

Undercover Reporter: Revelation

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Summary: While investigating a fledgling drug ring, Lois finds herself in the middle of a midnight stake-out with an unwilling new partner. A story set in Season 2, post-TOGOM (after the episode “That Old Gang of Mine”), in a world where Clark didn’t make it back. This isn’t a resurrection story; it’s a revelation story.

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Special thanks to the community members on the boards for so kindly welcoming me on my debut fic, and specifically to Terry for helping Superman catch Lois’ camera, Michael and Sara for becoming my unofficial betas, and Andreia for inspiring the sequel.

Lois bit back a curse as she slid on loose gravel.

She’d worn sneakers to give her better traction tonight. It was just her luck she’d find the one surface in the city where they’d let her down, she grouched mentally.

Intentionally keeping her footfalls as light as possible, she continued to creep quietly along the darkened side of the corrugated metal building beside her. Careful to leave at least two buildings between her and the car inching along in front of her, she stayed low as she moved. She checked the alleyway’s intersection before crossing, ducking out of sight of the car’s rearview mirror.

She caught a jolt of the early spring air as she crossed. It still held enough of a chill to make her wish that she hadn’t left her Jeep behind. But there was no way she’d have been able to tail the thugs this far in her brightly shining silver Jeep. The streets here were more akin to alleys anyway. They were littered with driveways and loading docks, but few places to hide an ostentatious SUV. Her quarry would have spotted her almost as soon as they’d entered the tightly constricted grid of crumbling streets that made up the warehouse district near the docks.

The car in front of her crept onward slowly, and she continued to follow. The alley was dark and she used it to her advantage. The absence of streetlights meant that most illumination came from the brighter lights of the high-rises beyond, although a few buildings had single bulbs above their main doors. With an abundance of caution, she

ducked into the darkened alcove of an empty loading bay, staying well out of sight.

She’d finally learned to be more cautious this year. It turned out that rushing headlong into danger didn’t necessarily catch up with you. But it could catch up to those around you. It could catch up to the person you’d somehow least expect to ever be in danger. The person who was always cautious when you weren’t. The person you’d come to rely on to just always *be there*.

And it still could have immutably grave consequences.

The lesson of caution had been the hardest of her life, that night in the casino.

As she passed the space between two rusted buildings, a slicing breeze off Hobbs Bay distracted her from her thoughts. The wind stung exposed skin with cold and assaulted her nose with the scent of sulphur and trash.

Her protesting nose made her wonder if the bay’s pollution issues should be one of her next investigations. It shouldn’t smell *that* bad! Wrinkling her nose against the tangy scent of the waterfront night, she hugged her jacket more closely and turned up the collar.

Ahead of her, the slowly creeping dark sedan finally rode its brakes to a stop.

She stopped, too.

Staying low, she backtracked to the corner of the building she’d been furtively navigating past. Turning around the corner, she slid out of sight of the car. She leaned against the crumbling exterior of the building and strained to hear what happened next.

The engine turned off.

Two car doors opened.

One closed, then the other.

Then silence.

Lois remained still.

It felt like the night held its breath along with her.

She fidgeted, knowing that she didn’t have the patience to wait it out. Plus, she reasoned with herself, cautious or not, she wasn’t in a safe enough position to just listen for whatever was going to come next. She had to see what was happening.

Dropping flat on the ground where she’d be less noticeable than at eye level, she army crawled a few inches forward. Slowly, she peeked around the corner.

Two shabbily dressed men had moved to the passenger side of the car. They stood, each looking down opposite ends of the street.

Smothering a gasp, she quickly pulled herself back out of sight. She counted to twelve, and snuck another look down the partially paved street.

This time the men were facing one another. She sighed in relief. She hadn’t been seen.

“...first ones here,” the first man was saying.

The second man walked toward the rusted warehouse directly in front of them and disappeared down a walkway at the far the side of the building.

She heard the thick metallic clunk of metal against metal.

Maybe a locked door being pulled?

A few seconds later, the second man reappeared and grunted out his agreement.

That meant they were meeting someone, then.

Bobby's tip had been right on the money. There would be a handoff tonight. And that meant an exclusive for the *Planet* tomorrow.

She could only just make out their voices. The gently lapping water of the nearby Hobbs Bay swallowed most of their conversation, leaving her with bits of sentences. She'd just decided that she had to get even closer when the first man pointed down the street toward her.

"...look around," she heard. She turned her ear toward them to hear better as the second man grumbled something under his breath.

"...both our heads if anyone sees...tonight," the first one was saying. "Shake a leg ...nobody's around. ...a couple of streets. ...in the back."

She had to guess at most of what they'd said, but it sounded promising.

