

Undercover Reporter: Resurrection

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Summary: Following a stray clue thrown to her in the aftermath of the Luthor Corp collapse, Lois finds herself partnered with Superman in a dangerous investigation. In the meantime, they attempt to make their fledgling relationship work, never knowing that this story may be Lois' last. A sequel to the author's "Undercover Reporter (Revelation)," this story is set in Season 2, post-TOGOM (after the episode "That Old Gang of Mine"), in a world where Clark never made it back to his old life.

Story Size: 35,398 words (196Kb as text)

Read the previous story: "[Undercover Reporter \(Revelation\)](#)."

"Any time now!" she said testily, looking up into the sky.

He was supposed to be here by now.

Obviously, he was running late.

Sure, there was probably a good excuse — there was always a good excuse. A really good one, actually. A life or death one.

But that didn't mean it wouldn't be nice if he showed up right about now, Lois thought, risking a dizzying glance down.

Palms sweating, she hoped it was something simple this time, like catching an imperiled jumbo jet mid-air, and not something time-consuming, like digging a village out of a mudslide.

She'd cross her fingers if she had a free hand...

Earlier that evening

Clark adjusted his grip on the airplane set across his shoulders, fighting against the buffeting wind just above the Rockies that was stubbornly trying to pitch the plane into a mountainside. Atlas-like, he guided it safely past the tallest of the craggy peaks.

It sounded like the auxiliary power had finally kicked in, but he kept his grip tight anyway. He'd guide the plane all the way down to the ground, to be sure that he didn't risk the passengers inside.

He could hear them cheering his name.

Superman had saved the day.

Superman always saved the day.

And he was glad he could help.

It was just...

He forced himself to keep hold of his neutral mask, his perennial 'Superman' expression, even though he knew he was hidden in the night sky, especially at this altitude.

The needs of the people on the planet below him seemed to amplify unendingly in the days since he'd left Clark Kent behind. These days, he found the rescues somehow both challenging and repetitive. It hadn't always been like this. Rescues had once been a highlight of a regular life, when he was fully integrated with society and the people he was rescuing. But that was back when he *had* a regular life.

He never imagined that he could think this, but sometimes... helping people wasn't quite as fulfilling as he'd once imagined it would be. It meant *everything* to those he helped, and it meant a lot to him, too, to be able to save a life. But since rescuing had become the sole reason for his existence, he often caught himself wishing that this wasn't his *whole* everything. And it worried him what Lois and his parents might say to that. So he dug in, and pushed himself harder to keep helping. Surely if he helped enough, if he saved enough people, he would start to feel a sense of balance again.

Helping is what Superman did, he reinforced to himself. ...As if he could ever forget.

Superman had been working double and triple shifts over the last six months. As a Kryptonian, he didn't need as much sleep as most people did. Now that he had no reason to keep up any pretense that he observed a regular human's schedule, he had simply let it go.

He had let go of a lot of things in his life lately. He tried not to track them, to let the changes come as they would, but...

Just the thought threatened to weigh him down far more than the jumbo jet balanced across his back.

But he pushed that thought aside.

He had a date tonight, and he didn't want any stray melancholy to linger, to even subtly mar the comforting embrace of a date with Lois. After all, he and Lois had enough trouble finding quality time together as it was.

It made him wonder, for the three-hundred-thousandth time, what would have happened if Clark Kent hadn't died on that casino floor.

Sometimes he wondered if they would still be dating now if he'd been able to keep on living his life as Clark Kent. Or would they have gotten together months earlier than they had, instead of living separate lives for so long? Would Lois have been happier that way?

Would things be this hard?

Because even though he and Lois were often together, and their relationship had definitely surged forward, it felt like they were somehow in limbo.

Just like the rest of his personal life.

It was tricky for Superman to date, as he always knew it would be. And that was the sum total of who he was now.

Stolen moments on the roof of the Planet, quick interactions after rescues, long nights of more work than play during investigations, and a few dinners with his folks in Smallville had sustained them over the last few months.

Every moment with her restored him. It was the only time that he felt like himself, that he could relax into a sense of normalcy. Each moment with Lois was a gift.

But in too many of those moments, they were still working most of the time. So many of their discreet, attempted dates had been interrupted by either an investigation breaking or a rescue happening. And neither the decrepit warehouses she dragged them to, nor the dirty alleyways he dropped them off in could exactly be considered romantic.

The six months they'd spent apart hadn't exactly done their relationship many favors either. He could never regret stepping in front of that bullet – he was grateful he'd been able to take the hit, instead of Lois.

But at the same time ...he really wished he hadn't had to step in front of that bullet.

He'd give anything to go back and change that night.

Anything, of course, except Lois.

If he had a thousand chances to relive that night, he would take that bullet for Lois every time.

Clark Kent had tried so hard to find another path for them. But time had run out on him.

Any hope for that future together, too, was just another example of something he'd had to let go of in this new world where only Superman existed.

Instead, he and Lois focused on the 'here' and the 'now.'

They'd sorted through a lot after the night of Lois' revelation. Her grief had been unexpectedly deep. In fact, it had been the only thing, outside of the familial obligation he felt toward his parents, to convince him to continue to come around at all. He couldn't have just left her mired in the bleak place she'd been after his death. He'd had to tell her.

He never had been able to resist Lois.

He just wished that he could give her the future that she deserved.

Sometimes, in the very back of his brain, just for a moment, he even wished that they could leave behind the rest of the world – including the mess he'd made of their lives. They could live far beyond the reach of the masses

he hid his identity from, far from everyone who'd known Clark, who wanted to hurt Lois, who inimically sought Superman.

And she would be safe.

And they could have a life – together.

But, he reminded himself, that wasn't what Superman did.

He cast those thoughts aside, determined to clear his mind. Instead, he mentally calculated how much time was left before she'd be in his arms again.

Focusing back on the lights of the nearing Denver International Airport, the jumbo jet on his back felt lighter at the thought of seeing her.

Lois' day had started out simply enough.

For the last few weeks, she'd been tracking down a group she suspected of fencing stolen diamonds. Aside from the intriguing little detail that her thieves seemed to already be rolling in dough, it had been a fairly arduous, time-consuming and, alright, *boring* investigation until tonight.

The story was another in her series on the continuing plague of the 'House of Luthor' and its fallout in Metropolis. Sick of stumbling upon Luthor's also-ran, would-be successors through their acts of public malice, she'd decided to take the reins and put the criminals on her timetable, instead of the other way around.

With a little unofficial help from her favorite precinct sparring partner, she'd acquired her own copy of the Luthor Corp look book. Of course, there were far too many people to just start investigating them one by one. Besides, not every one of them would turn out to be a criminal, even though Luthor's corruption had been disturbingly wide.

So she'd drafted a little more unofficial help, this time of the super variety, in acquiring – or 'borrowing,' as she'd phrased it to him – an old Luthor Corp hard drive from the partly pillaged office building.

A little *more* unofficial help from her trusty office lock-pick turned hacker, and she was able to access all of the now defunct property deeds and inventory lists from the once mighty Luthor Corp.

Materials ready and allies aligned, she got to work.

Cross-referencing all of the buildings on the inventory list with Luthor's shell companies had been laborious, to say the least. The more companies she had to slough through to find a connection, the nastier the contents of the building would prove to be. It was the type of thing she'd normally hand over to Jimmy. But she'd noticed that Luthor liked to hide unlikely little details right out where you could see them, and Lois had made an in-depth, posthumous study of the real Luthor. So it only made sense

that she, the world's only, unofficial expert on the mind of Lex Luthor, painstakingly took the project on herself.

No matter how creepy or surreal it was to continually retread the tracks of her perfidious paramour. She'd swallowed down any concept of an emotional cost for this penance. After allowing Luthor to get as far as he did unchecked, she felt it was her duty to clean up the mess she'd allowed to be made. And, she conceded, it was a bit easier to stand with a certain super beau by her side.

So once she'd *finally* made it through the cross-referencing bonanza, she held a list of locations short enough for her to check out in person. It would take her a while – even longer than it took to make the list. But she could do it.

Plus, *any* other part of this investigation would be better than sitting around reading down the list of real estate holdings her almost-husband had owned during his duplicitous reign as criminal overlord.

In her role as the unofficial Luthor Corp clean-up girl, dubbed so by the appreciative detectives at the MPD, and reluctantly accepted by her very anti-anything-Luthor partner, she meticulously inspected run-down warehouses, abandoned chop shops, 'private' docking slips and a series of other cobwebbed edifices across the city. The locations were spread out, most of them nondescript places that someone's eye would naturally pass over. Luthor had cleverly hidden most of his criminal dealings in plain sight.

...if someone knew where to look.

Now Lois knew.

And when she had some super help, things tended to go even faster.

Having such an easy excuse to go flying brought an irrepressible smile to her face.

At least, it had, at first.

She still loved to fly with him. She just wished she could find as easy an excuse to spend time with Clark Kent as she did with Superman. In the days after they'd found their way back to one another, she'd been so relieved to have him back that she was content to take him as she'd found him, regardless of which Suit he'd been wearing. But as time had passed, she'd started to miss the ease and anonymity that came with Clark Kent.

It had been harder trying to date a superhero than she'd initially realized it would be. They couldn't be seen together frequently, which meant what she considered an obsessive amount of discretion. She had to pretend not to care for him if anyone else was around. And even alone, she rarely saw him fully shed the Superman persona and just relax.

The longer she spent with the man who now only wore the Suit, the more she realized that it was Clark Kent that she'd fallen for.

And she missed him.

It helped, though, that Superman was still moonlighting as her undercover reporting partner for the Daily Planet.

After their first stake-out together on Mercy Graves' fledgling drug running op, she'd come to believe there was a code to the main inventory list. The more innocuous the listing's tag, the more nefarious goods she'd find. Graves' warehouse had confirmed that anything related to 'electrics' was drug-related. 'Office supplies' turned out to be some kind of equipment that had been ruled as medical, but looked to her like it belonged on the set of a Frankenstein movie.

But it wasn't the drugs or medical experiments that perturbed her.

It was the 'antiques.'

The tag was spelled with an 'x' on the documents – a special marker to those in the know that this was one of Lex's very special interests. So when she first saw the 'Antiqxes' label, she knew it wasn't a simple typo.

In fact, she'd bet Superman's cape that 'antiqxes' was the code word for kryptonite.

It was finding that 'antiqxes' tag that led her to discover that her own over-protective mode, once switched on, rivaled Clark's. She'd made it to both locations that had listed 'antiqxes' in their inventory within the first 3 hours of her search.

Both had turned up empty.

She'd nearly burned the second building down in response.

Did this mean that someone had beaten her to the kryptonite? Was there someone out there who wanted to hurt Superman and now had a weapon that could actually do it? After all, only a small group of people would have spotted the 'x' code. Of those, the number that were actually free to pursue the treasure where 'x' had marked the spot shrank to an impossibly small group after the arrests that followed her near-miss of a wedding. Now it looked like one of them had beaten her to kryptonite not once but *twice*.

Her anxiety level rose and remained.

It had felt like Lex himself was laughing at her, reaching up from his grave to trip her. Every time she thought she'd escaped him, there was another reminder that Lex Luthor was still all too present.

Despite her perturbation, she'd been forced to pursue other inventory tags when 'antiqxes' only turned up dead ends.

Tonight, the building she was visiting had listed 'women's sanitary products' on the inventory. As Lois

searched, she'd found that Luthor had injected his cruel sense of humor into the tags, just like every other part of his business. Lex might have pursued pleasure, but he'd never had much use for diamonds as anything other than convenient bait for women. Knowing him, she was guessing that the 'women's products' tag would lead to her diamonds.

A misogynist right to the end, she thought, scowling. The man had been truly irredeemable.

The storage warehouse holding the 'women's sanitary products' was owned by a shell company that was eight whole degrees away from Luthor Corp. Since it was such a distant connection on the paperwork, she had initially pegged it as one that stored something very, very bad. That hadn't quite added up to diamonds in her mind, but maybe there was something she was missing. After all, she was still cracking the code of Lex's labeling system.

When she got there, the "Luxe Soaps" sign hanging over the door had reinforced her suspicions. She hadn't yet decided if it was caprice or hubris, but Lex always marked his territory with 'x's.'

She'd been to this particular run-down facility already a few weeks back. When it had been completely empty, she'd crossed it off her list and left. On a hunch, she returned again the next week – to find it still empty. Even the decaying signage out front suggested that the Luxe Soaps building was long out of business, both legitimate and illicit.

But she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that someone had been there, that Luthor had left behind something insidious. She'd developed a sixth sense about this kind of thing, since her unofficial appointment to the Luthor Corp clean-up crew. All of his facilities had something nasty hidden away in them. After all, he hadn't planned on his business ending that ill-fated day he was supposed to marry her. Therefore, it struck her as even more suspicious to find this one completely clean.

And so she went back.

The third time she dropped in with no results, she had called in a little super-assistance. His eye had turned the building over twice at her insistence, but he hadn't seen anything Luthor-worthy.

But then he'd asked her if she'd noticed the fresh tire tracks. They looked like they'd already been driven over, so it was impossible to track the tread. But they were wide-set, which might have come from a pick-up truck or cargo van, they'd concluded.

The tracks began, or ended, she supposed, along the back door. The door itself was the metal type that rolled up and was wider than standard. You might not get a van in, but you could get something sizable out.

She'd snuck in alone twice more later that week, but the building remained innocent. Frustrated, but unwilling to let go of this lead after her 'antiques' failure, she called in her super support again and asked him to keep the building on his radar.

As usual, he didn't disappoint her. The next week, her investigating partner had stopped by to tell her the news that there were fresh tire tracks at her mystery warehouse again. That was twice in a row that the tracks had shown up on a Tuesday night.

She'd decided it was high time for a good, old-fashioned stake-out.

Now she just had to wait a week.

Lois had never been very good at waiting, and just the thought was making her twitchy. But she did have a few other research projects to tackle in the meantime. Plus, a slow week seemed like the perfect time to try and talk Clark into a dinner out – in a foreign country, perhaps, to lend them anonymity, and in a dimly lit restaurant, perhaps, to lend them atmosphere. Maybe then they could finally pick up on that conversation they'd started all those weeks ago about their page 8 story.

She grinned, her mind skipping back to a recent memory of sailing smoothly through the skies, cool night air on her face, strong arms holding her close.

No, she decided, a slow week could definitely have its perks!

The next Tuesday morning found Lois drafting a piece on Metropolis' languishing children's hospital, now one year bereft of Luthor Corp's supportive funding. After finishing that gloomy story, she was eager to leave the office and get some air. She'd popped into Perry's office to let her editor know that she was headed off to cover yet another chapter in her ongoing Luthor Corp saga, and bounced out again while pretending not to notice his inquiring look.

Perry had been a lot easier on her since, well... since Al Capone and his friends had wreaked havoc on her life. At one point, she'd thought Perry might be aiming to cut her off on the Luthor Corp follow-ups, but all of a sudden, he'd backed off. She was sure that her happiness at having Clark back was written all over her, and maybe it was evident enough that her surly, surrogate work dad worried less.

Or maybe her stories just sold enough papers that the old newshound had decided she could deal with her heartbreak how she saw fit.

Either way, he'd been giving her assessing looks these days whenever she headed out on any Luthor-connected story, and she'd started escaping his probing gaze as quickly as she could to ensure he wouldn't follow up his

measuring look with a question or warning. Perry was one of the few people on earth she had qualms about lying to, but protecting Clark came first, and she was pretty sure that meant a lie to her boss if pressed. So she made it a point to stay a step ahead of the questions behind his eyes.

Putting the emotional minefield of the Planet behind her, she headed out to prep for her stake-out.

On the way home, she picked up a copy of the Star and a bottle of bottom-shelf liquor. Stopping off at her apartment, she pulled her oversized, shabby coat out of her closet. She scrubbed her lipstick off using the sleeve, marred her mascara with the torn lapel, and then liberally splashed the cheap vodka over the front panels of the coat. Tipping the bottle into her mouth, she swished it around and spit it into her kitchen sink with a sour expression. She wiped her mouth with the coat sleeve and dabbed a little more behind her ears before unrepentantly emptying the rest down her kitchen drain.

Lacing her feet into her oldest boots, she pulled a knit cap low on her eyebrows, donned her torn, soiled coat and stuffed the Star under her arm. She checked herself in the mirror.

Her reflection looked like someone she'd cross the street to avoid.

Perfect.

Suppressing a grin, she left the apartment.

About thirty minutes later, she was weaving her way down a mostly empty street across town. Making her way around the back of the building, she let herself stumble into a pair of metal trash cans just past it.

Surreptitiously, she dropped a few pages of the Star to the ground between them, then sat down heavily on top of them. She tried to move loosely, her head falling back to the brick wall behind her. She let her mouth fall open and began her watch of the vacant Luxe Soap building across from her with lidded eyes.

She looked, and smelled, like a drunk that had passed out in the trash. *Master of disguise Lois Lane*, she thought ruefully. Hopefully, though, the ruse would be enough to keep people from looking too closely at her.

An hour passed.

The neighborhood was quiet.

She resisted the urge to scratch her nose. After all, in her supposed alcoholic stupor, it would look odd if she didn't seem to be sleeping the sleep of the dead.

So she sat motionless, her whole body rebelling against the enforced stillness.

It was moments like these when she particularly missed her partner. He'd made the Harrington stake-out at the Lexor a fun one, she remembered, occupying their down time with games and teasing her into a consistent good mood. He'd been a comforting, convivial guide in

Smallville, making her feel at home in a strange town as they chased down Trask. Even long overnights of sorting through endless research at the Planet became more tolerable with her partner at her side.

She and Clark made a good team.

Well, she amended, now she and *Superman* made a good team.

She frowned. That wasn't quite right, either, though. Superman was still working as a partner in some aspects of her investigations, but...

It wasn't the same.

He was helpful in a pinch, and he certainly sped up the boring bits. But she missed the man that could openly walk through the world with her, who would sit in a hotel room with the windows open and stop into restaurants to pick up take-out during an all-nighter.

She nearly sighed out loud. Now he had *her* thinking of his multiple identities as separate people!

They were still a team, whether or not he could – or *would* – disguise himself as a mere mortal these days. And they could make an even better team if he wouldn't be so *infuriatingly* stubborn about taking on the mantle of a mild-mannered man.

Shoving those thoughts aside until her target was back in range, she let her mind soar off on a daydream about flying and tried to ignore the itch on her nose, which was inching down to her cheek.

Hours passed.

A school nearby must have eventually let out, because uniformed kids with brightly colored backpacks began to trickle down the alley in small groups. Near the end of the noisy and ebullient stream, two pre-teen boys saw her and stopped to confer.

She assessed them through still-lidded eyes and decided that they looked altogether too interested in the drunk passed out in the trash. When she'd pieced this outfit together, she hadn't counted on the curiosity and daring of middle-school boys.

A moment later, they were hesitatingly winding their way over to her, all stops and starts, giggling as they pushed each other forward.

It would be easy enough to scare them off, but she didn't want to attract that much attention. And she really didn't want disgruntled parents sending a squad car down the alley to investigate the drunk that was harassing school children.

That would tank her stake-out for sure!

She sat up with a start and twisted to duck her face behind the trash bin next to her, making loud gagging noises. She heard the boys react and tried to wretch convincingly, arching her back and breathing heavily.

After a moment the boys "Eeeeeewwwww!" had faded.

She leaned back against the brick to see that the kids had gone.

Success!

She tipped her head up and rolled her shoulders to try and stretch while she had the chance, before she had to play out cold again.

Her eye caught a flicker of red hovering in the sky high beyond the building.

Conscious of the possibility of being watched from someone on the ground, she put her sleeve across her mouth and said out loud, "I'm fine."

The red remained in place.

"Really," she assured, arm still draped across her face. "There were a couple of school kids. I was faking it to try to help them lose interest in me. Ok?"

She watched as the small red flutter moved up and then down. It looked like a nod.

"Just checking up on me?"

She thought that the red dot in the sky was actually behaving himself today. In fact, he was so far off she was surprised she'd spotted him. He was clearly giving her a wide berth for her stake-out.

The red began to get smaller, if possible.

"You don't have to rush off," she said quickly. The red stabilized. "Can you tell if anyone is in the building?"

He came just a little closer and flew back and forth along the horizon for a beat.

She took that as a 'no.'

