am breaking all kinds of protocol by not informing them as it is, given that there is a legitimate plan to assassinate the President.”

“No Feds,” Lois said firmly in a way that earned her a raised eyebrow from Henderson. After all, she wasn’t in any real position to tell Henderson how to do his job. Before she could reply, however, Clark spoke.

“She’s right,” his voice was strong and sure. “We can’t be sure who we can trust in the FBI, and if Luthor got to the Vice President, you can bet that he has men there as well.”

“Any protection you can offer Steven will be more than enough,” Lois added. “After all, Superman will check up on him as well.”

Henderson sighed in resignation. “Very well. I’ll spare a few every day to make sure he’s safe. I won’t say why, and I will pick my best guys — ones I am sure are good honest cops, but I still can’t guarantee —”

“I know,” Lois interrupted. “I understand.”

“That still leaves stopping Luthor,” Henderson continued. He looked over at Superman. “I assume that’s where you come in?”

“It’s where we *all* come in,” Clark replied, his voice lowered that familiar octave, and his eyes serious. “You see, we need Mills and Luthor to think that everything is status quo. It’s even more important now because the money is getting moved. If Luthor discovers we know when the assassination is supposed to take place, he’ll change the date, and then he might just succeed.”

“Are you suggesting we use the President as bait?” Henderson asked, incredulously.

“Sort of,” Superman replied. “My friend Clark Kent’s mother knows how to make a fairly convincing hologram. She could make one of the President. I can speak to the President and let him know what’s going on ahead of time so that we have him moved and hidden somewhere secure. The hitch is that we have to make sure we arrest Vice President Wilson quickly and quietly before the President is due to give his press conference in two days. He can’t know what’s happening until it’s too late. When the

hologram of the President appears to walk on stage, I will already have tracked Mills to his location and can grab him before he can take the shot.”

“Once the key players are dealt with and Luthor’s money has dried up, it should be relatively easy to arrest the others connected to him,” Lois continued. “Once we have a few, my guess is they will be more than willing to name every person who worked for Luthor in exchange for some kind of plea bargain. Luthor will have new charges added to his already extensive sentence, and nobody else willing to help him.”

“That’s a good plan,” Henderson admitted. He cast a begrudging look at Lois. “You know, Lane, if you weren’t such a pain in my behind, I’d say you should have been a cop. You’ve got the mind for it.”

“No thanks,” Lois replied with a feigned shudder. “Polyester uniforms and doughnuts are not my style.”

“So, you’ll help then?” Clark spoke before Henderson could reply to Lois’ mildly playful barb. “We have two days to pull this off. We need you on board.”

“You have me,” Henderson replied with a reluctant sigh. “I’ll put some uniforms on your friend Steven today. We shouldn’t be in contact with each other until the day of the press conference, though, just in case.”

“Good point,” Clark agreed. “If it becomes absolutely necessary to get a message to you, I’ll fly by the precinct. Superman visits there on a regular basis, so it won’t seem too out of the ordinary.”

“Alright. Until then, Lane. Don’t do anything stupid.” Without waiting for a response, Henderson turned and walked back towards the entrance he’d come through.

Lois shook her head. “You know, just when I think I’m starting to like that guy...”

“I should go visit my folks tomorrow night and get that hologram machine,” Clark said, but his eyes looked worried. Lois knew that deep down he didn’t want to leave her, especially not after the phone call she’d received in his absence the day before. She also knew that he was struggling with the fact that he knew how much she valued her independence against his own instinct to protect her.

Lois touched his hand. “We can go together. Have dinner there maybe?”

She didn’t say it out loud, but the part of her that fiercely guarded her independence was also at war. And in this one circumstance, she found herself wanting to be as far away from Metropolis as possible.

“Sounds good,” Clark said with a relieved smile. “My parents will be happy to see you.”

“We should get to the *Planet*,” Lois said, “and update Claude and Jimmy. It might not be a bad idea to get them to lie low for the next two days as well. Perry, too, though I doubt he would listen.”

"I'll spin into the suit when we get there," Clark said. "Maybe Superman can at least convince Perry to take some precautions."

Lois nodded and they walked quickly back to the Jeep, her heart thudding swiftly as she put her key into the ignition. She wasn't sure why her nerves were so on edge, but she knew that the phone call from Lex had her more rattled than she cared to admit.

She was grateful to finally arrive at the bullpen, and although she was theoretically safe amidst the hustle and bustle of the newsroom, a part of her still remained unsettled. *He* was in her life.

Logically, she knew it meant that he had people working for him and reporting back to him. People on his payroll that hadn't discovered the well had dried up yet. But obviously the fact that he hadn't personally been watching her did not make her feel any better. The *Planet* was supposed to be a sanctuary. It was the closest thing she could have gotten to a home beyond her apartment, and to violate that...

She shuddered and sat down at her desk. She could see out of the corner of her eye that Clark had arrived in the suit and was talking to Perry in his office. Smiling, she got up and headed over to the coffee maker, feeling more relaxed now that she'd seen him. It was irrational, really, but no matter where she was, or what she was doing, the sight of Clark always had the power to make her feel safe.

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## Chapter 26

The rest of the day passed in a blur as they all made preparations for the looming press conference. Lois kept an eagle eye on her extension, hoping for some news with regards to the money. She knew that Steven would be doing his best to make sure it went as swiftly as possible, but she was equally certain that Carstairs would be trying every trick in the book to stall the procedure on Lex's behalf.

Perry, as expected, had not seemed the slightest bit worried that Lex Luthor was plotting something. Indeed, Lois had watched Perry as Superman had delivered his warning. He'd puffed his chest out and hooked his fingers around his suspenders before informing Superman that an old experienced newshound like himself could smell danger from a mile away. He'd then proceeded to thank Superman for his concern, but insisted he'd be fine. Lois could tell as Clark left the office that he'd been trying to keep a straight face as he'd listened to Perry's exaggerations.

She also knew that at some point, Clark would have to leave to go and inform the President that he was in danger and tell them about their plan. She had expected him to do it right after they returned, but instead, she'd watched as he found excuse after excuse to stay. And even though there

were a million reasons he should leave, she loved him that much more for staying.

She allowed herself to get lost in thought for a few more minutes until a coffee appeared in front of her. She looked up and smiled at Clark feeling both grateful and guilty that he was still there.

"How many cups of coffee have I had this morning?" Lois asked absently as she took a sip.

"This is your third," he said with a bemused smile. "I think you might have a problem."

"Do you think they do twelve-step programs for caffeine?" Lois grinned back.

"Hmm, well since the first step is admitting you have a problem, you might have trouble getting to the other eleven steps," Clark teased. Lois gave him a mock pout.

"I'll have you know I can stop any time I want," she shot back. Before Clark could offer a retort, Lois' phone rang and she instantly felt her entire body go rigid. Clark noticed the change in posture and leaned over to pick up the receiver before she could stop him.

"Clark Kent," he said tentatively. Lois watched and felt the tension melt from her body the moment Clark visibly relaxed. It wasn't him. It wasn't Lex. After a moment's exchange, Clark handed the phone to her and Lois answered it.

"So, I finally got to meet the famous Clark Kent...well, sort of." Steven's friendly voice caused the rest of Lois' worry to ease slightly. "Is he moonlighting as your receptionist?"

"Sort of," Lois admitted. "I got a rather unexpected phone call from Lex Luthor yesterday. Clark was just making sure this wasn't a repeat occurrence. He hasn't... tried to contact you at all, has he?"

"No, thankfully," Steven said, and Lois wondered if he sounded slightly rattled. She imagined it was one thing to be told that you could potentially be enraging a psychopath and another to have evidence of it. Before she could dwell on that too much further, Steven spoke again. "Listen, I just called to let you know that the account has been closed. I have a cashier's cheque for the money for you. It's in the safe in my office, but I'll be honest, I —"

"Want to get rid of it as soon as possible?" Lois finished for him. Despite the incredibly tempting amount, something about having that much money in your possession — money previously owned by a notorious psychopathic murderer — must be absolutely terrifying. Lois couldn't blame him for wanting to get the money to her as soon as possible.

"Yeah," he admitted, sounding slightly embarrassed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not normally spooked, but something about having a heavy police presence outside

my home and office is a bit unsettling. Do I have you to thank for that, by the way?"

"Superman, actually," she said, "but I might have mentioned it to him."

"Well, I am grateful for your friends in high places. Literally high places." She could almost hear him grinning at his own joke and remembered why he was always so much fun at parties.

"Well, I'll give you the chance to meet the man himself," she replied, shooting a look at Clark that he immediately understood as his cue to listen in. "Superman is at the *Planet* right now. I am sure he will have no issues picking up the cashier's cheque and bringing it back here to me as a favour."

"Wow, that's impressive," Steven said with a whistle. "I've always wanted to meet the man in blue. I appreciate it."

"No more than I appreciate all you've done for me," Lois replied gratefully. "Seriously."

"Well don't thank me too thoroughly. I added a couple of extra zeros to the bill since you can afford it." Lois knew he was joking, but resolved to write a cheque for much higher than what she'd originally promised him. She knew exactly what he was risking by helping her, even if he didn't fully realise it.

"Superman should be there soon," she told him. "Once you give him the cheque, do me a favour and take a vacation for a few days?" She tried, but she couldn't keep the nervousness out of her voice.

"That bad, is it?" Steven asked, all jokes forgotten.

"Something is about to happen that's going to make Lex Luthor extremely angry," Lois said, not wanting to get too specific, lest he have people watching and/or a way to bug their phones. "And prison or not, he has ways of getting to people. I would feel a lot better if you were out of town."

"Gotcha," Steven replied. "I feel a spur of the moment fishing trip coming on the second this cheque is out of my hands."

"Good," Lois said, feeling relieved. "I'll be in touch soon."

Once she'd hung up, she looked at Clark, who seemed to know what she was going to say before she said it.

"I'll pay a visit to the President first and pick up the cheque from Steven as fast as I can," he promised, looking as if leaving was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I'll be fine," Lois insisted, pretending for his sake that the idea of Luthor calling her again while he was gone didn't terrify her. "I will stay at my desk and Jimmy, Perry and Claude will be here the entire time. Go."

He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead settled for a soft kiss on the lips before heading for the

elevators. Moments later she could hear the sound of him taking off into the sky and forced herself to turn her attention to the computer screen in front of her as she typed up her notes for the story of a lifetime on her machine.

She allowed herself to be immersed in that task while he was gone. When he returned, he seemed immensely relieved when she informed him that she'd had a boring, if productive hour and a half, and he possessed similar good news when he informed her the President was willing to go along with their plan.

"Did you managed to get the —"

"It's somewhere safe," he assured her. She nodded and chewed her lip thoughtfully. Clark sat down next to her and took her hand.

"You're still not sure what to do with the money, are you?"

"We both know we don't want it," Lois replied with a sigh. "But what do I do with it? That money destroyed lives. Luthor used that money to create an empire by swallowing up company after company in his bid to control everything and everyone around him."

"It was the source of his power," Clark agreed, clearly feeling the heavy weight of responsibility as well. "We need to make sure that every vestige of his power base is gone. If we get rid of too much of the money in one place, like a charity, then someone loyal to Luthor might still be able to regain control."

"That's it!" Lois exclaimed, an idea suddenly coming to her. It was so simple. Why hadn't she thought of it before? "Clark, we have the list of all the companies Luthor bought out or took over don't we?"

"Claude has it, I believe," Clark replied, looking at her curiously. "After all, his family's aviation company was one of the ones Luthor bought shares in."

"Then we use the money to buy them back," Lois replied. "All of them. We buy back every company Luthor took via hostile takeover. We give people back their livelihoods and donate whatever money is left over to a series of charities."

"Are you sure?" Clark asked, looking slightly surprised. "You realise this will mean buying Claude's family's company back for him."

Lois grimaced.

"I know," she sighed. "But whatever my feelings for him are, his family didn't deserve to lose their business. Besides, for Claude, that money will come at a price. He and I still need to have another conversation. But as long as the money is safe for now, that can wait until tomorrow."

They had one more day to plan before the press conference, and Lois already felt exhausted. She checked

her watch. It was early, but she knew Perry wouldn't begrudge them if they left.

"It seems the only thing left for us to do is get the hologram equipment from my parents," Clark said as if reading her mind. Her stomach rumbled just as he'd spoken.

"Let's get out of here," she urged him. "Let's go to Smallville now."

"Right now?" Clark asked her as he stood up and reached for her hand. She allowed him to pull her to her feet and into his arms where he placed a soft, but tantalising kiss on her lips. The din in the newsroom seemed to vanish.

"Why not?" she said, suddenly feeling the full intensity of Clark's gaze. She shivered slightly, thinking of just how much she enjoyed the way he was gently running his fingers up and down her arms.

"I thought we'd go back to the apartment and spend some...time together," he said somewhat lamely. She laughed, enjoying the innocent sheepishness in his expression. She leaned over and whispered in his ear in a way that was intended to drive him crazy.

"Let's get out of here."

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## Chapter 27

Though Clark had told his parents they would be in Smallville for dinner at six, both of them lost track of the time as they continued to familiarise themselves with each other's bodies. By some unspoken agreement they stuck to oral forms of pleasure. Lois wondered if Clark felt the same as she did — that it was enough that they were able to slowly learn how to please each other with no expectations and no added pressure. She hadn't actually asked him, but she got the impression that Clark was just as happy as she was to be in the moment with him, especially with everything else going on around them.

As they lay together in the afterglow, with Clark's arms around her, Lois thought about the fact that she had never felt more cared for or loved. She'd never had experiences like this with any man, and it made her appreciate Clark all the more while simultaneously making her want to go back in time and tell her younger self that there *were* better men out there.

She felt Clark absently brush her hair away from her forehead, placing a kiss there. She shifted to get a better view of his face and noticed out of the corner of her eye the time on the clock. It was ten to six.

"I think we're going to be late for dinner," she giggled. He sat up and turned to look at the clock and groaned, but did not look particularly upset.

"I guess we got carried away," he said sheepishly.

"I think we needed to," Lois replied, thinking about everything they had been dealing with. "But we really

should get dressed. Your parents are expecting us, and I don't want to have to try to lie to your mom when she asks what kept us."

"Good point," he replied, swinging his legs over the side of the bed before standing up and spinning into the suit. It took Lois a little bit longer to grab a sweater and jeans and shove them on. Eventually, they were ready to go and Lois was resigned to the fact that they were, in fact, going to be late.

"I'm engaged to the fastest man in the world and we still can't be on time for dinner," she grumbled with mock annoyance as Clark lifted her into his arms, and floated out the window and into the air. She shivered ever so slightly and wrapped her arms tighter around his neck.

Despite the fact that they had flown together many times since she'd discovered his secret, Lois didn't think she would ever get used to the sheer freedom that was flying with Clark. It was different than when she had thought she was flying with Superman. With Superman, she'd always felt a sense of unreality — like being with someone that she could never truly touch. He'd always kept himself somewhat distant from her. But with Clark, it felt as if he was sharing what it truly meant to be him in every sense of the word. Instead of feeling distant, she felt most connected to him when soaring above the clouds, nestled in his arms. How he could have done this for so long on his own without being able to share it with anybody was both heartbreaking and amazing to her.

She lost all track of time and thought as they flew through the air. She knew he normally went a little slower when carrying her, but tonight she wondered if he was taking his time on purpose. She wasn't sure why, but she didn't question it.

Eventually, she saw the Kent's farmhouse below them and felt themselves descending. Before her feet had even touched the ground, Martha Kent had thrown open the door to the Kent's farmhouse and was making her way towards them, where she pulled them into a giant bear hug.

"I'm so sorry we're late, Martha," Lois said when she'd released them and begun to usher them inside. "We got...held up at work."

And there it was. She'd lied to her almost-mother-in-law. She felt guilty immediately, especially since she had seen Clark attempt to sneak anything past his mother. It couldn't be done.

"Nonsense," Martha replied, dismissing her apology with a wave. Lois felt relieved immediately, and she was reminded of why she loved Martha Kent so much.

The table was already set, and before Lois realised it, they were eating, talking and laughing as if it were just an ordinary night at the Kent farm. Lois had almost forgotten entirely about their reason for being there until after

dessert had been cleared away — an incredible homemade apple pie that Lois had enjoyed so much she might have asked for the recipe were she in any way domestically inclined.

Jonathan was bringing out a pot of coffee for all of them when Martha finally mentioned the elephant in the room.

“I tested the hologram equipment you wanted,” she said. She spoke with a feigned casualness that Lois knew all too well. It was the same technique she used to get information from reluctant sources. She had assumed Clark had explained to his parents everything that had been going on, but when she thought about it, he hadn’t really had the time to do so. Living together had meant being in each other’s pockets almost constantly, and Lois hadn’t seen him have a lengthy conversation with his parents at any point.

“Thanks, Mom,” Clark had replied, his own voice equally casual but not nearly as good as Martha’s. “I promise not to damage it.”