"Yeah, alright," the second man grunted back.

The first man turned away from her and started making his way down the street, but the second man headed in her direction. She pulled back again.

His steady pace indicated that he still hadn't seen her. He would have to have been looking at the ground in order to see her move, after all.

She assumed he would turn down the street that separated them. So, she waited until she thought he was even with the corner of his building and then chanced another look out.

Surprised, she realized that he hadn't turned to make a circuit of the warehouse as she'd anticipated.

Instead, he was headed right toward her!

She eased herself backward as silently as she could. Once out of sight, she immediately lunged to her feet. The slap of the man's boots against the asphalt was loud enough to hear now. She began picking her way down the far side of the building, hoping to get to the next corner and out of sight before the tattered man turned his own corner and spotted her.

The gravel shifted beneath her feet with every step. The small stones sliding over one another sounded far louder than the chaotic pounding of her own heart in her chest.

She was moving too slowly! With one foot in front of the other, she cursed her sneakers, the gravel beneath them and the mayor's office for its obvious neglect of city

maintenance. This neighborhood's road disrepair would be the story after the bay pollution, if she lived through this!

She was nearly to the corner, when she heard the man's shoes crunch the gravel she'd slipped on earlier. That meant he was about to turn her corner. She'd have to take the chance of running now or he'd see her for sure!

She took three bounding steps to reach the corner, threw herself to the ground and rolled sharply out of sight. Fully around the corner, she froze and listened.

The crunch of the man's boots was distinct. She measured the pace against her now furiously beating heart.

His pace was much steadier.

He hadn't seen her. Otherwise, he'd be chasing her.

But he *would* see her in another minute if she didn't start to wind her way down this side of the building, too. Pushing herself to her feet, she found that she was standing on asphalt in much better repair than the adjacent street. No loose gravel meant she could move faster without making as much noise. Still stepping lightly, she sprinted down the side of the building, assessing her surroundings.

Once she reached the corner, it would put her at the back of the building that the men had stopped their car in front of. If she took the turn away from their building — and away from her pursuer's most likely path — she'd probably have just enough time to get to the next intersection beyond. Then she could turn out of sight before her steady pursuer got to the corner she was running toward now.

She might be able to tuck down and hide there for a moment, and maybe even catch her breath. If her pursuer turned back toward his original building, she would have placed herself in position to come up behind him. It would let her chase him, instead of being chased herself. Then she'd be in a stronger offensive position, instead of the defense she was literally running now.

Satisfied with her plan, she directed her sprint on a diagonal across the street. She could only just hear the footfalls of the man behind her and it sounded like she was outpacing him. Though he was getting closer, his boots were thankfully still crunching the loose gravel on the far side of the building. Meanwhile, her jog had already taken her nearly to the next corner.

She was going to make it!

Suddenly, she ran smack into a solid mass, nearly knocking the wind from her. Two arms grabbed her, pulling at her from behind.

Fleeing from the second man, she'd forgotten the first!

One hand clamped over her mouth, and she was pulled backwards. She tried to twist away from the arm around her middle, but it was like steel. Bringing her elbow down hard, she pushed away from the hand over her mouth, only to find herself held in place.

She couldn't move!

A fissure of fear raced down her spine.

She inhaled deeply through her nose to dispel the rising panic, and unexpectedly felt herself start to instinctively relax.

A familiar scent washed over her and she stopped fighting his grip, instead leaning securely back against a recognizably hard chest.

Safe.

She felt safe.

It had been a while. She indulged in the sensation, letting it engulf her completely, and exhaled a breath she'd been holding for weeks.

The hand against her mouth eased, but left one finger pressed gently against her mouth. His message to stay quiet was clear enough.

She nodded her agreement and the hand fell away entirely. The arm that had gripped her waist slackened, too, but didn't drop away.

She twisted to look up at her sudden company.

His face was stoic tonight, as usual, his brown eyes alert. She gave him an accusatory 'what are you doing here?' look and he raised an eyebrow in return.

She rolled her eyes without bothering to hide the expression from him. Was he planning to be an accomplice or a wet blanket tonight?

These days, she never knew.

In the past few months, her hero in blue had kept himself aloof where she was concerned. The year prior, they'd taken a break from one another after she'd confessed her feelings and fled straight from his rejection to the altar. It had been at least a full month before she'd seen him in person again.

It had been torture. After running into him nearly weekly for the entire year before that, his absence for those long weeks felt like an eternity. Once the *Planet* was back up and running, they'd been reestablishing their usual rhythm. But all too soon tragedy had cut across all of their lives just before Thanksgiving.