"Maybe it's good news that there's no one home, yet. It means I haven't missed them."

He didn't seem to have a response for that. She knew he'd rather be on this stake-out in her place. Too bad that bright red spandex was so noticeable.

With a brief look at the trash can that was hiding her, she said, "I don't have much peripheral vision. Anyone lurking around this alley or the main street up there?" She nodded toward the front of the building.

She watched as the red moved back and forth parallel to the horizon line again.

"Good!" she replied. "If nobody's watching me, they won't realize I'm watching them. At this rate, though, we won't have time for dinner tonight. Rain check?"

She frowned behind her coat sleeve. Too many of their dinner plans had met this fate lately, between rescues and investigations, and Lois was starting to feel a certain discord about living under the ever-urgent deadlines of their jobs. Things had been a whole lot easier when Clark had been a reporter at the Planet with her, and not a superhero full-time.

But the red dot executed a loop-the-loop in the sky. Apparently, he was looking forward to dinner with her, regardless of when it happened.

"If nobody shows up tonight, I wonder if we should give this building another deep look anyway. Maybe we're missing something."

The red dot lurched closer.

"I didn't mean it was dangerous," she forestalled him. "But maybe it's just a transfer point. Or maybe it's automated or got a secret door or something."

The red dot came closer still.

"Hold it, Fly-boy. I said 'later.' Let's not spook them if they've got eyes on the place that we can't see. Meet me back here around 11?"

Her answer was another enthusiastic loop.

Maybe he was always looking forward to seeing her. It was an endearing thought.

"Good," she said with a slow smile, "It's a date."

She grinned at the complicated barrel roll that answered her before he winked out of sight. It left her with a feeling of warm anticipation. She just wished that the warm feeling could hang around a little longer. She'd noticed that she'd started to feel strangely bereft when he wasn't nearby.

Letting her arm drop away from her face, she pushed her thoughts aside and arranged some of the trashed pages of the Star over her legs. Spring might have come to Metropolis, but it was still chilly enough against her torn pants and thin coat. Focusing back on the Luxe Soap building, she shifted into a more comfortable position and let her simple daydream about flying elevate itself into another Clark-focused fantasy.

Day bled into dusk.

A pick-up truck drove by her directly, and she quickly committed the license plate to memory, but it ambled on down the alley and didn't return. Otherwise, her little alley was quiet.

Night descended quietly, blanketing Lois and the warehouse she watched.

"Anybody home?"

Clark popped his head through the kitchen door of the familiar farmhouse. At once, he was soothed by the lingering smell of apple pie and the sound of the light creak in the door that had been present since he was a kid, though it was too low for human ears, he'd since discovered.

"Clark, honey!" Martha was at the sink, sleeves rolled up to her elbows, her voice as bubbly as the soap lathering the pan in her hands. "We saw the plane that you landed in Colorado!"

She shook the soapy water off her hands and reached for a dish towel.

"We figured you'd be late, so I saved you a plate," she said, moving toward him with a warm smile.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said, accepting her fierce hug, at the same time glancing back through the window to ensure no one else was near enough to see it.

Martha pulled back, and gestured upstairs toward Clark’s childhood room. “We’ve still got some of your old clothes upstairs, if you’d like to get comfortable while you eat.” Without waiting for his reply, she went on, “Let me get that plate out of the oven for you!”

It wasn’t a subtle hint, and he fought to hold back a sigh.

At first, he’d appreciated his parents’ attempts to give him back bits of the life he’d known. Their intent was sweet and caring. But the longer it had gone on, the more it had started to wear at him. And his mom just didn’t seem to understand. He was Superman full-time now. And Superman wore super-suits. There was no Clark Kent. It was a big enough risk visiting Clark Kent’s parents as frequently as he did. As much as the spandex suit called for attention when spotted, he didn’t dare walk around in Clark Kent’s clothes anymore, even in the isolated farm house.

Just the thought was overpowering. He was again gripped by the fear that had been steadily cementing itself in his mind since that night in the casino.

Now, more than ever, *no one could know*.

He couldn’t risk anyone ever knowing that Superman had once been Clark Kent. All it would take would be one glimpse of him with freshly washed hair or wearing a Smallville t-shirt, and someone could start piecing together how a dead man might have survived those shots to the heart at point-blank range.

And then his parents would be bargaining chips. Hostages. Maybe even collateral damage. Their lives would be nearly as forfeit as his was.

Not to mention Lois and the trouble he couldn’t even begin to imagine *her* getting into.

He couldn’t risk it all now, just for the achingly familiar comfort of eating a nostalgic slice of pie at his family’s worn dinner table in a faded pair of jeans.

Too dangerous, his fear whispered.

Which reminded him that he needed to be cautious on this visit, to be wary and aware. It was the opposite of what he’s wanted for his family, but all of his visits held a potential for putting them in peril. A car was rambling down Route 84 at the edge of their back field. Two boys were boisterously making their way along Patterson’s Creek a few miles off. An airplane was passing steadily overhead. No one was close enough to see or hear them in the farmhouse, not yet.

But that didn’t mean that someone wouldn’t *get* close enough.

Being ensconced in the welcoming farmhouse kitchen, feeling the warmth of his mom’s hugs, and hearing the familiar creak in the screen door had always allowed him to revert to the peace and safety that had been the predominant feature of his childhood home. But now he couldn’t afford the luxury of that feeling, no matter how much he yearned for the simple mundanities that he’d never be able to indulge in again as Superman. It would only take a second of his guard being down to overlook approaching danger. If he missed the signs, if someone got to Lois or his mom or dad – he felt his fear spike again.

He couldn’t let that happen.

Not again.

He’d nearly lost Lois in that casino.

He’d lost himself instead.

He gripped the edges of his cape in a subconscious gesture, as if it could protect him.

“I can’t stay,” he said aloud, his voice exuding an outer calm that masked the whirling pain of his inner tempest.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be there. It wasn’t that he didn’t miss them. It was just that it was dangerous.

Plus, the conversation inevitably always came back around to resurrecting Clark Kent.

The man who didn’t exist.

It was bad enough when Lois brought it up – a fight she pointedly instigated once a week. He couldn’t argue with his parents about it, too. The farm had always been his sanctuary, and he needed that more than ever these days, even if he only allowed himself to indulge in it for short bursts.

As she stood up from the oven door with a full plate, Martha’s initial flash of disappointment gave way to a sharper look. “Have you eaten at all today?”

“I’ve eaten,” he assured her.

It wasn’t a lie, he told himself.

The sun here was food to Kryptonians.

Then again, his mom always could spot a fib of any kind.

“Clark,” she said in a caring voice, “you know how much your father and I –”

“Sorry, Mom, I’ve really got to go.”

“Honey,” she tried again, with a sympathetic expression.

“Really, Mom, Lois is waiting for me. I’m late as it is.”

For a second, he thought she was going to push him on it, the way she used to push Clark to open up sometimes when she could tell something was bothering him.

He was almost disappointed when she didn’t.

Instead, she followed the example he’d set over and over again lately. She let it go.

And with her reluctant yielding to his feeble excuse, he felt himself sink inexplicably further into his Super facade.

Dropping his warm plate on the counter, she handed him a chocolate chip cookie instead, and kissed his cheek. “Jonathan’s in the barn. Be sure to say ‘hello’ on your way out. And hug Lois for us.”

He gave her a quick smile and turned to leave. He didn’t need super powers to feel her concerned gaze on him all the way out the door.

To relieve the boredom, Lois counted the bricks on the building wall.

Four times in a row.

Then she considered banging her head against them, just for a change of pace.

They were nice enough bricks, she supposed. It’s just that the builders had been so decorative with them that there weren’t as many as there should be on a normal brick wall. The whole bottom corner of the building was just one big foundational stone. It made the counting go a lot faster, leaving her without much of a distraction.

The irony wasn’t lost on her that she was facing a brick wall in this investigation, now both literally as well as metaphorically.

She subtly shifted her legs to try and keep her muscles from falling asleep. If her drunken subterfuge didn’t work, she would have to be prepared to run, even if her limbs were cramping after endless hours on unforgiving, newspaper-covered concrete. She stretched her calf muscle as far as she could, feeling the light burn that came with it.

Suddenly, car lights shone down the alley.

She froze, holding her legs still.

She heard a car rumble slowly down the alley closer to her.

Just before it reached her, it stopped.

Lois held her breath, resisting the urge to lean forward to see it.

The car’s headlights cut out.

It turned and backed into the Luxe Soap building’s loading drive, where it finally came into her view.

An oversized white cargo van.

She felt her sixth sense for trouble kick in, tingling along the back of her neck as excitement rolled down her spine. These had to be her guys!

The van backed up and stopped nearly against the door. Two men exited the cab. One reached into his pocket and she heard the jingle of keys followed by the thick click of a padlock. Seconds later she was watching him push the roll-up door at the back of the building upward. Meanwhile, his companion had opened the cargo doors at the back of the van. They met and started unloading a heavy-looking crate into the warehouse.

Her brow creased in frustration. Was that what the van was packed with? She was supposed to be hunting for diamonds tonight, but these big crates looked much too

bulky to be carrying such small, precious cargo. She’d been expecting a sketchy, unmarked van, sure – but she hadn’t expected it to be full.

Just what scheme had Lex been running here?

The pair came back out, and she noticed a brown satchel under the driver’s arm. It looked a lot more like something that could hold tiny gemstones! When had *that* been dropped off at the warehouse? In the darkness, her eyes tracked the lackey to the front of the van, where he dropped the satchel onto the driver’s seat and shut the door before heading back to help his buddy unload again.

Her eyes slid back to the cab of the van.

He’d left the door unlocked.

She had to get a look at that satchel!

The two men had picked up another crate and were shuffling back into the warehouse, and she was tempted to bolt for the van. *Be cautious*, she reminded herself. She’d time how long it took them to make a trip, she decided, and then sneak over to try and get a peek inside.

The two men lumbered through the doorway, turned and disappeared from view.

Lois started her count immediately.

1-Mississippi.

2-Mississippi.

3-Mississippi.

4-Mississ –

She heard another car make its way into the alley, and stopped her count. No doubt her guys would have heard the car, too, and altered their path because of it. She’d have to try and count again once these interlopers had moved on. Still unable to see around the trash cans shielding her, she pushed herself up a bit, eager to get a better view.

Before she could see anything, the vehicle cut its lights, and she felt the hair stand up on the back of her neck again. Maybe *these* were her diamond hustlers?

They weren’t.

The vehicle came into view, and, inexplicably, it was an identical white van. It parked directly in front of the first van — smudging the tread marks, she noticed — and two more men got out. They, too, started unloading heavy crates into the warehouse, moving with the speed of those undertaking an illicit activity.

Just how many bad guys had been invited to the Tuesday night party?

She squinted to see the license plate on the second van but couldn’t make it out in the dark.

“Clark?” she whispered urgently. “Are you back yet? Can you see their plate numbers?”

Nothing changed around her, not even a tell-tale whoosh of air.

“Clark?” She tried again, knowing he would have already been beside her if he’d been within hearing range.

It'd been worth a shot, she thought, but she'd known he wasn't due back for at least another half hour.

Based on the size of the vans and the size of the crates, these guys would be long gone by the time Clark made it back for their undercover date. Lois shifted impatiently. She needed to get a closer look before the vans drove off and left her with no leads!

Two of the men had just re-entered the warehouse, and two were just exiting. Not the best pattern, but she could work with it.

The two men that were visible climbed into the back of the van closest to the building. Knowing they wouldn't see her now, she shook off her make-shift paper blankets, smirking as she left the Star in the trash where it belonged, her favorite and most petty stake-out tradition. She leaned forward, grateful to be out on her feet at last, and crouched down in a runner's starting position. If the other two men would come out to their van, these two would head back in, and it would give her a large enough window to sprint across the alley.

She waited, poised.

There they were!

As they passed the nearest van to them, the first pair of men climbed out with a crate, making their way to the door.

She flexed her calf muscles, bending low, ready to run.

The first pair of men reached the van farthest from the Luxe Soap building.

This was going to be tight.

She took a deep breath.

They climbed into the van.

She pushed off with her back foot —

And a crash rang out!

Drastically off balance, Lois could only pivot her momentum to fall backwards into the hard brick wall behind her, fighting her sluggish muscles for control as they threatened to tip her over into the metal garbage can beside her. If that happened, the clamor would be impossibly loud, and they'd find her for sure!

At the same time, both men jumped out of the van they'd just gotten into.

She managed to steady herself and ducked down low, praying she hadn't been seen.

"What was that?" One of the men from the van closest to her shouted.

"Aw, nothin'," one of the other pair called back from near the warehouse door. "Butterfingers here dropped his end!"

"Well, be careful! Ya scared the daylights outta us!"

"Awwww, yer fine!" The man with the crate picked his end back up, gesturing to his partner. "Let's just get this done fast!"

"Listen, you better be careful with that!" the nervous man at the van snapped back.

"Yeah, yeah!" The man with the crate was already on the move again.

The nervous man pointed a finger at them, "I mean it! You bust anything and the boss will have your head!"

The blood froze in her veins.

She hadn't heard that name in nearly a year.

The Boss.

She shook her head against the specter that rose up to meet her.

Luthor.

Panic crested down her spine.

Luthor was The Boss.

She'd missed it entirely the first time, but she would never miss it again.

No, she told herself, knees going weak.

She pushed into the wall against her back to keep her upright, as fear collapsed her spine.

No, Lex is dead.

To her horror, it sounded like more of a plea than a cold fact.

Lex is buried, she told herself again, more sure this time, as she talked herself down. She knew she was being irrational.

After all, *anyone* could be a boss.

Anyone could be the boss of *this* operation.

Anyone living, she tried to convince herself, pushing the panic back into place. You can't be a boss of anything if you're dead. And *Lex was dead*.

She refocused.

She was here to find out who had taken his place.

Because he was definitely *not* here anymore.

Putting her attention back on the operation in front of her, she saw that the Scared Pair was now headed inside with their crate, while the Butterfingers Duo were already returning. Butterfingers and his mouthy partner may have downplayed the moment, but they were clearly on the alert now. They both scanned the area as they headed back to their van, looking to see if the noise of the crate's fall had attracted attention.

Butterfingers hopped in the van. But his mouthy partner stood at the door, looking both ways down the alley. His gaze moved past her, then stopped. He looked back at her trash cans, squinting into the darkness.

Dammit.

She held her breath, not moving, and willed herself to be invisible.

"Hey, Mac!" Butterfingers grunted. "Help me with this."

She watched as Mouthy Mac took an anxiety-inducing step toward her, squinting harder.

Then he gave up and moved back into the van.

Lois held back the sigh of relief, willing her tense limbs to loosen.

Time to get things back on track.

She watched the men move two more sets of crates, getting their timing down. On the third set, she saw her chance and vaulted herself across the alley, coming to rest in front of the first van. Heart pounding in her chest, she waited for someone to shout out that they'd seen her.

No call came.

Silence meant success!

Now came the hard part, since she'd have to do this by sound. She heard footsteps coming down the drive and wondered if it was the Scared Pair headed for her van or the Butterfinger Duo that would stop nearer to the building. Either way, they sounded like they were getting close. She crossed her fingers that they still had crates left, and that they wouldn't come around to the front.

In the next instant, she felt the van she was leaning against dip down.

It was the Scared Pair! And it seemed like there was another crate left to move.

She positioned herself at the far corner of the van, hugging the silhouette of the bumper. A moment later, she felt the van lighten with a little jolt. Tracking their subsequent retreating footsteps, she tried to step in time with them, quietly making her way to the back of the van.

The Scared Pair's footsteps receded into the warehouse.

As soon as they were through the door, she dove from her cover alongside the first van across the gap between the vehicles, landing at the front of the van nearest the Luxe Soap warehouse and scrambling to blend into the silhouette of the grill.

She listened.

Silence, she thought gleefully.

And then more footsteps.

This should be the Butterfingers Duo, she thought.

From her new vantage point between the vehicles, she couldn't see them, but she could see into the van that was now in front of her. There was only one crate left. She bit her lower lip. She'd really have to make this fast!

The van she was leaning against dipped. Thank goodness they'd still had a crate to unload!

Knowing she had a tight window, she held her adrenaline-infused impatience in check, and waited until she felt the van rock again, then crept toward the driver's side, again using the sound of their footsteps to cover her own. They had to be getting close to the warehouse now...

She heard them cross the threshold, footsteps now absorbed on a cement floor instead of crunching on gravel, and flung herself around to the driver's side to open the

door and search the cab. Prising the satchel open, she found three small black velvet bags inside. She hastily pulled the drawstrings loose on one, unpeeling it into her other hand.

The diamonds glittered in her palm in the scant moonlight.

They were smaller than she'd imagined, each at least two carats, but not much more than that — and there were only three. The other two little bags didn't feel any heavier. Did that mean there were only nine small diamonds total from this job? That didn't seem like a lot, and probably not worth the vans and the thugs and whatever was in the crates, if they were even related.

But she didn't have the time to analyze it now.

She dumped the diamonds unceremoniously back into the bag, tightened the closure, dropped all three into the satchel and left it where she found it.

She closed the door quietly, and then bumped it with her hip to get it to latch. She turned and dove back in front of the van.

A footstep sounded a second later.

She tried to listen over her quick breathing.

The footsteps sounded unhurried.

So they hadn't seen her.

But that wouldn't be the case much longer! This would be the Scared Pair, and that meant they'd have to cross directly in front of her to get into their van. There was no way they'd miss her if she stayed here.

She stayed low, all but crawling along the front side of the van, until she finally turned the corner. She snuck down the far side of the van, trying to stay far from the crate-carriers.

Once the Scared Pair got their last crate, she would be able to sneak up past their van and back to her little encampment between the trash cans. She should be at least passably safe then. Even if they found her there, she could probably convince them she'd slept through their whole drop-off.

In the meantime, the Scared Pair had pulled their crate out and were closing the back cargo doors.

Another set of footsteps began crossing toward her from the warehouse. The Butterfingers Duo! They'd come back out early!

It was time to think quickly. She would never make it around to the front of the vans without a gap between the pairs coming and going from the warehouse.

She was trapped!

They were mere steps away.

Crossing her fingers, she dropped to the ground beside the van and rolled.

Footsteps crunched along on both sides of her, and both cab doors opened and then closed. The van settled a little lower than it had without passengers.

This could be worse, she thought glibly, looking up into the metal undercarriage of the van.

The engine started.

She winced. Should she call for Superman? He'd have her out of this in a nano-second.

The second pair of men were headed back into the warehouse with their final load. Stuck in a supine position, she contorted herself to try and look around for other ways out. There was a high chain link fence on the far side of the warehouse, but she'd never climb it quickly enough if they saw her. If she ran back to her alley, the Butterfingers in the van's cab would see her pass them for sure. And she didn't want to chance actually running into the warehouse.

With deepening dread, she squirmed around to examine the underside of the vehicle. *No scary metal bits sticking down*, she assessed. Maybe if she stayed put, she might just be alright. Besides, she'd seen this in TV shows all the time, and the hero always came through.

Right?

As the Scared Pair approached her for the last time, she realized they were at their best angle to see her. In response, she tried to pull her feet up toward her.

Please don't notice me, she willed them. *Please don't notice me now!*

She heard two hollow metallic thunks and nearly gasped out loud. But the Scared Pair were just saying goodbye to the Butterfingers with a pat to the cab's door, and their footsteps continued onward to their own van. She heard the engine start and their van pull away.

Much closer to home, she heard the van above her shift into gear.

She flattened herself, and prepped to roll in case Mouthy Mac decided to turn at the last minute.

But instead, the van began moving gently forward and slowly slid over and past her. She tilted her head back, and watched in near shock as it turned leisurely into the alley and pulled away.

She sat up, running her hands over herself as if in disbelief that there weren't any injuries.

She was fine!

She laughed out loud into the empty night.

She'd outmaneuvered the bad guys, seen the evidence — not that it made much sense — and not been hurt or caught!

Good luck lightening her mood, she swaggered up to the warehouse door and tried it.

Locked.

Her good mood prevailed — a locked door didn't stop Lois Lane! She fumbled in her pockets for her lock picking

kit. She'd switched coats, she remembered, which meant that her kit was at her apartment.

Good mood wavering just a bit, she circled the building, looking for options. The front door was locked, too. She put her shoulder into it. It didn't budge.