“Are you planning on telling me why you wanted me to make a hologram of the President?” Martha asked, making eye contact with her son as she poured his coffee. Lois watched Clark wince as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t be doing. He looked away and stared down at his cup as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

“There’s a threat against the President’s life,” Lois said, figuring that if she told them some of the truth, maybe they wouldn’t dig too deeply. She knew that Clark likely hadn’t told them everything because he didn’t want them to worry. Lex Luthor was a sore spot for everyone. After all, he’d nearly killed their son with Kryptonite.

“And you want to lure the person responsible out with a hologram?” Jonathan guessed.

Lois nodded. “We know the date and time of the attempt,” she explained. “We figured if we could make it look as if the President was there, then police and Superman could apprehend the assassin so they can’t try again.”

“And what does Lex Luthor have to do with it all?” Martha asked softly. Clark’s eyes shot up, startled.

“How did you know —?”

“I didn’t until just now,” Martha replied, sounding a tiny bit proud of herself. “I know he’s in prison, but your voice has only ever sounded that frightened one other time and it was the day that —”

“That I almost married him?” Lois interjected, feeling her heart sink. She’d always secretly feared what Martha and Jonathan must think of her, given the fact that she’d turned their son down when he’d poured his heart out to her, only to throw herself at him as Superman not twenty

minutes later. And then, as an added insult, she’d broken their son’s heart a second time by agreeing to marry a mass murderer. She couldn’t imagine any parent in the world wouldn’t hold at least a tiny bit of resentment or anger. She might as well get everything out in the open so at least she would know where she stood with them.

“Oh Lois, we don’t blame you,” Jonathan said quietly. “Clark told us how he manipulated everyone into thinking he was a good person.”

“Not to mention taking away everything that meant anything to you,” Martha chimed in. Her voice was firm, but her eyes were kind.

“Martha, I…” Lois scrambled to try to articulate what she wanted to say and found herself floundering. “Thank you, but there’s more to it than that. It’s…complicated.”

“Jonathan, could you show Clark that chore in the barn that you needed help with?” Martha asked pointedly. Jonathan took the hint immediately and stood up.

“C’mon, son. There’s a…thing I need help with.” He shot a look at this wife. “Apparently.”

Lois watched Clark go, feeling more than a little nervous and not at all convinced that she hadn’t in some way stuck her foot in her mouth.

“Martha, I —”

“Now, you just stop right there, Lois Lane,” Martha said, sternly. Lois froze at the tone in her voice, feeling certain that she’d been right about their feelings towards her all along. “Do you honestly think I have been harbouring anger towards you over Lex Luthor for all this time?”

She sounded incredulous and slightly hurt. Lois wasn’t sure what to feel or think, only that she knew how she had hurt Clark in the past and couldn’t imagine how Martha or Jonathan could be totally okay with the fact that she’d almost married the same man who had nearly killed their son.

“Honestly?” Lois said, feeling it was best to get it all out there. “Yes. At least, a little. After all, I almost married him and he —”

“I know what he did,” Martha said softly and the anger in her eyes took her by surprise. “To both of you. Honey, the man is a psychopath. A murderer. Of course he would manipulate and isolate and hurt you and anyone else to get what he wants. I *know* that.”

“He did,” Lois agreed, feeling close to tears. “But I let it happen. Clark told me how he felt and I —”

“You were scared,” Martha interrupted, reaching over and squeezing her arm gently. “I know how that feels! But I don’t for a second think you ever meant to hurt Clark. I know how much you love him, how much you have always loved him. I knew it back then, just as much as I know it now.”

“How could you possibly have known?” Lois asked, the astonishment clear in her voice. “I didn’t even know.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Martha said soothingly. “And that’s mine and Jonathan’s doing. At least, when it came to who Clark really was. How could you know when you didn’t have the whole picture? We should have encouraged Clark to tell you who he was, but he’s had to be careful all his life, you see. We were so worried someone — the wrong someone — might find out about him that we... well, I think he could have told you when Lex bought the *Planet*. If anything, I blame myself for not encouraging him to trust you.”

“How did you know I could be trusted?” Lois asked, feeling both humbled and awed by the fact that Martha had all but said she had known over a year ago that she could be entrusted with Clark’s secret.

“I told you,” Martha replied with a gentle smile. “I could see how much you loved him. It was written all over your face that first day I met you at the corn festival. When Clark got sick, the worry you felt told me how much you cared. I saw the way your face would light up whenever he smiled at you. When he saw you in that dress, I saw the way you blushed. I could see it then, even if you couldn’t, and I knew it would only be a matter of time before you figured it out.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Lois said, her voice hoarse with emotion. She’d never realised just how much the older woman had been not only rooting for her son’s happiness but for hers as well. “Thank you.”

“No, Lois,” Martha said, her eyes shining with unspoken emotion. “Thank *you*. You’ve made him happier than I have ever seen him. However the two of you got here, I’m glad you did.”

“Me too,” Lois replied feeling as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders. “He makes me so happy, Martha.”

“Good,” Martha said, her eyes twinkling with warmth, “and if he ever stops making you happy you let me know. I love him, but I don’t know if you’ve noticed, that he can be a bit of a lunkhead at times.”

Lois laughed out loud just as Clark came back inside the room with Jonathan. Lois noticed from the look that Jonathan gave Martha that he’d kept Clark away as long as he possibly could.

“What’s so funny?” Jonathan asked.

Lois shook her head.

“Nothing,” Martha said with a wink. “Girl stuff.”

“Girl stuff, huh?” Jonathan gave Clark a look.

“Marriage tip, son, they start talking ‘girl stuff’, it means they are plotting against us.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, Dad,” Clark said with a chuckle. “Mom, can you show me how this hologram machine works again? I don’t want to make any mistakes.”

“Absolutely,” Martha said with a nod. “Anything to put that son-of-a-bitch back in prison where he belongs.”

“Mom!” Clark said, sounding slightly shocked. Martha shrugged, nonplussed.

“He tried to kill you with Kryptonite,” she said unapologetically. “Anyone who threatens my boy is a son-of-a-bitch. Now give me a second while I get the machine ready.”

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## Chapter 28

They lingered at the farmhouse long after Martha helped show them how to use the hologram machine, not wanting the night to end. Lois felt a newfound kinship with her almost-mother-in-law, and she could tell Clark also felt safer in a location where Lex Luthor would not be able to spy on them, no matter how good his sources.

Eventually, a yawn from Jonathan that he tried to conceal prompted Lois to glance at the clock.

“Oh, Clark, look at the time!” she exclaimed. “We’re so sorry, you two must be exhausted. We should go.”

“Nonsense,” Martha said with a wave of her hand. “You aren’t going anywhere...either of you.”

“We have to get back, Mom,” Clark protested, though Lois could see he didn’t want to go and Lois didn’t blame him. She finally didn’t feel as if she had to look over her shoulder every other second, afraid that someone was watching her or that Lex Luthor might phone her again.

“You can fly back in the morning,” Martha said pragmatically. “I’m sure Perry won’t mind if you’re a little late. He knows after all what’s going on, so just let him know you are somewhere safe and that you’ll be in later. I’ve already made up the guest bedroom.”

“Well, alright,” Clark relented and she heard the relief in his tone. He glanced at her. “As long as you’re okay with it?”

“I’m more than okay with it,” Lois said heartily, and she noticed Martha smile just a little bit wider. “We’d be happy to stay.”

“Good,” Jonathan said standing up. “But you’re right about one thing, I am tired. And since I have to get up with the chickens tomorrow, I’m going to get to bed.”

“I’ll do the same. Everything is ready for you both in the guest room. If you need extra towels in the morning, for a shower, let me know. Good night.”

As Lois watched Jonathan and Martha head to bed, she felt a powerful longing. She could see the ease with which the two communicated. The way they playfully teased one another. She could tell there was a deep and intense love still present between them even after all those years of marriage, and she knew that even though she and Clark

were not quite that comfortable with each other yet, they were getting there. She wanted this. She wanted what they had more than anything and for once, she believed it was possible.

They just had to get Lex Luthor out of their lives once and for all.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Clark said softly as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders on the couch where they both still sat.

“Just thinking about how effortless your parents’ marriage seems,” Lois replied. “But I know it isn’t effortless. I know now that it’s taken years for them to get to a point where it seems that way. I guess I was just realising that I didn’t know that before, you know? I just thought that if it was right it would just fall into place, but it doesn’t work that way, does it?”

“No, I don’t think it does,” Clark mused. “But if it helps, I guess I thought the same as you did. That because I love you so much, our relationship would just...work. I think it’s why I tried to rush it the way I did. Once you knew my secret, I felt that the last hurdle was gone. We were free to be together...to have the forever I always knew I wanted with you, but —”

“We couldn’t just pass go and collect our \$200,” Lois replied with a nod. “I know. I’m glad, though. I think I like putting in the work. I got to know you first as a friend and partner. And then when I discovered your secret, I got to know you all over again. And we had to get to know each other as romantic partners. We’ve been learning so much about each other these past few days, and I’ve loved every second of it.”

“Me too,” Clark said as he pulled her close for a soft, lingering kiss. “Almost-living together has been pretty wonderful.”

“Seeing you naked doesn’t hurt either,” Lois said with an impish grin. “Finding out the suit does in fact come off has been pretty amazing.”

“Lois, my parents might hear you!” Clark exclaimed, looking both mildly scandalised and slightly embarrassed by the compliment.

“Only if your mom has super hearing as well,” Lois replied. “And I’m not fully convinced she doesn’t. Are you sure she’s not from Krypton too?”

“No, definitely Kansas,” he said with a laugh. “She’s just very perceptive. And I gather from the look on your face when I came back into the room that whatever she said must have given you...peace?”

“She’s not the only one that’s perceptive,” Lois observed. “But yes, peace. I’m getting there. Thanks to you and your parents.”

“What time should we head back tomorrow?” Clark wondered, giving the clock another quick glance.

“Later,” Lois replied. “I’m in no hurry. There’s really only one thing I need to do. Otherwise, I think we are set for the press conference.”

“I want you with Henderson,” Clark said. “When I take down Mills, I mean. I know you’ll want to be there, but I need to know you’re safe. Otherwise I can’t —”

“I know,” she interrupted softly, and a sense of knowing seemed to pass between them as Lois came to a fuller and richer understanding of the burden he carried and the lives that depended on him including her own. His shoulders seemed to sag with relief and the two of them settled into a comfortable silence, letting the peaceful sounds of the countryside wash over them as they felt their troubles melt away.

The following morning they awoke early and took their time in getting ready to leave. Martha made the most incredible pancakes from scratch. Lois raised an eyebrow at Clark as she watched him pour syrup all over his fourth helping. Though she knew he could eat whatever he liked, she had never seen him eat so much all in one sitting. It dawned on her that he had perhaps modified the amount he ate in front of her and other people in order to seem more ‘normal’. It was likely so ingrained in him, that even though they were ‘almost living together’, he continued to do it.

But here, on the farm...he was home. This was the place he felt most comfortable, surrounded by the people who accepted and loved him unconditionally and had always done so. And now she was included among them.

It also occurred to Lois that perhaps the reason he hadn’t truly allowed himself to feel this comfortable while they were ‘almost living together’ was because he was in her apartment — her home. Where they were going to live after the wedding was still a vague question mark. They had agreed to move the things she planned to keep into his apartment at first because it was larger, but hadn’t decided anything beyond that. And up until now, she had been okay with that. The future, after all, was full of change and Lois was not a fan.

But now, she was looking forward to it. Instead of fearing all the changes to come, she welcomed them.

“Lois, honey, you’ve barely touched your second helping,” Martha observed. “Are you full? I can put them in a container for you, though whether they’ll survive the flight, is anyone’s guess. Clark might just snatch them right out of your hand.”

“I promise to behave myself,” Clark said with a wink in Lois’ direction that said otherwise.

“They’re delicious, Martha,” Lois insisted, shoving a forkful into her mouth. “I’m sorry, I was just thinking... about pancakes.”



“Uh-huh,” Martha said, eyes twinkling. Lois was saved any further reply as Jonathan came into the kitchen, having completed the morning chores for the farm and eagerly helped himself to what was left of the pancakes.

Lois watched as the chatter resumed, still thinking about the wedding and the questions that lay beyond it. She suddenly found herself realising she didn’t want to decide which of her possessions she wanted to discard or keep as she moved her things into Clark’s apartment. She wanted the two of them to sit down and decide which bits and bobs of both their lives they would transfer over to a place that was neither his nor hers, and, if necessary, buy new things they could use to furnish it together.

She didn’t want to live in his apartment or for him to live in hers. She wanted a home that belonged to both of them. A home with a guest room for when Clark’s parents came to visit, where Clark could eat as many helpings of food as he wanted and where they could maybe someday start a family.

It was with these thoughts in mind that they said their goodbyes eventually to Martha and Jonathan and began their flight back towards Metropolis.

“You’ve been quiet all morning,” Clark commented as they flew slowly above the clouds. “What’s on your mind?”

“Family,” Lois said as she snuggled in closer against his chest. He didn’t say anything more, and Lois wondered if he was thinking the same thoughts she was.

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## Chapter 29

They didn’t make it into work until late afternoon. When they did finally arrive, the first thing they noticed was Jimmy and Claude sitting hunched over the tracker while they organised all the evidence they had collected on the Vice President of the United States, ready to hand over to Henderson the next day. Lois felt a small pang of guilt for not having been there to help them, then reminded herself that they were likely safer here without her.

She also realised that if Lex had spies watching the *Planet*, their presence would be known to him very soon. It was best they stay as far out of Jimmy and Claude’s way while they finished up as possible.

With that in mind, she gave a nod to both of them and headed to her desk where she and Clark spent the rest of the afternoon organising their own notes and writing up the preliminary story, which they would edit later after the arrest had already taken place — assuming everything all went to plan, they wouldn’t have to change anything. But Lois knew better than to assume.

She managed to lose herself in her work for an hour or so before Claude came over to inform them that he was doing his usual lunch run, asking if she or Clark wanted

anything. She and Clark both gave him their orders and he left.

“He’s made himself awfully useful,” Clark commented as they waited for their food. Lois nodded.

“He has a lot to make up for,” Lois replied, thinking back to their conversation and the apology he offered her. “He knows that. I think he’s trying, though.”

“I can’t pretend I will ever like him, knowing how he hurt you,” Clark said, his voice quiet and contemplative. “But I think I can understand the desire to make up for past sins.”

“Yes,” Lois said, feeling slightly dazed with a sudden flash of understanding. She knew exactly what Clark was talking about. Wasn’t that what she’d been trying so hard to do ever since the original Lex fiasco? Make things right? Not just to Clark, though there was a certain degree of guilt there for not believing him about Lex in the first place, but more than anything, she’d been trying to find a way to redeem herself — so that when she looked in the mirror, she would no longer see the woman who had almost married a cold-blooded killer. She would no longer see the woman who had hurt the only man she truly loved because she was scared to trust something real. She would be free.

She wanted to be free.

“Lois, you okay?” Clark was asking.

“Hmm?” she replied, her mind still elsewhere with thoughts too complex for the newsroom.

“You zoned out on me there,” he said, his brow crinkled ever so slightly.

“I was just thinking,” Lois murmured, “about forgiveness. About how sometimes the hardest person to forgive is yourself. Clark, I don’t think it’s my forgiveness Claude is looking for.”

“What makes you say that?” Clark wondered, sounding curious. Lois gave him a small smile and squeezed his hand.

“Gut feeling.”

“Well, I know better than to go against your gut.” His tone was light, but the meaning behind his eyes was clear.

Before she could respond, the elevator doors opened and Claude exited, heading in their direction with the sandwiches they’d ordered. Lois touched Clark’s shoulder and stood up.

“Can I talk to you?” she asked Claude as she gestured to the conference room. He looked surprised, but nodded, handing Clark his sandwich and not making eye contact.

Lois led the way, and when they found themselves alone in the room, Lois suddenly had no idea what to say.

“Was there something you needed?” Claude asked her, frowning slightly after a moment of silence.

“No, it’s just...” she trailed off, trying to form the thoughts that were just racing through her head not thirty seconds ago. She eventually realised that she couldn’t articulate them even if she’d wanted to. The thoughts themselves were gone — ephemeral and intangible, but the feeling remained. She trusted herself. She trusted her instincts. She knew what she had to do.

“I just wanted to let you know that I’ve decided what I am going to do with Lex’s money,” she told him, her voice businesslike, lest he get the wrong idea. “I’m going to use some of it to buy back Dupont Airlines.”

“You’re...” Claude looked stunned. He couldn’t have looked more surprised if she’d announced to him that she was planning to leave the *Planet* and become a singing waitress. “You’re what?”

“Buying back your company,” she repeated. She was slightly amused by the shock on his face, but didn’t let it show. “I will transfer the shares over to you. Your family will own it outright once more.”

“But...but why?” he asked, his voice having gone up an octave. He looked almost nervous. As if he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” she said, speaking slowly and deliberately. “Because it will help to destroy Lex’s hold over people. Because I plan to do the same for every company Lex has bought out under a false name, and because your family did not hurt me. They shouldn’t be the ones to suffer.”