She sniffed as her heart constricted. Before her thoughts could drag her under, she pulled her mind away from the mild-mannered man that they always seemed to stray toward.

Instead, she firmly put her mind back on the man currently holding her tightly against a wall.

The holidays this year had passed in a cold, heavy blur, and she hadn't caught even a glimpse of spandex in the sky until a few weeks into the new year. His presence in Metropolis seemed to dwindle while one of the worst winters in recent memory raged on. She'd finally started paying attention again as they'd headed toward spring. By then his regular patrols seemed to resume.

Had he been grieving, too?

After all, Superman had been friends with both halves of the hottest team in town. She shook her head at the ad campaign Perry had been drawing up for the *Planet's* star reporting team. Those plans, like so many others, would never be a reality.

With no way to ask the hero how he was feeling, she'd decided to tread lightly around him if they bumped into one another. Maybe they shared some common ground on this. She'd certainly spent the winter hibernating and licking her slow-to-close wounds. Maybe he'd done the same.

But the superhero seemed to be in his usual top form, possibly even better than before. In the new year, he'd expanded his reach far outside Metropolis, chasing the sun from one coast to another. As they headed toward spring, he'd been abroad more, too, circling the globe and leaping from one crisis into another. His rescues seemed to happen with much more alacrity, she'd noticed. He didn't linger after an encounter, instead moving on quickly, almost even abruptly, from one rescue to the next.

She'd been able to observe this new trend up close. In the past three months, he'd still found the time to save her bacon from a fire, two robberies, a kidnapping gone wrong and a hostage situation. But as both the kidnapped and the hostage, he'd deliberately yanked her out of harm's way and unceremoniously dumped her halfway across town before heading back alone to bag the bad guys. She'd missed details at both scenes, and nearly been scooped by the *Star* at her own kidnapping. Big Blue hadn't even left her with a quote. In two instances, he hadn't gotten in her way, though he'd kept his distance. Both of those times, she'd had to — again — publish her articles without a quote from the main witness of the story. And she was still in the doghouse with Perry because of it. In only one of their encounters had he helped her get the story.

So instead of treading lightly around his feelings, she'd spent a significant portion of the spring deeply irritated at the suddenly all-business hero, who seemingly didn't have time anymore for her, either as a member of the press or as a fellow grieving friend.

She appreciated him saving her life, such as it was these days, but contemptuously despised his effect on her stories. It particularly riled her since she was taking more care these days. In two of the previous five rescues, she could have easily extricated herself without any help at all, let alone super help. And so she was understandably wary when her spaceman showed up these days.

He'd known her for two years, and she thought he knew better than this by now. She'd thought he knew *her* better. It left her unsure of exactly what kind of friends they were.

He'd save her, sure. But at this rate, his idea of a 'safe' rescue during *Planet* business might cost her her job.

...which might not be the worst thing to happen to her, she thought wearily.

She heard footsteps approaching again, and sharply pushed aside her thoughts. Unsure of the hero behind her, she shifted her weight to take a step forward. Instead, she felt herself floating upward.

In a blink, she realized that they were on top of the building she'd been skulking around. Finally disengaging from the spandex-clad arm that had anchored her, she walked back to the side of the roof and cautiously looked down into the street. The two men that had been in the car were about to meet at the corner below her.

Clever of them, she thought. If she'd finished that sprint across the street to get away from the second man, he would have corralled her straight into his compatriot.

Superman had saved her from being caught.

And she was still in the neighborhood where she'd started the night! That was a good sign.

It looked like he'd decided to truly play her hero tonight then, and not a wet blanket. Casting a glance back at the man in blue cautiously watching her, she decided that she shouldn't rule in his favor just yet.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at a nearly inaudible level, knowing that he would hear her.

He shrugged in reply, a gesture that didn't quite fit him. Something in her brain tried to catch hold of the inconsistency. But then his shoulders lowered, his arms crossed and he slid into his typical wide stance. The familiar pose chased away the twitch in her brain.

Still not sure if she had a partner in crime or a babysitter tonight, she looked back over the side of the building and crouched down to observe the two tattered men more closely.

They had met at the corner he'd flown her away from and were walking back toward the front of the warehouse. They then moved around to the front of the car, leaning against the still-cooling hood. The second man took a packet of cigarettes out, slipping one into his mouth before offering his buddy the pack. The first man checked his watch, and then pulled his own cigarette from the box. They lit up, settling in to wait.

"Can you hear any cars coming?" she asked her super-powered shadow on a whisper.

"No," came a voice in her ear.

She nearly jumped as she looked back over her shoulder. She didn't realize he'd gotten so close.

She gestured to the building the men were camped in front of. "Can you get me down to the side door?"