Wondering how close it was to eleven o'clock and Clark's promised return, she circled around again, looking for weaknesses.

It was an old building. Like most in this neighborhood, it was made of stone and brick. She'd noticed earlier that the corner of the Luxe Soap warehouse had a chief cornerstone as tall as her waist. Above it, the decorative masonry blocks formed an interlocking pattern at the edge of the building before the darker, smaller bricks took over to blend smoothly into the wall.

The quoining brickwork made perfect footholds, she realized with sudden inspiration.

As she'd learned through numerous investigations with her undercover partner over the recent weeks, roof entries were rarely protected with as much vigor as ground doors.

Reaching up, she grasped a protruding brick with each hand and hauled herself up, feet coming to rest on the lip of the cornerstone.

Stretching upward from her crouched position against the wall, she grabbed another mason block to pull herself up. Then another.

This was going to work!

It turned out to be a slow, laborious climb.

The texture of the old masonry scraped and bit at her hands. Some of the bricks were misshapen or broken entirely, leaving jagged edges that she had to grip carefully or else risk cutting her hands. After one crumbled away at her touch, she realized that she had to be judicious when putting her weight on them, too, both with her hand and then again with her foot.

Nearing her goal, she realized that her interlocking bricks stopped a few feet from the top. Instead, there was a smooth capstone facing that covered the last few feet.

When she ran out of handholds, she kept moving upward, literally hugging the building as her feet navigated the footholds.

She didn't dare look down.

With only two footholds left, could she make it to the top?

Her hands met the metal rain gutter at the edge of the roof. She grabbed onto it to steady herself, and took her last two steps upward.

Finally!

Hopefully the trek had been worth it. Standing on tip-toe, she looked across the roof, hoping for an entry point.

A skylight.

Yes!

She'd make it inside before her investigating partner even made it back, she bragged to herself.

Gripping the rain gutter in front of her, she pushed down to test it.

It held.

Up, up, and away, she thought with a confident grin.

Twisting, she lifted one leg to the top of the roof, then pressed down against the gutter to heave herself up.

As far as Lois Lane stake-outs went, this had been a pretty simple one. Doing her best to ignore the lingering haunted feeling from the mention of The Boss, she set her sights on the skylight ahead of her and thought, *Easy as pie*.

That was the instant her boot slipped on the damp, corrugated roof.

She lost her balance, pitching backwards into open air!

One leg flew free – her other foot came down hard on the brick she'd climbed.

Too hard.

Her breath caught in her chest as it crumbled away under her.

She threw an arm up, reaching blindly above her.

Which, of course, was how she came to be here, hanging from the rusted gutter off the side of the roof, not so patiently waiting for her own personal superhero to show up before she fell to her increasingly likely doom.

"Any time now!" she said testily, risking her balance on a glance upward into the empty night sky.

She tried again to swing her leg up over the gutter. Her heart clamored when the piping shrieked, separating nearly a foot away from the wall. She gasped aloud as the gutter bowed and she slipped another inch, nearly losing her grip.

Both arms now extended above her as she hung, she couldn't catch a deep breath.

"Any time at all!" she grumbled again.

Her palms were getting sweaty, making her hold more precarious by the second.

And her already tired shoulders were aching sharply as they protested supporting her weight.

...But she'd lose their bet if she called for him.

Straining her neck, she looked around for ways to save herself on this one.

Finding none, she huffed in irritation.

The building wasn't even on fire! There was no countdown running. No one was shooting at her. She was just a klutz! And if she called for help now, she was going to hear about this one until she really did fall off a roof, she just knew it. She grimaced and decided to strengthen her resolve.

She'd get herself out of this.

Gripping the metal frame with renewed determination, she carefully tried to haul herself up high enough to get an elbow secured.

But the gutter dislodged even further from the wall with a grating screech, and she halted her movement, closing her eyes against the inevitable fall.

She gripped the metal firmly with both hands.

She was literally hanging on by fingertips now.

...And they were slipping.

It would be harder to collect his five bucks with a broken back, she thought.

With a last glance down to the ground, she resignedly took a breath and opened her mouth to call for Clark.

"Hi, honey," a teasing voice came from behind her.

Finally, she thought with relief, and let go of the roof.

"Hi," she said back a second later, looking up into a pair of smiling brown eyes. "You're late."

"It doesn't seem to have delayed you much," he said. His eyes were laughing at her now. "I think you owe me five dollars."

"Do not," she argued, her competitive edge kicking in. "I didn't actually call you."

"No, you just threw yourself off a roof," he chuckled.

"The bet was that I had to *call* for you," she insisted. "And I didn't! So it looks like you actually owe *me* five bucks."

"Next time I'll let you fall first before I say hello, so that you have plenty of time to give me a shout," he said with perfect innocence, knowing it would get on her nerves.

His playful threat was empty, but she sighed dramatically anyway. "You know, you could be *helpful* and take us over to that skylight."

He glanced over at the roof she'd let go of a moment before. Even knowing he'd be able to catch her, seeing her fall always gave him a jolt. "So that's where you were headed. What happened?" he asked, as casually as he could.

"It's slippery," she complained.

He hid a smile, depositing them lightly near the skylight. It was a little slippery, and he kept one hand at her waist as they walked across the roof toward their goal. After all, you could never be too careful with Lois.

Plus, it was nice to feel her warmth against his hand. He'd missed her today.

"If you were going to be late, you could have called, you know."

He glanced down at his Suit pointedly before replying dryly, "I didn't have a quarter on me."

She turned the tables back on him by following his glance down, her eyes tracing the path with significantly more detail.

He nearly blushed.

But then she changed gears again, rivaling him for speed. “They have invented these things called pagers, you know. And new fangled devices called mobile phones are sweeping the nation.”

Her voice sounded sharper than their usual banter, and he had a guess as to where this was going.

“I don’t think they’d let me set one up as ‘Superman.’” He nudged the raised cover of the skylight and it came loose from its frame.

“You should have let me write that story,” she grouched.

He nearly groaned aloud as their banter tilted closer to full-scale argument.

Whether or not to write the story explaining just how Clark Kent, non-Kryptonian, had survived point blank shots to the chest had become a familiar reprise and an increasing source of tension since Lois had learned the truth of Superman’s identity. His total reluctance to discuss it had stalled their page 8 story – along with a lot of other things.

Actually, it was the only thing that they really fought about with any heat.

It came between them, even when everything else felt so right.

“After I’d been dead for six whole months? Come on, Lois, we’ve been over this.”

“And we need to go back over it until we find a solution!” she shot back. “It’s not like we’re trying to bring *Elvis* back from the dead!”

“We would’ve had to have come up with a miracle,” he said, tugging the skylight cover off and setting it aside.

“Well, a man can fly, for Pete’s sake!” she snorted, stepping into his waiting arms. “Isn’t *that* more unbelievable than a man just going missing for a few months? This kind of thing happens all the time!”

“Usually the man that’s missing isn’t also the man that can fly!” He lifted off the roof and lowered them gently down into the warehouse, scanning for any security cameras that Lois hadn’t already tripped or any waiting goons that hadn’t come after her yet.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to do these investigations as Clark Kent? To actually share a byline for the stories we write? To pick up your old life?”

He could see her eyes pleading with him even in the enclosing darkness. The pang in his chest that made itself present whenever he thought about his old life pulsed. “You know that it would,” he replied thickly.

“Well, then?” she said expectantly, finding her footing on the concrete floor.

“Well, then, what?”

“Well, then, let’s write the story that will bring you back!” She stepped away from him to tug a tarp off of a nearby crate.

He crossed his arms over his chest. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to go along with her plan. Successfully writing this story would mean that they could finally get on with the rest of their lives together – first as partners at the Planet and then as partners in, well, [i]more[/i]. But, as they’d discussed, [i]in depth[/i], they weren’t confident that they’d actually be successful in making people believe the story if they wrote it. And he couldn’t risk his secret that way. Risk her that way.

“We couldn’t come up with anything believable enough,” he reminded her. “We’ve been over this before, Lois.”

“Well, that was before! *Your* memory might be unfailing and eidetic, but most people’s *aren’t*. Memory gets hazy with time. I’d bet at least a third of those witnesses would change their minds about whether you were shot at all, just by hearing *one* other witness swear that you’d dodged the bullets. It happens all the time! Why do you think they separate witnesses to question them?” Still fumbling with the heavy tarp, she glanced around them. “Any of these lead-coated?” she asked pointedly.

“No,” he replied, before continuing their argument, “And what about the bullets? The police couldn’t have missed –”

She cut him off, “I’ve been thinking about that, too, and —”

“Huh,” he said, suddenly distracted.

He was looking intently at the crate she’d been freeing. “What?” she asked, diverted from her line of thought by his tone.

“I think you’ll have to see it to believe it,” he said, pulling the padlock off the hinge she’d been reaching for with a loud metallic crunch. He flipped open the lid and she climbed up the side of the container. He reached in and pulled back another tarp and —

“Guns?!”

“Lots of them,” he confirmed grimly.

She looked around at the crates on every side of them. *It would be an awful lot of weaponry*, she thought, doing some quick mental math based on the crates stacked around her.

“Are there guns in all of them?”

Her partner glanced around at the other crates that surrounded them, “All of them,” he said, with a cold note to his voice.

Guns would certainly be more lucrative than those measly little gems she saw earlier, but... *guns?* Why were

there *guns*? And where were the rest of the diamonds for her story?

“So... there are no diamonds in any of them?” she confirmed, trying to wrap her brain around what was really happening in this warehouse.

He shook his head.

She'd been so sure! She'd seen the little satchel of rough diamonds loaded into the van before it had left. She'd even held them in her hand! But she'd assumed there would have to be more. A lot more. There was just no way that nine measly diamonds had been the whole haul. She'd thought that the satchel just held a sample for potential fences, or something. It wasn't worth putting this whole thing together for one little packet of gems every couple of weeks, even if they *were* diamonds. If it was just that, they'd have to be paying out more than they were taking in on this operation.

Even a dumb criminal would figure that out eventually.

In the meantime, her partner was already getting that melty look in his eye. “Not yet!” she interrupted, throwing a hand out in front of the weapons, just as his eyes began to glow red.

She'd known early on that he hated guns. Recently, the rest of the world had gotten a fresh reminder of that, too. Without an active secret identity to protect, Superman had become slightly more opinionated over the last few months, from reporting unsafe living conditions to the city to speaking out about the clear, to his eyes, effect of cigarettes on the human lung. But his opinion on guns in the urban setting had been the most pronounced. As a rule, he'd begun unabashedly melting any gun in Metropolis that wasn't obviously claimed by a uniformed officer.

Lois had approved wholeheartedly. She got a kick out of seeing the criminals' faces as they stared down at the newly molten, metallic street art that had only a moment before been their weapon. She knew her hero had a more serious intent, of course. Guns ruined lives. It had been a gun that nearly separated them forever, that was still separating them in so many ways.

He looked at her, eyes clear and back to their usual deep chocolate. “What?”

“I think...” Her mind tried to interpret what was off about the pile of brand new semi-automatics she was staring at. “I think...”

What was she missing? Was there some other payment involved? Her instincts were screaming at her that this was a much bigger story than she'd initially believed.

It suddenly clicked.

The diamonds hadn't been stolen in the first place. They'd only looked that way to Metropolis jewelers because their origin had been falsified!

They'd been traded!

“They're smuggling guns!” she cried. “They're sending the guns out and bringing the diamonds in. And I bet there's more money somewhere in this, too! Electronic transfers or something! It's the only thing that makes any sense.”

His forehead creased, trying to follow her logic. “So where are the guns coming from?”

“And where are they going?”

There were only a couple of real options. While weapons were a popular commodity basically everywhere, only a few places in the world were in a position to smuggle American artillery like this right now.

She would know. She'd caught wind of a rumor like this back when Lex had been running the Metropolis underworld, before Clark had joined the Planet. But after starting some initial research, she could never pin it down. Most of the receiving ports she'd looked into were remote, hard to get into, and harder still to get out of. You'd have to basically be untraceable and invulnerable to investigate there.

...*untraceable and invulnerable*, she thought, her eyes settling on the yellow S shield.

“Clark...” Her mind was suddenly moving a thousand miles a minute, faster even than a speeding bullet. “I have an idea.”

“Oh, no,” he said on a groan. “I know that look.”

She grinned at him.

One week later.

He watched as she launched herself out of his arms and stomped into her bathroom, half-blindly grabbing for a clean towel. “Humidity is one thing,” she complained loudly, “but I have never been that hot in my life!” She tried to wipe her face with the towel, then tsked. “Ugh! This mud is so caked on, I'll never get it all off.”

He stifled a chuckle.

“You know, you didn't have to follow that guy into the jungle,” he said glibly.

“Well, you looked busy with the guys firing at us from the truck.”

“Not so busy that I didn't have time to stop that guy from holding your head down in the mud.” The guys with the guns hadn't bothered him much. They'd all been concentrating their fire on the big red and blue target. He'd been so much more afraid of Lois suffocating as the courier they'd been trailing held her face down in a shallow pool of muddy water for what seemed like an immeasurable amount of time.

She glowered at him through the dirt on her face. “I got his shipping lists, didn't I?”

He knew when to stop pushing his luck. She had tackled and disarmed the guy in the first place, anyway.

“You did,” he agreed peaceably.

Casting him a look almost as dirty as she was, she said, “Since not all of us can super-spin, I’m going to have to shower to get this off.” She threw the towel to the ground in defeat. “Good news, though – we don’t have to go back to the Congo,” she said sarcastically. “I brought half the rainforest home on me! I’m sure the next package of diamonds is just buried in this mud somewhere.”

He absolutely did not grin at that.

“Are you hungry?” he asked instead.

She made another sound of disgust, scraping something wet and slimy off her upper arm. “I think I will be, once I feel like a person again instead of a living riverbed. Thai?”

He glanced at the little digital clock on her oven; timekeeping was the appliance’s single use. “I think it’s a little early for lunch in Thailand.”

“Chinese, then?” she substituted, trying to extricate a long prickly frond leaf that was determinedly tangled in her mud-drenched hair.

He walked over and gently pulled it out for her.

It amazed him daily that he was living his life with Lois Lane as his partner, especially now, after everything they’d been through. It might not be exactly the way he’d always pictured it, but it defied his expectations nevertheless.

He bent to kiss her, and she stepped back.

“Don’t,” she said in a grumpy tone, “You’ll just get mud all over yourself again.”

In response, he leaned closer and gently rubbed his thumb slowly over her lower lip, brushing away the single speck of mud there. His breath hitched. He marveled at his response to her, even covered in mud, looking and smelling like she’d been dragged through a burnt-out jungle in the middle of the night.

Which, of course, she had.

Her breathing had unconsciously synced with his, and he caught the moment when her eyes darkened. He bent to kiss her again, then teasingly stopped just short of touching his mouth to hers. She closed the distance, and he grinned into their kiss, thrilling as a spark ran down his spine. He felt her smile against his mouth before he pulled away.

She opened her eyes, and his heart constricted at the emotion he found there.

“Get extra dumplings,” she said, heading back toward the bathroom.

His smile didn’t diminish as he obediently headed for the window, content to use his powers for once not just for the preservation of the endless masses, but solely to make her happy.

Two weeks later.

“Based on the scale of this, whoever’s behind it has to be as rich as Midas,” he said, landing just inside her window, as his cape billowed out and then settled around him.

“Or as rich as Lex,” she rejoined.

“What do you mean?” His brow furrowed as it always did when that name was mentioned. He couldn’t help it. He’d hated the man.

She was sitting on the floor crossed-legged, surrounded by stacks of paper. A couple of them were at least three feet tall.

Tonight, he’d been following a cargo ship that had originated in Metropolis, but sailed to Angola by way of Suriname. He’d watched as the ship docked in Luanda, just a stone’s throw from the Congolese rainforest and the place where they’d nabbed the shipping manifest in the first place, before heading back to her for the night. In the meantime, she’d dove into research, looking for a paper trail that would connect the transit lines he’d been following back to the person behind this whole mess.

Reaching for a page from a short stack beside her, Lois said, “When I did the cost analysis on the transport for the shipping containers you’ve been tracking, it occurred to me that there are only a few people in the world that can afford this. Lex was one of them.”

“And we already think this was his operation to begin with,” he completed her thought. “Luthor was the third richest man in the world, and he lived in Metropolis. He’s the perfect fit.”

“Right, but he can’t be running this operation from beyond the grave.” He didn’t miss her light shiver or the moue of distaste that flashed across her features.

“Someone had to take it over or the shipments wouldn’t keep coming,” she went on, continuing to sort pages and gesturing to the paper castle surrounding her. “I think the top fifty-five richest people in the world could manage this. Luthor supplied the ship and the fake inventory for the initial buy-in, but there’s still someone out there now paying the crew, buying up his old properties, hiring the thugs to transport the stuff from the docks, bribing port officials,” she looked to him for confirmation here, and he nodded, affirming the cash he’d seen changing hands tonight, “and keeping the whole thing running. When I cross-reference the millionaires with who’s been in and out of Metropolis in the last year, and narrow that down to the people with sole interests — meaning they aren’t in a partnership — that leaves us with five.” She cleared her throat. “Four, taking into account Luthor’s death.”

Sour as any mention of Luthor made him, he was impressed. She’d gotten a lot done on her end. “Four is a lot easier than fifty.”

"You're telling me," she said, shuffling the pages in her hand.

"Who are they?" he asked, starting to speed-read through her piles of research.

She gestured to a different pile as she ticked each off her list. "Arthur Chow, who has lived in Metropolis since his wedding; Carol Ferris, the airline heiress; Simon Stagg, who seems to pass through town an awful lot; and Bruce Wayne, the Gotham playboy. Wayne's on the board of two of Metropolis' orphanages, and he's in town often enough."

A memory surfaced of the first time he'd met Luthor. "What about Elena Pappas? Luthor was always lumping her in with Chow as his next two business conquests."

"She's not worth nearly as much since the divorce. Her husband managed to get on the board and they voted her out."

"Ouch," he replied with a wince.

"Misogynistic business practices at their finest," she said wryly.

From her tone of voice, he had a feeling he'd be seeing *that* exposé soon.

He kept them focused. "Ok, so, Chow, Ferris, Stagg, and Wayne. Do you know any of them?"

"We both met Chow the night of that fundraiser magic show. If you could call that a meeting," she said acidly, remembering Cat draped possessively across the man as she threw thinly veiled, gloating barbs at Lois. "I've done a couple of stories on his businesses tangentially, but I really don't know much about him." She shrugged. "It's probably worthwhile trying to line up an interview, even if it's a puff piece. Maybe I can sneak a peek into his desk drawers while I'm there."

He fidgeted, knowing that his expression was bordering on grim.

Of course, she noticed his change in demeanor.

"What?" she asked.

"It's just... tracking down an exclusive interview with a millionaire, breaking into his office... that's how it all started with Luthor. I don't know if it's such a good idea."

The whole thing felt ominous.

Like history repeating itself.

He sighed.

Luthor's ghost wasn't only haunting Lois.

Still, he knew he was being overprotective, and he also knew that she hated when he did that – so he braced for a classic Lois blow-up.

"Things are a lot different now than they were when I met Lex," she said instead, surprising him.

Their eyes met and he read something warm and reassuring there.

This had happened a few times since she'd found him again. He'd said or done something that would have once created an explosion that rivaled the Kryptonian sun. But now, he'd watch her take him into consideration, reading him before she responded in a more measured way. She must have been paying attention that first year, even when she'd pretended she wasn't. Because she was masterfully applying her knowledge of how to handle him now. In the past few weeks, she'd de-escalated a couple of tense moments when they'd stumbled into sensitive spots.

It was yet another reason his heart was irrevocably bound to the small woman sitting on the floor in oversized sweatpants in front of him. She'd not only survived what he'd put her through, but come out of the experience with more compassion for her tormentor. He felt a rush of appreciation for her.

"Anyway," she was saying, "I've never seen Ferris or Stagg in person. I did meet Wayne once at a charity gala. He was cute for a billionaire, I guess, but he wasn't the story I was after that night."

For a woman that didn't actually care much for material wealth, she somehow gravitated toward men that had made it their specialty. He felt his hackles rise again.

She was still sorting the pages she held into the piles to her left. "What did you come up with tonight?"

He chose to let her taste in millionaires go. After all, she'd picked him.