“That’s...” He blinked again, still looking rather stunned. She watched as he fumbled for words, and eventually, as if realising that no words would be suitable, said the only thing that came to mind. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Lois replied, her tone somewhat brusque. “I am not doing this for you. But you *are* going to do something for me.”

“What can I —”

“After Lex is brought down once and for all, I am going to go into Perry’s office and tell him that I wrote the story that you won that Kerth award for,” Lois told him, her tone matter-of-fact and leaving no room for debate. “I’m telling you not because I want your permission or your blessing, but simply to give you the courtesy of not being blindsided if and when Perry confronts you.”

Looking over at him sitting there, she noticed him wince at the mention of Perry. Even now, though he didn’t work for the *Planet*, Perry seemed to inspire a certain level of respect. Lois had been in Perry’s doghouse a time or two and she knew first hand that, like a loving, but strict parent, Perry’s anger was not nearly as bad as his disappointment. And Perry would be both angry and disappointed in Claude. Then, as if wanting to remind Claude that lying was useless, she spoke again.

“Perry will believe me. I know this now. I should have known it then.” She sighed and watched as Claude sank into the nearest chair. “Don’t try to deny it. For both our sakes. You’ll only make it worse.”

“And that’s what you want me to do?” Claude asked her, suddenly looking even older and far more tired than she’d ever seen him. She shook her head.

“No, that’s what you’re going to do,” she said. “What I want you to do...the favour I will ask of you once this is all over, is that you tender your resignation from your newspaper once you return home and leave the field of journalism for good.”

Claude’s head shot up in surprise, maybe in shock.

“You want me to —”

“Quit your job as a journalist,” she repeated. “What you did when you stole my story was bad enough, but you won an award for it and still you didn’t come clean. You’ve built your career on a lie — a career that is supposed to be built on honesty and truth. How can the public have any faith in us if we don’t live that truth every day? Not to mention that once it becomes known that you stole my story — a story that won you an award, you may end up being fired by your paper anyway. This way you would get to leave on your own terms.”

Claude nodded, his shoulders slumped in resignation. He looked defeated, and for some reason that didn’t make her happy, nor did it make her sad.

“What will I do with myself?” he asked, but more to himself than to anyone else. And this time, Lois did allow herself to feel a flash of anger.

“That’s not my problem,” she replied, her voice tight. “But you will thankfully have a family company that you can go and work for, should you choose, which is more than most get.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, standing up and straightening his shoulders. “For what it’s worth, I *am* sorry. And...thank you.”

He was at the door before she could respond, exiting into the bullpen while she finally allowed herself to sink down into the chair, trying to figure out what exactly she was feeling and whether it was positive or negative.

She didn’t even notice that Clark had come in until the sound of a chair scraping beside her caused her to look up and into his warm, loving eyes. He smiled and all was right with the world again.

“Everything okay?” he asked softly. She nodded, but said nothing. Clark reached for her hand and squeezed it softly. “Just remember, if you want me to give him a very gentle non-Superman punch in the nose, I will.”

He gave her an endearingly boyish grin that somehow caused her stomach to flutter in a way that seemed unique only to him.

"I appreciate the offer," she said, shooting him a slightly mischievous grin of her own. "But I think there are better uses of your time."

"Oh?" Clark said, raising an eyebrow. She found her gaze drift down to his soft, full lips — lips she knew to be capable of making her feel incredible things and her heartbeat just a little bit faster. "And what can I do to make better use of my time?"

"Kiss me," Lois murmured. "I'd always rather have you kissing me."

The words were barely out of her mouth when he took her face in his hands and kissed her thoroughly and in a way that promised so much more than he was able to give in this moment.

She sighed as they finally parted.

"Suppose we have to join the real world, now?" she asked him.

He nodded and took her hand.

"For a few more hours," he said, as he led her to the door of the conference room. Then, leaning over, he murmured in her ear in a tone that caused her entire body to come to life. "But I promise, when I get you home, you're all mine."

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### Chapter 30

Clark made good on his promise, and under any other circumstances, she would have slept soundly, his body wrapped around her like a shield. But on this particular night, her sleep was fitful and broken, her anxiety over what was to happen the following day invading her every thought.

The sunlight streaming into the windows broke her out of a troubled sleep, and she sat up, yawning deeply and following the smell of fresh coffee that she could hear bubbling in the kitchen.

Though Clark was awake, he too looked tired and apprehensive. The press conference started in two hours. If everything was to go to plan, the President would be inviting the Vice President into his office for a last-minute debrief while Lois and Clark drank their coffee. He would then be arrested and detained in the Presidential Suite of the Lexor hotel until Mills was in custody and Lex could do no more harm.

Though Lois knew their plan was solid, the idea that something might go wrong was omnipresent.

Clark sat a cup of coffee down in front of her in his wobbly mug. He must have noticed the worry in her eyes because when he spoke, his voice was calm and reassuring, though the expression on his face wasn't entirely convincing.

"I flew by Mills' place today. He was getting his weapons ready. It didn't look like he was aware anything was amiss."

"Good," Lois said, only slightly mollified. Second thoughts were swirling through her mind. "Are we doing the right thing, Clark?"

"What do you mean?" Clark asked, his eyebrows knit together in a frown.

"Well, the President might be a hologram, but the people there for the conference won't be. What if something goes wrong and Mills shoots someone?"

"He won't," Clark replied, and this time he *did* sound a bit more confident. "I'm not going to let Mills get the chance."

Lois felt a bit more reassured by the determination in Clark's eyes. She knew how keenly he felt the burden of responsibility that was being Superman on a day to day basis. It was times like this that the feeling must be magnified ten-fold.

She took another sip of her coffee and checked the time.

"Oh no, Henderson will be here in twenty minutes, I've got to get ready!" she exclaimed as she jumped up, nearly spilling the contents of the wobbly mug all over the table.

She rushed into her bedroom and flung on the first pantsuit she could find, noting that Clark hadn't changed. She knew it was because the moment Henderson arrived to escort her to the outdoor convention centre stage, where the President was supposed to be giving his speech, Clark would spin into the suit and Superman would follow Mills. No point getting dressed when you're just going to change again. Even if you could change at super speed.

She emerged from the bedroom running a brush frantically through her hair before racing into the bathroom to brush her teeth and promising herself she would shower after the press conference. Clark had used his heat vision to toast a bagel for her and was spreading cream cheese on it as she looked around for her purse and keys.

A knock sounded on the door a few moments later, just as Lois had taken her first bite of the bagel. She watched as he scanned the door and gave her a nod to let her know that it was, indeed, Henderson.

Henderson entered and quickly took stock of the apartment as he said hello. Lois realised it must be weird for him to be in her home — like seeing a teacher outside of school. Pleasantries exchanged, things quickly became awkward.

"I have an unmarked car across the street," Henderson told her, likely to break the tension. "We'll take it to the press conference and you'll stay with me to the left of the stage while Superman arrests Mills. It should be an easy bust. We got the Vice President this morning. He confessed everything."

“Good,” Clark said with a nod. “I’ll be right behind you. I just need to stop at the *Planet* and file last night’s story with Perry.”

“Might be all over by the time you get there,” Henderson warned. “If everything goes to plan and Superman does his job, then the hologram of the President will cancel the press conference because of an upset stomach and it will be rescheduled. Likely people will be leaving when you arrive.”

“We should get going,” Lois interrupted, hoping Henderson wouldn’t ask too many questions about why it was so important for Clark to file his story this early in the morning. Henderson nodded to her relief, and Lois gave Clark a quick kiss on the lips. She wanted to say more but didn’t want to express what she was feeling in front of Henderson. Thankfully, the look in Clark’s eyes said everything she needed to hear.

*It will be okay.*

She kept that thought in her mind as they walked towards Henderson’s unmarked police car and got in. The ride to the venue was silent. Lois got the feeling Henderson wasn’t much for small talk, and she wasn’t sure what she would say to him even if he was. Mercifully, the ride was also brief, and Lois felt nerves gather in her stomach as they made their way to the right side of the stage. Several other police officers personally vetted by Henderson himself were standing there, and as they closed ranks around her, Lois wondered if this was what politicians and celebrities felt like every day.

She dismissed the thought almost immediately, thinking that it was likely something they were used to. She herself was somewhat of a public figure because of the Lane and Kent billboards as well as the original Lex Luthor scandal, and thus was occasionally recognised getting her morning coffee or running errands, but it was nothing compared to the security and scrutiny that followed someone like the President. She was grateful for that.

In no time at all, everyone had taken their seats, and it occurred to Lois that at this very moment, Clark was hovering somewhere above Mills, waiting to see him pull out a gun before swooping down to apprehend him.

A moment later, a hush fell over the crowd as the Mayor of Metropolis walked onto the stage. Her heart began to race. It was the Mayor’s job to introduce the President, which meant that in just a few more moments, Lex Luthor would be finished for good.

She didn’t hear a word the Mayor said, but eventually the applause told her he was finished and she watched, hands shaking, as the Mayor left the stage. Moments later, the President’s hologram walked on. She watched as he headed to the microphone and saw behind him that one of

Henderson’s men was getting a message relayed to them via a walkie talkie. The hologram appeared to be clearing his throat as one of the men gave a nod and eventually the hologram spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming out today. I appreciate your interest in these talks and what they mean for our two nations. Unfortunately, I don’t appear to be feeling very well. Nothing serious, just some breakfast that didn’t agree with me. I think it’s best we reschedule this press conference for when I am at my best. I thank you all for your understanding.”

Without waiting to take any questions from reporters, who all started clamouring at once for more information, the hologram turned and exited the stage. Lois let out a breath she hadn’t even realised she was holding and shot a look at Henderson who looked equally surprised it had actually worked.

“We should get backstage,” Henderson said to her as people began to head back to their cars. Lois followed Henderson as he headed behind the stage and she fought the urge to run up and fling her arms around Clark, who stood there in the iconic red and blue suit, handing Mills over to Henderson’s men along with the high-powered sniper rifle he’d brought with him to do the job.

“I flew by the President’s Suite and checked on him to make sure he was safe,” she overheard him saying to the men. “Everything was fine.”

“We can’t thank you enough, Superman,” Henderson said as they arrived and Clark noticed Lois. There was a softening in his expression meant only for her — something so small that only someone who knew what to look for would see it. She gave him a meaningful look in return and knew he had understood.

“Superman,” she said, making her way towards him. “Could I get a statement for the *Planet*?”

“Absolutely,” he replied, his tone serious but his eyes warm. He looked over at Henderson then and spoke to him. “Why don’t I escort Miss Lane back to the *Planet*? That way you can personally make sure Mills ends up in the least comfortable jail cell at the precinct.”

“Sounds great, Superman,” Henderson replied with a nod. “And thank you again for all your help.”

Lois waited while the police, led by Henderson, left and fought the urge to collapse into Clark’s arms.

“Thank God it all worked out,” she murmured under her breath. “Are we really going to go back to the *Planet* right now?”

Clark shook his head. “I’ll fly us over the precinct to make sure that nothing goes wrong booking Mills into custody and then we will go home. I think we’ve earned some rest.”

“Yes,” Lois said softly, thinking of how utterly perfect it would feel to be curled up in bed with Clark’s arms holding her tightly for the rest of the day. “Let’s go home.”

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### Chapter 31

When they arrived back at Lois’ apartment later that day, she felt both exhilarated and exhausted. The President was safe, and tomorrow the whole country would know via a *Daily Planet* Lane and Kent exclusive, that the Vice President had been arrested for conspiring to assassinate the President along with a host of other charges. Lex Luthor would also have more charges brought against him, and this time, there would be no judges in his pocket or people under his thumb to help him weasel out.

She would need to hire someone to handle the money and buy back all the companies that Lex took over or bought out. That would take time, but it would be worth it. Lois had been too tired to talk to Perry about her stolen story, but made a mental note to do so the next day. It would be a difficult conversation — especially when it came to explaining to Perry why she hadn’t come forward back then, but it was necessary.

Claude would be returning home, though when, she wasn’t entirely sure. He wouldn’t have any work to do now, since the trade talks between the US and France were to be cancelled and an investigation launched into the French authorities behind it.

Lois felt oddly unsure of what to do with herself as they both kicked off their shoes and she went into the bedroom to change into something more casual. Though they hadn’t put any specific time limit on their practice run at living together, Lois had somewhat assumed that once the story was finished and the President safe, Clark would return to his own apartment and they would make their wedding preparations living separately.

She wasn’t sure why she’d been operating under that assumption — certainly nothing Clark had said had given her that impression. Maybe it was simply that the timing of their agreement had coincided with the threat to the President and Lex Luthor’s return.

Now that she felt she was truly starting to heal, she realised she didn’t need to practise living with Clark. She knew it would work — that they would work. And yet she wanted to continue practising.

She listened as Clark clattered around in the kitchen while she pulled on a pair of shorts and slipped a t-shirt on. She opted not to bother with a bra, loving the fact that she felt comfortable enough with the boundaries she and Clark had established that she knew he wouldn’t see it as an invitation. And there were times it would be — an explicit one — but not at this specific moment.

They’d spent a few nights exploring what gave them both pleasure, and Lois had a feeling that with the threat of

Lex Luthor behind them, they were both ready to take the next step, and she wanted to, but she also knew that, despite the fact that it was only mid-afternoon, it had been an emotionally exhausting day and she wanted some time to relax with Clark before they had that conversation.

She made her way back into the living area to find Clark had helped himself to an apple, cut it up and offered her a slice out of the bowl. Something about the gesture made her heart clench. She wasn’t sure why. He’d made her food before in her kitchen — both when they were living separately and over the last week. But something about this moment — this snack that he made himself and casually offered to share told her that their lives were fully integrated in a way she hadn’t anticipated. It had all happened so organically that she had missed it. Or thought she had.

She declined the apple, and watched with some amusement and affection as he ate it at super speed. She was about to suggest they lie together and cuddle when an all-too-familiar look stole quickly across her fiancé’s face. He gave her a slightly pained and apologetic look.

“Lois, I’m sorry, but there’s an apartment fire and...”

“Go. I’ll be here waiting,” she said softly. He nodded, and without further comment had spun into the suit and flown out her living room window. Lois gave a small sigh and decided to make herself a cup of tea while she waited for him to return. She opted not to close the window, as the day was warm and she hoped he would be back soon. In the meantime, she was grateful for the way the curtain sheers fluttered softly with the breeze.

Tea made, she was about to curl up on the couch with a book that had been neglected for the better part of a month when someone knocked on the door. She reluctantly stood up, and unlocked the door, assuming it was someone from the police department wanting a statement. It wasn’t until she began to open the door that she remembered that she and Clark had already told Henderson they would give a statement the following day.

Before she could even attempt to close the door, however, a tall, lean body pushed back against the door frame, and her eyes widened with shock as she looked up to see the face of Lex Luthor forcing himself inside her apartment.

Unable to prevent him from fully entering, she backed up and glanced around the apartment, immediately looking for something — anything — that she could use as a weapon. There was nothing.

He shut the door behind him, and as he did so, she noticed that he only used one hand. In his other hand, he held a gun and it was pointing straight at her. His eyes met hers and Lois shuddered at the terrifyingly crazed look in them. He was armed and she...she didn’t even have on a

bra. He could kill her or...No. She wouldn't think about that. She wouldn't think about how totally and completely vulnerable she was.

"Hello, Lois," he said, his voice soft, despite the wildness in his expression. He glanced inside, as if looking for something or someone. Clark. He had to be looking for Clark. And she had to stall for time. As much time as she could.

"Lex...how..."

"Did I get out of prison?" He sighed as if disappointed in her. "I told you, there were guards loyal to me and a warden who would look the other way. You really should have listened when I told you that those walls wouldn't hold me for long."

"But you don't have your —"

"Money?" Lex interrupted. His eyes flashed dangerously and Lois cursed herself for her misstep. Bringing up the fact that she'd moved the money out of the account he'd set up was not a smart move. "Yes, you did leave me in a bit of a bind, didn't you? Thankfully my escape was planned long before the warden and guards knew that you'd stolen the funds I was using to pay them, or that the Vice President had been arrested. They assumed my pardon was forthcoming, which was lucky for me. But very unlucky for you and Mr. Kent. Where is he, by the way?"

"He went to the store to get bread," Lois lied. Her hands shook and she tried to hide them behind her back as she took stock of what she could use to defend herself if it came to it. She wouldn't have enough time to get to the kitchen to grab the knife that Clark had used to cut the apple. The umbrella stand where her umbrella sat was directly behind where Lex currently stood. There was nothing she could use to defend herself with if he pulled the trigger and Clark was still gone. Even if she called for him, he wouldn't get back in time. And Lex knew it.

"Pity," Lex replied with a frown. "I wanted to kill him. But I suppose I'll have to settle for —"

"Killing me?" Lois blurted out. She immediately regretted it as he fixed her with yet another unhinged look.

"Now that depends on you, Lois." He would have sounded entirely reasonable were it not for that look in his eye — the look that told her all bets were off. A week ago, she'd been relatively confident when she'd told Clark that Lex's obsession with her would prevent him from committing violence, but now...well, now she knew that if he truly believed there was no chance between them, that he would kill her without a second thought. It chilled her to the bone.