He made eye contact then, assessing her. "What's inside?" he asked in a tone that made her think he was going to be a wet blanket after all.

She couldn't let that happen.

"Drugs," she said flatly. "I've been following a trail that started at a couple of high schools on the west side. I think those guys are buying drugs to sell to kids. The police haven't been able to pin anything down since the first kid OD'd on Christmas Eve."

She clocked his expression as it changed. The criminals might think that Lois Lane was the hero's weak spot. But she knew better. Superman would do anything to save children.

He still looked a little skeptical. That was fair, she supposed, given her track record.

She pressed on, "Henderson's last partner moved over to narcotics. So he asked me if I'd keep an ear out."

"And this is you keeping an ear out?" he asked.

Was that a grin or a grimace tugging at his mouth?

"Yes!" He was frustrating her. "There's nothing to report to them if I don't actually get in there and see what's going on. And no report back to Henderson means no chance of stopping those drugs from putting another kid in the hospital," she said direly. "Or worse."

He finally nodded at her and glanced at the two men still smoking on the hood of their car. She followed his eyes. It didn't look like the tattered drug pushers had any intention of moving soon.

Before she could process what was happening, his arm was around her waist again and she was standing beside the door she'd been looking at only a heartbeat earlier.

He released her on contact with the ground, but she hadn't quite found her feet yet after the sudden change in location and gravity.

She pitched forward, hands landing on his chest as his arms came back up to steady her. Her forward momentum stopped. She glanced up with a grateful smile, and their eyes locked.

He must not have been expecting the sudden contact, because it left his expression unguarded. She recognized the look in his eyes and knew that it would be mirrored in her own. She'd missed that look.

Her heart skipped a beat.

She grimaced internally, knowing he'd be able to hear that. But he seemed as frozen as she was.

Drawing in a ragged breath, she took a half step back and tried to even out her breathing. Turning toward the door and trusting him to cover them, she reached into an inside pocket and drew out Jimmy's old lock pick kit. Kneeling down, she examined the deadbolt and lever handle lock and got to work.

The handle lock gave way to her hook pick and tension wrench in about 30 seconds. But the deadbolt was another matter. She swapped out her tools and tried her C-rake. The pin refused to budge.

"You might want to hurry," came a quiet voice above her.

She swapped tools again, feeling his cape flap against her leg as it was buffeted by the breeze off the bay. She'd assumed this was a single cylinder lock, but it was a double. Wishing she'd had time to tail the guys long enough to do a little pick-pocketing and make a bump key, she wiggled the tension wrench.

"How's it coming?"

"It's coming," she said, now hearing a car approaching in the distance. That must have been what caused him to warn her in the first place.

"Do you have a time estimate on that?" he asked with some urgency.

"It's more of an art than a science," she retorted.

The car was closer now, and she could see headlights playing across the asphalt of the street where the men were smoking.

"I could just break it," he offered quietly.

"No!" she immediately rejected. "Then they'd know someone had been here! They'd suspect something was up."

And that could cost her the story she'd spent months tracking down.

The second car came to a stop, and she heard the footsteps of the two men that had been waiting.

"Lois—" he whispered, sounding even closer to her than he'd been before.

"Just a second," she stalled.

A car door opened and slammed shut.

"Out of time," he said, just as she felt the lock turn.

"Got it!" she said over him, as she felt his arm wind around her again.

And then she was standing in darkness.

Her picks were still in her hand. His arm was still around her waist. But her vision had gone completely black. She tried to peer up at him in the utter darkness that was enveloping them.

"Nice timing," he said.

She thought she could hear a smile in his voice. Unable to see his face, or anything at all, she couldn't tell if his expression matched.

"Are we inside the building?" she asked. That was the only logical possibility that fit the blinding night that surrounded them.

"Yes."

"Can you re-lock the door from this side?"

She felt his arm leave her, and she slipped her pick case out of her pocket to rehome her picks. A second later, she heard two locks snick back into place.

"Can you still see?" she asked.

"Well enough," he replied.

"Them," she clarified. "Can you still see them?"

A short pause. "A man and a woman arrived in the second car. They're talking to the others. The smoking men are assuring the woman that no one else is nearby."

She snorted. "Do you recognize any of them?" She wished she had that see-through-walls power. It really came in handy.

"No," he replied.

Jimmy's pick kit safely stowed in an inner pocket, she put an arm out in front of her, and slid one foot forward in the opposite direction of his voice. When she didn't crash into anything, she took another slow sliding step, and then a third.

"What are you doing?"