...*Well, what was left of him*, his subconscious nagged. This couldn't have been what Lois had imagined for her life – what she'd wanted in a... partner? Paramour? Gentleman caller? But now wasn't the time to define their definite but murkily demarcated relationship. They had a story to work on and Lois was in the zone.

"They made port in Luanda, just like you thought they would."

"Ah-ha!" She dropped the pages in her hand and twisted behind her to snatch up a different file folder.

"Perfect!"

"What does that mean for us?"

"It means I'm taking Carol Ferris off our list. She's the only one without any interests or known affiliates in Angola or Suriname."

"Down to three, then," he said.

They shared a look. This was good. This was *progress*. *It was more than he could say for the rest of his life*, that vicious little voice in the back of his head reminded him.

"I think with these three, we can start chasing them down. We should divide and conquer," Lois said, tugging his attention back.

He frowned. "More than we already are? It's the middle of the night and I'm just getting back from Africa

while you've been..." his eyes roved over the scene in front of him again and he suppressed a grin, "...building yourself a fort out of printing paper."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

"I don't really like splitting up any more than you do," she shrugged, "but it's the best plan. We should do with these three what we've been doing to track the shipments. I'll start researching and track their movements on paper. When I find something interesting, you can track them down from the air and see if that something *interesting* is something *incriminating*."

His frown deepened. That sounded like a lot of time away from Lois.

"We're usually better when we work together," he pointed out, crouching down to her level, just beside a paper parapet, cape pooling at his feet.

"But splitting up has been working for us on this investigation," she said, leaning forward. "We've never been able to cover this much ground this fast before."

"It doesn't leave much time for anything else."

Her expression was immediately conciliatory. "I didn't mean — You should still prioritize rescues—"

"That's not exactly what I meant," he said slowly, his voice pitched lower. He reached out and tucked an errant strand of hair back behind her ear.

The air thickened between them.

He was rewarded with a faint blush pinking her cheeks.

"Well... anyway, I'm not sure how much further I'd get with the rest of this tonight," she said, gesturing to the mountains of printed sheets organized around her. "I've been at it since I got home." Standing unsteadily, she groaned, "Ugh, of course. My leg's asleep." She shook her left leg.

She hadn't replied directly, but Clark couldn't hide his delight that she'd called off work for the evening. She'd essentially put their relationship before the story, he realized. If he didn't know her this well, he'd have missed how meaningful that was.

But he did know her well.

It was a big shift for them.

It felt good.

Like everything else about Lois, he found that her undivided attention was addicting.

He stood, too, but found that his eyes dropped low again as she bent down to rub the sense back into her calf muscle.

"Just how were you planning to get out of there?" he asked, dragging his eyes from her curves to the paper-ream castle with one eyebrow raised.

"Well, I was hoping my boyfriend would be chivalrous and scale the walls," she said, testing her weight on both legs again.

"Boyfriend?" he asked, stunned at her casual use of the appellation. He hadn't known that word was in her lexicon.

"Chivalrous," she reinforced tartly, gesturing to him.

He floated above the file folder moat she'd enclosed herself in, and held out a hand to her.

She took it, and together they stood on air, gently turning in place.

He shifted so that his arms came around her.

A much-replayed memory surrounded him, and he heard the faint strains of *Fly Me To The Moon* echoing through his consciousness from a year past. Back then, he'd never thought they'd get this far.

"Pizza tonight?" she asked hopefully.

"Boyfriend?" he repeated, knowing there was a goonily happy look on his face.

Her lips curved into a soft answering smile.

"Aren't you?"

"Yes," he answered immediately. He wasn't stupid, after all.

He felt a rush of gratitude. Lois found ways to articulate what he wouldn't dare. It made their relationship somehow more tangible, something he'd needed sorely after every other anchoring aspect of his life fell away.

"So, then, boyfriend, pizza tonight?"

He nodded, still lost in the intimate moment they'd carved out, and she grinned impishly up at him.

"Can I pick the toppings?"

Of course she could.

He'd give her just about anything.

One week later.

"I had a thought," she said cautiously, talking over Clark Gable's antics as he tried to teach the already capable Claudette Colbert how to hitchhike.

"Hmmm," came Clark's contented reply.

They were curled up on her couch together, his cape hugging her shoulders, limbs entangled under a quilt, cuddled closely enough that somehow even her loveseat was comfortable. A black and white movie flickered on the television across the room. Crumpled napkins and cold pizza slices sat on an open grease-stained box in front of them. They'd been on a pizza-around-the-world kick this week. Having made it through New York and Chicago, they'd gotten to northern Italy tonight, much to Lois' delight. He'd taken the time to pick up her weekly supply of Swiss chocolate while he'd been on the continent, too.

It was a rare night for them.

Truth be told, the gun runners had such an immense head start that she was pushing herself and Clark harder than she would have on an average story. She was trying to keep busy and gain ground on them, rather than sit paralyzed, overanalyzing her response to Lex's

involvement in it. She knew she'd never fully let go of the guilt and embarrassment over that mistake of a relationship, and there wasn't much point trying.

And, of course, Superman was always pulled away at some of the truly most inopportune times. She forced down a blush at the thought of his last late-night rescue. Things had just been getting interesting when that faraway look crossed his face.

But tonight he seemed relaxed. At peace. Happy to hold her all night while Claudette Colbert walked all over Clark Gable.

His mere state of relaxation was a rarity in and of itself these days.

On the surface, it seemed that all was right in their world. Lex was gone. Their investigation was progressing. No one had even shot at her in weeks, which had to be a record. And, most importantly, they were together. After a year of tension and clumsily stumbling past each other's subtle attempts to get closer, and after another six months of forced separation, they were finally, finally on the same page.

...Mostly.

She glanced at her tightly drawn drapes. She was always double checking them, now. There was no way they could explain Superman locked in a cozy embrace with Lois Lane while watching *It Happened One Night*.

At Clark's insistence, they had to be careful in public, too, even more careful than when he'd been living in the world as Clark Kent. If either of them acted like Lois-Lane-and-Clark-Kent instead of On-the-Job-Superhero-and-Daily-Planet-City-Beat-Reporter, someone could put the pieces together.

Secretly, she wondered if anyone – except her, of course – could make the connection. But she kept that speculation to herself. She was choosing her battles with Clark more carefully these days – a large factor in why she held herself back from talking Clark out of his newfound, perplexing, and singular dedication to the spandex uniform.

While she had learned to be more circumspect during their time apart, Clark had learned lessons, too. She wondered again if he was taking some of them too far. Checking the water level was one thing. Avoiding water altogether was another. Something in their time apart had made him edgy, almost anxious, and much more wary than he'd ever been before.

She didn't want to ruin the cozy atmosphere tonight, but her brain had been working their problem over anew since they'd uncovered that first cache of guns at the old Luthor Corp warehouse. Their field trip to the Congo had given her another brilliant idea – the one she'd been waiting for.

Now, she just needed to talk Clark into it.

She started off innocuously, "I was just thinking... If either of us had gone alone to the Congo chasing this story, we would have had a hard time reporting in."

"Mm-hmm," he replied into her hair, still mostly focused on Claudette Colbert flagging down a ride by flashing some ankle.

"...And whichever of us went down there would have to be off the grid almost entirely to make it work."

That sounded like she was just thinking it through, right?

"Mmm-hmm," he said again, taking the time to gently nuzzle her temple.

Right.

She leaned into his touch encouragingly, but didn't let it distract her.

"And we'd probably have to be down there for months, right? Maybe even a year."

Slowly, she told herself, *slowly*. This was a sensitive topic for him, she knew.

"And we'd have to be completely untraceable."

The nuzzle had turned into soft kisses.

"And, well, if we put all that together, well... I think this story could be our page eight story,"

She felt him tense.

"Not tonight, Lois..." he said, pulling her closer.

Dammit.

"We need to talk about it, Clark," she said softly.

"We've been through this before," he said, burying his face in her neck as if he could hide from the conversation.

Great Caesar's Ghost, he was at least as stubborn as she was! It almost made her wish she had an Elvis allegory to reach for. It always seemed to work for Perry.

Well, she had a few things that Perry didn't.

She ran her fingers through his hair in a caress.

"I miss you," she said, not having to fabricate the emotion that came with it.

Her other hand moved down to trace the line of blue spandex at his wrist, before gently tugging at it. The Suit had been fashioned to create distance, protecting Clark's identity and therefore those closest to him. But it had somehow morphed into a boundary line that was preventing Lois from becoming closer to him, preventing them from both from moving into a *real* relationship that could go anywhere beyond what the metaphor of the Suit allowed.

"I'm right here," he responded, tightening his arms around her.

It would be so easy to just lean into that embrace and let him distract her tonight. They'd been content to be together, on the couch, dissing American pizza, watching Clark Gable use every trick in the book.

It had been achingly simple.

But the in the next moment, she knew, the phone would ring, or the door would buzz, or her mother would inquire her if she was seeing someone yet — or Lucy would ask her how she was doing in that transparently piteous tone — or Perry would walk past Clark’s desk with his singularly somber look — or Jimmy would accidentally say Clark’s name out loud and the entire newsroom would still, as if bracing for her eventual breakdown — or any of the hundred situations that she had to survive on a daily basis, and that he never had to see, would happen — and it would all get complicated again.

It had already been a month since she’d had this specific burst of an idea, and over two since she’d lost the first fight about the topic in general. If he didn’t want to talk now, another day would go by. Followed by another. And another.

And those days would add up.

A week.

A month.

A year.

A lifetime.

A lost lifetime of what could have been for them.

Now that she’d gotten him back, she wanted that lifetime — a *whole* lifetime, one that was properly complicated, not by his assumed death, but by a host of other daily domestic issues. She wasn’t content with living for the scraps of their days anymore. And based on everything she’d known about her traditional, upstanding, chivalrous, family-oriented, farm-raised do-gooder, she suspected that it would eventually bother him, too.

So instead of indulging in the easy distraction of his comforting embrace, she lightly pushed back, “You know what I mean.”

He made a non-committal noise.

“What if you’d been in Africa this whole time?” she asked gently, cautiously.

She felt him sigh and then he was sitting up, moving away from her. The look on his face made her think this wasn’t going to go well, in spite of how softly she’d led them into it.

“How did I get to Africa when I had three holes in my chest?” His voice was dull.

She’d been working the problem from the other end, so this part wasn’t as fully fleshed out as it should have been. “Maybe you had a little super help with just that one thing?”

“*Super* help,” he practically spat, at once irritated. “I’ve spent the last nine months acting like Clark Kent doesn’t exist so that no one could ever guess that he could be alive, that he could be Superman. And you’re throwing

them together again! Not only that, but you want to publish it!”

Her jaw nearly dropped at his quick turn to anger. *She* was supposed to be the one with the short temper, wasn’t she?

He’d gone on without pausing. “You know how many people hate me. You know what someone could do if they held you or my parents as leverage? What they could make me do?”

He stood, pacing in fear or agitation, she couldn’t tell which. What had happened to him in the six months they’d been apart? She thought she’d seen what his death and subsequent isolation had done to him, thought she’d given him a reprieve and a path to heal. But this paranoia felt fresh, and not healed at all. How did he keep so much of this bottled up?

“I did this for them,” he said, gesturing broadly to the past. “To protect them! To protect you!”

“Clark—” she cut in, hoping to calm him before he said something she couldn’t let lie.

But he didn’t even hear her.

“We have enough trouble with criminals and crazies targeting you, and that’s with just a tenuous, professional connection to me. Imagine what they would do if we flat out told them you were dating Superman! The way things are now, you’re safe.”

He looked heavenward for a moment before amending, “Safer.”

Gaining steam again, he went on, “I won’t just throw away the last nine months now, on the chance that one of your impulsive schemes nabs us a more exciting story!”

She wasn’t the one with heat vision, but she saw red anyway.

Cautious, my foot, she thought.

“Listen, you overgrown boy scout,” she snapped, not letting herself feel guilty about the wounded look that immediately crossed his face.

She stood, squaring off with him, her voice rising to forestall any rejoinder. “Don’t even *think* of putting that on me. *You’re* the one with the hero complex,” she rightly accused, tugging sharply at the corner of his now ever-present cape before snapping it back at him, “but you’ve been forcing it on all of us – me, your mom, your dad. You made this choice for all of us! Not me! I would never, *ever* have let you get into this mess if you’d let me know what was going on when everything happened. But you didn’t tell me. You didn’t tell me *anything*! Not that you were Superman, not how you felt about me, and not that I didn’t, in fact, watch you *die in my arms*, all while you were *protecting* me.”

She could have kicked herself for letting her voice break on those last words. She didn’t want to win this fight

out of pity! She wanted to win out of sheer, overbearing *rightness*.

"You could have asked for my help and you didn't," she continued, in a tone that was much steadier.

Watching his face, she could see that his own fury had fled, and she thought he might finally be ready to listen.

"But you're a lucky man," she said, still stiff but magnanimous, "Because I'm offering to help anyway."

The resistance seemed to go out of him entirely. He sat down heavily in the nearest chair, aside her kitchen table.

"I know you don't seriously believe that I'm trying to use our lives and your identity to get a better story," she said.

He shook his head, then slumped forward to let it rest in his hands.

"So, do you want to tell me what this is really about?"

He sighed, but was quiet.

A moment later, she wondered if he intended to answer. Clark always did have difficulty articulating the more difficult emotions with her, and it hadn't gotten better since he'd decided to reduce his identity to the super-suit. Once she'd realized the truth about his identity in tights, she'd started to suspect his reluctance had come because he'd never spoken his deepest thoughts aloud at all. Tonight was confirming that he instead chose to shield his loved ones from his messiest emotions.

Well, Lois Lane had been forged in messy.

"Clark?" she prodded, keeping her voice soft and open.

He muttered into his hands.

"One more time for those of us without super-hearing?" she asked gently.

"I can't lose you."

"You won't," she assured him firmly, familiar with this litany.

She'd always imagined that Superman's deepest fear was an accidental application of his powers, hurting someone inadvertently. But every action he'd taken and every worry he'd voiced since she'd found him again somehow came back to staying near her and keeping her safe.

It made her wonder...

"But I could," he said darkly. "And I've lost... so much already... and everything else..."

Oh.

Her ears perked. This part of the conversation usually just diverged into a warning about her and his parents needing to be more cautious and to stay away from him in public.

He didn't talk about this part, about how Barrow's shots had really affected *him*.

She crossed the room and perched on her kitchen table beside his chair, hand moving soothingly to his back.

"Perry, Jimmy, everyone in Smallville, my job, working with you. My life." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I can't bring you coffee in the morning or take Jack to a movie or give Jimmy advice on girls."

"I bet Jimmy would love advice about girls from Superman."

He chuckled in spite of himself and looked up at her. "You know what I mean. I can't get a pager or walk you home or rent my own place or get married or have a job." He looked helpless. "I can't have a life."

Privately, she agreed with him. It was killing him to try and contain all of Clark Kent's empathy, wit, passion and life into this superhero's two-dimensional form – and *that* was killing her. But right now, his pain pulled at her, and she reassured herself that the last few months together shouldn't be discounted, that even if the other trappings of Clark's life lay by the wayside, she was still there. And she wasn't going anywhere.

She put a hand to his cheek. "You have a life," she insisted with quiet resolution.

His hand covered hers. The look in his eyes was grateful, at once forgiving and apologetic, adoring.

How could you be so deeply sure that someone was being an addle-brained lunkhead, and still be willing to follow them to the ends of the earth?

Love, the answer came clearly.

The thought was so vivid it shook her for a second.

But, well... obviously. Otherwise, what in the world had they been doing? She pushed all that away to deal with later. One major emotional landmine at a time.

"Clark, if you really want all those things, why not just live under another identity? Louie can get you papers. Good ones. You can start over in another city. You can rent a place, get a job, do anything there, if that's what you really want."

"I really just want you." Her heartbeat sped up as the intent in his gaze intensified. He sighed, and something in his eyes broke. "...But sometimes I get overwhelmed that I'll never have a chance at the other stuff, too."

"You can have it back," she nudged, resuming her train of thought from earlier.

He reached for her, and she slid closer to him, still sitting on the table as his arms wrapped around her waist, burying his head in her lap.

"Can we please talk about this another night? I don't want to fight about it anymore."

She could hear the pleading tenor of his tone and realized, not for the first time, that she wasn't immune to Clark Kent.

She held him tighter.

"Just promise me you'll think about it," she stipulated.

She felt him nod weakly and smoothed her hand across his hair.

Looking down at his slicked hair, she realized how much had changed between them. A year ago, she'd have pushed him until he'd left or they'd imploded again, sending them back to their separate corners until the bell signaled the next round. Tonight she'd stood her ground but taken a much softer approach.

And it had worked.

Instead of separate corners – separate hemispheres – he was curled around her as if drawing strength from the contact. So maybe she *had* learned something worthwhile from the whole lonely, six-month nightmare without him, after all.

The man holding her sighed, finally relaxing into her touch.

Clark learned his own lessons during our time apart, she thought again, fretting anew.

His fear and reticence tonight sparked a deeper concern in her that they hadn't been the right ones. It wasn't like Clark to be angry. It wasn't like him not to have hope.

She held him tighter as her mind worked over her fresh worries for him, for their future. She would figure out a way to save him, the way he'd saved her countless times.

Some jobs were for Superman.

But it looked like sorting Superman was a job for Lois Lane.

Two weeks later.

She shivered.

Summer had come and gone quickly this year, and the chill of fall was starting to creep in early.

Plus, the high altitude probably wasn't helping.

"I think he's in for the night," she said.

He tugged his cape up, wrapping it securely around her and hugging her closer to him.

"I thought that, too, the first few nights. But the house goes dark and then when I scan it, there's no one inside. Sometimes the butler comes back, but even he doesn't show up for hours."

She sighed, resigned to another hours-long stake-out. He could be as stubborn as she was when he got a bee in his bonnet about something. And it was obviously a sore point that this man kept sneaking out from under Superman's watchful eye. So she kept her focus on the softly lit door she'd been assigned while he scanned the interior over and over.

They hung high in the air above a stately manor house on the outskirts of Gotham City.

"Can't you see where they go?" she asked.

"The house is old," he explained, eyes roaming the grounds. "Some of the rooms are coated in layers of lead

paint, and it looks like there's some kind of lead in the pipes and throughout a big slab of the foundation, too. It's like looking through heavy static bars on a black and white television."

They waited.

Suddenly, he tensed.

"Do you see him?"

"No..." he said, his focus trailing off.

Looking up at him, she could see that he was listening to something far away, his attention on the city itself.

"What is it?" she asked, as she felt his shoulders begin to relax.

"It sounds like a break-in at Gotham National Bank."

"Do you need to—"

"No," he said. "Batman is there."

"Do you want to help him? You haven't really introduced yourself, yet."

"I think he's got it under control." He visibly winced. "...although those thieves are going to need treatment for concussions."

He focused on her again fully, leaving Gotham's criminals to their house detective. "I'm not in Gotham much. If I'm spotted here, I'm afraid it'll tip off Wayne that we're onto him – if he's our guy."

She nodded.

They looked back at the mansion house and resumed their watch.

"The bat thing freaks me out a little."

"What?" he asked on a laugh. She'd startled a chuckle out of him.

"Just, like, ew, bats. Gross. Why pick bats? They're just rats, but with wings. ...and making them fly is not an improvement!"

"One day I'll ask him for you."

He kissed the side of her head lightly, still smiling broadly.

Three days later.

"With the fall of Luthor Corp, you've been expanding your business interests in Metropolis over the last year. Is that correct, Mr. Chow?"

"A good businessman always expands and diversifies his portfolio."

A good businessman doesn't bore his interviewers into a stupor, she thought acerbically.

It had been one boiler-plate answer after another with this guy. And worse, she was pretty sure she'd read every one of his answers verbatim in another article about the man already – which meant that it wasn't even worth publishing a single thing he'd said in the last half hour!

Not that she had been banking on too much more, she reminded herself. After all, this visit was supposed to be more of a fishing trip than a real interview.

After noticing the high number of Luthor Corp subsidiaries bought up by Chow's own conglomerate, Lois had started hunting around. That's when she'd noticed that most press releases had been buried on Friday afternoons – a day referred to in her industry as 'trash day,' since readers traditionally missed the end-of-week news as they headed off into more exciting weekend activities. That meant that Friday news went out with the trash as far as the press was concerned.