"How does that depend on me?" Lois asked. She already knew the answer, but her goal right now was to buy herself some time. Clark would be back as soon as he

finished his rescue. She only hoped it was the only rescue he needed to attend to. Keep Lex talking, by any means necessary...that's what she needed to do.

"Well, one way or another, I am going to get my money back from you. Now, you can either help me willingly, or you can do so...unwillingly. And I truly hope you come willingly. You look...radiant."

The way he said the last word caused her face to drain entirely of colour. She wanted to cry, but instead she held herself together. She backed up even further and glanced towards the window in the living room silently wondering if she would be able to climb out the window before he could shoot her. Dropping down the fire escape was risky, but if she could get somewhere public...

"Don't even think about it," he admonished gently. "You'd be dead before you could blink."

"If you kill me, how will you get your money?" Lois asked, unable to prevent the tremble in her voice.

"I suppose I won't," he replied with a shrug. It was the shrug that truly terrified her. If he was that blasé about potentially losing two hundred million dollars, then he really wouldn't hesitate to shoot her. She had to get Clark's attention somehow. Now.

"That's a lot of money to lose," she replied, trying and failing to sound casual. "How do you expect to convince me to go with you?" She watched as Lex moved slowly towards her, like a predator stalking his prey.

"I plan to appeal to your generous nature," Lex replied with a smile that would look perfectly at home on a python. "After all, it's in both our interests for you to come with me right now."

Lois' gaze settled on the wobbly mug that had been left out on the coffee table close to where Lex was currently standing. If she could get to it, she might be able to use it as a weapon. It looked to be solid enough that if aimed correctly at Lex's head, could potentially knock him out. Lois was certain that Martha Kent would see no better purpose for the mug. The trick was to get there. Slowly, she started inching towards Lex, all the while thinking, *keep him talking.*

"How is it in my best interest to help you at all?" She took a small step. "Surely you must know by now that the police know you're missing." Another small step. "The warden will likely already be in police custody, and once he realises the money is gone, he will turn on you." Yet one more. He still hadn't noticed. Or didn't care. She wasn't sure which scared her more.

"All the more reason you should want to help me," Lex replied, waving the gun in a vaguely threatening way. "A man who has nothing left to lose is the most dangerous kind in the world. And sooner or later, Mr. Kent will be back with the bread. Don't think for a second I won't

hesitate to shoot him the moment he walks in the door. In fact, I will relish it.”

His eyes gleamed as he spoke, and Lois knew he was telling the truth. Though she was grateful that normal bullets couldn't hurt Clark, kryptonite could and Lex knew it. The only advantage they had was that he didn't know Clark's secret but that would end the moment he attempted to shoot him and failed.

She took another step and tried to sound more confident than she felt.

“So, what...I go with you and you spare Clark?” She took another step. Almost there. Just one more. “Do you honestly think the police won't catch you? It took me three days to withdraw that money from the account you set up. I can't do it again without raising some eyebrows. You have to know that.”

“Oh I do,” Lex replied softly. “Just as I also know that the moment you get the chance to, you will call for Superman. I have a contingency plan. I *always* have a contingency plan. Surely you must know this by now, my dear. I have kryptonite. Lots of it. And a place to hide. Do you remember that bunker I built? The one that was an exact replica of your apartment? Do you think that was the only one?”

She took another step, and did not break eye contact, though the surprise she felt at this statement clearly showed on her face. He smiled smugly and Lois knew that he hadn't noticed her movements. Her hands closed over the mug. He still hadn't noticed.

“Oh, yes,” he all but purred. “I have somewhere for the two of us to go where we will be quite hidden. I've had all my bases covered since —”

His words were cut off by the sudden and sharp blow that Lois delivered to the side of his head courtesy of the wobbly mug. He gave a cry of surprise and shock, dropping the gun and stumbling backwards as the mug broke and his head began to bleed.

Lois leaped forward and shoved him back as she dove for the gun. Her fingers had almost closed over it when she felt his hands close around the back of her ankle, yanking her backwards just enough that the gun was out of reach. Lois flipped around onto her back and shoved her foot into his face with all the force she had. She heard a sickening crack as her foot made contact with his nose and more blood gushed forwards.

Both of them scrambled to their feet and Lois accidentally kicked the gun even further back with her heel towards the wall near the open window. She backed up further, wanting to be able to turn around and grab the gun, but too afraid to take her eyes off of Lex, who lurched drunkenly towards her, incandescent with rage.

“You'll regret that,” he growled, and Lois backed up another few steps until she felt the curtain sheers gently flutter against her. The window was right behind her and she could see the gun to the left of her, out of the corner of her eye. Lex thankfully hadn't managed to locate it. She knew that the only way she could keep him from finding it was to keep him mad. She could fight him one-on-one if she had to. She'd already managed to wound him, and she merely had to stall for time. She could do this. And part of her wanted to do this. She just needed to keep him from getting the gun until Clark —

Oh no. Kryptonite. He said he had kryptonite. Did he have it on him? She couldn't risk finding out. She had to somehow stop him before Clark got back.

*Taunt him. Distract him. Keep him mad.*

“What's the matter, Lex? Is the honeymoon over?” she taunted, keeping her voice as level as possible. He was facing her now, and still hadn't noticed the gun. She knew if she moved towards it, he would see it too and could potentially get there before her. “Did you really think I was going to come with you? Willingly?”

“You loved me once,” he insisted, though now he didn't sound so sure. She kept eye contact as he inched closer to her. The lower half of his face was stained red with the blood from his nose, and his head wound bled freely. He looked almost demonic and Lois had to remind herself that she knew some martial arts and he was injured. It was as close to a fair fight as she was going to get.

“I never loved you,” Lois replied, spitting the words out as savagely as she could. “I loved Clark. It was always Clark. You were a mistake...an aberration of my sanity.”

“You're lying!” he yelled, this time a bit louder and with a bit less control. He moved a step closer, and she realised that being right up against the open window was her best advantage. “We were happy. We were in love. You've been brainwashed by that...Kent, but you'll love me again. I can *make* you love me.”

“You can't make anyone love you, Lex,” Lois said. She would have felt sad for him, were it not for the fact that he was completely deranged and utterly psychotic. “You've never loved anything or anyone in your life. You don't know how to do anything but control people. But I am done letting you control me. I would rather die than go anywhere with you.”

“I can arrange that,” he hissed, lunging towards her. In his rage, he was clumsy and slow, which gave her the advantage, allowing her the time she needed to leap out of the way, knocking him forwards as she dove to the left where the gun still lay.

She picked it up and rounded on him, only to see that he'd gotten tangled in her curtain sheers. Before she could even process what was happening, he fell backwards,

grabbing onto the sheers as he fell out the window and hurtled down the three-story building head first.

The sound of his body hitting the concrete followed by the screams of passers-by told her everything she needed to know.

Dead. He was dead.

And yet, despite knowing this, she looked anyway. The sight of it almost made her physically sick.

Blood. There was so much blood. She hadn't realised the human body had so much to spill, and yet it did so freely, staining the sidewalk a deep crimson she wasn't sure would ever come out.

She drew back from the window, the gun clattering to the ground as she sank to her knees, dry heaving and retching. The room seemed to spin and she felt herself growing lightheaded, putting her head between her knees as she fought to keep from passing out.

The whoosh of Clark's return sounded oddly far away and she barely noticed as he lifted her into his arms. His face swam in front of her and though he was speaking to her, he sounded as if he were underwater. Eventually, she was able to make out bits and pieces.

"...okay? Lois? Lois..."

"M okay," she managed to say, "but Lex he...he..."

"I know," Clark said, coming more sharply into focus. Her thoughts returned to her and Clark — seeing she was more in control of herself — set her down on the couch. He then made his way over to the phone and picked it up, dialling 911. She barely paid attention to the conversation that followed and didn't even notice as Clark changed out of the suit and into a t-shirt and jeans.

It wasn't until he picked up the gun and gently set it down on the coffee table, that her entire body began to tremble. She hadn't even noticed she was crying until the tears landed on her hands and her vision blurred. He was next to her instantly, pulling her close while she shook softly against him.

"Is he really...?"

"Yeah," Clark replied, and for once she wasn't sure what he was feeling. "I...Superman saw him fall."

"He came in here while you were gone," she sobbed. "He had a gun and he wanted to...but I fought back and then he got caught in the curtains and...and I..."

"You didn't kill him," Clark reassured her. "It was an accident. And I am so glad it was, because if I'd gotten here a moment sooner I might have —"

"No," Lois interrupted, shaking her head through her tears. "You...you wouldn't...you couldn't...you..." She wasn't sure why, but she didn't want to hear him say the words out loud, despite knowing deep down in her gut that they were true. Superman wouldn't kill. It was against his moral code, but Clark where Lex was concerned?

"I'm sorry," he said, sounding on the verge of panic. "I didn't mean to upset you. I just feel so helpless. I wasn't here. He got to you, and I wasn't here. Again."

"Not your fault," she said, shaking her head violently as if to dispel the image of Lex's body from her mind. She couldn't make sense of her emotions. One moment she was feeling the most intense guilt she'd ever felt and the next, she felt so panicked and scared she didn't think she would ever stop shaking. She felt intense relief but also anger. She had no idea which emotion was dominant at any given time and barely noticed as Clark pulled her back into his arms, holding her and murmuring his love as fiercely as he could in an attempt to keep the demons at bay.

She had no idea how much time passed as they sat there. Eventually, a knock at the door shook them both out of their stupor. Clark scanned it and stood up.

"It's Henderson," he told her gently, looking completely helpless. She knew he wanted to answer the door and tell Henderson not to bother them, but she also knew that wasn't possible. Lex Luthor had attacked her and now he was dead. She was going to have to pull herself together and answer some very difficult questions.

"It's okay," she said, grabbing a nearby tissue and attempting to clean her face. "It's okay, I...you can let him in."

\*\*\*

## Chapter 32

Henderson and his men took their time, not leaving Lois' apartment until well after the sun had set. Not once during those several hours that Henderson and the other officers were there, had he treated her like a potential criminal despite the fact that there were no witnesses to say that Lex had fallen and not been pushed out the window. Given her history with Lex Luthor, Lois felt that it would only make sense for her to be considered the prime suspect, but Henderson did not behave as if he believed her to be anyone other than a witness. He simply had his men cordon off the scene, gather evidence and eventually take Lex's body to the morgue.

Clark had, at that point, insisted that one of Henderson's men go with the ambulance and station himself with the body. Given what had happened the last time Lex was thought to be dead, Henderson didn't argue.

Meanwhile, inside the apartment, Lois had sat and told Henderson her story with a sort of numb detachment while his men mapped out the sequence of events using the physical evidence available. They took a few samples of the blood on the carpet from where Lois had hit him, and had confiscated what was left of the wobbly mug along with the gun he'd brought with him. These, Henderson had assured her, would help corroborate her account. Lois was only too happy to cooperate in any way she could and too



exhausted to argue or cause Henderson the usual headaches.

She wondered if her docile behaviour was part of the reason Henderson treated her with such kid gloves. He even offered to put her kettle on, but Clark beat him to it. He'd stayed silent the entire time Lois spoke. To the casual observer, he appeared almost calm. But Lois could see the way he was gripping the couch when he sat or the way he seemed to need to get up every few moments either to get something to drink, make a snack for the officers or some other task she knew could wait.

She knew that he was almost certainly beating himself up for not being there, but she couldn't help but feel damn grateful for that. One of Henderson's men had confirmed to Henderson that Lex's body had kryptonite in his pocket. It had been taken straight to Star Labs to be locked up with the other samples. Knowing that it hadn't been an empty threat had caused her entire body to go cold. She might have lost Clark if he'd been there to try to save her.

No, it was better this way. Eventually, when there were no more questions for Lois to answer, Clark had inquired as to whether Lois was going to be charged with anything. Henderson had shaken his head, and Lois felt tension leave her body she hadn't even realised she'd been holding in.

"We don't see any reason to press charges at this time," Henderson said and Lois couldn't help but notice the gentleness in his voice. "All the evidence checks out so far. We will just need a statement from Superman, as you said he was the one to see Luthor fall, correct?"

"Uh, yeah," Lois replied, cursing herself for mentioning that detail. She'd been flustered and had almost said Clark's name instead. "He had to attend to another rescue, so he couldn't stay, but thankfully Clark arrived home around the same time."

"All the same, since he saw the fall, we'd like to speak with him. I doubt a prosecutor will want to go anywhere near this case if Superman's seal of approval is on it. Will you tell him to come by the station if you see him?"

"Will do," Clark said with a nod. Lois felt slightly nauseous as Henderson motioned to his officers that it was time to leave. He got all the way to the door before turning to look at her once more.

"It's just a formality, Lois," he assured her. "I have no intention of taking this anywhere. You're not a murderer. The only murderer in this scenario got what he deserved. I fully believe that. Goodnight."

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"You didn't kill him," Clark said, shutting the door after Henderson and the other officers had left. He sat down next to her on the couch. "It was an accident. Even Henderson thinks so."

Lois knew he was telling the truth. Academically, she knew. She had gone over the scene in her head and out loud to Henderson over and over in the hours since it had happened. She'd done what she'd had to do and she'd survived. What's more, she'd protected Clark. And, if she was honest with herself, she felt absolutely no sadness or remorse over the fact that Lex was dead. Dead meant he couldn't hurt them anymore. Dead meant that she and Clark could finally be at peace.

And yet, she worried that there was something wrong with her for feeling this way. And, despite the fact that she did feel peace, she also worried she would never get the image out of her head of Lex's body on the pavement cracked and broken with blood pooling around him.

She must have been in her own thoughts for too long because she felt Clark pull her gently against his chest and her legs curled underneath her automatically as she leaned into him.

"Did you hear me?" Clark asked softly, his breath warm against the top of her head. "You didn't kill him."

"I know," was all she could think to say. There was just so much. She no longer felt as if every emotion was swirling through her like a tornado. Rather, it was the opposite. She felt numb and detached — as if everything had happened to a different Lois Lane and she was sitting with Clark watching it all on television. It certainly wouldn't be a family show at this point. A viewer discretion warning would flash across the screen, especially for the death scene.

"Do you..." Clark's voice cracked slightly, and it suddenly occurred to her that he was likely feeling some pretty strong emotions just as hers were numbing. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I..." Lois sat up and looked at him. "I don't know." She looked away feeling somewhat ashamed, though she wasn't sure why. She felt like there was some specific way she should be acting and she was failing. Clark seemed to expect something from her, though what that was she wasn't sure. She mumbled her next words and broke eye contact, staring down at her hands. "I don't know what I want."

"Do you want me to leave?" He spoke hesitantly, but she could hear the fear in his voice. She looked up again and noticed for the first time just how tense he was. His jaw was clenched and he was sitting ramrod straight. Cold fear nestled in her stomach. Did he think she was angry with him? She couldn't bear to think that was the case, and yet he wasn't looking at her at the moment. Was their practice arrangement about to come to an end?

"Of course not!" she exclaimed, reaching out and clapping his hands. A former version of herself would have lashed out, but Lois didn't have it in her to hide anymore.

She'd fight for Clark tooth and nail if she had to. "Why would you ever think that I would want you to go?"

"Because you should!" he blurted out. He stood so quickly, she almost fell off the couch, and he paced for a moment or two the same way he'd done while she recounted the scene to Henderson. "I wasn't here. I let my guard down and you —"

"No!" The ferocity in her voice caused his head to snap up and he watched as she stood up and marched right over to him and took his face in her hands. "You listen to me, Clark Kent. This is the one and only time I am going to say this. I have had a really traumatic day and I am not going to sit here after all of that and listen to you blame yourself for what happened. I'm glad you weren't here. Glad, and... and...relieved and so very very thankful."

"You are?" Clark looked slightly stunned and, for the moment, mollified.

"Of course I am!" she exclaimed, exasperated, and for the first time since Henderson had left, felt a little like her old self. "He had kryptonite on him! He was going to kill you and if he hadn't, then you..."

She trailed off, not wanting to verbalise the worries that still swirled in her head. Would Clark have killed to protect her? She didn't know and she didn't want to know. And now she wouldn't have to. She squared her shoulders and looked Clark in the eye.

"You're so used to saving me, Clark," she felt her voice waver ever so slightly as she spoke. "It's all you've ever done. But tonight, I saved myself. And I saved you and I am damn proud of that, so I'd better not hear another word from you about how you should have been here to protect me. We're partners and we protect each other."

"I'm sorry," he apologised, his shoulders slumping slightly. "You've had...the night from hell and I made this about me. I don't know what I was thinking."

Her heart went out to him instantly. He looked the same way she felt — lost and unsure of what to do next. He folded her into his arms and Lois felt some of the night's tension and numbness slip away as he held her — his heartbeat beating in sync with her own.

"I love you," she murmured into the fabric of his shirt. "And after everything that has happened, the last thing I want is for you to leave. I want you here. Not just for tonight, but for the rest of my life. Don't you know that by now?"