Was that amusement creeping into his tone? she wondered incredulously. One arm stretched out in front of her, she slid her foot forward again, keeping a lower base than usual. She might look ridiculous, she conceded. But that didn't make her a willing object of derision! Excuse her for being just a plain human with ordinary eyesight, instead of some kind of demi-god with super-powered night vision! Not everyone had invulnerability if they crashed clumsily into furniture.

"If they're going to stay out there chit-chatting, I'm going to take a look around," she snipped back impatiently.

"We're in an empty room with file cabinets along one wall. There's an open archway across from us that leads to the loading bay. The rest of the warehouse is through there."

She was sure now that he was helpful hero again, and not the incredible super dampener he'd been lately.

That still wasn't going to make up for him laughing at her, though.

"Which direction are the filing cabinets?" she asked into the inky sea of nothingness.

"Too late for that," he said with a low current of urgency. "They're headed this way."

"Let's hide in the warehouse. Maybe we'll be able to see where they're going from in there," she said, turning back toward where she thought it was.

They both heard the deadbolt lock turn over.

"I've got a better idea," he said.

She felt the wind rushing past her and realized he'd moved them. She gritted her teeth. That was the fourth time tonight she'd been whisked off somewhere without warning, and it was starting to grate on her. Lois Lane was used to having agency over where she went.

She opened her mouth to remind him of that, but in that moment realized that while she was still standing, her feet were no longer touching the ground. In fact, she was willing to bet that she was much closer to the ceiling than the floor. One of her arms wound around him so that she could grip his shoulder, and she felt him chuckle lightly in reaction. Her irritation rose another few degrees.

The door opened and soft light spilled inside.

Lois counted four silhouettes as their footsteps reverberated against the hard floor. She strained against the warehouse shadows to see where they were headed. The door closed behind them a second later pitching them all back into the endless black.

But then amber light bloomed, and Lois blinked as her eyes finally adjusted and took in the room. A man in a sport coat stood beside a floor lamp. It illuminated five green, rusting file cabinets on the wall perpendicular to the door. On the wall opposite from the door they'd entered through, two dented metal folding chairs sat side by side. The concrete floor continued from their room through the opening that he'd said led to the loading dock.

She was observing all this from high above, of course. Even though she'd known that he'd carried them aloft, it took her a second to push away the surprise at actually *seeing* that they were at least 30 feet above everyone else's heads.

Lois took her first look at the woman below. She was dressed in dark colors, though she looked to be a bit better attired than the two tattered men she'd come to meet. From Lois' vantage point, she couldn't see the woman's face. Nor could she identify her from the average build and dirty blond hair.

Lois switched her focus back to the other new member of the group. The man in the sport coat had broad shoulders and wore a scowl. The creases around his mouth suggested that this was his preferred expression. He looked like a thug to her, and everything about him screamed 'hired muscle.' That meant the blonde woman was probably in charge here.

"How much did you move last week?" the blonde asked without preamble.

The concrete and metal enclosure made it much easier to hear, even if she was 30 feet overhead. No longer fighting the wind gusting between the buildings or the lapping of the bay, she could hear every word clearly for the first time tonight. And the echo of the little warehouse office was actually working in her favor.

Gently unzipping the pocket on her coat, she pulled out her mini tape recorder. She zipped her pocket closed again and lifted the device in front of her face to see the buttons in the dark. She could do it by feel, and had before, but she preferred to see that the correct button was being pressed.

One-handed, she rolled it over to start the record function when it suddenly slipped from her grasp.

The arm around her waist disappeared, and for exactly one beat of her heart, she was suspended in mid-air.

On the other side of that heartbeat, she'd just become sure she was in free fall, when she felt an iron hand grip her by the upper arm.

She'd managed to hold in the scream that had nearly broken free, and now she consciously forced herself not to exhale in relief. Moments like this always renewed her appreciation for Superman's special abilities - he could move FAST!

He must have let her go in order to catch the recorder before it fell into the line of sight of those below. Then he'd moved back upward to catch her again, though she'd managed to twist herself in to a less catchable angle, she realized. It looked like she'd dropped a couple of feet, but she was nowhere near the floor. Even now he was towing her back up toward the ceiling, moving very slowly so as not to attract attention, his eyes on the meeting below.

She twisted her arm to get his attention. His eyes flicked to her and she mouthed, 'Record!'

He pursed his lips, but ignored her command, instead continuing to pull her slowly upward.

Irritated, she twisted again, jerking her arm. She felt his grip tighten in response. He gave her a look but instead of stilling her movements, she gestured with her free arm to the recorder in his other hand.

Superman didn't roll his eyes, but she swore she could feel him fight the urge.