Chow Consolidated had a lot of trash to take out, it seemed.

Because every release in the past six months was given to the press for their Friday edition. And every single one talked about dismantling the Luthor Corp companies that had been purchased that week, in order to sell them off in pieces.

Not *one* had been sold or dismantled.

She'd seen this kind of disconnect before. In fact, it was straight from the Luthor-shady-business-playbook. And so it wasn't a surprise that something about Chow's own business practices reminded her of the whole ordeal with Lex and the Planet.

And that sort of thing would never happen in Metropolis again on her watch.

Pushing her ever latent fury at Lex aside, she followed up with Chow, "Has your philanthropic portfolio also expanded in proportion to your recently acquired assets?"

"A good businessman always considers the community."

That one had been a direct quote from the Chow Consolidated Code of Conduct.

She glanced down at her notes so that he wouldn't see her roll her eyes.

Having now spoken with the millionaire, she was sure that he was into something he oughtn't be. She just wasn't sure yet whether it was the something she and Clark had been tracking. But she'd find out. Arthur Chow was smart enough and rich enough, but he was no Lex Luthor. *This* overly entitled millionaire wouldn't pull the wool over her eyes.

...Although that might be because every time she closed her eyes in Arthur Chow's presence, she saw Cat Grant sticking her tongue in his ear.

Cat Chow, her bored mind supplied giddily.

She looked up from her notes, renewing her determination to worm a real answer out of her reluctant interviewee.

"Has Chow Consolidated taken on any of Luthor's other affiliates recently?" she asked, too lightly.

She watched him carefully, but his expression didn't change.

The question hadn't been accusatory, but she'd drawn enough of a line to Luthor Corp that it would make a guilty man nervous – if he was the one who'd been picking up Lex's little illegitimate side businesses, that is. She wanted him to at least suspect that she suspected him – if, after all, there was something to suspect here.

But there was a sort of frozen, dead look in his eyes. At first, she wondered if it was panic. But a second later, she reassessed. She'd seen the same expression on other well-to-do men who thought they were above the press. It was usually a sign that they'd mentally checked out during an interview.

"His charities, for example?" she offered smoothly, to continue the conversation.

"Chow Consolidated is a financial supporter of works of greater good in Metropolis."

Not an answer.

At least, not an answer to the actual question she'd asked.

She offered a saccharine grin to match the false smile he was bestowing upon her and pivoted.

"Yes, but aside from the company line, Mr. Chow, would you personally agree that it's a moral responsibility of the upper class to give back to society, rather than capitalize on it for personal gain?"

After all, she reasoned, smuggling guns wasn't exactly a transaction that helped the world at large. She'd seen how this had happened with Lex, too, though admittedly after the fact. His wealth was so extreme that it was isolating. It had left him without empathy for others, but with a solitary hobby of gobbling up everything in sight.

Including her.

"That's the half-hour, Ms. Lane," Chow said, standing. He held out a hand. "It was nice to have met you."

Ugh, she lamented. Thirty minutes and she hadn't even pushed him off script! She must be losing her touch.

She stowed her notepad in her bag and shook the limp hand that was outstretched to her.

Leaving the world's most boring interview behind her, she mentally reviewed whether she'd learned anything she could apply to her current investigation. Chow had confirmed his uptick in travel recently, but hadn't given her specifics. He hadn't even blinked when she'd made the Luthor Corp comparison. That could also mean he was too petrified to blink, though. ...Then again, the man did a fair enough impression of a cold fish that she wasn't even sure he had the imagination to successfully take on Luthor's black market schemes.

Now that she'd set the bait for him, she supposed she'd have to wait to see if anything unexpected pulled on her line in the near future.

A heartbeat later, she was looking down at the rapidly receding city street she'd just been walking on.

"Cl-Superman!"

Not this again, she bemoaned inwardly, her arms automatically circling his neck. She'd thought they'd left the unexpected pick-ups behind them.

"What were you doing in Arthur Chow's office?"

He sounded mad.

Why in the world was *he* angry? She was the one who'd just spent a whole half hour of her life with a living, breathing press release.

"I was interviewing him."

"You were practically accusing him of taking over for Luthor!"

"I was *not*!" she threw back, insulted. "I was just setting up the pieces for him in case he already knew what I was talking about. And since you were listening in, you'll notice he didn't take the bait."

"You're being too direct, Lois. We talked about this and we both agreed to investigate more cautiously," he reminded her chidingly, eyes still ahead of them.

She still agreed with that in concept, but he was taking it too far in practice. She had to do *something*, and this was barely even poking a sleeping bear!

"I *am* being cautious. Except for being plucked off a public street in broad daylight by a flying Kryptonian in brightly-colored spandex, it's been a quiet day."

He had the grace to look chagrined at that.

"I thought we weren't supposed to be seen together," she nudged.

"I know," he grimaced. "I just – I saw you with Chow and I got worried," he said, finally making eye contact with her, his face softening.

"You broke the ru-ules," she chimed in a sing-song voice.

To her delight, he looked even *more* chagrined.

She looked out over the horizon, taking in the cityscape and the view that only Superman could offer her. "While we're up here, I can think of a way you could make it up to me."

His eyes darkened a little, his arms hugging her a little closer. "Don't you have to go back to the Planet?"

"We could always take the scenic route before you drop me off," she suggested, her fingers flirtatiously tracing the 'S' over his chest.

He kissed her temple in agreement, changing their course.

But he still looked troubled.

"You don't have to worry so much," she said reassuringly, one hand moving to his cheek. "We've been at this for months and nothing's gone wrong. No one knows we're working together. Not even Jimmy has any idea what we're investigating. Who's going to catch on to us now?"

Two days later.

"Superman!"

Her voice was shrill as she flung herself to the floor behind the carved-up frame of a white cargo van resting on cement blocks near the center of the room. Her hands instinctively came up to cover her head.

Hopefully these guys aim as well as they cover their tracks, she thought as she heard the safety snap off somewhere behind her.

She slipped against the smooth floor, then intentionally leaned into her momentum to slide even further, aiming to align herself with the back tire of the parceled van.

She overshot the mark, sliding past her cement block cover.

"Superman! Help!" she shrieked.

He didn't immediately appear at her side.

She tried to crawl or slide further backward to the van she'd skidded past, and the relative safety of the cinder blocks in the wheel well.

But the goons had finally caught up with her.

The first gun went off, striking just to her right.

At least partially obscured by the van, she went still and curled into a fetal position to create less of a target. No sense in helping the violent fools.

The first shot was followed by a second, closer this time, and pinged off the metal frame just above her.

She tightened herself into an even smaller ball.

A third shot, closer still.

"Superman! Now!"

She heard the unmistakable sound of a semi-automatic.

She sent a plea out into the universe. *Please don't let me die at the hands of thugs this epically stupid.*

The rain of bullets began in a staccato hail – and just as suddenly became muffled.

"You lost the bet this week," came a voice in her ear.

"I lost the bet this week," she acknowledged in relief, still lying on her side, but now relaxing, huddled safely under his cape, his steel frame between her and the gunmen.

"Are you—"

"I think I'm fine," she said, not moving as her heart rate slowed, knowing that he was already scanning her anyway.

"Why are you covered in..." he sniffed experimentally. "Oil?"

That was a long story.

She sighed, then grumbled, “There’s a vat of it in the back.”

“And you wanted to see what was at the bottom?”

She didn’t dignify him with a reply.

A fluorescent bulb caught a stray bullet above them and exploded. He leaned over her a little further and twitched his cape up to fully cover her head, protecting her from the sparks that rained down.

Tiny glass fragments showered the ground around them like tinkling iridescent snow.

It would have been pretty, if not for the threat that one stray spark would set her on fire.

“So no cache of guns?”

She shook her head, hearing one of the idiots reload. “Just these miscreants. And no diamonds. But no cargo van that’s actually in one piece, either,” she indicated the partial frame a couple feet behind them, “so they could have moved it all before I got here.”

He glanced back over his shoulder and a second later she heard one of the punks drop their gun, screeching over the pain in his hand. It looked like they were about to have more melted metallic artwork in their future. She’d be sure to compliment it on the way out.

...Right after she called the MPD to pick up these idiots. They weren’t even supposed to be here. She’d staked out this site to get the pattern of their comings and goings down. For some reason, the goon squad had changed their routine in the last two days.

“Lois?”

That level of untamed mischief in his voice was never a good sign.

All she wanted was a hot bath somewhere far away from all the gun-fire and broken glass, but she’d just bet that her impenetrable shield would continue to sit there immovably until he’d had his fun. It’s not like the bumbling thugs behind them were really a threat at this point. She could hear two of them trying to work out how the still-melting gun had become welded to the floor.

“Yes?” she ground out.

“Why are you barefoot?”

She could *hear* his smile, which added another layer of annoyance heaped upon this entire, awful, *misbegotten* day.

And *honestly*, were these punks ever going to stop shooting? All they were doing was keeping her pinned in place so that he could tease her. She wouldn’t forgive them for *that* as easily as she would for the bullets.

“I broke a heel,” she said, fully aware that it came out as a whine. She’d *liked* that pair.

“That means shoe shopping this weekend,” he replied cheerily. “You like shoe shopping.”

The words sounded placating, but she didn’t have to look at him to know that he was laughing at her again.

“Oh, shut up.”

He didn’t know it yet, but he was *definitely* flying her to Milan for those new heels after this was over.

Two days later.

The clock along the wall from the elevator hit the ‘one’ for the second time in Lois’ work day.

She picked her head up off the desk, shoving away the spreadsheet she’d been dangerously close to drooling on, and capping the open highlighter.

“Jimmy, how’s it coming?” she called, fatigued and impatient at the same time.

“It’s not like you asked for something easy, Lois!” came his frustrated voice from a few desks over. “This guy’s got 16 accounts across about a dozen countries, and those are just the ones I can find,” Jimmy stalled, gesturing briefly to the monitor in front of him, before his screen changed and he returned to his furious typing. “I’m not even getting into his Swiss account on my own and the encryption on the Cayman gateway times out and resets after a certain point, so I have to start over every few minutes!”

A breeze disturbed the papers on the desks around them.

“Lois, how’s it coming?”

“S-Superman!” No matter how many times he met the hero, Jimmy still sounded impressed.

“Hi, Jimmy,” Superman said, in as non-Clark a voice as he could muster in the all too-familiar settings.

He looked at Lois, “So? How’s it coming?”

In reply, she made a series of frustrated gestures toward their favorite office gopher.

“The engines are starting up on Chow’s private plane, and somehow Wayne just completely vanished,” he said in a rush. “Who am I going after?”

“Bruce Wayne?” came Jimmy’s astounded voice from behind them.

“We’re still working on Chow’s accounts,” she said, her already long night evident in her beleaguered tone.

“The meeting is set for tonight,” he said urgently.

“I know that!”

“I need to pick one.”

“I *know* –” she snapped back.

“Right now,” he prodded, motioning to the open window.

“We haven’t had enough time to get into their accounts!”

“If I don’t go right now, I’ll lose them both!”

She hesitated, digging for that reporter’s instinct that she trusted not to fail her.

“Lois!” he interrupted her concentration.

“I don’t know!” she all but shouted back.

He put his hands up. “Ok, ok. I’m sorry.”

They took a beat to exchange a silent apology.

He took a breath and said, “I’m going to go back to Gotham. Wayne keeps disappearing on me and I can’t figure out how.” He turned and started to float up toward the double window on the second floor.

Lois turned that over in her mind. She’d met Bruce Wayne in person once. He’d clearly cast himself in the role of entitled playboy, but there was something too intense about him for her to entirely buy it. He’d struck her as someone who wore his demons close to the vest, but not someone who was morally bankrupt. Maybe the opposite, actually. In fact, if she had to make the comparison, something about him somehow reminded her much more of Clark than of Lex. A liar, maybe... But despotic? ...not quite. Everything in her mind screamed at her that Wayne felt like the wrong mark.

Chow, though...

“No!”

He turned back to her mid-air. “No?”

“It’s Chow.”

“You’re sure?”

She fretted, wringing her hands “No!”

“Lo-is!”

“It’s not Wayne! The timing of his disappearances doesn’t match up to any of this. Whatever he’s doing when he shakes you, it’s not this.”

Her instincts were good enough for him. “Ok, Chow, then. I’m headed back to the airport.”

“Stay safe,” she said on impulse.

His eyebrow quirked.

“If one corrupt millionaire had kryptonite, they all might,” she expanded, unable to quell a worry that she didn’t understand.

Tonight was important. They knew the meeting with the gun runners was happening in the next couple of hours, but they didn’t know where it was. They had to pick one of their suspects and follow them, hoping they’d guessed who was guilty correctly. Even knowing they could be following a dead end, she couldn’t shake the feeling that this whole investigation was coming to a sudden head.

“I’ll be careful, Lois,” he assured, his voice warming her sudden chill.

They shared another meaningful look before he blurred out of sight.

The paper in the newsroom fluttered, and a second later she heard his tell-tale sonic boom.

“Wow,” said Jimmy’s awed voice behind her. “I didn’t know we were working with Superman.”

Lois suppressed an eye roll. She loved Jimmy to death, but sometimes...

She shook her head ruefully. Then again, after that patented Clark-and-Lois newsroom exchange, she should be grateful that their only witness was the king-of-missing-the-obvious.

Taking a new breath, she turned back to him and said, “We still need a paper trail to back him up. Let’s see how many of those accounts you can crack before Perry sends you out for donuts.”

Forty minutes later.

“Lois?”

She looked up from the coffee pot she was waiting on, still restlessly tapping her fingers against the top of the counter.

“Remember when you asked me to cross reference everything on that old Luthor hard disk for the ‘antiques’ tag?”

That woke her up more than the coffee ever would.

But she reminded herself to focus. ‘Antiqxes’ hadn’t been on the illicit activity shopping list for tonight. “I thought you were working on the Channel Islands account,” she said sternly, trying to keep Jimmy focused on the task she needed most.

He clicked into another window to confirm. “The decryption program is still running.”

She couldn’t resist. Flipping the switch back off the coffee pot, she crossed the pit toward Jimmy’s desk. “What did you find?”

“Well, on the list you’ve been working with, ‘antiqxes’ was listed twice. But yours isn’t the most updated version.”

“How do you know?”

“The timestamp on the digital file. There’s a newer version on the hard drive you brought me from Luthor Corp, and it’s dated a couple weeks after yours. Actually, it was updated the day before your wedd—I mean, the day before Luthor jump— uh, here, take a look.”

She leaned over his screen, ignoring the foot wedged in Jimmy’s mouth. He was right. The version she’d been working off of was nearly two weeks older.

“Can you tell what the changes are?” she asked.

“Yeah. I pulled up both versions and ran a comparison through the software. In the new version, it didn’t find the word ‘antique’ at all, even with your ‘x’ spelling.”

Her brows knitted together.

“But it did find a new word - fertilizer.”

She pieced that together. So the ‘antique’ code had been replaced by ‘fertilizer.’ Why would Lex have changed his code for *this* on the day before his wedding?

She felt suddenly apprehensive, wondering if it hadn't been a mere organizational update that had driven the name change. What had happened? What fresh horror had Lex been planning as a lead-in to his wedding? She made a mental note to ask Clark later. She'd noticed that he was always cagey about the details when conversation about that day came up, but she'd never pressed him about what she'd assumed was just an old jealousy.

"Fertilizer?" she wondered aloud.

"Yeah. But it's weird. He spelled it wrong, too."

Her heart raced. "What?"

"F-e-r-t-i-l-i-x-e-r."

Lex's code.

Her instincts launched into high alert.

"How many times is that word in the document?"

"Three."

Three.

Three of Lex's x's.

"Show me."

He clicked through the document for her. The first one was near Suicide Slum. That was the one she'd raced to first. The second one had been just a few blocks from Lex Tower, and she'd gotten to that one, too.

"C'mon, Jimmy," she prodded impatiently. "Where's the third one?!"

He clicked ahead again.

"It's down on Baxter Avenue," he said, reading from the screen.

X marks the spot, she thought.

She was already racing to her desk to grab her coat and keys before the thought was complete in her mind, heart in her throat.

There was a third stash of kryptonite.

"Keep working on Chow's accounts! If you strike out, start on Wayne's. Any suspicious activity in Wayne's, start yelling your head off for Superman and don't stop until he shows up or I get back!"

She grabbed her coat without stopping and picked up speed as she headed for the ramp.

"Where are you going?"

She punched the button for the elevator. "Baxter Avenue!"

Twenty minutes later.

Lois bit back a curse as her foot slid on the loose gravel beneath her. Her heels really weren't up for this sort of thing, and she missed her usual after-hours prowling-around sneakers. She had half a mind to step out of the stylish pumps entirely, but, as she'd been reminded all too recently by her ill-fated oil dip, running in heels was still a step up from running barefoot.

She planted her feet solidly beneath her and cupped her hands to peer through the dusty window in front of her. Inside, large wooden crates sat piled high, shrouded in long shadows. Cobwebs stretched across the gaps between them, dust motes clinging to the gossamer.

The place looked deserted.

Maybe there wouldn't be any running at all tonight, she thought with uncharacteristic hope.

The Baxter Avenue address had led her to a nondescript storage building. It had a smaller blueprint than most of Lex's other properties, but was two stories. The sign had been removed, though weather and age had stained the lettering indelibly on the building: The Exhibit Supply Company.

It had been impossible for her to miss the 'x' in the name.

She swallowed. Whatever she found in this warehouse had been one of Luthor's last acts on Earth. The thought sent a chill down her spine.

Moving around the side of the building, she had discovered that the little warehouse boasted a dark green door.

She tried to ignore the foreboding that had settled over her as she'd left the green door untouched and slipped around the back to the window she was currently peering through. Pushing against the window, it was unwilling to budge. Either locked or stuck, she decided it wouldn't offer her the discreet way in that she was searching for.

Moving further along the building, she came to a fire escape that led up to the second floor. Taking a quick look around and not catching any movement, she decided that 'up' usually worked out well for her, and reached up to mount the ladder, speedily making her way upward. Finding a door at the landing, she quickly got to work with her lock picks.

It snicked open obediently a moment later.

She paused again, listening intently at the cracked door. When there wasn't any indication that someone had heard her, she opened the door quickly, slipping inside and pulling it nearly closed behind her.

Silence and darkness met her inside.

When nothing moved, she pulled her penlight from her pocket and switched it on.

The short hallway she now stood in offered two other doors in front of her and a staircase to her right. She glanced down into the shadowy bowels of the building but couldn't see further than the top-most steps. But she didn't see anyone lumbering up out of the darkness, so that meant no one had seen her, either.

Holding the penlight in her mouth, she grasped the knob of the door that she'd just come through in both

hands and quietly closed the door all the way, letting the latch fall silently back against the strike plate.

Now she had to be sure that there was no one else upstairs, that no one could come up from behind and surprise her when she made her way down to investigate the storage area below.

She moved quietly toward the farthest hall door and grasped the knob. Moving slowly, she turned it as silently as she could until she felt the latch recede.

She held her breath as she counted silently.

3...

2...

1...

She flung the door open quickly and cast her tiny light across the room.

Completely empty.

She checked behind the door and then gave the room a slower, more thorough look.

There was nothing there.

She lowered her light.

It was odd. She'd almost expected there to be someone waiting for her inside. Her senses were still on high alert from thinking she might run into kryptonite, but her instincts were screaming something else at her, too.

As if she weren't alone in this building.

She stepped back out of the room and moved toward the second door.

Grasping it tightly, she cautiously turned back the latch and held her breath again, for luck.

3...

2...

1...

Her penlight swept the room.

Nothing.

Huh.

She'd felt sure that there had been someone in here.

She glanced behind her into the hall.

No one.

"Clark, are you here?" she whispered as quietly as she could.

Silence.

"Clark, this isn't the time to jump out and yell 'boo.' This place gives me the creeps."

He might joyfully tease her through these situations, but if he was nearby, he'd be able to hear her hammering heartbeat, and he'd go out of his way to keep her from being afraid.

That meant he wasn't here.

She really was on her own for this one.

To ease her mind, she swept her penlight over the empty room a second time.

And that's when she saw it.

The open window.

She threw her light across the room again, into the corners and across the ceiling before stepping inside and checking behind the door.

There was no one else in the room.

Crouching down, she moved her light across the floor near the window. The bare floorboards didn't look particularly weathered.