"I do," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "But sometimes I get into my own head. And tonight when I got here and saw his body fall and you on the floor...well, I never knew I could feel like this. So helpless."

"That's how I felt," Lois said, stepping back and looking him in the eyes. He looked at her with such utter devotion that it almost stole her breath away. "Ever since I

almost married Lex, a part of me has felt...helpless. And even though I had you and he was in jail, he still had power over me. He, and every other federal disaster that came before him made me feel as if I would never be capable of a healthy relationship. And it was that part of me...that part that was still afraid that kept us from taking the next step."

"And now?" There was no mistaking the hopefulness in his gorgeous brown eyes.

"I'm ready," she replied knowing as she said it that she meant every word with all her heart. "It's hard to explain, but tonight something changed. He tried to kill me, but he didn't. He couldn't. I'm too strong."

"You are," Clark murmured, gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "And I am so grateful for it...for you."

"There's a lot I need to process," Lois admitted, taking a deep breath. "I still don't know what I'm feeling. But I do know that I need you here with me. And that's a new feeling for me. Need. I used to feel like needing someone was a weakness. And I fought so hard against it, but I..."

She choked back a sob that seemed to bubble up in her chest and he pulled her close immediately, holding her tightly as she rode the wave of emotion that seemed to crash through her.

"I need you too," he whispered between gentle kisses atop her head. "I've needed you from the first moment I saw you. So much it scared me. It still scares me."

"Then we will be scared together," Lois said with a shaky laugh as she wiped her tears away with her sleeve. "So no more talk of you leaving me...got it?"

"I didn't mean forever, I just meant...y'know, tonight," he said quietly, his dark eyes searching hers. "I just thought that maybe you'd want some space."

"If I want space, I'll tell you, I promise," Lois assured him, reaching up to touch his cheek gently. She understood why he was unsure and confused. The woman she'd been before Clark had agreed to stay had pushed him away on more than one occasion. She'd become so used to being hyper-independent, that it hadn't occurred to her to do anything else. "But you were right a week ago when you said that if we wanted to build a life together, I couldn't just run home when things got difficult. You helped me understand that. And after tonight...I don't want to be alone."

"Not alone," he rasped, dipping his head and claiming her lips in a strong, surprisingly fierce kiss. "Never alone."

She surrendered to him immediately, allowing her entire body to be consumed by the feel of his tongue thrusting into her mouth and the strength of his arms as he pulled her flush against his body. She moaned softly and felt that familiar rush of heat that always seemed to be there whenever he touched her...whenever he looked at

her. His kisses quickly became more frantic and Lois couldn't help but be swept up in his urgency...his need. It mirrored her own.

His arms tightened around her ever so slightly, and she felt his hands moving down her body until they clutched her butt. She tried to think, tried to force her brain to concentrate. Was this the right time? Was this the right place? She'd been attacked hours ago and watched her attacker fall to his death and she...

Needed this. Needed this so badly it hurt.

Oh God, he felt good. Tasted so good. She moaned again, this time louder and he gripped her tighter. She created a little bit of space between them partly for her own sanity and partly because she wanted to touch him — *had* to touch him.

She placed her hands against his chest and felt him gasp in between kisses. She ran her fingers lightly down his body as he groaned his own approval. But it wasn't enough. She needed to feel his skin.

Reaching under the fabric of his t-shirt, she felt him twitch as she touched him, and he broke the kiss to let out a soft hiss of appreciation. She continued to rake her fingers down his body, using more force than she normally would, but suddenly feeling an almost visceral need to do so.

She had no idea why, but there was an almost panicked part of her that felt she needed to be as physically close as possible — forcefully and desperately. Whether that was a side effect of Lex's attack, she had no idea, but he didn't seem to mind the near-violent way she touched him. In fact, he appeared to crave it. Perhaps it was because he was invulnerable, but he groaned his appreciation of what she was doing loudly.

"God, Lois, you're killing me," he whispered, his voice husky between kisses. "I can't think straight when you touch me...when you..."

He trailed off as she kissed him again, whimpering into the kiss as she gripped his shoulders and urged him backwards towards the sofa. As their bodies touched again, she remembered once again she wasn't wearing a bra. It was an odd thing — to come to that realisation two times in one night in very different situations. She didn't feel vulnerable or frightened the way she had before. She felt strong and powerful. She felt in control and sure of herself in a way she had never felt before.

They reached the sofa and she pushed gently against his chest, urging him to sit. She pulled away from him once more and her eyes met his lust-filled gaze. His chest heaved as he panted for air, and she knew she was doing the same. Her skin seemed to buzz and she felt anxious when she wasn't touching him or feeling him. Was this a side effect of the attack? This raw, unfiltered and urgent

feeling that seemed to consume her? Or was it just the way he made her feel?

She climbed into his lap, not wanting to answer any questions that might take her away from this moment, this feeling. She kissed his lips and then, shoving her hands under his shirt and gripping him tightly as she gently and then not so gently kissed and grazed his neck with her teeth.

"Oh...oh God, Lois..." Clark panted, "do you think we should...I mean, should we...st...stop?"

There was an incredible heat in his eyes, but there was also a hint of worry. They hadn't talked about this, hadn't discussed it, and if there was a top ten for 'worst times to make love for the first time', doing so after a man has tried to kill you and then plunged to his death had to be top of the list.

"Do you want to stop?" she asked him, wishing his hands were on her, touching her, feeling her skin...oh God, she couldn't think of anything right now except how much she wanted him.

"No," he said, doing the very thing she wanted as his hands reached out to roam up and down her arms as if they had a life of their own. She wasn't even sure he was aware he was touching her. It was as if their mouths and their bodies were having two entirely separate conversations. "Stopping is the last thing I want, but you've been through something really traumatic and —"

"I love that you're checking on me," Lois said, biting back a moan of pleasure at the way his fingers grazed her skin so slightly. Harder. She wanted it harder. "Tonight was...awful. But this...this is...oh, Clark, the way you're making me feel right now...the way you're touching me... I just want more. I want you."

"Are you sure?" he breathed, his eyes darkening as his strokes along her arm became more confident. "I don't want you to regret this...our first time, that is, if you're saying you want me —"

"Yes," Lois panted, "I want you to make love to me. I've never wanted anything more. You make me feel so alive, so needed, so safe. I don't want to think, or worry that this is wrong, because it feels so good. You feel so *good*. So right. I know this isn't the way you pictured our first time, so if you don't want to, I understand —"

"I want to," he growled, gripping her hips and causing her to gasp.

"Then don't stop," she pleaded. "Please, don't stop."

He made a low, almost guttural sound and he reached for her shirt, pulling it swiftly over her head.

She kissed him again — hard. He made a deep noise of encouragement as she reached for his shirt and attempted to lift it off him. It wasn't enough that he was touching her bare skin. She needed to feel his as well. He took pity on

her, and yanked the shirt over his head, tossing it onto the floor. She felt her breath leave her as she always did whenever she saw him shirtless.

“Kiss me, Clark,” she whispered, her voice low and sensual. “Please...”

He obeyed instantly, kissing her with an intensity that surprised her. She cried out at the incredible feelings he evoked and returned the kiss with equal fervour.

She reached down and gently touched his jaw. Summoning all the willpower she possessed, she kissed his lips softly before standing up and taking a step back.

A rush of love and desire flooded through her. He was so beautiful and so very sexy. She still couldn't believe he was hers — that this life was hers. Attacks from deranged psychopaths aside, they had built something incredible, something she never thought she would have and he helped her to believe that she could have it. And for some reason her body stilled. She wanted nothing more than to go to bed with him, but couldn't seem to want to leave this moment — this perfect moment in time.

Clark must have sensed a shift in her emotions. He stood up, but didn't move to progress things further. She wasn't sure why until she felt a tear roll down her cheek. It landed on her hand and she brushed it away as quickly as possible, worried that Clark would want to put the brakes on things if he saw her cry.

“Lois?” he said her name softly, and she could hear the concern in his voice. It only made her want to cry even more, something that puzzled her, as her body simultaneously wanted his touch so badly it almost made her tremble.

“I love you,” she whispered as another tear fell. She didn't know why, but she needed him to know. *Really* know. She needed him to see what was in her heart — wished he could crawl inside of it so he would know just how much better he'd made her world. But all she had were words — three words that felt so inadequate compared to the emotions she was feeling. And a moment — this perfect moment that would never come again.

Something in her eyes must have convinced him she was okay — that she wasn't having a breakdown or re-living any of the trauma of Lex's attack. Her mind couldn't be further from those events. All she could think of was how much she wanted to be in his arms, feeling him touching her, getting lost in his eyes.

“I love you too,” he murmured finally after a moment of silence. “And every time I tell you that it feels like the first time. I get...nervous, but in a good way. I feel my heart pound and my stomach flip over, and when you say it back I feel —”

“I know,” Lois breathed. “I know. I feel the same. And I try to put it into words...how I feel...how you make me

feel, and there just aren't any...at least, none that we can speak.”

“I guess that's why they call this...what we're doing... or about to do or...” he broke off, slightly flustered and Lois felt her heart skip a beat. He still wanted her and she still wanted him — something her body was reminding her of. He took a deep breath. “I guess that's why they call it making love. I don't have to tell you...I can show you. With my lips...my hands...my body.”

His voice deepened and Lois felt her heart begin to race. Before she could say anything, he reached out and pulled her close. She pressed her body against his, and he cupped her face in his hands, kissing her deeply and awakening every nerve ending in her body.

“Talk to me with your body, Clark,” she whispered, taking his hands and placing them on her hips. Heat surged through her. “Show me how you feel.”

“C'mere,” he growled, as he lifted her into his arms and captured her lips in his. He carried her into the bedroom and the kiss deepened. Lois could feel every ounce of his love in the way he looked at her, the way he kissed her, the way he touched her. She knew that no matter what happened, that love would only grow. And somehow that was all she needed to know it would be okay.

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Lois eventually collapsed on top of Clark, feeling every single ounce of energy drain from her body. He gathered her into his arms and placed soft, almost reverential kisses atop her head.

“My God, Lois, that was —”

“I know,” she said, feeling awed and deeply humbled at what had just transpired between them.

She'd been so frightened of becoming intimate with him, afraid of disappointing him the way she'd thought she had disappointed Claude and every other man she'd been with but it was only now in this moment she truly understood. She hadn't disappointed them — they had profoundly disappointed *her*. The way it was between her and Clark was how it should be.

“Thanks for, uh...talking me through it,” Clark said, and though she couldn't see his face, something told her that if he could blush, he would. “I'm not sure I would have lasted without your help.”

“I think you managed just fine without my running commentary,” she said with a small smile. Still holding her, he rolled onto his side, allowing for them to look at one another. “What exactly was it you were thinking of to get yourself back...under control?”

He looked away and ran a hand through his hair. This time it was very clear he was embarrassed, which only made her want to know even more.

“Come on, farmboy, spill,” she teased. “There are no secrets between us now.”

“I, uh, was trying to remember the lyrics to the song ‘Whoomp! There It Is’,” he admitted, refusing to meet her eyes.

“Don’t you hate that song?” she asked with a small chuckle. He nodded, still unable to look at her, which she found even more adorable.

“Yeah, that’s why it helped,” he said with a wry smile. “You were driving me crazy, Lois. Every single moment of it was...I can’t even put it into words.”

She reached out and caressed his cheek, and his eyes met hers. He was smiling at her in a way that made her heart race.

“You drive me crazy all the time,” Lois replied. “Granted, I have never resorted to reciting ‘I’m Too Sexy’ by Right Said Fred in my head, but I might have to start if you keep looking at me the way you are now outside of this room.”

He laughed and leaned in for a soft, lingering kiss.

“We should get cleaned up,” Lois said reluctantly when they parted. She was grateful that they had discussed birth control when they had first gotten engaged so that they hadn’t had to worry about fumbling for a condom during their first time.

Clark nodded and Lois did her best to extricate herself from him, making a quick run to the bathroom and tossing a roll of toilet paper in his direction. Once clean, they didn’t bother to put their pyjamas on. Instead, Clark pulled down the bed covers and climbed into the bed.

Lois made her way back to him and he enveloped her in his arms almost immediately, kissing her and murmuring words of love over and over until she drifted off to sleep.

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### Chapter 33

The room was dark and she was cold. It was night, which confused her. Shouldn’t it be day? She’d thought it was day. Lois looked for the light switch but couldn’t find it. Why wasn’t it there? It had always been there. Frantically, she twisted around, trying to see through the curtain of darkness that was suddenly her apartment. Her furniture wasn’t in the right spot and her window...where was her window?

Before she could process anything, a loud wrenching sound caused her to turn. She tried to scream but no sound came out as her door was flung open and a figure entered cloaked in the same darkness that seemed to be trying to consume her.

Lois couldn’t see his face, but she knew who it was. She had always known. He was in her every nightmare. In every shadow. The root of every part of her fear. And he was here in her living room — her living room that wasn’t

her living room, holding a gun in his hand — the only thing she could see in the inky blackness.

“Did you think you could just kill me Lois?” he asked, his voice silky smooth. This wasn’t the voice of the man who’d panicked and fallen through a window. This was the voice of a man who had nothing to fear. A man holding a gun in a room with no window and no way out. “Did you think it was that easy? I’m here. I’ve always been here.”

“Cl...Cl...” She couldn’t speak. Why couldn’t she speak? She tried to run, but her feet wouldn’t move. They felt weighted down, as if the air itself had mass and was forcing her to be still — rooting her to this spot.

Making her a victim.

“He’s not coming,” Lex hissed. “He’s not coming and there is nowhere for you to go. You can’t even scream. Now close your eyes and say goodbye.”

The glint of the barrel of the gun caused ice cold fear to shoot through her. She opened her mouth and tried to force out a scream — to yell for Clark as loud as she could, but she could only watch, helpless as Lex’s finger started to squeeze the trigger.

Before the bullet could hit her, she felt something close tightly around her, holding her in place. She tried to move, tried to shake it off, but it wouldn’t budge. Her apartment disappeared. She panicked, and this time when she opened her voice to scream, an ear shattering cry erupted.

The arms encircling her — and they were arms — only tightened around her. She thrashed around desperately trying to escape, but the arms held tight.

Seconds felt like hours as she fought and soon she could hear a voice. It sounded both distant and right beside her. It was soothing, calming and familiar.

Clark.

And suddenly she understood. She stopped fighting. She felt her body go limp with relief as she began to wake up. The arms that held her were Clark’s arms, and the voice that spoke to her was his. She’d know that voice anywhere.

Just as that realisation came to her, the words made sense. Lex was gone. She was in her bed. She was safe, and Clark was holding her.

“I’m here, Lois,” he whispered, his voice urging her to believe him...to hear him. “Lois, wake up. Please. Whatever you’re dreaming, it’s not real.”

“I...I’m awake,” she mumbled, opening her eyes as full consciousness returned to her. The blackness was gone, replaced by the light emanating from the lamp on her bedside table.

She found herself lying on her side and Clark encircling her. They were still naked, and the feel of his warm skin pressed against her added a feeling of security that she couldn’t even name.

She rolled over to face him and looked into his worried eyes staring helplessly back at her. Her nightmare had frightened him too, though she suspected that was because a nightmare was not something Superman could fight.

"I was...trapped..." she managed to say, swallowing the tightness in her throat and forcing the tears down that suddenly threatened to spill over.

"Was it..." he hesitated, and Lois wondered if he was afraid to even say the name out loud lest he somehow summon him. "Was it Lex?"

She nodded, not wanting to say the name either. He was dead and yet something inside her warned her that saying his name could somehow bring him back to life. She didn't want to think of Lex while lying naked in Clark's arms. She especially didn't want to tell Clark her dream. Didn't want to relive it or think about it, and yet she felt the words spill from her as hot tears slid down her face and panic filled her chest, threatening to suffocate her once more.

"He was here and the window was gone and you weren't there and he had a gun and I couldn't scream, Clark, I tried and I couldn't move and I couldn't scream."

She shook her head, trying desperately to banish the memory of the dream as well as the memory of the actual event that had spawned it. He *had* been in her apartment and she *had* faced him. But the window had been there too, and Lex had fallen out of it. He was dead. Or he was supposed to be. Why did he feel more alive now than ever?

Words continued to tumble out of her, fast and furious. She wasn't sure she was making any sense and yet she had to say them, had to get them out or they would choke her.

"...said he was here, that he's always been here. Even dead, he's here in my mind. I can't get away, I couldn't escape I...the window was gone and you were gone and I needed you and I couldn't move and —"

Suddenly, his lips were on her, and he was kissing her — fiercely and with a deep sense of desperation that Lois matched. She could feel Clark's fear and the deep, primal need to protect her. His arms wrapped around her and she felt his fingers wind through her hair, his body pressing against hers like a shield. She whimpered against him, as he deepened his kiss, tasting the salt of her tears as they rolled down her face, this kiss in its near wild ferocity about something completely different.

"Safe," he murmured between kisses, "safe. I'm here. You're safe. You're home."

Home.