He turned her recording device over in his hand and depressed one of the buttons. Then he continued to pull her toward him. As he maneuvered her, she realized that he wasn't pulling her into the same position. This time, he carried her the way he used to, one hand behind her shoulders and one beneath her bent knees.

Once settled, she had to resist leaning into him. She only now realized just how much she had missed this.

While they hadn't exactly gone on leisurely pleasure flights before, there had always been a shared intimacy in flying together - his arms around her, cradling her to his chest, as they shared a wordless connection and affinity for the endless skies and the sunset beyond. It had always felt both soothing and exhilarating. And try as she might, particularly in these recent months, she could never quite shake the feeling that it was where she was meant to be.

But over the last few months, that had all changed.

Flights were notably faster. Last time, she'd had to turn her head away from the harsh winds they passed through at what felt like an accelerated speed. What had once been an indulgence in something that they both loved now felt

perfunctory at best. During the hostage situation, he'd made dropping her off seem like a chore.

She couldn't really bring herself to complain, though she'd been incensed in the moment. Having already lost one friend, she didn't relish pushing Superman and therefore risking losing another. Things were already strained with both Jimmy and Perry, too, as they insisted on treating her with kid gloves. She wouldn't further alienate Superman, as well.

Still, she wondered at the new-found speed he'd poured on during their recent flights together. A hunch told her it had been his attempt to discourage conversation. That was another thing she missed between them. They didn't have regular in-depth conversations per se, but there had always been banter and a shared understanding. It had always seemed like a unique skill of theirs to exchange a lot of meaning with few words. But it had been months since she'd been able to discern any hidden meaning in his eyes.

And, of course, in perhaps the biggest change of those recent flights, he hadn't held her nearly as close.

Unlike right now.

In the present moment, he'd pulled her quite close, pressing her against his chest. But it still didn't feel like the seeming affection she'd once reveled in. In fact, she had the sneaking suspicion that he was trying to keep her still.

Like that would ever happen.

She fought a grin and tried to focus on the conversation below them. By now, the woman had clearly defined herself as ring-leader. It sounded like the two tattered men were distributors. Mr. Hired Muscle didn't contribute to the conversation, but stood just behind the blonde woman looking brooding.

She wondered if he was paid by the frown.

As the drug peddlers below continued to compare numbers, she lightly adjusted her position against the steel arms holding her in place, and delicately unzipped an inner pocket. Very carefully — very, very carefully, with the fallen recorder in mind — she pulled out the Planet's smallest SLR camera and double checked that the flash was off. She looked through the little viewfinder to focus the image, and leaned forward to get a better angle.

She felt herself jerked backward and looked up at her current mode of transport.

Was that exasperation creeping in behind his eyes?

What did he think they were here for? Photos were evidence, and she'd made it clear that she'd come here for evidence. Chalk up one more point in the 'wet blanket' category.

Giving him a look that conveyed she thought he was being overcautious, she pointedly turned back toward the people below. Without leaning so far forward that her own personal safety rail would pitch her backward again, she

clicked the shutter, capturing Mr. Brooding's face. She took a second photo, careful to get a good 3/4 profile of the younger man that she'd fled from earlier. She'd have to wait to get clear shots of the other two. But at least she'd managed to get the floor and the filing cabinets in the picture, which should make it easier to link these guys to this warehouse. Satisfied for now, she stowed it securely back in her pocket.

"...no discounts," Blondie was saying.

"But we've pushed all our product earlier than the deadline. What about an early delivery bonus?" the older tattered man wheedled.

"You sell faster, that means you can sell more overall. That makes more profit for both of us. That's your bonus," Blondie replied callously.

The younger man made a 'tsk' sound and shifted his feet. The two tattered men looked at each other for a moment and seemed to reach some silent accord.

Then the older man said, "Fine. Then give us our next supply now."

"Follow me," Blondie said. She looked at her Muscle-Man. "Bruno, follow us."

Lois chortled quietly at that. Mr. Brooding's name was Bruno. It fit.

Blondie headed through the archway, her low chunky heels clacking across the cement floor. The two tattered men followed her, and 'Bruno' trailed after the group.

A second later, a fluorescent light flickered on in the windowless warehouse beyond.

Lois turned to her own now-brooding muscle man. "Let's go," she urged. "We need to get in there so I can get photos of the hand-off."

For a second, she thought he was going to argue, but he flew them over to hover above the archway. He stared at the wall, and she assumed he must be looking through it to see the people inside the warehouse proper.

Still looking at the wall, he whispered, "Two of them are facing the door. If I move through the doorway, we'd have to go low enough that they might see us."

"Is there any other way in?"

He looked around again before replying, "Not one that wouldn't attract even more attention."