She cautiously crossed the room and placed her palm on the wood below the sill. It has been a chilly, wet spring and a rainy summer in Metropolis. The windowsill showed none of the warping that you'd expect from wood that had been exposed to the elements for weeks. So it hadn't been open all summer, she concluded.

That meant someone had opened it recently.

She ran her hand questingly around the whole frame, but the window didn't offer her any other clues.

She quickly crossed the room again, back the way she'd come, shutting the door behind her. After flicking her light across the hall to be sure she was still the only one there, she switched it off.

There was no one upstairs.

She looked toward the black expanse of the descending staircase.

It was time to see if that was also true of the floor below.

She stood with her back to the door, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. If she was headed downstairs, the staircase was her only option. But if there was someone else in the building, she'd be a sitting duck heading down the stairs with a light. Maybe if she snuck down in the dark, it wouldn't be as easy to spot her.

Once she could see well enough to make out the silhouettes of the other doors in the hall, she crossed to the stairs and crouched down. Holding onto the railing, she took two steps down.

The stair creaked beneath her.

She froze.

If someone was there, they'd have heard that.

She strained her eyes to peer into the darkness in front of her for several silent seconds.

It was as still as a cemetery.

No one sounded an alarm or came running. Her brow furrowed as she considered the possibilities. Maybe whoever had been here had come and gone already? She slowly took one more step down, aiming for the side of the staircase where the wall opened up. She leaned down to look beneath the wooden railing, and the first floor came into view.

It was *very* dark. What little light came in from the windows was obstructed immediately by the first row of crates nearest them. The crates that she was here to search

were stacked everywhere, in some places up to the ceiling, giving the warehouse a labyrinthian quality. It looked spooky, at best.

She threw a quick prayer out to the universe that the winding trails through the building were the only similarity to a labyrinth that she'd encounter tonight. Because labyrinths weren't just dangerous because you could get lost in them. ...They usually had a monster protecting them from intruders.

Stop it, she told herself bracingly. Forget the creepy nightmare, and get the kryptonite.

Scanning the floor below, she didn't see anyone else's lights or movement as she panned across the graveyard of Lex's crumbled empire, and that was the important part.

She stayed low. Crablike, she tiptoed her way down the staircase. Pausing at the bottom, she looked for labels on the three closest crates. 'Cables,' 'pipes' and a general 'electrics' tag. Her upper lip rose in distaste at her findings. Not what she was looking for. She chose the path beyond the crate labeled 'electrics.' On that first investigation with Superman as her partner, they'd figured out that anything labeled 'electrics' was really hiding something much more illicit.

Maybe the coded tag for drugs would lead to the more illicit cargo, like a box with the coded tag for kryptonite?

As she moved, she glanced down at the floor, and with a shock, stopped still.

There were footprints.

The hair rose on the back of her neck. Usually, she'd be thrilled to find evidence that she was on the right track. But the haunted house feeling had paired with this investigation's constant reminders of Lex in her mind, and by this point, she couldn't ignore the clawing fear that she was heading toward a monster in the heart of the labyrinth after all.

Her eyes flicked nervously from side to side, scanning the darkness again.

Why had the only night Clark was truly unavailable been the one night she just had to come sneaking through one of Lex's eerie mystery warehouses?

In spite of the chill she was fighting off from the sight of the footprints in the dust, she decided to follow them.

She skulked along down a row of boxes, keeping her footsteps light while constantly checking back over her shoulder. Being in the maze, it felt like there were even more crates than it had looked like from above. She read the labels on them as she passed.

Still following the footprints, she came to the corner of her row of crates when her eye caught something.

The label on the side of this crate read 'Fertilixer.'

Her muscles tensed.

This was what she'd been looking for!

Please let it be here! She begged the universe.

If she could rid the world of just *one* piece of kryptonite, she might be able to make up for some of the pain she'd caused him over the Lex debacle. If she could just find one piece, Clark would be that much safer. She remembered what it had been like during those desolate months after she thought he'd been shot. Her whole world had become unbearably bleak.

Back then they'd only been friends. Plus, she'd still have had Superman to rely on. She wouldn't have that kind of fallback now, if anything really happened to him. And now that they were so much more...

No, she couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to Clark now.

When this was over, they really needed to have a talk about the rest of their lives. Over the last few months, it had become more than apparent to her that he was hurting and not healing from the loss of his non-super life. Her initial flicker of desire that they needed to do something about his frozen emotional recovery had built to a near-inferno that was now threatening to escape and light them both on fire, invulnerable or not. She vowed that she was going to do whatever it took to stop Clark Kent from letting his life pass him by.

But first, she thought, with renewed determination, she was going to destroy this kryptonite.

A few moments earlier.

A rustle of wind preceded his arrival by a millisecond, and he had time to scan the newsroom before a nearby voice stuttered his name.

"Sup- Superman!"

"Hi, Jimmy," he said reflexively, wondering where Lois was. He gently expanded his hearing outward from the bullpen, searching for the single heartbeat that he knew best in the world.

"I- I, uh, finished the search Lois had me running," Jimmy reported.

Right, he remembered. Lois had been trying to track the funding for all the thugs and bribes through Chow's and Wayne's multitudinous bank accounts. That had been her half of the job tonight. Jimmy was clearly still running down the information for her.

He blinked, pausing in his hunt for her heartbeat just after discovering that she wasn't in Perry's office. Reining in the impulse to ask where Lois was, he instead replied to the eager young man's pronouncement.

"Did you find anything?" he asked, absently extending his hearing down to the newspaper morgue, half his mind still on Lois.

"I cracked the Cayman account!" the young hacker said with pride.

Clark felt his own reporter's instinct come rapidly online, and he zeroed in on the computer in front of his friend. He crossed toward Jimmy with alacrity, and leaned over to see his monitor, one hand on the back of his chair. In spite of the billowing cape that was just settling around him, it was an accustomed tableau that was no longer his daily custom. He reminded himself to ignore the resulting pang. Superman did not work in a newsroom.

"Here," Jimmy said, drawing his attention back by hovering his cursor over an amount, a string of transaction numbers beside it. "This \$5000 withdrawal was wired out of the account on the day before Lois said the last bribe was given at the port in Suriname." He scrolled down and hovered his cursor over another similar line item. "And this \$5000 withdrawal was wired out on the day before the bribe at the Luanda port."

This was good! It might be circumstantial, but it was a trail! And paired with what he'd overheard tonight, it might be even more than that. "Are there any more of these?"

"Yeah," the gopher scrolled down again, nodding, "they're pretty regular. There's even a kind of a pattern." Jimmy quirked his eyebrows, reading down the screen.

"Call the Port of Metropolis and see if you can get a hold of the itinerary for this ship," he said, grabbing a pen off Jimmy's desk and jotting the name on the pad there. "The *Arianna*. See if the rest of Chow's withdrawals line up with her stops. And see if they can give you the name of the carrier or the consigner. Now that we know it's linked back to Chow, his name has got to be there somewhere."

"You got it," Jimmy said, and Clark found himself unexpectedly disappointed not to hear the affectionate 'CK' at the end of his friend's sentence.

The light twinge near his heart made him immediately yearn for Lois, and the comfort he'd come to associate with her. It was then that he realized that he hadn't seen her since he'd arrived back at the Planet. He extended his hearing quickly down to the lobby before swinging up to the roof in a last bid to find her.

She wasn't there.

"Did you say *The Arianna*?" Jimmy interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes. Why?"

"I've seen that name recently," Jimmy said, his brow furrowing in thought. "But it wasn't connected to Chow."

"What was it connected to?" More than a ruffling of his reporter's instincts, his whole nervous system was now on edge.

"Uh..." Jimmy stared at the paper Clark had written on as if it would hold the answer he was looking for. Then all at once the confusion cleared. "I remember! Here." The gopher clicked into a new window at his computer and

Clark leaned over to look at the screen again. It was an inventory list. And it looked familiar. The company logo at the bottom was unmistakable.

Cold gathered in the pit of his stomach.

"Jimmy..." he regulated his voice carefully, using the superhero tenor to mask his immediate worry, "where's Lois?"

"Oh, she ran out a while ago."

He felt his heart stutter as he stood to move in front of Jimmy. Lois was only moving at a run these days if something big was happening – and that *something* usually had to do with an awakening Hydra head of Lex Corp.

"Ran out?" he prodded.

"Uh, yeah," Jimmy said, putting his hand to the back of his neck and leaning back in his chair, "She was looking for something of Luthor's."

Luthor.

Again.

A chill raced down his spine.

There were suddenly too many Luthor-related coincidences popping up at every turn of this investigation. He had to go after her. Right away.

"Where?" he asked, ineffectually pushing down the fear that was now surrounding his heart. She'd gotten a head start on him while he'd been watching Chow. By now, anything could be happening!

"Is something wrong?"

"Where, Jimmy?" he repeated urgently, no longer bothering to mask his fear in his haste.

Jimmy leaned forward again and clicked his mouse. "4815 Baxter Avenue," he read off the screen.

Clark was in the air before Jimmy finished his sentence, racing south, barely hearing his own sonic boom as it reverberated in his wake, shaking the windows of the Planet and the buildings he left behind.

He'd had an increasingly uneasy feeling since he'd left Lois over an hour ago. He'd even thought that he'd heard her calling for him, whispering his name – though he'd shaken that off, attributing it to his overactive and, as she described it, overprotective imagination.

...But what if that had really been her calling for him?

What if she'd needed him, but couldn't scream?

What if he hadn't come when she'd called?

He poured on the speed, cursing his synapses for moving as fast as the rest of his body, since as he flew, they were throwing up panicked images in his mind's eye of Lois in danger – falling from a building, ducking as an assailant reached menacingly toward her, stumbling down a dark alley, clutching a too-wet wound in her middle, her unmoving form lying still in a fire-ravaged jungle.

He'd left the Planet only a second ago, and Baxter Avenue was already coming into view ahead of him now.

Instead of using his vision to hunt for the address, he put all of his focus into listening for her heartbeat.

There weren't many signs of life nearby. The rundown warehouse district he was speeding over was nearly empty tonight.

The first he picked up wasn't hers. It was weaker, and he could hear a cough rattling through the lungs adjacent to it.

The second pulse was so fast that it was easy to identify as a cat, and he moved on.

The third was too heavy, with a smaller echo, as if the arteries were clogged.

And then...

An achingly familiar rhythm.

Lois.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he turned slightly left and began to descend in her direction.

But the sigh caught in his throat.

Her heartbeat was faster than usual.

Too fast.

She was nervous.

No, he corrected, listening more intently.

She was *afraid*.

His own fear cemented, hardening into a cold lump in his stomach. He would never forgive himself if something happened to her. Lois had been a crucial part of his life even before his world had severely narrowed in scope. Now, she'd become so important to him that he wasn't entirely sure he could survive without her.

He didn't want to try.

He was racing whatever she was hiding from, he knew.

As he sped toward the warehouse, he sent up a silent prayer that he'd won this race.

...It was then that his hearing picked up the second heartbeat.

His x-ray vision tore through the walls between them, seeking her out.

With a shock of brutal recognition, he caught a glimpse of the scene below and pulled himself sharply out of his near-wild descent, calculating the odds against what he was seeing. .

Sickly stunned, he felt his impenetrable heart break in unstoppable anguish.

He couldn't...

He couldn't save her.

Lois!

In the midst of the shadowy, silent warehouse, Lois crept over toward the other side of the 'fertilixer' crate, intent on her search for kryptonite.

Suddenly, something brushed against her ankle and she twisted around, hands coming up to fight whatever

minotaur had finally come upon her. The cobweb tickled her ankle as she looked at it, and she bit back a gasp before shaking it away carefully. She swallowed down the need to exhale a deep breath as she felt it drop away, and continued on her quiet path. Finally arriving at the corner of the crate, she reached for the latch.

There was no lock.

Looking down around her, she saw the padlock lying on the cement floor inches from her feet.

Someone had beaten her here!

She cursed under her breath, but didn't move away.

She had to be sure.

Pulling the latch back, Lois slid the lid off the crate, moving the heavy, rough-hewn rectangle as quietly as she could. Pen light in hand, she clicked it on and stepped up onto its thick wooden baseboard, leaning over to see inside.

It was empty, like the other two 'antiques' locations.

Her heart dropped in disappointment.

She'd let Clark down again.

This meant that the danger was still out there.

"Looking for this, my dear?"

There was so much scorn in the voice, it sent a frisson of fear through her heart.

Startled, she slipped from her perch and looked up, eyes racing to meet the silhouette of a tall man in the shadows, his hair askew, with the outline of a long, flowing trench coat. His hand was outstretched – and emanating from it was a wicked green light.

Her mind blanked in fear as she had the impossible thought that she really *had* been chasing ghosts.

She knew it was entirely irrational but, "Lex?"

The patronizing chuckle that followed could have been his.

Almost.

"Unfortunately, not," the voice said, tugging at her memory. "I'm afraid you really did send Mr. Luthor to an early grave." The accent was cultured.

She blanched, pushing down the otherworldly panic, and tipped her penlight up toward his face.

"Nigel," she concluded, surprised.

"I wish I could say it was nice to see you again, Ms. Lane." His face took on a hard look. "But you've been a thorn in my side for too long to afford you such niceties."

"A thorn in *your* side?" she asked, stunned.

"That's right. You were insufferable enough as Mr. Luthor's fickle paramour. But no matter how you got in the way then, I was still paid. Now when you get in the way, it's a threat to my livelihood."

What had she stumbled into? Was Nigel selling kryptonite?

“Your livelihood? What are you talking about? I haven’t come near you.”

“Haven’t you? Then it must have been someone else who stole my courier’s shipping manifest. And someone else that had half my transport team arrested at the warehouse two days ago. And someone else that undermined my business partner’s confidence with her hapless little interview earlier this week.”

The penny dropped.

“No, no, Ms. Lane. You’ve been a thorn in my side *all summer long*.”

Nigel was her gunrunner.

“But.... you?” She spluttered. “It couldn’t have been you.”

“You never were as clever as you thought you were.”

“But...” No. The pieces didn’t add up. “But the boats changed their path. Lex never had the contacts in Suriname.”

“Contacts can be made. Or eliminated,” he added with light menace.

Her mind spun against the impossibility that, in spite of everything she’d done...

The House of Luthor had crumbled.

But it had not fallen.

On top of that, someone else had moved into the ruin.

She realized that the ground had fallen out from under her instead.

“But you couldn’t have afforded to keep this all running,” she accused wildly.

“Millionaires are all much the same,” Nigel replied sedately. “I find that catering to one is much like catering to another. It was not difficult to change company from Mr. Luthor to Mr. Chow.”

“Chow!” She’d been right! “You’re working for Arthur Chow?”

“During the Luthor Corp buyout, Mr. Chow let it be known that he was interested in unique opportunities to increase his holdings, especially those that were less than ...traditional. He was more than happy to offer a generous compensation package to someone who already knew the internal workings of this operation.” His smile was smug. “As I said before, new contacts can be made.”

Now that she’d uncovered the mystery, her brain was starting to assess her own situation – and the question skittered across her mind whether her own curiosity really would be what killed her, as the adage went. The fact that Nigel had both a grievance against her and a lot to lose by letting her go made that gun in his hand much more dangerous. Lucky as she often was, she was no match for a competent MI6 agent. Her little defense classes wouldn’t stand up to his professional combat training. She had to think quickly, buy herself some time. He’d said that she

was insufferable. Maybe she could irritate him – angry men made mistakes.

She put on her most unimpressed voice. “So you keep Luthor’s operation afloat by getting into bed with Chow. Does *he* think of you as a servant, too?”

“He thinks of me as a vital component in a lucrative operation.”

Nigel seemed a little too unaffected. So she pushed it.

“Just another cog in the wheel,” she dismissed, taunting him. “Just like with Luthor. You should have heard what he said about you when you weren’t around.”

That scored a hit – she saw a tick near his temple.

“You should hear what he said about *you* when *you* weren’t around,” he responded. She didn’t want to know, and her stomach turned at the thought. Nigel gave as good as he got.

“Now, then. Call for Superman.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Call for Superman.”

Her eyes flicked down to the fatal green rock still bathing him in an ugly, ethereal light. Did Nigel know what he was holding? He had been Lex’s right hand man, but Lex saved his trump cards for himself. Regardless, she wouldn’t call for Clark with that awful green crystal in the room. But she couldn’t risk letting Nigel know that. Maybe she could bluff them both out of this.

“Why on earth would you want Superman to come here and catch you raiding Luthor’s old junk? Why are you even here?”

“I expect for the same reason you are. Because we’re both heading into the endgame of our little chess match.” His hand tensed and the green glow shifted across his features.

“You see, tonight your big blue wonder is following Mr. Chow’s private jet to a meeting that he wasn’t invited to. It would be better if he didn’t attend. So while Mr. Chow continued on to his appointment, I came here to acquire an antique. ...or should I say ‘fertilizer?’” Nigel grinned. “Mr. Luthor had always hoped to sprinkle the dust of this particular Kryptonian antiquity over Superman’s grave.” Nigel turned thoughtful. “Perhaps Mr. Chow will now let me do the honors. After all, he was ever so grateful that I had a method of insurance to offer him.”

A spike of ice pierced her.

She truly had found a monster at the center of the labyrinth.

Nigel knew exactly what kryptonite was. And he knew what it was used for. Of course he did. Luthor had trusted Nigel far more than he’d trusted her. Bluffing wouldn’t help her here. Her faith in talking her way out of this one receded.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist on redirecting Superman tonight. Call him," he said, bringing his other arm into focus. The pistol gleamed in the sickly green light.

It was a terrible standoff.

Kryptonite versus a gun.

Her life held up against Clark's.

She knew which one she'd pick every time.

Her eyes met Nigel's.

"You'll have to live with the disappointment," she spat acidly.

Behind her back, she crossed her fingers that *she'd* live through this.

"You always were a fickle woman. It's a shame you never offered Mr. Luthor this loyalty," Nigel said lightly.

"It's a shame Lex was a lying, sociopathic, murdering crime lord," she said without remorse.

She heard the safety click.

"This is your last opportunity to see your beloved superhero again before you die. And make no mistake, you both *will* die."

She held his eyes, cast in the feral green light, and sealed her fate.

"I won't do it," she said firmly, her heart in her throat.

"Very well," he said, seemingly unbothered. "I would have preferred you to be a part of the alien's downfall. There's a certain poetry to that ending that Mr. Luthor would have appreciated. But if you're not willing to play your part, so be it." He tsk'ed. "Unfortunately, that does mean that you have no further use."

He leveled his gun at her heart.

She instinctively opened her mouth to scream, and saw Nigel's eyes light at her impulse.

She clamped it shut.

She wouldn't call for him.

She *wouldn't*.

Even to save herself.

She wouldn't endanger him.

She wouldn't lose their bet this week.

But she wouldn't bring him back to his old life now, either.

And she wouldn't share his new one.

They'd never work together again.

They'd never visit Milan, never write the Congo story for page 8, never get married, never do any of the other hundred things she'd promised herself they would.

They'd never grow old together.

I'm so sorry, Clark, was her last thought as she watched Nigel's knuckles whiten to squeeze the trigger. *I love you.*

The bullet exploded from the chamber.

"MPD!" a voice shouted out.

The bullet whizzed past her ear, close enough to clip her hair.

She flinched, eyes still on Nigel.

"Drop your weapon!"

Nigel wheeled to meet the voice, and Lois dove down behind the empty 'fertilizer' crate.

Chaos broke out.

She heard shots in the darkness.

It was impossible to track who was shooting!

Wood splintered somewhere above her and she ducked lower.

What in the hell was happening?

Had a patrolman seen her penlight in the darkened warehouse? Or found a window open where it shouldn't be? If this was some young beat cop that had stumbled in, he wasn't going to be any sort of a match for a corrupt and seasoned special agent.

Another shot rang out.

Then silence.

Fear set in anew, overtaking her confusion. The officer must be down. Casting a glance toward the stairs, she wondered if she could sneak out of the building to bring back help.

"Lois?"

She blinked. That voice didn't have an English accent. It sounded like gravel.

"Bill?" she squeaked out incredulously.

She peeked out from around the side of the crate.

"Yeah, it's me." Her friend came into view. "Did you get hit?"