He was right. She was home, but it had nothing to do with the walls surrounding her and everything to do with the man who held her, and kissed her with a passion and love that she'd never known could be real. He *was* here. He always had been. And even if dream Lex had been

right, that a part of him would always be with her, so too would Clark. He would be here every night to banish the nightmares, to kiss her and chase her demons away.

She pulled back, gasping for air, and pressed her head against his chest, the scent of his body comforting, as she convulsed into sobs once more. She wasn't sure why she was crying now, she only knew that she needed to — that it was the only way to purge all the emotions that ran through her.

Fear. Rage. Weakness. Strength. Love.

Love. She'd hold onto that. Cling to it...to him, when everything else failed.

Clark held her steadfastly in his arms while she rode the tsunami of emotions until she was completely spent. Even then, he continued to kiss her gently and run his hands through her hair and down the small of her back.

"He's gone," he promised her. "Dead. He can't hurt you anymore."

"We thought he was dead before," she hiccupped. "We thought we...I...was safe. And then he was back and —"

"But he's gone now. I promise."

"How can you be sure?" she asked, grabbing for the toilet paper to wipe her tears and face. She could feel the puffiness in her eyes and knew she must look a fright.

"After you fell asleep, I flew by the morgue where they took his body and scanned it. He's dead and his body is securely guarded. I came back just before you started making noises in your sleep. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have let you alone like that. I just needed to be sure."

"Don't be sorry," she said, reaching out and touching his face gently to reassure him. She realised that when he returned, he'd removed his clothing instead of putting his boxers on and climbed back into bed with her. She felt her heart clench slightly at the knowledge that he'd seen her in distress and had held her — skin to skin — to reassure her. "There are times when you're going to need to leave in the middle of the night. I understand, and I am so grateful you checked to...to see..."

"I had to," he replied grimly. "I had to be sure. After last time, I...Lois, I'm scared too."

She wasn't sure why, but somehow knowing that he was just as frightened helped. The bad guy was dead. They'd finally made love. Things were supposed to wrap themselves up into a nice tidy bow. This was supposed to be the happy ending, and yet, Lois knew it wasn't that simple. Things were never that simple.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "for...scaring you and for..." she trailed off, unable to articulate how she was feeling. They'd made love for the first time that night and then this...

“You have nothing to apologise for,” he said. The look in his eyes was fierce and loving. And she knew he had understood what she was feeling, even without the words. “Earlier, when we made love it was perfect. But these feelings are yours and they are real and I’m here.”

“I thought I was okay,” she admitted, feeling ashamed for reasons she couldn’t understand. “I thought...he was gone and that was it. We could move on. A fresh start, but...it’s going to take a while, isn’t it?”

“I think it is,” Clark acknowledged. “And I don’t know how to fight an enemy that isn’t there. I want to take all this pain for you, but I don’t know where to start.”

“Start with this,” she said, taking his hands and wrapping them around her waist. She didn’t think she would ever tire of feeling his hands on her body. “Start by holding me, and never letting me go.”

“Always,” he vowed, kissing her with aching tenderness. “You have me...body, mind and soul.”

She was able to sink back into his arms, feeling the depth of his love covering her, forging her armour, preparing her for the fight ahead.

“Don’t be scared,” she heard him say before she drifted back into sleep. “There’s two of us now.”

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### Chapter 34

Morning dawned, and Lois woke to the feel of Clark’s body behind her, his arms wrapped around her tightly. The memory of both her nightmare and their lovemaking returned to her, and she fought to think of the pleasure of the latter as she listened to Clark’s steady and even breathing. His hands were settled on her hips and his breath felt soft against her neck.

She felt Clark mumble something and tighten his grip on her body. He was waking up, ever so slowly. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the feel of him, the scent of him, the way his weight lent her comfort and gave her strength. Nothing could touch them here, in this place. She was strong on her own, but he made her stronger. Being with him was stronger than her alone.

“Good morning,” she heard him whisper as he gently kissed the back of her neck. She felt a shiver run through her body, and the nightmare evaporated like smoke. She was suddenly very aware of the fact that, though Clark was not completely awake, parts of his body were.

“Good morning,” she replied innocently, arching her back ever so slightly. He gave a quiet groan. “Something wrong?”

“Only that you’re killing me,” he said softly, though she could tell he was enjoying it.

“Should I stop?” she asked, coyly, enjoying the feeling of power she seemed to have over him.

“Do you want to?” His voice was husky.

“Don’t stop,” she begged. “Never stop.”

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Though neither of them particularly wanted to get out of bed, Lois knew there was a possibility that Henderson might have more questions for her about both the attempt on the President’s life and Lex’s death. Clark also had to go into the precinct as Superman and give his statement in order to fully exonerate Lois, which, though Henderson had all but promised was a sure thing, still made her a bit anxious.

It was with this in mind, that they both dressed reluctantly. Despite the morning’s lovemaking, the nightmare she’d had was still with her. Clark made a simple breakfast for the two of them, and Lois marvelled at how much better she’d been eating since he’d started living with her. They ate in silence, both without looking at the window that Lex had fallen out of. She wasn’t sure when she’d feel comfortable opening her curtains again, but she knew she couldn’t keep the window closed forever, given Clark’s need to fly in and out for Superman rescues.

She did the dishes and chewed on that thought for a bit as Clark called the newsroom. She could hear half the conversation as he did so and from the sounds of it, Perry had been informed via Henderson about what had happened. Lois couldn’t help but think that telling Perry about Lex’s attack wasn’t strictly necessary to the case and wondered idly if he’d done it for her so Lois wouldn’t have to.

When Clark hung up and headed back into the kitchen, she had just finished drying the dishes and putting them away.

“Perry says to take our time,” Clark told her. “He even understands if we can’t make it in at all.”

“I have to go in,” Lois replied, biting her lip and sneaking another glance at the window. “I don’t think I could stay here and look at —”

“I know,” he admitted, rubbing her shoulders absently. “Do you want to stay at my place for a few days? Or however long it takes to...”

He trailed off and Lois understood why. What could he say that wouldn’t sound clichéd or ridiculous? Until she ‘got over it’? Until she forgot? She shook her head.

“I have to face this,” she said, her entire body feeling heavy. “I can’t hide at your place, or in my room. But at the same time, I don’t...”

She looked down, and tried to stop her hands from shaking.

“Don’t what?” Clark asked. Lois’ throat felt tight and she had trouble swallowing as she turned around and looked up at him.

“I don’t want to see the sidewalk where he...where he fell.” She drew a shaky breath. “Do you think Superman

could fly me to work before he goes to give his statement to Henderson?"

"Of course," Clark replied, and Lois' heart was instantly lighter for it. She knew she hadn't killed Lex, but she also knew that if it meant her life or his, she had been willing to. That knowledge combined with the site where he'd fallen made her heart race with anxiety. She would look eventually. She had to. But not now.

"We should get going," she said softly, still staring into his deep brown eyes. They were full of concern as well as love. She knew it was likely eating him up inside not being able to *do* something or fix things because that was his way. But some things couldn't be fixed. At least not right away.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay at my place for a few days?" he asked, gently cupping her cheek with his hand. She instantly wanted to forget the world and just get lost in the depths of those brown eyes. "It's not running away, Lois."

She shook her head, and stepped back away from him, breaking the spell and brushing away a stray tear that had escaped down her face. She wasn't sure why, but his worry as well as the tenderness in his expression made her want to cry.

"I don't know what I want," she finally admitted. "I know that I don't want to see that sidewalk every day or look out that window or..." she trailed off and took a deep breath trying to steady herself. "But a wise reporter once told me that I can't run away to your place whenever things get difficult."

"I wish I'd never said that," he muttered as he ran a hand through his hair. A flash of anger shot through his eyes but she knew it wasn't directed towards her. "I didn't mean —"

"I know you didn't," she assured him. "I know."

And then it dawned on her. Something that had been hovering in the back of her mind for a while now. Something she'd been thinking about ever since she'd seen him at his parent's farm. This wasn't his home, anymore than his apartment was hers. He could live here — and would do so quite happily if she asked him, but it would never truly be theirs, and she wanted that.

Her apartment was full of so many memories of her life before Clark. She'd moved in straight out of college when she'd first started working at the *Planet*. She'd been dead broke for the first few years, sometimes surviving on nothing but minute rice, but she'd done it. She'd made it. She'd built a home for herself, and it had been a good home.

But it was hers. Filled with memories of a life that didn't involve him. She wanted the two of them to find something that wasn't already filled with memories — a

blank canvas that they could decorate with their life together and fill with a whole new life. She wanted it now more than anything and not just because it meant not staring at that window every day or the sidewalk below.

"I just...don't know what to do," Clark said helplessly. This time she reached out and touched his face, bringing him closer for a long, deep kiss.

"I know what to do," she told him breathlessly after they parted. "Move in with me."

"I thought..." he looked confused. "Isn't that what we're already doing?"

"I don't want you to live in my apartment," she told him. "And I don't want to live in yours. Those were both spaces for two people that don't exist anymore. I want to find a place with you. A new place. One that we can grow old together and maybe even...maybe even one day start a family together."

"You...you mean that?" Clark looked so hopeful, it would have been comical had it not also been so heart wrenchingly sweet. "We've never talked about kids..."

"I know," she said with a sigh. "There were lots of things that I was afraid to talk about. Afraid to think about. I was so convinced that even allowing myself to have this, that wanting more would somehow ruin it. And while I admit that the idea of being a parent scares me to death, it's a fear I will gladly confront if it means I get to do it with you. What do you say? Will you live with me in a place we choose together? No more practice."

"A thousand times yes," he murmured, leaning down and kissing her with aching gentleness. "I am so in awe of you, do you know that?"

"And I am in love with you," she said with a soft laugh. "I can't wait to look for houses together. In the meantime you should probably..."

She made the spinning gesture and he immediately did so, scooping her into his arms. The familiar rush that always filled her whenever he held her took hold, and she wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her into the sky. She knew not to look down. There was nothing for her there.

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### Chapter 35

Clark dropped her off at the *Planet* before flying to the precinct to talk to Henderson. He promised to return the moment Superman was done giving his statement. She could tell he was worried for her, but Lois always felt at home when she was at the *Planet*. Something about the chaotic din and frenzied pace soothed her. She assured Clark she was exactly where she needed to be, then got onto the elevator.

The moment the doors opened and she stepped out, the noise level dropped considerably. She had expected that. Though the full explanation of what had happened with the



President had yet to be published the rumour machine was alive and well and add that to the fact that TV news had been reporting on Lex's death outside her apartment and... well, Lois had assumed she'd be the centre of attention.

She lifted her chin and tried to ignore the curious stares as she headed over to her desk. As she did so, she noticed that Claude was already there. She hadn't been sure when he would return to France, and she knew she would have to be in touch with him in order to turn over control of Dupont Airlines to his family, but she was fairly surprised to see him in the newsroom. He looked as if he was waiting for her, and her heart sank.

Among other things, she'd intended to have a talk with Perry and explain that Claude had stolen her story today. Though she knew that would mean Perry contacting Claude, she had hoped it would be via a phone call. She felt weary in a way that had nothing to do with lack of sleep and everything to do with the fact that, dead or alive, the federal disasters of her past had worn out their welcome.

"I...wasn't sure you'd be coming in," Claude said when she reached her desk. "I hoped you would, but I didn't know if...well, I heard what happened."

"Hello, Claude," Lois replied, unable to hide the exhaustion in her voice. She knew he was trying to be kind, but she had neither the energy nor the emotional bandwidth to deal with it. "Do you mind moving over? I need to start typing up the story on the President before the Metropolis Star scoops us."

"They can't, though," Claude said. "I mean, not really. They don't have half the inside information we do...you do, I mean. Anything they print will be mostly speculation and rumour."

He was right, and Lois knew it, but she still felt compelled to get to work. She hadn't seen Perry yet, and was hoping that when she did, Claude would have taken the hint and left.

"I appreciate that," she said, trying to stay polite, "but I still need to write it. Is there something you could be helping Jimmy with?"

"Not really," he admitted. He looked a bit nervous. "I'll be honest, my flight home leaves in a week. I wanted to stay and help with whatever financial matters needed to be worked out with the purchase of my company's shares...if you're still planning to buy it back, that is."

"I am," Lois replied coolly, "but you really don't need to be here for that. I intend to contact my lawyer today and let him know that he can come back to Metropolis. Once he does, I will sign whatever he needs me to, and then he will take it from there."

"I understand," Claude replied sheepishly. "I realised there is not much for me to do here, but I'm rather at loose

ends. I thought...well, I know you'll be telling Mr. White about the story I stole, and I know that he will want to talk to me and I guess I just wanted to make it easier on everyone by being here...and being accountable."

"I...thank you," Lois said, not knowing how else to respond. "I appreciate that."

"I'll get out of your hair for now," he offered as he stood up. "I am going to borrow a desk and type up my resignation from my newspaper. I plan to uphold my end of things. I want to be better."

"You...you can use Clark's desk," Lois said, unable to believe the words that were coming out of her mouth. "Until he gets back that is."

Claude nodded and headed over to Clark's desk. Lois gave a soft sigh of relief. She hadn't expected Claude to be so agreeable about her demand that he quit his job, and wondered briefly if doing so under these conditions was somewhat of a relief to him. It also made her realise that she hadn't known him very well at all. Not even close. She knew what Clark was thinking or feeling simply by looking at him. A smile, a gesture, even the tone of voice that he used conveyed more to her than any conversation she'd ever had with Claude.

All those months she'd spent working with him, looking up to him, idolising and thinking she was falling in love with him...it had all been so surface level it was unreal. Sleeping with Claude had been a disappointment both physically and spiritually. She hadn't ever communicated with him or any man she'd been with the way she had with Clark. The act had been there, but that was it.

And now that she knew what she'd been missing, she knew it was worth it. She'd taken the hard route, but it was worth all the pain and heartache. Because when Clark touched her, it was real. When she told him what she liked, he listened. And the way he made her feel was both explosive and peaceful.

She focused her attention back on the story, determined to get some work done before Clark returned. She wasn't going to write all of it, of course. After all, Clark had done just as much work on the story and would share the byline. However, she decided to get the boring job of organising all the facts and quotes in the meantime.

Time seemed to slip by and before Lois knew it, the familiar touch of Clark's hand on her shoulder told her he had returned. He pulled up a chair and she saved her work, then turned to him.

"How did it go?" She tried to keep the hint of anxiety out of her voice, but couldn't have been very successful because he reached out and squeezed her hand gently.

"Henderson told me the police will officially be ruling Lex Luthor's death an accident during an attempted

murder. No charges will be filed. He said there isn't a jury in the world that would prosecute you at this point."

"Oh," she said, suddenly feeling rather lightheaded. Clark gripped her hand a bit tighter and she took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I'm glad. I know he'd said last night that it would most likely be ruled an accident but..."

"I know," Clark replied. "I think Henderson noticed that even Superman seemed a bit on edge when he gave his statement. But it's over."

Over. As in finished. Did he really believe that? Sure, she hadn't killed Lex, but did it really matter that she wasn't technically responsible? She felt responsible regardless. And something about that distinction wouldn't let her fully relax.

"It isn't though," Lois said softly. "Over, I mean. I'm not sure it will be for a very long time. The fact that I didn't personally push him from the window doesn't mean I don't feel as if I did."

"Lois —"

"And I'm relieved! Relieved!" she interrupted, feeling the panic rising in her chest threatening to spill over. "And I don't know what to do with that. I mean, I'm basically glad a man is dead and glad that my actions sort of lead to his death!"

"Lois —"

"What does that make me? *Who* does that make me?"

"Honey —"

"And if he was trying to kill me, should I even care? Should I just be glad he's gone and wash my hands of it? I want to, but I keep seeing him fall out that window when I close my eyes and —"

The feel of his lips on hers, kissing her deeply stole her voice from her. She melted into the kiss without a second thought, allowing the memory of what they had done that morning and the feeling of his tongue dancing with hers drive the panic from her mind. She pushed her thoughts aside and allowed her body to take over, and her body only wanted one thing: Clark.

Eventually, they parted and Lois fought to regain her senses. She cast a surreptitious look around the office, but nobody was paying attention to them. Either they were used to the sight of the two of them kissing at work, or they hadn't seen it.

Lois was surprised to find herself relieved. She wasn't normally self-conscious about displays of affection at work. Though not strictly professional, Perry never seemed to have an issue with it, but this time it was different. This was the morning after. Surely if others had seen that kiss, they would know. She couldn't explain it, but they would know. The kiss felt different — the way Clark looked at her was different. There was a sureness to him now that

wasn't there before — a confidence with her body that hadn't been there before they'd made love. And that look in his eyes...Lois shivered.

"Oh, Clark, this is all so overwhelming," she admitted with a shaky breath. "Every time you look at me, I think of this morning and last night and how good you made me feel, but then...somehow it's mixed up with the attack and the fall and I don't know how to feel. I feel guilty that you make me feel so good and —"

"I know," he said, gently touching his forehead to hers. She closed her eyes and drew a long deep breath, allowing the feel of her hands in his and his physical presence to calm her. "But you have nothing to feel guilty about. And whether it's right or wrong, when I think about what could have happened...well, I know it's not very 'Superman' of me, but, I'm not sorry. He got what he deserved."