"We have to get photos of them," she insisted. "And we need to get the recorder closer."

"I can move faster than their eyes would be able to see us, but it would be pretty uncomfortable for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm invulnerable to G-forces. You're not."

"I've never been hurt flying with you before," she pointed out.

"I've never gone this fast with a passenger," he said. "For a reason," he added when her skepticism obviously wasn't quelled.

"So what's our other option?" she asked.

"I could bring the recorder in and take photos for you," he offered. He dropped them down to the ground, and she swung her legs down to stand next to him. But she held onto his arm stubbornly.

"Not on your life," she said. "It's my story, and I'm going with you."

"Lois," he said, frustration seeping into his carefully controlled tone, "I don't think I can get us both in there safely."

A sudden thought struck her. "Do you even do that?"

"Do what?"

"Gather evidence. Don't you usually stop crimes as they're happening? This doesn't seem like your usual Friday night of super crime prevention."

His eyes slid away from hers just as a loud grating sound reached them from the next room.

"They're opening one of the crates in there," he said urgently. "Give me the camera."

"Look, it'll be fast but it'll be fine."

"Lois, it wouldn't be!"

"Just take me in," she insisted hotly.

"Lo—is!" he shot back.

For some reason she felt a surge of shock and elation as he said her name, even though his tone was definitely annoyed now. She shook the feeling away as he held out his hand and said, "Camera." With another impatient glance at the wall beside them, he said, "It's now or never."

"Ugh, fine!" Still off balance, she capitulated with agitation, unzipping her pocket. "Make sure you get their faces and the drugs in the same shot! And make sure you —"

"I know what to do," he said steadily, taking the camera from her hand and blurring out of sight.

She crouched down beside the open archway and shook her head in disgust. Was this just another part of his crusade to keep her out of harm's way? Was that why he'd insisted on accompanying her inside in the first place? Thinking back over the night, a lot of his actions tonight had been focused on keeping her out of sight — and out of reach — of the people she'd been following.

Come to think of it, she realized it wasn't like him to ride along on one of her stake-outs. He usually only showed up after a final countdown had begun. ...or after the fuse had been lit. ...or when someone's finger was already pressing the trigger. ...or as her temper gave way to fear and she finally called for help in the seconds left

before the building was about to explode. That wasn't the situation she was in now.

She hadn't even been caught, yet, for goodness' sake!

And just when did Superman take a course in investigative reporting? He'd said he knew his business with the camera. Then there was the recorder. As he'd floated them aloft, she noticed that he'd held her recorder in one hand, speaker carefully uncovered and pointed at the people below. Even though they'd be harder to spot in a darker corner of the ceiling, he'd kept them directly overhead of the criminals. It had meant that the recorder was close enough to pick up their voices. Had he positioned them because of that?

He'd naturally staged himself as a lookout as she'd picked the door lock, too. Something about the way he'd stood just over her shoulder, giving her quiet warnings about their progress reminded her deeply of something. Her senses were desperately reaching to remember and make the connection, but she couldn't quite place it.

Maybe she could chalk up all of his behavior tonight to general competence or even common sense.

But something about it gave her a hunch that they'd been through something like this before.

One thing was certain, though. She'd never been on a stake-out with Superman.

Putting that train of thought aside, she laid low to the ground and took a chance to peer around the corner.

Only two of them had their backs to her, but it didn't matter. All four were intent on the open brick of white powder in the woman's hand. The younger tattered man looked like he was tasting it, and Lois made a sour face reflexively. He wiped his hand clean and nodded to the older man, who in turn nodded at Blondie.

"Same price," Blondie stipulated.

"Yeah, yeah," the older man reluctantly agreed, "Same price."

Lois couldn't hear much else of their grunted conversation from her position all the way back at the archway, but the woman was encasing the powder again. She handed it over and pulled another out of the open crate beside her. She held out her other hand expectantly. The older man handed her two stacks of cash. She spent time counting it before handing over the second brick.

Lois felt a level of glee she hadn't felt in months. Her partner for the night should have some incriminatingly iron-clad photos after this. At different moments, both the older man and the woman had held both the drugs and the money at the same time. She could just see the look on Henderson's face when he got his hands on this evidence.

And, to top it off, she'd finally recognized Blondie. Blondie had been one of Luthor's lower-level secretaries,

though, apparently, she'd had more access than either Lois or the police had realized.

Lots of Luthor's old employees seemed to have access to things they shouldn't, she thought.

And it had been keeping her busy.