"No, I'm ok," she said, standing and belatedly running her hand over the side of her head to be sure. The bullet had cut three inches off a wide lock of her hair. She fingered the newly split ends. "How did you know I was here?"

Henderson was making his way over to the fallen Englishman, police-issue pistol still trained on the prone form.

"You ever see a panicked superhero?" He tossed a tight grin at her.

Clark must have made it back to Jimmy and followed her here. He would have been able to see that Nigel and the kryptonite were both in the building. Unable to help her himself, he'd brought her the next best thing. Detective Bill Henderson. She watched as her favorite Inspector kicked Nigel's gun out of reach.

He bent to feel for a pulse.

"Is he...?"

Henderson shook his head with appropriate solemnity. Then he looked more closely at the body and whistled, stooping low. "Did you see this?"

“Yes, and we have to get rid of it,” she said, noticing the green glow splash across Henderson’s face and already wondering how she was going to dispose of it.

“What is it?”

“I’d rather not say,” she said, pulling the lid off a random crate to see if there was anything useful inside. More miles of electrical cables. She rolled her eyes. *Typical*, she grouched to herself. Lex stocked plenty of *kryptonite* but hadn’t left her anything *useful* when she needed it.

“Don’t tell me, then. I’ll just read the report when it comes back from the lab.”

“What?!” she exclaimed, looking back at Bill. “No! You can’t send that to a lab! Are you crazy?!” That was all they needed! More evidence that the stupid stuff existed. “We have to get rid of it before anyone else shows up!”

Henderson stood then, and in a pointed voice said, “That would be tampering with evidence.”

“Not if it was never here in the first place,” she said wryly.

Henderson’s brows creased. “I don’t play that game.”

“It’s no game,” she batted back, hands squarely on her hips. “It’s life and death.”

“Lane, what the hell —” He put a hand to the back of his neck, then looked at her shrewdly. “Is this the reason your usual babysitter isn’t in here with us?” His eyes flicked skyward.

That was too close to a truth that she wasn’t prepared to tell, even to Henderson.

“Bill—” she said coarsely.

“He can’t come in here with this thing, can he?”

“He *can*...” she replied, hovering over the technicality. Henderson stared at her for a moment.

“Is it harmful to us?” He finally asked. “Can we touch it?”

“It hasn’t hurt me before,” she said honestly.

Henderson went over to the body and carefully picked up the kryptonite. He studied it for a moment while she held her breath.

Then he walked over to Lois and handed it to her.

She swallowed reflexively, several muscles relaxing in relief as she clutched the ugly green stone in an unyielding fist.

Thank *goodness* Clark had chosen to bring a friend.

“Thank you, Bill,” she said on an exhale, voice breaking.

“I’ve got to call this in,” he said, tilting his head back to Nigel’s still frame.

“I’ll figure out what to do with this in the meantime.”

A noise came from behind them, the sound of metal clattering to the floor.

Henderson’s gun came up swiftly, but Lois had the overwhelming instinct that the sound had been one of help, not harm. She made her way toward it.

“Lane!” Henderson’s voice was tense again. “Get back here!”

“I don’t think we have to worry,” she said, spying one of the crates’ latches lying on the ground. It hadn’t been there when she’d passed by before.

“Why’s that?”

She made her way toward the now-open crate.

“Because if there was another bad guy over here, I think this end of the building would have already been set on fire long before he got anywhere near us,” she said glibly.

Stooping to pick up the latch, she felt the heat coming off of it and realized it was still molten. She pulled her hand back. Instead, she stood and pushed aside the crate’s lid that was now free. Shining her pen light inside, she saw rows of carefully organized, dull gray pipes. She grinned.

“Give me a hand with this!” she called brightly over her shoulder. Looking up she said quietly, “Thanks, Fly-boy.”

He’d know the gratitude was for more than the lead pipes.

Henderson reached her a moment later, holstering his weapon. He caught the other end of the thick pipe that she was liberating from the crate.

“What are we doing?” he grunted.

“Help me get it over to the door.”

Together they hefted it out the green front door, now disfigured with a melted lock and knob. She led them around the side of the building, and they dropped it out of sight in the empty alleyway.

She looked up.

A welcome red and blue figure hovered in the distance.

“Can you seal one end from there, or do I need to move it closer?” she asked into the sky.

In reply, one end of the pipe began to glow red. Once it had melted shut, she rolled the pipe over, examining it.

“Now what?” Henderson was watching her with interest.

“I’m looking for cracks.” Flipping a saucy look back at Henderson, she said, “Can’t be too careful.”

He rolled his eyes. “You still need me for this part?”

“Nope.”

“You’ve probably only got a couple of minutes,” he tossed over his shoulder as he headed back around the corner and into the warehouse. Out of her peripheral vision, she saw the lights turn on inside, and she heard him on a walkie-talkie as she turned back toward the pipe.

She tossed the kryptonite in, and wiped her hand across her skirt. It hadn’t felt like anything beyond a regular

gemstone to her, but she still didn't like holding something with such a malicious effect.

The pipe in front of her glowed red again, and she stepped back from it.

A second later, she was clasped in a furious embrace that was somehow both gentle and immovable.

"Hi there, big guy," she said.

The hug got tighter.

She returned it, burying her face in his chest.

Time stood a little stiller for a moment.

"I'm gonna need to breathe here in a second, honey," she finally choked out.

His grip immediately loosened, but he didn't let go of her as he pulled back.

"Thank you for bringing Bill," she said.

"I was so scared." His words tumbled over each other.

"I know," she said, remembering her theories about Superman's greatest fear. "But you saved me. We made it. And we broke open the gun smuggling ring."

His eyebrows rose.

"You weren't here for that part?" she asked. "Turns out Chow was bankrolling Nigel's takeover of Lex's smuggling operation."

"I've got photos of Chow tonight. Can we prove Nigel's involvement?" he asked.

In reply, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her microcassette tape recorder, which had been recording since she'd arrived at the building. She switched it off.

"Yep," she grinned. "We'll just have to give it a bit of light editing at the end there."

He beamed at her and she felt her expression grow to match his.

"Henderson's back-up will be here soon." She tilted her head at the pipe. "You should go fling that into the sun and we'll start writing up our notes. It's going to take us some time to piece it all together."

"Right," he said. But he didn't move.

"What?" she asked, tilting her head curiously.

Panic had seared through him when he'd seen the gun pointed at Lois, and he'd been driven to an even higher fear when he saw it was a kryptonite-wielding Nigel that was holding it. They'd gotten through it, and he'd raced to hold her the second he was able to reach her. But ever since they'd been separated for all those months by Clark's death, he'd found himself needing more of a reassurance that she was safe after situations like these. He felt himself give in to that need now.

He dipped his head and kissed her.

Lois felt herself falling into the kiss. His mouth was warm and firm against hers. Her adrenaline had been fading since Henderson had shown up. Immediate danger over, she'd pushed herself to uphold the brave facade to

contain the kryptonite. But Lex's memory and Nigel's threats had shaken her. Superman rarely kissed her in plain view of the world, even as alone as they were now, behind an abandoned warehouse and covered by night, so he must have sensed that they'd both needed the connection.

The kiss was comforting.

And *electric*.

Her pulse sped up and she leaned into it.

He felt her deepen the kiss and felt his control slip in the same instant. His arms slid fully around her again, drawing her closer to him as proof that she was still sound and alive in his arms. The thought sent a thrill through him, and he slid a hand into her hair, cradling her head with primal possessiveness.

She inhaled on a gasp as he began to trail erratic kisses down the side of her neck, languorously teasing her pulse point. In an automatic response, she rocked her hips against his.

Her movement against his body sent a rush down through his pelvis to his toes. He couldn't catch his breath and he didn't care.

His mouth moved down across her neck until it met the line of her shirt collar, and he ran his other hand up her side and over her shoulder to tug it aside. He kissed her skin beneath the fabric, feeling her fingers digging sharply into his back beneath the cape.

A siren pierced the surrounding darkness.

They paused, brought back to a world that held more than just the two of them.

She reluctantly pulled back, as breathless as he was. "I'll see you back at the apartment," she said.

He nodded reluctantly, letting his fingertips trail longingly down her arms as he stepped away. With a last lingering look back at her, he tossed the pipe over his shoulder and headed skyward.

Lois had to ground her bouncing steps as she turned and made her way back into the warehouse.

This was one story she was looking forward to finishing.

Two hours later.

"You're sure about this?"

"Yes," Lois said with certainty. "Everything is there. His accounts, the money trail, photos of the diamonds and guns – both here and leaving the Congo – photos of him meeting with his liaison and then that same guy meeting with guerrilla fighters later, the shipping manifests, signed statements from dock workers on both ends, the air traffic control records from his private plane. There's even a recording of him plainly planning to two-time his buyer and sell to both sides! Plus St. John's confession is on tape."

"If he didn't know he was being recorded, it's inadmissible."

"It's enough to get a warrant without your having to verify everything else first," Lois shot back.

"My office doesn't usually work with reporters." The way the woman said 'reporter' made it sound like a four-letter word.

"Maybe that's why you're always lagging behind," she offered blithely. At the blonde's unbreaking stoney expression, Lois finally huffed, "You know, I do have some experience with this kind of thing!"

The blonde woman looked at her skeptically before her gaze slid to the dark-haired man sitting beside her.

"Is she for real?"

The man smirked. "This is Lois Lane," he said laconically.

"That doesn't hold much stake with me," replied the assistant district attorney,

"She's on the level," Henderson said, this time with no trace of a smirk.

The ADA glanced down skeptically again, and leafed through the first pages of the file Lois had set on her desk a few minutes before.

Honestly, what was it with this woman? Maybe it was because she'd been hauled into the office at who-knows-what-time-it-was-now, or maybe she didn't like having another woman beat her to the close of a case. Well, either way, that was all just fine by Lois. She didn't particularly feel warm and fuzzy about the blonde ADA, either.

But she wasn't going to let a snippy civil servant get to her tonight. Tonight – or, well, this morning – she and Clark would *finally* be writing their page 8 story. She *hoped*. And she had a feeling she'd need all her reserves of patience for that potentially life-changing endeavor.

"Anyway," Lois sniffed indignantly, "This is a courtesy. That copy of my notes is for you. I'm sending the same notes to my editor in a few hours, and it'll be on the front page of the Planet. I'm only here now to let you get your ducks in a row so that you aren't caught with your pants down after missing the biggest criminal in Metropolis." Her smile was saccharine. "Twice."

"Down, girl," Henderson said under his breath, but she caught the chuckle in his voice.

The ADA rose from her chair. "Miss Lane. Inspector." Apparently, their meeting was over.

Lois moved to the door.

"Thank you for your time, Ms. Drake," she heard Henderson say behind her.

Lois didn't bother to look back. She still had a lot of work to do tonight.

And, of course, she had someone waiting for her.

Thirty minutes later

"The Elite Criminal: How the Ruling Class Maintains the Caste System," he read from her screen thoughtfully. "It's got less alliteration than a lot of our headlines."

She wrinkled her nose. "Perry's pedantic penchant for snappy soubriquets sometimes suggests sensationalism."

"Clever," he said drolly.

"I'm serious! This can't be tinged with any kind of hoke or gimmicky headlines! This is the second billionaire in a *year* that decided he was above the law and above the rest of us, too," she said, ramping up into a familiar-feeling rant. "This guy was helping incite a *war* just to make money off of both sides, in a nation where basic resources for non-combatants were already in short supply. We're talking about milk for kids, Clark! Flour for bread, basic medicines. Chow pushed an entire country toward civil war and economic collapse for money that would have only marginally supplemented his current millions! He didn't even *need* it! And that's not even considering all the collateral crime that this whole fiasco introduced into Metropolis along the way."

She shook her head, deeply bothered, again, by Lex and his vision for the city that he'd almost gotten away with. The plan he'd tried to make her complicit in. That Chow had tried to resurrect.

"I know we're using this story to expose one man, but this whole thing says something deeper about our society," she said with feeling. "This isn't just a gun-running story anymore. It's a pattern now. It's a cautionary tale. ...And it could be real Pulitzer material." She paused briefly to finally inhale. "I just can't live in a world where this kind of thing can happen, and not try to do something to stop it. The better this story reads, the bigger difference it can make.

The title can't be campy."

They sat at her kitchen table, Clark for once dressed in sweats and not the Suit. It was an enormous win for her – for *them* – and she knew it. Tonight was going to be a long night, she'd pled convincingly. And as much as she loved what the spandex did for his figure, nowadays she was always eager to see him in anything else.

Over the last few weeks, the Suit had become more and more a symbol of what kept them apart. She never minded when he rushed off to rescues or arrived late from saving the world, of course. But there was a limit to how many times Lois Lane could be seen with Superman in public – as he'd reminded her over and over *and over*. Tonight's kiss had been a rare occurrence, and a symptom of how worried he'd been, to let his fear overwhelm his constant caution. Much as she tried to follow his rule and even make light of it, she worried that eventually Clark would feel she'd hit her allotment.

What would happen then?

After tonight's roller coaster, she needed a break from the reminders of what kept them apart. So she'd made a case for the old gray sweats and Smallville Corn Festival t-shirt.

Plus, she supposed, it wouldn't hurt for him to be wearing Clark Kent's clothes right now, since she was about to dig her heels in about bringing Clark Kent back.

"I agree," Clark said, referring back to her title. Then he chuckled, "Did we just make Bruce Wayne the richest man in the world?"

"Maybe he'll thank us with an in-person exclusive interview," she said with a telling look on her face. "Then we can ask him where he went all those times he disappeared on you. I don't trust millionaires anymore. They're always hiding something."

Chairs side by side, she poured a cup of coffee for each of them as Clark started on his pass of their draft.

She glanced down to see what he'd done to her copy while she'd gotten the pot and mugs, and frowned. "You took your name off the byline."

"We need to talk about that." He already sounded defensive.

"You said you'd think about it," she said, leaping to an offense that she hadn't planned on bringing out until later in the night.

"I have been thinking about it. My name just can't be on this, Lois," he said apologetically, reaching over her again toward the keyboard. "I think you mean 'racked' here, not 'wracked' with a 'w.'"

"No, Clark," she said, her voice quietly resolute.

"You meant 'wracked?'" he asked, pausing his hands over the keys and re-reading the screen.

"Not that," she said with frustration.

He caught her tone and looked back at her.

"Lois?"

"I am not submitting this story without your name on the byline."

He put his hand over hers and she braced for him to say something loving but stupid. "Lois," he started, in a calmly heroic voice, "I know that you wanted to use this story to turn my death into an undercover reporting assignment. But it's just too hard. Too many people saw me get shot in the first place. It can't work."

"It will," she insisted.

"There were witnesses, Lois," he said, obviously trying to fight the quickly flooding exasperation. They'd had this argument before.

"Including me," she said matter-of-factly.

"Lois, I don't want to —"

She went on, ignoring his interjection, "--and I knew that you were alright. I even knew that you were going to Africa."

She had a plan. And after their near-miss with Nigel tonight, she wasn't going to give him another moment's peace until he heard her out. She wasn't going to let him continue living in pain and fear, holding his cape tightly around him as if it could protect him from another heartbreak like the one he'd experienced by giving up Clark Kent's terrible ties. They were going to solve this, one way or another. *Tonight.*

He must have seen the resolution in her eyes because for once he didn't shut the conversation down instantly.

"Ok, let's say you did," he replied, tacitly agreeing to let her play the scenario out for once. But he couldn't even get through his next sentence without his tone turning combatively incredulous again. "How do you explain the lack of, you know, *fatal hemorrhaging?*"

Her lips curved in a moue of distaste at the thought before she said, "A bullet-proof vest."

"A vest," he repeated.

She held fast and nodded confidently.

"And why exactly was I wearing a vest on that particular night?" he asked skeptically.

"If you weren't, you know... you," she said, gesturing generally to the place where his S crest normally sat, "Wouldn't you wear a bullet-proof vest on all your investigations with the notoriously danger-prone Lois Lane?"

"So I'd been wearing a bullet-proof vest for over a year?" The skepticism in his voice had shot up another notch.

"I think it might have started after the Dragonetti heist," she said thoughtfully. "Having the bad guys catch you off guard at home base would have been startling. That would make the most sense."

"Lois —" he started, clearly having a hard time swallowing that.

So she cut him off, "Clark! We were headed to a mob-run nightclub looking for legendary 1930's murderers. Don't you think it might have been an easy jump to want to wear a vest that night?"

"Ok, ok, let's say I wore the vest. Don't you think the police will be awfully interested in this hypothetical vest? The ballistics won't match."

"I've thought about that," she rejoined quickly.

"And why doesn't that surprise me?" He massaged the bridge of his nose where his glasses had once sat.

"First off, your case is already closed. Those gangsters have been tried and sentenced already. So there's no reason for the police to be looking for evidence. And even if you

wanted to use it to reverse his sentence, Burrows died two months ago.”

“He died?” Clark asked, looking up in surprise. He hadn’t heard that. After all, it wasn’t like he could just buy a newspaper at the corner stand these days.

“Only Bonnie Parker is still alive. Hamilton’s clones – they weren’t stable. They just, sort of, degenerated.”

When he didn’t respond, she said persuasively, “Plus, you’ve been in a war-torn country for a year. Don’t you think a bullet-proof vest might have been on your packing list, particularly since you were wearing it the night you left?”

He met her eyes. Was that a grudging hope she saw forming?

“And don’t you think that maybe that vest took other shots in the last year? Even in the same place as Clyde’s bullets? Wouldn’t that alter any ballistics inspection? At least enough?”

“But there is no vest.”

She gave him a wry look and huffed. “I don’t think that’s the hard part, Clark.”

He raised an eyebrow, but she could see his unwilling acknowledgement that this story was sounding more possible with every detail.

“It sounds... slightly more plausible,” he agreed.

“Ok! So we’ll add your name back to the byline,” she said, reaching across him toward the keyboard.

“Lois,” he caught her hands in his before they could reach the keys, “It’s plausible, but it’s still not possible. I just – I can’t risk my parents. They gave me everything. I can’t repay them this way, by taking chances with their safety.”

“Have you asked them?” she asked, watching his face carefully.

She’d been deeply curious what his parents thought of their son’s new relationship to the world, living solely as a benevolent god instead of a favored small town son. But since this conversation always ended in an argument, she never got to ask. Actually, she was surprised they’d gotten this far tonight. Usually, she’d be standing alone at her open window long before this. In fact, this long after the start of their usual argument, she’d be standing over her kitchen sink, cursing Clark’s name into a carton of rocky road.

After all, just because she’d learned caution over the last year didn’t mean that extended to patience with her boyfriend when he was behaving with the IQ of an absolute walnut.

In the meantime, said walnut was stubbornly not answering her last question.

“Clark?” she pushed gently.

“They agree with you,” he said on an exhale. “But they don’t understand!” he protested quickly. “They haven’t lived in Metropolis for years watching the villain of the week go after you just because you might be on a first-name basis with me.”

“Clark,” she said as patiently as she could. “That’s not because of Superman. That’s just me. It’s because of *me*. They’d be coming after me anyway.”

He frowned at that.

“They were coming after me before you and I ever met, and they still are now, without anything to do with Superman,” she said, thinking of tonight’s mess. And last week’s. And... She forced her mind to focus. “I think that this plan will work. And it sounds like your parents do, too. You made the choice for all of us last time. Don’t we get to decide, now that we have another chance?”

The Clark Kent pout was in full effect now as he felt this conversation, and his own resolve, slipping away from him.

He met her eyes again, considering.

He saw care reflected back in them. Compassion. Love. For him.

He never thought he’d get this lucky.

...And that was exactly why he couldn’t risk losing it.

“I’m sorry, Lois. But no,” he said with finality.

Lois sighed, her shoulders drooping. “Ok, then,” she said, as if recalibrating. She released his hands and shut the laptop.

“Ok?”

“Ok,” she nodded.

He’d missed something.

She took a sip of her coffee. “I’m still pretty wound up after all this. Do you want to watch a movie?”

He shook his head, as if that would make her behavior clear. “Lois, what?”

“A comedy, maybe. Something light?”

“No, I mean — I — that’s it?”

“That’s it,” she said with an easy shrug, leaning back in her chair.

“And that’s alright with you?” He couldn’t be understanding her correctly.

But she was nodding, and calm. “That’s alright, Clark.” Too calm.

“So we can just keep going as we have been? The star reporter of the Daily Planet, and her secret undercover reporting partner, Superman?”