Hearing Clark say that made something inside her unclench. She knew she would have to unpack her feelings about Lex's death, but she also knew that he wouldn't judge her for them, and though Clark was also Superman, she knew he wasn't perfect or above complicated feelings. Human or Kryptonian, there was no easy way forward. But, he was here. Lex was gone. She wasn't going to be charged in connection with his death. And they had made love for the first time. There were things in her life worth celebrating. It was going to be okay.

"Thank you," she finally managed to say. "I don't know why, but I needed to hear that."

"There's no one way you have to feel here," Clark reminded her. "It's not as if there's a 'how to deal with seeing your psychopathic ex-fiance fall from your window the night he tried to kill you' book in the lifestyle section."

"True," Lois replied with a sigh. "All the same, I think I will book an appointment with Dr. Friskin for next week. After I talk to Perry, that is. Have you seen him?"

"He was downstairs getting lunch a few minutes ago but he's back in his office now," Clark told her. He studied her quietly for a moment and then said, "You don't have to tell him about the story Claude stole today, you know. It can wait."

"I know," Lois said as she took a deep steadying breath. "But I need to do this sooner rather than later or I never will. It's been weighing me down for too long."

"Do you want me to come in with you?" Clark wondered. She shook her head.

"I love you for offering, but I think this is something I need to do alone." Clark nodded, and although Lois knew that he wanted to be by her side to offer support, he would respect her wishes. "Could you...wait out here for me though? Barring any Superman rescues, of course."

"Absolutely," he promised, placing a featherlight kiss on her cheek that caused her pulse to quicken again. "I'll

look over the notes you made while you're there if you want. We can write it together when you're done."

She nodded, squeezed his hand and walked across the newsroom to Perry's office. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Claude's gaze following her. He obviously knew what she was about to do. She tried not to let that influence her thoughts as she walked into Perry's office.

Perry, more than used to her barging into his office without knocking, barely spared her a glance. He was too busy picking his sandwich from the deli apart and muttering angrily to himself.

"Why is it so blasted difficult to remember that I said no tomatoes?" he grouched.

"You ordered a BLT, Chief," Lois reminded him gently, trying to stifle a smile. He did this every week.

"Well I'd order a BL, but nobody seems to know what that means," he grumbled. "There somethin' I can help you with, darlin', or are you just here to argue sandwich semantics?"

"I was hoping to talk to you," Lois said, feeling nervous and hesitant. Perry noticed it too because she saw him sit up and set the sandwich aside to give her his full attention. She paused and turned to close the door to his office before she faced him again. "It's about...Claude. Well, Claude and the story he won the Kerth award for."

"What about it?" Perry asked, his eyes narrowing the way they usually did when he knew something smelled fishy.

"He didn't write it," Lois replied, letting out a breath as she metaphorically ripped the band-aid off. "I did. He stole it from me and passed it off as his own. And I...I let him get away with it all these years."

A moment of torturous silence passed between her and Perry before she watched him drag his hand over his face, shaking his head softly.

"Judas Priest," he muttered to himself. Then, looking her directly in the eye, he said, "I think you'd better tell me everything."

"You..." she hesitated. "You believe me?" She'd thought he would. She'd expected him to. And yet somehow, she needed to hear him say the words for it to be real.

"Well, of course, I believe you," Perry said, sounding slightly incredulous. "You're the best damn reporter I've ever worked with, and beyond that you're...well, you're like family to me, honey. I know you wouldn't lie...not about something like this. Now pull up a chair and tell me how this happened."

"I..." Lois felt the tension melt from her shoulders as she took a seat, her legs feeling slightly shaky and her emotions threatening to betray her. "I don't know where to start."

"Start at the beginning," Perry urged. "And then work your way up to the part where I go out there and hang that good for nothin' rat Dupont upside down by his toenails and shake him for loose change."

Lois suppressed a smile as well as a swell of gratitude at Perry's reaction. To have him not only believe her but get that angry on her behalf meant the world. Still, she wasn't through with this yet, and she owed it to herself and to Perry to explain what happened and why she hadn't come forward at the time.

In a halting voice, she recounted the events that led up to Claude stealing her story to Perry, sparing no details. It was difficult, as she was tempted many times to hide the more embarrassing aspects of it, such as how she was drawn in by him, lied to and then of course how he had managed to access her story when she was in such a vulnerable state.

Perry thankfully said nothing. He sat and patiently listened until she was finished, which was a relief. When it was clear there was no more to tell, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully and gave her a sad smile.

"I am so sorry, Lois," he finally said. Something about his posture and bearing seemed to change. It was as if he aged ten years in an instant, looking extremely weary. "I should have spotted it. Old newshound like myself...ha! Some Editor in Chief I turned out to be."

"You can't blame yourself, Perry!" Lois exclaimed in surprise. "Claude was...well, he was older and charming and...so very convincing! Sometimes we see the things we want to see in people, regardless of whether or not that is the face they are really showing us. It's not our fault. I'm only just starting to learn that."

"I hear you, Lois, but I..." Perry shook his head. "Aw, hell, I guess I just feel bad. I didn't protect you then, but I can now. I can make it right, now. If you want me to, that is."

"If you're asking me what I think you're asking, then yes," Lois said. She'd anticipated this part of the conversation. She knew that if Perry believed her, he would want to make it right. "I would like you to alert the Kerth Award committee."

Perry nodded, and Lois knew he'd known what her answer would be.

"Now, it's not gonna be easy," he warned her. "I believe you...course I do, but an accusation like this...well, they're gonna want to investigate, and without proof, it's your word against his. I'm only tellin' you this now because they might want to question you both and —"

"Claude is willing to go on record and admit he stole the story," Lois interrupted. She knew what Perry was trying to say, and if it weren't for the fact that she'd already spoken to Claude, she would have appreciated his

not-so-subtle attempt at caution. But the warning wasn't necessary. She knew that while she had his unconditional trust, in the eyes of an awards committee, even a three-time Kerth-Award-winning reporter would be held up to immense scrutiny — especially when that reporter also happened to be a woman.

“Oh!” Perry sounded surprised, but also relieved. “Well, then that changes things. I'll uh...give the committee a call. Right after you send that low down dirty son of a —”

“Chief —” Lois warned. Perry gave a small huff, stood up and walked over to the door.

“Fine. Send Dupont in here please. I just wanna have a polite chat.”

Lois nodded and stood up. She meant to walk out the door that Perry had opened, but instead, she found herself overcome with affection for her boss, giving him an impulsive and swift hug. The soft ‘oof’ of surprise from Perry told her he hadn't been expecting it either. When she stepped back, he cleared his throat and looked away.

“Thanks, Perry,” she said quietly.

“Don't thank me yet, darlin' ,” Perry said gruffly. “Now go on and get that lyin' creep...er, Claude and send him on in here.”

Lois smiled. A small part of her was tempted to tell Perry to go easy on him, given that he had already agreed to back her up. She fought the impulse.

“Give him hell, Chief.”

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## Chapter 36

It turned out that Lois didn't need to give Claude the message. He'd been watching as she'd gone in and come out of Perry's office and had gotten up immediately after she left. As they passed one another, he gave her a pained grimace.

“On a scale of one to ‘should I be planning my funeral’, how bad is this going to be?”

“Do you have a will?” Lois shot back. Claude sighed, shook his head and kept walking. When she made it back to her desk where Clark was still waiting, she sat down, gave him a tight smile and turned her attention back to their story.

She began typing, but stopped when she noticed that Clark wasn't focused on the computer. Instead, he was staring at Perry's closed office door with a strangely triumphant smile on his face. Lois felt her jaw drop and gasped in surprise.

“Clark, are you —?”

“Listening in on Perry's conversation with Claude?” Clark said with an unapologetic grin. “Absolutely. You said I couldn't hit him, but I'm not going to miss this.”

Lois gaped for a moment and then poked him gently in the side.

“Well? What's Perry saying?”

Clark reached for her hand and relayed the long and very angry rant that Perry was currently delivering to Claude, word for word. Lois was amused to find that Perry had managed to work an Elvis story into his lecture before calling Claude a few of the names he'd almost used when she was in the office and telling him to get the hell out. Though her anger had long since faded, there was a piece of her that felt both vindicated and touched to know just how deeply Perry cared.

When Claude exited the office, head down looking utterly defeated, Clark turned to her and kissed her, a boyish smile on his face.

“Enjoyed that, did you?” Lois asked wryly. He nodded.

“Better than cable.”

“Well, I'm glad you've gotten that out of your system, Mr. Maturity,” she teased, though inside her heart was beyond full. “Now, if you're done abusing your powers, we have work to do.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he said innocently as he turned his attention back to the computer. He pointed at the screen and grinned. “That's not how you spell ‘alleged’, by the way.”

She resisted the urge to playfully hit his shoulder, and then realised that for the first time since Claude had shown up, things felt almost normal. She and Clark were here together, and they were bantering. It felt good. No, it felt better than good.

She couldn't pretend that she understood this emotional rollercoaster she was on, but she was finally starting to realise that she couldn't control it, and that was okay. One moment she might feel the way she did right now — that things were okay — and the next...well, the next she might remember the way the crimson blood stain covered the pavement after Lex's fall — and it was in those moments she knew she would have to hold onto Clark. She would need to trust him with the most vulnerable parts of herself, and that was no longer terrifying.

It was freeing.

She looked back at Clark and gave him a mischievous smile — the one she knew usually drove him crazy and bit her lip. She leaned forward.

“You keep editing my copy, and I'll —”

“You'll what?” he challenged, eyes twinkling and his face only inches from hers. Suddenly, it felt as if the floor had dropped out from under her. Her pulse sped up and she found herself being drawn into him, the way she always did when he looked at her with such raw longing.

“Don't push me, Kent,” she breathed, “you are way out of your league.” She could see Clark gulp and his eyes darken with anticipation and marvelled at the way one simple phrase could be used so very differently. He

obviously recognised the words she'd said to him the first day they'd met as well because he twined her fingers through his and leaned in, giving her the gentlest kiss on the cheek while he whispered in her ear.

"You like to be on top. Got it."

She shivered and closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than to be back in the safety of her bedroom with Clark next to her, clothing optional. But they had a story to finish and imagining all the things she wanted him to do to her was extremely distracting.

But such an enjoyable distraction.

She bit her lip and reluctantly pulled away.

"Later," she said under her breath in a tone low enough that only he could hear. "We finish this now, and we can explore any position you want."

He groaned softly and she could see him grip the desk just a little bit tighter.

"You're killing me," he said hoarsely.

"Good," she replied with a somewhat wicked grin.

"Now, which of these headlines should we pick?"

Clark very reluctantly forced his attention back to work, and they spent an hour writing up the story, checking sources, organising quotes and getting everything ready to print. They were just putting the finishing touches on it, when Perry left his office and strode purposefully over to Lois' desk. She noticed as he approached that Claude had either left or made himself scarce, and smiled in amusement.

"I just spoke with the Kerth Committee," he told her. "Claude has to provide them with a written statement saying he stole the story from you and that it was your original work. Once he does that, a retraction on his award will be printed in the *Planet*, and the Kerth will be sent to you in the mail."

Lois suddenly found herself at a complete loss for words. She'd been hoping for this, but hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. She hadn't even thought it mattered all that much to her whether she had the actual award. She'd told herself it had been more about ensuring that the truth was known in general, but also where Perry was concerned. She hadn't really thought much beyond that. Even though Claude was willing to give a statement, she hadn't thought about whether it mattered to her to have the award on her shelf.

And now, as she searched her feelings she found it did matter. It mattered a whole damn lot. That Kerth was more than just an award; it was a symbol of the woman she had become and the battles it had taken to get her there.

"Lois, honey, you okay?"

She swallowed tightly and nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Clark reached out and rubbed her shoulder reassuringly.

"I think she's just a little overwhelmed, Chief," he said. She nodded and fought to regain control of her emotions before speaking.

"Thank you, Perry," she finally said. "I can't tell you what it means to me."

"Aw, don't thank me," Perry said with an embarrassed wave of his hand. "Besides, it looks good to marketing if we can say that the *Planet* has a four-time Kerth award winner on staff. Five if you count Kent here."

Lois shot Clark a grin. She didn't for a second believe that Perry cared about how the extra Kerth looked for marketing.

Perry cleared his throat. "How's that story on the President coming along, by the way?"

"We're mostly done," Clark replied. "Just putting the finishing touches on it."

"Good," Perry nodded. "Then I want you both to go home and don't come back until Wednesday. I mean it. You were attacked last night and you've earned yourself a long weekend at the very least and I won't hear no for an answer."

"We can't take four days off, Perry!" Lois exclaimed. "We still have to write the follow up on the assassination attempt!"

"Follow up?" Perry gave her a sharp look and Lois took a deep breath. She'd already anticipated Perry's objection to her writing the Lex Luthor piece. Clark looked at her in surprise as well.

"Well, the rules do say that we have exclusive rights to the follow up," Lois reasoned, "and I do have a firsthand account of Lex Luthor's...escape, so I thought —"

"Firsthand account?" Perry exclaimed. "That's putting it mildly! Hells bells, darlin', the man tried to kill you! You can't write the story. You *were* the story. You know darn well it's a conflict of interest."

"But Chief —"

"Lois, he's right," Clark cut in. She whirled on him, eyes flashing fire at his betrayal.

"Et tu, Brute?"

"I'm serious," Clark said patiently. "Think about it. The police *questioned* you. Even though they declined to press charges, if you wrote...if *we*...wrote the piece there would always be questions about the paper's integrity. I think someone else has to handle this one, and I think you know that."

She did. Damn him, she did. Deep down, she wasn't sure she even *wanted* to write it, but a major story was a major story, and fighting to be front and centre was so ingrained as to almost be instinctive. Still, Lois wasn't used to going down without a fight.

"If not us, then who?" she asked.

“Lois, you’re not the only good reporter at this paper,” Perry reminded her with mild amusement. “But it is a good question. Stevens is on assignment, and Jackson is off sick. I could assign it to Bates, but —”

“What about Jimmy?” Lois blurted out. Both Clark and Perry looked at her in surprise. She hadn’t meant to make the suggestion, but once the words were out of her mouth, she was surprised at how right they felt. Jimmy had worked hard with them for the story on the President. He’d been there every step of the way, and beyond that, she knew how hard he’d been working to be taken seriously as a potential reporter. She also knew how hard it was to advocate for yourself when you’re young and inexperienced. She couldn’t go back in time and change her own past, but she could give Jimmy the hand up she’d never had.

“Jimmy?” Perry said sceptically. “Now don’t get me wrong, the kid has promise, but this is a big story and —”

“He’s never going to be ready if you don’t give him a chance,” Lois pushed. “You of all people know we have to start somewhere. All I needed was someone to believe in me...to give me that big story. That’s all Jimmy needs too. I think he can do it.”

“Plus, he did all the research for the piece on the assassination attempt,” Clark chimed in. Lois was relieved that he was in agreement with her. “He knows that story inside and out. I think Lois is right.”

“Fine,” Perry grumbled. “But that means you two go home. I don’t want to see hide nor hair of either of you until Wednesday, comprende?”

“But Perry —”

“I mean it, Lois,” he repeated, his voice a bit gentler, but no less insistent. “You’ve been through a lot. Both of you. Once that story of yours is on my desk, I want to see tail lights.”

“Got it, Chief,” Clark replied.

Perry nodded, satisfied, and gave her shoulder a light squeeze before heading back to his office. Lois sighed.

“We can go back to my apartment,” Clark suggested, as if reading her mind. It wasn’t as if she didn’t want to spend four uninterrupted days with Clark — far from it. They’d just made love for the first time. Under any other circumstances, she’d be jumping at the chance to spend four days in bed with Clark, but it also meant returning to her apartment. “We can use the time to call your friend Steven and put things in motion for Lex’s money and maybe...look at housing listings to search for a place of our own?”

Lois raised an eyebrow.

“That’s awfully ambitious of you, considering what I was thinking we would spend the next four days doing.”

She reached under the desk and gave his thigh an insistent squeeze. The result was Clark banging his knee against the desk in surprise.

“Lo-is,” he protested, his jaw set tightly in concentration. “You know I can’t think clearly when you put images like that in my head!”

“What images?” She batted her eyes, feigning innocence — something that only caused Clark’s expression to darken in a way that let Lois know exactly what he was thinking. She shivered as he leaned forward. Maybe this hadn’t been the best game to play in the newsroom.

“Images of you...from this morning.”

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to picture it, allowing a soft moan only he could hear to escape her. He ran his fingers lightly down her arm, causing the heat that had started to build to intensify. She moved her hand slightly further up his thigh in return, and he made a slightly strangled noise.

“Now that is a good image,” Lois acknowledged softly, “but not as good as the one I had in mind.” She leaned over and whispered in explicit detail what she wanted to do to him.

“It’s like that, it is?” Clark almost growled. “You’re going to make sure I never leave this desk with that kind of talk. Besides, I wasn’t finished.”

“Oh?” She quirked an eyebrow at him and he swallowed tightly. She moved her hand even further up his leg until she’d almost reached his inner thigh. If she moved it any further, things might look suspicious and they both knew it.

“Hey, CK, hey, Lois!” Jimmy called as he approached. As if caught in the act itself, she wrenched her arm backwards from Clark’s leg and banged it hard on the desk. She swore under her breath, both because of the pain and because of Jimmy’s ill-timed interruption.

His voice, though cheerful, ripped through Lois’ mind, destroying the incredibly erotic fantasy she’d conjured up and causing her to grit her teeth. She looked up and tried to force her breathing to return to normal. Clark looked similarly frustrated and had a far worse poker face than she did. Thankfully, Jimmy seemed blissfully oblivious, pulling a chair up and sitting down as he ran a hand excitedly through his naturally floppy hair. “I just spoke to the Chief! He told me that you guys suggested I write the Luthor story and I just wanted to come over and thank you.”

“It’s no problem, Jimmy,” Lois replied, shooting a resigned but frustrated look back at her partner. He shared the look but gave Jimmy a smile nonetheless. “You worked hard and you deserved it.”

"I know, but..." Jimmy seemed at a loss for words. He looked at Lois seriously. "This is huge. First there's the story itself and then there's...well, I know what a story like this will mean for you...for both of you. And I understand if you were just being nice and all. If you wanted to give something like this to a more experienced writer, I would totally understand. I know what Luthor did to you and I —"

Lois reached out and grabbed Jimmy's hand, something that seemed to surprise him. The fantasy flew out of her mind as the reality of the moment pressed upon her. She found herself equally surprised not just by her actions, but by how strongly she felt about Jimmy being the one to write the story.

"That's exactly why I...why we wanted you to write it. You know. You did the research. You put in the time. You did everything a good reporter is supposed to do. You've earned this story, and there is nobody else in this newsroom other than Clark that I would trust to tell it properly."

"But I —"

"Lois is right," Clark said quietly. "You've more than earned this." Jimmy looked as if he wanted to argue further, but thought better of it. He stood up and nodded.

"Can I ask you guys for help if I need it?"

"Normally, I would say yes, but Perry has exiled us from the newsroom for the next four days," Lois replied, shooting Clark a meaningful look. "But we trust you, Jimmy and we believe in you."

"Oh...wow. Thanks," Jimmy said, sounding slightly awed. "You don't know what it means to hear you say that. I won't let you down, I promise."

Lois nodded. "I know."

Jimmy gave them a lopsided half smile and turned to go.

"Hey Jimmy," Clark said, causing Jimmy to turn halfway back to his work station — an area he shared with other researchers. "You can use the computer at my desk while we're gone if you need to."

Jimmy's eyes lit up as if it were Christmas and he grinned.

"Whoa, thanks, CK!"

Lois watched him go and felt a small tug of nostalgia as she did so. Jimmy wasn't all that much younger than she and Clark and yet somehow his youthful exuberance felt like a lifetime ago. And while a small part of her envied that feeling of just starting out and standing on that big precipice of job and career, she wouldn't go back. Not for anything.

Every choice, both good and bad, had led her here — to her job, her friends and to Clark. She glanced at Clark

out of the corner of her eye and saw him gazing at her intently.

She looked back at him and grinned. "What are you thinking about?"

"Whether we're ready to hand in the assassination piece and get out of here," he replied, his voice low and quiet sending shivers up her spine.

"There might be the odd spelling mistake or two," Lois admitted, feeling suddenly breathless. The look he was giving her had to be illegal, and she found herself wondering if everyone else could see the way his every intention seemed to be written all over his face. "Do you... want to edit my copy?"

*Did that sound dirty? Oh God, somehow she'd made it sound dirty!*

"Perry's an editor right?" Clark said as he stood up, took her hand and pulled her to her feet, leaning close to her ear where he spoke in a quiet rasp. "He can handle it. Come back to my apartment. I need to touch you."

She swallowed heavily, grabbed her coat and allowed him to lead her out of the newsroom, heart beating wildly as erotic scenes played on repeat in her mind.

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### Chapter 37

They'd barely made it through the door of Clark's apartment before his lips and hands were on her. She responded with equal fervour, grabbing him by the tie and pulling him towards his living room.

In the haze of passion, she forgot about the steps in his apartment and found herself falling backwards only to be caught by him as he floated the two of them down the stairs and pulled her flush against his body once more.

His tongue swept her mouth, teasing hers in a way that drove her crazy.

"I...think...I'm...addicted...to...kissing...you." He spoke breathlessly in between, as his hands cupped her face and hers busied themselves with undoing the buttons of his shirt.

He felt so good. Everything about this felt so good. It was the strangest feeling — a feeling of intensity mixed with safety. She trusted him with every cell in her body and yet she'd never felt so alive — so frantic for his touch.

They clumsily started to make their way back towards his bedroom, while Lois' fingers still struggled with his shirt buttons.

"Just rip it," he growled as he began kissing his way down her neck.

She hesitated and then did as he suggested, ripping the shirt open to reveal the familiar blue suit underneath. They'd flown high above the clouds on the way back to the apartment for a number of reasons — some to do with his present state of arousal — but in doing so, it meant he

hadn't had to change into the suit. Lois made a frustrated noise low in her throat.

"This damn suit," she muttered. He stepped back and grinned at her, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he shrugged the ripped shirt off, revealing the S underneath.

"I thought you liked the suit," he said, his voice almost a purr that sent jolts of heat to all the right places.

"I do," Lois replied, reaching out and grabbing his belt buckle to pull him close once more. She stood on her tiptoes and whispered into the hollow of his ear, "But right now it's in between me and what I want."

"And what exactly do you want?" Clark asked, his voice deepening in a way that told her his control was slipping. She met his eyes and almost gasped at the raw need in them. She could see every kiss, every movement, every touch and every gasp of pleasure in those eyes.

"You," she breathed, "I need you."

Lois reached up and wrapped her arms around Clark's neck, bringing his lips to hers in a tender kiss.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity squeezed into a heartbeat, Clark kissed her gently once more and whispered, "I love you".

Then, he gathered her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

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There was still so much left to do. Lois couldn't help but think of the monumental tasks that lay before both of them as her cheek lay pressed against the warm expanse of his chest.

She knew she shouldn't be thinking of her to-do list right now. They had just made love. They had four days off work and beyond that, a lifetime ahead of them. Lex Luthor was gone and they were finally free. *She* was finally free. And yet that freedom had come at a cost. And behind every beautiful and pure moment she had with Clark lurked the darkness that sometimes threatened to overwhelm her. She had to hope that it wouldn't always be like this. It hadn't even been a full twenty-four hours since the attack. She had to believe that things would get better in time, but for now...

A to-do list was easy. It was safe.

Call Steven to initiate the process of buying back all of the companies Lex bought out. Make an appointment with Dr. Friskin. Look for houses with Clark. Make love to Clark. Make love to Clark again. And again. And again...

Lois allowed her mind to veer off into fantasy and felt her eyelids grow heavier as she did so. Clark's heartbeat was warm, steady and reassuring. She wanted nothing more than to think of their wedding and future together. But she knew it wasn't that easy.

"Penny for your thoughts?" He sounded sleepy as well and she couldn't help but smile. She loved his voice. She

loved the way he said her name in their more intimate moments, the way it deepened when he was aroused or sounded almost childlike when he was happy. And sleepy Clark? Definitely an adorable one to add to the list of 'Clarks' she loved.

"I'm just...thinking," she hedged. She wasn't sure how much she wanted to tell him. After all, they had just made love. She didn't want to bring things down with thoughts of Lex's finances, or her own personal trauma. She wanted to be safe in this space with him.

"You're making a to-do list in your head aren't you?" he asked, his voice heavy with warmth and amusement. She sat up and gave him a mock glare. He gave her a mischievous grin and she felt a smile creep across her face despite herself.

"I'll have you know I was not...oh, who am I kidding?" She flopped back down and snuggled back into his arms.

"I know you better than you think," he said, kissing the top of her head.

"You know me better than anyone," Lois replied. It never ceased to amaze her how well he knew her. She should have known it was useless trying to hide her fears from him. Somehow he just knew. He always knew.

"I could say the same for you," he murmured. His soothing voice was a balm to the wounds she was still nursing. "All my life, I've been searching for you. I didn't know what you looked like or who you were, but I knew you were out there. And the moment I saw you, I knew I'd found you."

"I wish I had known," she said, swallowing tightly at the emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. She tried to distract herself by trailing her finger up and down his chest and marvelling at the way he seemed to feel both soft and solid at the same time. "I wish I could have looked at you and seen *you* the way you saw me. We wasted so much time..."

"You had your own searching to do," Clark told her gently. He sat up and she did as well, snuggling into the crook of his shoulder. "I'm just so glad you found me at the end of it. Because, the truth is, without you, there would be no Superman. Everything I've done, everyone I've saved, I owe to you. You gave me a reason to keep going. To keep fighting."

"I just gave Superman the name," she protested, overwhelmed by the faith he seemed to have in her. It was difficult to wrap her head around the idea that the strongest man on the planet needed her.

"You gave me more than that," he said, reaching down and tipping her chin up to look at him. The love she saw reflected back at her from the depths of those warm brown eyes was both intense and peaceful. "Without you, I would



probably still be wandering, trying to find my place. You gave me a home and a purpose. You saved me, in every way a man could be saved.”

“Clark,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. She had no other words for him — no grand speeches or declarations. Just his name on her lips. She fought to keep her emotions at bay as he leaned down to kiss her — a tender, yet breathtaking kiss.

“We *will* get through this,” he vowed softly. “I know that we never imagined starting our lives together under these circumstances, but I don’t think for a minute that this will break us.”

“How can you have so much faith?” she marvelled. “Where does it come from?”

“You,” he replied with a heartbreaking smile. “It’s always been you. I can’t help but be in awe of you. But you don’t have to carry the weight of this alone. Let me help.”

“My Superman,” she breathed, kissing his lips, his cheeks, his neck and down to his shoulders. “My Clark. If I taught you how to be strong, then you taught me how to be vulnerable.”

“See?” he said, smiling at her. “Hottest team in town.”

She kissed her way further down his chest, running her hands over his abdomen and down towards his torso. She knew there were still a million things left to do, but right now all she wanted was to get lost in him. They didn’t have to figure everything out today, or even tomorrow.

“Hottest team indeed,” she said as she kissed his belly button and a soft moan escaped him.

She understood now. She was finally home.

And she never wanted to leave.

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## Epilogue

The hotel room was dark. A small light on the table beside the bed provided the only source of light. Lois lay in Clark’s arms, in the aftermath of their lovemaking. The wedding ceremony had been incredible, their vows deeply personal and the reception so full of joy and laughter that she might have thought it all a dream were it not for her wedding dress and his tux lying unceremoniously on the floor, dumped carelessly in the midst of their passion.

She lay on his chest, with every reason in the world to feel as if everything was perfect. The nightmares, while still there, were less frequent and Clark would banish them with his body and his words the moment she woke up. They were scheduled to leave for Hawaii the following morning. They could have left immediately after the reception, but even with the convenience of a husband who could fly, Lois had wanted to spend their first night as husband and wife in their own bed. In their new home.

In the two months between the attack and the wedding, Lois and Clark had found and moved into a beautiful

brownstone building. She wasn’t sure how she’d known it, but something inside her had told her that this was where they would spend the rest of their lives as a married couple. It was a lot to plan a wedding and a move at the same time, but Lois found herself very motivated once the decision was made to find their forever home. Her own place was too full of memories and staying at his place made it feel as if they were still playing house.

And now, they were married in a new home, about to embark on that happily ever after. And yet, Lois’ anxieties were still there. Despite her bi-weekly meetings with Dr. Friskin, and despite that her wedding to Clark had gone off without a hitch, and despite the fact that their new house was beyond perfect, she couldn’t help but worry.

Clark shifted slightly and Lois gave a soft sigh, her cheek warm against his chest. She wondered if the wedding was everything he had hoped it would be. Their lovemaking had been perfect — beyond perfect. They had spent the last two months exploring their bodies, talking about what pleased them and getting used to the change in their relationship in the wake of a great deal of trauma.

But deep down, Lois couldn’t help but wonder if it would have been better to wait. He’d been a virgin and she hadn’t. He’d told her that he had wanted their wedding night to be special and Lois worried that she might have robbed him of that experience. Doctor Friskin had assured her at their last session before the wedding that Clark wouldn’t see it that way, and Lois knew she was right.

But regardless, Lois knew that their first time had happened the night after she’d nearly been killed and something inside her told her that it shouldn’t have happened that way — that Clark deserved a first time free of trauma and pain. She knew that was her own guilt talking, but it was a feeling she couldn’t seem to shake, and it seemed to resurface in these moments of quiet.

“Are you okay?” Clark whispered, as if reading her thoughts.

“Of course, I’m —” Lois paused, hearing Doctor Friskin’s voice in her head, urging her to communicate. “I’m...not sure.”

“You want to tell me about it?”

“I...” she hesitated. She didn’t want to bring down their wedding night with heavy thoughts and yet, she knew that Doctor Friskin would encourage her to share them. “I guess I’m just thinking that maybe we should have waited...for our wedding night, I mean.”

“Why do you think that?” he asked, and she was grateful to hear only concern in his tone.

“I just...it was supposed to be special. Your first time, I mean. And waiting until the wedding...well, I just think maybe it would have been even more special to have your first time as husband and wife.”

She left out the rest. She left out the part where his first time shouldn't have been the same night that her ex-fiance took a nosedive out of her third-story window and bled out on the sidewalk in front of her apartment.

"Honey, where is this coming from?" He sat up, and she did as well. He reached out and brushed a stray bit of hair out of her face, studying her expression intently as he did so. "You know that it doesn't matter to me if our first time was on our wedding night or not. All that matters is that it was with you. What's really on your mind?"

"It shouldn't have had to happen that way." She looked down, trying to keep the tightness out of her throat. She didn't want to cry. Not on her wedding night. "Your first time shouldn't have been the same night that —"

"Lois, look at me," he said, his voice soft but fervent. She did and he leaned over and kissed her with aching tenderness.

"If I could go back, the only thing I would do differently would be to stop Luthor before he ever got to you. I hate that he caused you pain. But I would not change a thing about the way we first made love."

"How can you mean that?" she asked, her voice a hoarse whisper. "You said you wanted our first time to be special and —"

"Our first time happened at one of the darkest moments we've ever faced," he replied quietly. "We have both been through so much. And that night was so hard and you were so brave and we needed that, Lois, both of us. We needed it to heal, to become stronger. We needed to make love to chase away the dark. And I don't regret a single second of it. I never have and I never will."

"I love you," she told him. "I love you so much and it feels like those words are totally inadequate to describe how I'm feeling but...I love you."

"I love you too," he replied. He kissed her again and when he pulled back she could see an impish grin playing across his features. "Besides that may have been our first time making love, but there are lots of other firsts."

"Oh?" she teased, feeling her heart lighten the way it always did after a serious conversation with him. "You have any other firsts in mind?"

"Mmmm, lots," he said, his eyes darkening ever so slightly. He reached out and ran a hand down her face, her neck and over her shoulder. She shivered and despite their recent love making, she felt her body awaken at his touch. She could tell he was similarly affected by the look in his eyes. She loved that look.

"What kind of firsts?" she asked, biting her lip in anticipation.

"Fantasies," he replied, his voice gruff. "Things I... want to try now that we know each other better. Trust each other. Things I've never done before, so they would still be

first times." He was softly running his fingers up and down her arms, and she sucked in a sharp breath. He'd had fantasies. Suddenly she wanted to hear them more than anything.

"Tell me," she implored. "Tell me one of your fantasies."

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," he shot back with a sexy grin. Lois felt herself smile too. "I bet you've got some, right?"

Oh she had some alright.

"You go first," she said, feeling both turned on and shy all of a sudden.

Her desire only grew as he described his fantasies, shyly at first, but with more sureness as they both went on to describe several fantasies...making love outdoors, outdoors, in the conference room...a replay of the dance of the seven veils...

She even worked up the courage to share a more risqué fantasy or two, feeling for the first time that she could really talk to someone about what she wanted and know that not only would he listen, but that he would move heaven and earth to make it happen. She'd never felt so safe in her life and after everything that had happened she needed that. She needed to feel that she *could* be so vulnerable with him.

And soon, the descriptions of the fantasies were too much for both of them, and they made love again — intensely, passionately. It felt like its own first time and Lois knew somehow that it would always feel this way as long as they continued to communicate.

As they laid there in the aftermath of their lovemaking, neither one of them felt particularly inclined to move.

"That was incredible," she told him softly. "I didn't realise you wanted...that you had thought of all of those fantasies."

"You see? I told you we have a lifetime of firsts ahead of us," he said, sounding both drowsy and satisfied. "We have so much time for firsts. I haven't missed out on anything. We're only just beginning, Lois. You and me."

"I know," she replied feeling full and warm and as far away from grief and pain as you could get. She was here in his arms.

"Welcome home," he said, before they both drifted off to sleep.

THE END