“Oh, that. No.”

There it was, he thought. *The catch.*

“What part?” he asked.

“Well, all of it, really. Except the Superman part.”

He parsed that. “You’re not going to let me be your partner anymore.”

He couldn’t help but feel a certain crestfallen despair start to amplify and take control. Ever since Capone and his gangsters had shot Clark Kent, a big part of him felt like they’d severed his life more completely than Luthor had tried to do with the kryptonite cage. Working with Lois had brought him back in so many ways that he’d never be able to articulate them all. The idea of losing that all over again cut him.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she said, finally taking the reins of the conversation after stringing him along. “You act as if you’re well and happy to sacrifice your daily life for those around you, but I can’t pretend that everything is fine. I need more than that.”

He felt his heart stop, something he hadn’t known it could do. “Lois, please—” His panic came quick and harsh. “I can’t lose y—”

“You won’t,” she assured. “But we can’t live like this anymore, barely seeing each other and only in secret. We need to figure something else out if we’re ever going to have a chance at the normal life you’ve been wanting. You have to know that,” she said, looking to him for confirmation.

“It’s been working,” he argued weakly.

“It’s worked *so far* and it hasn’t been easy,” she corrected. “And it hasn’t been enough. It’s not a forever kind of plan.”

“Forever?” he caught the one word that didn’t usually pop up in their conversations.

The way his life had turned out, they’d had to focus on the ‘here’ and the ‘now.’ He’d thought that was what she’d wanted. Lois had always shied away from commitment.

But then again, she’d always had the option to choose before, he thought with a pang of guilt. They hadn’t been able to get to a point where they’d needed to consider a real commitment before he’d been shot in front of her, severing any hope for a future for them.

But now she was using a word like ‘forever.’

He would give just about anything for a ‘forever’ with Lois Lane.

He decided this was one turn in the road that he could roll with.

Meanwhile, she’d reopened the computer and signed online. “Here,” she said, showing him a website she’d pulled up in Netscape Navigator. “There’s a modern cabin for sale on a mountainside in Colorado. The chance is low we’d ever run into anyone we knew there. Two bedrooms, new kitchen, big back deck. It’s got a high tree line behind it, and it’s pretty secluded,” she said, scrolling down to a photo of a wooded, picturesque property. “It’s perfect cover for unnoticeable comings and goings from the air.

It’s a 7-hour drive to your parents’ house, so it should take you about 2 seconds to get there. Maybe a couple of minutes with a passenger. And it’ll probably take you about 3 seconds to get back to Metropolis for patrols. ... though I’ve been wondering if you shouldn’t take some random patrols across the country, just to throw people off in case they’re ever looking to pin down your location.”

He pulled his gaze from the screen back to her, shocked.

“When did you research this?”

“On and off, the last few weeks.”

He glanced at the computer screen again. She’d put a lot of thought into this.

“I think we should see it before we take it, but it could work.”

She’d shocked him again. “Before we take it?” he echoed dumbly, willing his mind to catch up to her.

“Well, it’ll have to be in my name, but...” she said, suddenly seeming shy about her plan. “But, well, yeah.”

“Lois...” This wasn’t how he’d expected his night to go. He would never have guessed they would have ended up here. She was offering him exactly what he’d longed for these past few months. It would be so easy to say yes. Still... “You really mean this? This is what you want?”

“I’ve spent enough time without you,” she sighed. “And I’m running out of excuses to find time *with* you! Jimmy’s already worried that the extra nights a week I spend at ‘tae kwon do classes’,” she added air quotes to support her meaning, “are just a bad coping mechanism for your death. Perry gives me looks every time I leave the office on another Luthor story, so *that* talk is brewing. Henderson has been all over me about that fuse box you melted when the laser alarms came on last month. And *don’t* start on that one again —” she cut off his instant grin as she referenced his favorite of her recent misadventures.

At the reminder of that investigation, his mind caught up with the implications of what she was suggesting. “But this would mean...” he shook his head. “No. You can’t give up reporting.”

“I’m *not* giving up reporting,” she said with an eye roll so dramatic that she usually only reserved it for Jimmy. “This doesn’t have to be the all or nothing you’re imagining. Perry will print anything I send in as long as it’s well written and the facts are straight. Besides, it’s called the *Daily Planet*, not the *Daily City*. I don’t have to work in Metropolis to write the news. And lately I’ve been thinking that the stories I write are, well, a little small. I think I can make a bigger impact if I look at the whole world, not just one city. Like the article we wrote tonight. We got onto it because it started in Metropolis, but it stretched into the crisis in the Congo and unveiled the corruption of people who could afford to change millions

of lives across the globe for the better. With a little help,” she nudged his shoulder with hers, “I can chase a story anywhere. And maybe now the next millionaire will think twice about stoking the fires of a war if they know I’ll be watching.”

“I didn’t realize you’d been thinking about all of that,” he replied.

She shrugged. “It just feels like there’s more out there. For both of us.”

“Well, in that case, this is exactly why you should send this article to Perry,” he argued, gesturing to her laptop.

“This can start you on the road to those global stories.”

“I told you,” she insisted, “I’m not sending it in without your name on it.”

“Lois, this is your chance for the Pulitzer. You said so yourself.”

“The only Pulitzer I want is one with both of our names on it.”

She was bringing stubborn to a whole new level. He felt his temper flare uncharacteristically, and he stood as his voice rose. “You are so stubborn!”

She laughed.

She actually *laughed*.

“Look who’s talking!” she fired back without heat.

He felt his jaw drop. If he was being stubborn, it was only to protect her!

“Lois, Clark Kent can’t put his name on —”

“I know you don’t think you can. That’s why we have the cabin plan.”

“Lois,” he started, still staggered that she’d even dreamed that up, “I can’t —”

“We can! And we should at least try.” She stood and walked over to him. “If this plan doesn’t work for us, in a year or two we’ll just come up with something else. We’re good at that.”

He shook his head again, and he heard her tone shift to explain it to him in a way he didn’t know how to refuse.

“There are only two options. I can either live my life here in Metropolis with a Pulitzer and Clark Kent, or I can have a cabin in the mountains with Superman. Take your pick.”

Living with Clark Kent was out of the question. But living as a recluse didn’t sound like her, either. It was Lois Lane 101 was that she belonged in a major city newsroom. Now she was flatly denying that as a necessary component of her happiness.

But they’d both changed since that heart-rending night in the casino.

Maybe Clark Kent’s death had affected her as much as it had affected him.

He wondered briefly whether or not she was telling the truth. No. She wouldn’t lie. Not about this. Lois had grown

while they were separated, and he’d seen her strength grow, too, now that they had come back together. She’d evolved in so many other ways in the last year – maybe this version of Lois who could flourish outside a newsroom was true now, too?

Plus... It would be so, so easy to go along with her plan.

But he was Superman now, his mind argued against the easy temptation of a life with Lois. *Only* Superman. He glanced down to look at the S emblazoned across his chest, his constant reminder.

It startled him when it wasn’t there, and he belatedly remembered that Lois had talked him into changing into sweats while they wrote.

Without the Suit, he wasn’t Superman.

But he couldn’t be Clark, either.

Was he anyone?

The thought shook him, and he felt the need to gasp air.

He tried to get a hold of their conversation again, to get back on track.

He *was* Superman, he reinforced to himself.

And he was Lois Lane’s boyfriend.

And he needed to protect her.

Sometimes even from herself.

Because she really deserved the Pulitzer she’d been hunting for. They’d been working for this, he reminded himself. Tonight she’d almost died in a warehouse for this!

“If you don’t submit that story, Chow will get away!” he tried to reason.

She shrugged. “Probably not. We already gave all of our evidence to the DA’s office. And Henderson knows what’s going on. They’ll handle it.”

He looked at her, struggling for words. “But the story... You would give up your chance at the Pulitzer for *me*? No, Lois, no.” How could she be so calm when she was suggesting that they just give up what little remained of their lives from before... before he’d lost his?

She stepped closer, her hands coming to rest on his chest. “For most of my life, chasing a Pulitzer was the most important thing in the world to me,” she acquiesced, her voice low. “Until the night I thought you died.”

A cold feeling gripped his insides as he recognized the emotion she was battling. It hit too close to home, and his hands flexed imperceptibly as he stopped himself from reaching for the comfort of the cape he was no longer wearing.

It had been a real possibility that he could have lost her tonight, the way she thought she’d lost him in the casino. His own ‘death’ had sent a wave of complicated emotions over him, all urging him to reevaluate his entire life and make her the singular focus. But at first he’d tried to spare her from being wrapped up in that mess, and then later

he'd tried to preserve her from harm that could come from proximity to him. Trapped as he was, with so many of the world's catastrophes on his shoulders, he couldn't change much. It had left him indulging in yet another fantasy that they could just live apart from everything that plagued them and just –

And that's when it struck him.

He'd been holding onto the ghost of his old life *through her*.

And it had been killing him.

It had been killing them both.

He'd been grieving for a life he couldn't have, unable to see that he was holding them both back.

Lois had seen what he couldn't.

She'd found a way to create a *new* life.

Together.

Maybe he would be just Superman to the rest of the world, but Lois had figured out how to give Clark Kent a safe, secluded home. With her.

She shrugged again, in answer to his argument over the article.

"Things change," she said.

Just when he thought he couldn't love her more, his heart expanded. His hands came up to close over hers.

She looked at him with shining eyes. "It turns out I'd rather have you than a Pulitzer."

"I love you," he said on impulse, all tenderness and devotion.

"Clark..." she breathed.

"You don't have to say it back," he said quickly. He felt himself blush. "I just— You mean so much to me, Lois. I just wanted you to know. I mean, you have to have known already. But I wanted you to hear it. I love you."

In response, she kissed him.

Deeply.

It felt like a promise.

Her hands threaded through his hair as his came up to cup her face, one thumb brushing against her cheek. The affectionate touch made her heartbeat speed, the sound pounding in his ears as she pressed herself against him. His hands moved down to grip her waist in response. He'd started things off so sweetly, but she was nudging them into a higher gear, picking up where they'd left off outside the warehouse.

She gently bit his lower lip, and he felt the sensation all the way down to his feet.

This time he would let things get a bit away from them, he decided.

Now that they had *forever* to look forward to.

He couldn't be luckier. The bravest, most beautiful, most intuitive woman on Earth – and on Krypton, too, he'd wager – had offered to run away with him. They would go

on investigating and fighting the bad guys and putting the whole world right one corrupt plot at a time.

The hottest team in town.

...A title that Lois was currently trying to earn in a completely different context, he mused, as she ran teasing fingertips along the waistline of his sweats, a tantalizing new boundary to cross now that he wasn't in the one-piece Suit. He leaned into her, hands running beneath her shirt and up her arching back.

She was literally his dream come true, he thought, kissing her more deeply.

And he was hers.

She'd said so.

But...

But he knew Lois' dreams, what she wanted most, what made her tick – better than he knew himself, it turned out.

Her dreams had been about setting the world right, stamping out injustice and fighting for equality.

That was what had been behind the whole Superman crush, hadn't it? And her infatuation with Luthor, the proclaimed do-gooder philanthropist. And it must have been what had drawn her to the Planet, too, Metropolis' beacon of truth and hope made tangible in print.

Her hips slid against his as she ran her tongue over the suddenly sensitive shell of his ear.

But his mind stubbornly refused to sway from thoughts of their future and the path he was accepting for them.

Because he *knew* Lois Lane.

And he knew that her dream had never been to live in hiding as a superhero's sidekick.

She *needed* Metropolis.

She *needed* the Daily Planet.

And they needed her.

"Wait," he said, pulling away. "This isn't right."

She looked up at him with darkened, hazy eyes and kiss-crushed lips.

"Clark?"

"You would give up your entire life here for me, your chance at your lifelong dream, your career, Jimmy and Perry? You love this city. You love being a reporter. You love that life more than anything."

"I love *you*," she said, pressing herself back against him.

His heart beat wildly against his chest at hearing it for the first time. *This* was what he'd been chasing his entire life, and been bereft of for just as long. Hearing her speak it out loud put his world into a focus that he'd been missing for a year.

"And I love you," he promised. "That's why I can't let you give this all up for me."

Her hazy look was sharpening.

“Let me?” she said, clearly choosing indignation to dissuade him from where he was going.

He recognized the trap she was setting with that question. “Yes,” he plowed forward, knowing she expected him to backpedal. “What you’re offering now is that you give up basically everything that I gave up when Clark Kent was shot. Lois, I know what that’s like. It’s been—” he shook his head, unable to come up with an equivalent descriptor. “I could *never* do that to you.”

He took a deep breath, and he felt something that had been gripping him for a whole year release, as love and courage finally overcame it. “Loving you means trusting you and knowing that we’ll beat anything we come up against. Together. So if you think that people will buy the ‘undercover reporter in Africa’ line, I think we should do it.”

For the first time in his life, he saw Lois Lane speechless.

Perry White walked into the darkened offices of the Daily Planet, silhouetted in the early morning light of dawn. Stepping onto the ramp, he inhaled deeply. He loved the smell of India ink in the morning. Like an old, loyal confidant, it had greeted him every day for the last forty years. And every day, it reminded him that he’d made a difference to the people of Metropolis — that he’d contributed to the greatest paper in the world. The stories he chose to run in the Planet kept the city on the straight and narrow. They improved people’s lives. They made the world a better place. His life felt worthwhile because of the difference he’d made, stray India ink clinging to his cuffs over all forty of those years. He inhaled again, looking forward to a new day, a fresh chance.

As he crossed the bullpen, his eye passed over the empty desk that stood in his path between the elevator and his office. It had been nearly nine months since his second-favorite reporter had left it behind. He flinched away from the thought, as he did every morning, and resolved that today would be the day he filled that open city reporter position.

His office door had been left open, he noticed, running a hand fondly across the empty desk as he passed it, as was his daily ritual. He’d be sure to remind Jimmy to double check the lock after the late nights. The kid ought to get into the practice now of locking the editor’s office. It was a habit that would serve Jimmy well in the future, if Perry’s plans for the kid came to fruition.

He stepped over the threshold and flipped on the light. “Great shades of Elvis,” he gasped, one hand over his heart. “You... you... you’re supposed to be dead!”

The not-dead-man darted a glance to the woman sitting beside him.

“Well, see, Chief, not exactly,” she said, standing.

Her partner stood, too, settling into place just over her shoulder. It was an unexpectedly familiar tableaux. Seeing it healed a wound that Perry hadn’t been able to admit was still giving him pain.

He’d waited as long as he could for them to come up with some wild — wild, but plausible — story to sort this all out and restore his newsroom to optimal working order. Perry had been worried enough for them both that Alice had been worried about *him*. Lois had been so broken those first few months after Clark had been shot, he’d nearly called the hero down from the skies himself to shake some sense into the man.

But over the last couple of months, Lois had an edge back to her writing and a lilt back in her step, and he’d known something had changed for his protégés. He’d started to watch her every time she headed out to wage her crusade against the defunct but Hydra-like Luthor Corp, looking for any clue to gauge whether his second-favorite reporter might come home to his desk in the bullpen any time soon. So while it surprised him to see his most precocious investigative team in his office this morning, it wasn’t entirely unexpected.

After all, he wasn’t the editor of the Daily Planet because he could yodel.

Still, he braced himself for the conversation, sending up a prayer to the patron saint of fast-talking reporters. From the look on Lois’ face, this one ought to be a doozy.

In the meantime, his ace reporter went on with determination. “We knew that I was too high profile to disappear without making any of Luthor Corp’s affiliates nervous, so it just had to be Clark. But see, we got this really unbelievable tip that we couldn’t pass up, about arms dealers running guns from Metropolis to the Congo. And when the opportunity presented itself...” She gestured toward Clark.

Perry held up a hand. “Hold on, now. Just let me get this straight. You got a tip on gun smugglers from the Congo. So you ran the investigation from this end, and Clark’s been running his side of the investigation *in Africa* for nearly a *year*?”

He thought Clark looked worried. Naturally, with full bravado, Lois confirmed, “Yep!”

He ran a hand over his mouth to conceal a grin.

That was a doozy.

“And, uh, did the Planet get the exclusive?” he inquired, holding onto his Editor Voice with a tight grip.

She looked at Clark, who held out a couple of typed sheets.

Perry glanced down to skim the first paragraph and whistled.

"I think I'd better sit down," he said, crossing the office and setting his briefcase down in its place next to his desk.

He dropped into his chair and out of habit reached for a red felt-tipped pen.

The pen sat unused in his hand as he read through the latest Lane and Kent exclusive. His eyebrows stretched toward the ceiling as he read through to the last paragraph, which was tinged with Clark's softer humanitarian tone and a call for an end to the distribution of arms exports across the world.

Perry dropped the pen, turned back to the first page and read the entire thing again.

He ignored Lois and Clark as they exchanged a look between them.

This story wasn't just a doozy.

It was a *humdinger*.

When he finished reading through the second time, he asked Clark, "And you've actually been to Africa? This is for real?"

Lois jumped in to answer. "It's for real. Chow and Nigel did everything we're accusing them of. Lex, too. The DA's office is going to start issuing subpoenas, if they haven't already." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's been a couple of hours since we checked in with Henderson."

Perry had to stifle another grin.

That hadn't *exactly* been his question.

The article was careful not to explicitly talk about Clark's whereabouts, though it described remote locales like Suriname and Angola with confidence and detail. He'd have to take their words for it that no one could dispute that Clark Kent had been in that part of the world.

He skimmed the first paragraphs a third time before finally nodding, impressed in spite of the one element of super-fiction he knew must run through the core of it. It was a groundbreaking piece, enough so that he'd bet it would hide the fact that Superman had apparently gone undercover for the Daily Planet for nearly a year. The buzz from the gunrunning story and the broader context to beware billionaires that they'd woven together would do a nice job of covering up Clark's nearly impossible return.

Elvis couldn't have come up with a comeback like this.

Out loud, he said gruffly, "I'm proud of you two. This is Pulitzer material."

Lois' glow brightened. She looked to Clark, who was staring at her with a hopeful smile on his face.

"We're gonna have one hell of a story to explain to HR," Perry warned, already dreading the bureaucrats. "But I suspect the brass upstairs will be happy enough once they take a look at this." He eyed Clark. "That's assuming you're back with us, son."

Clark nodded firmly. "I'm definitely back, sir."

Lois beamed at her partner, who caught her eye, his own smile widening in response.

"Congrats, kids," he said. He knew he sounded like a proud father rather than a stern editor. But he didn't mind. It wasn't every day that one of his surrogate kids came back from the dead. ...Even though Lois sure gave it a run for the money just about once a week.

"You'd better get this over to layout," he said, waving the hard copy toward the door.

Lois was up like a bolt, snatching the article pages from his outstretched hand as she bee lined for the bullpen, clearly eager for this headline.

"Kent," Perry caught him nearly out the door, "Where should accounting send your paycheck? You still at your old place?"

"He's staying with me from now on," Lois answered, intertwining her hand with his and pulling her partner through the door.

As Perry watched Clark follow Lois through the bullpen, it dawned on him that he'd finally honored his promise to himself. Today really had been the day he'd finally filled the open city reporter position.

He started to chuckle. Life was beautiful sometimes.

The whole Clyde Barrows debacle had reminded him that even the most incisive and precocious reporter could miss a story if they were too close to it. He felt distinctly misty-eyed that his girl had seen the truth – and had seen Clark – for what they were. In spite of his often hard-boiled attitude and tough love in the newsroom, he'd always wanted Lois to find happiness, safety, and success. And it looked like Clark had finally proven to be that missing link for Lois.

Perry smirked. It figured that Superman would be the only one able to keep up with her.

Lois was currently perched on the edge of her partner's desk, their world-shifting article in hand, as Clark sat behind his computer, his eyes on Lois.

They looked perfectly at home.

They looked like they were ready to take on whatever the new day brought them.

But most of all, they looked incandescently happy.

Something subtle shifted in the universe, as things finally aligned, clicking in to the way they were always meant to be.

The hottest team in town was back together and ready for action. Perry was about to publish a story that looked as hard-hitting as any he'd seen before. And from the pearl-cut ring that sparkled on Lois' left hand, his favorite reporting team was about to make things even more interesting in his bullpen.

His chuckle blossomed into a laugh.

He knew that these two were going to keep him on his toes.

And he couldn't wait to see what was in store for them next.

THE END