The emptiness of the holidays this year had sent Lois into a frenzy for work. It was her least favorite time of year anyway, but this year's had been the worst since she was a kid. Lucy hadn't made it home. Her dad was knee-deep in some research project, and she couldn't even convince her mother to have Christmas dinner with her. She'd resorted to inviting Perry and Jimmy over on Christmas Eve, but they'd had families that actually wanted to spend time with them. And, of course, she couldn't rely on Clark this year.

She'd thought of him a lot that night, as she'd stared out at the silent snow coming down outside her window. The gathering emptiness had been as cold as the gathering snow.

She'd already been throwing herself into her work before the holidays, but after that night... After that she'd required a more relentless pace to keep her steady. When she didn't find as many big leads in Metropolis as she thought there should be, she started hunting for smaller stories. And she began her investigations with what she knew best: the many-headed hydra of Luthor Corp and its seemingly endless list of illegal subsidiaries and illicit affiliates.

Lex was just the gift that kept on giving.

She could really pick them, she castigated herself for the thousandth time.

The vacuum that came in the wake of Luthor Corp's downfall had been unprecedented. The city had attempted to bail out a handful of Luthor's legitimate local companies, which would have lent some stability to the Metropolis work force. But competitors and outside interests had swooped in to take hold of the most lucrative operations. Those take-overs had more often than not been hostile. Luthor had left many more enemies than friends, and his former employees were forced to bear the brunt of that enmity. As a result, many of them had lost their jobs as the business world had laid siege to the once untouchable Luthor Corp.

With Metropolis' biggest employer under fire, some of Luthor's previously honest employees had made creative use of their Luthor Corp knowledge as a stop-gap between their sudden job loss and the unemployment line. In fact, she'd followed a trail unknowingly laid by one of them right to this warehouse tonight.

So she hadn't lied earlier - not exactly. She *had* spoken with Henderson about the drug case, after all. In passing, he'd mentioned that his old partner, who'd switched departments recently, had gotten saddled with a case that

wasn't going anywhere. Still smarting from her lonely holiday, Lois perked up at the sound of an unsolved mystery in the city. After some prodding, Henderson took pity and gave her a few off-the-record details on the sudden influx of cocaine into the west side high schools.

Lois had quickly figured out that she'd already been working the case from the other end. Only, she hadn't mentioned that part to her big blue boy scout. Knowing Superman's dislike of Lex Luthor, even in death, perhaps it was better this way. No need to tell him she was chasing Luthor's ghosts tonight.

The sound of the crate lid scraping into place called her attention back to the Luthor Corp cast-off and her cohorts. Her gaze flicked upward but it seemed that her partner for the evening was well out of sight. She looked back at the group. The two men had bagged the bricks and were heading toward her, followed closely by Blondie and Bruno the Brooding.

Lois maneuvered herself backward and away from the opening. *She was either flat on the ground or up in the air on this assignment*, she thought ruefully, brushing off her knees. Regardless, right now she was fervently hoping she'd be back in the air before the first of the peddlers came back into the room.

"Superman!" she whispered as loudly as she dared. "Our new friends are going to see me in a second."

She scanned the little room again — nothing but a floor lamp, which was much too thin to hide behind, and a group of filing cabinets, which wouldn't give her much cover. She might make it to the door, but its opening would give her away.

Stepping backwards, she headed for the far, dark corner of the room.

"Superman!"

She kept an eye on the archway, but didn't see any sign of blue spandex.

"I know they're dumb, but there's no way they'll miss me in here." She could hear the group's footsteps approaching her now. They were getting closer very quickly. "Superman! Please!"

The footsteps were close enough that they'd make it through the archway in about a second.

"Sup—"

Her breath caught in her chest as the overwhelming sensation of being pulled sharply against gravity overtook her.

"A little warning might be nice," she grouched in a whisper, as she dug her hands into his shoulders, fighting back a surge of dizziness whilst in mid-air.

He'd been right about moving too fast with a passenger, after all. She dropped her head on his shoulder to stave off the nausea and took shallow breaths.

"I told you that you wouldn't like it fast," his voice said into her ear.

Was Superman teasing her again? She mustered up a dirty look for him but her attention was captured by the group moving below her.

The two tattered men crossed the concrete floor directly under them and walked through the still unlocked door.

Amateurs, Lois thought smugly. They hadn't even locked the door while showing off where their drug supply was stashed! Anyone could have walked in! It was a shame she hadn't just had Henderson's partner come with her tonight. He could have stumbled upon the door she opened for him and they'd have wrapped this up by now.

Brooding Bruno turned off the lamp and met Blondie at the door. They both exited and a moment later, Lois heard one lock turn over, and then another. Footsteps receded into silence. One car started and pulled away. The other followed a moment later.

He lowered them to the ground at a what she considered a reasonable pace for the first time that evening.

Lois expelled a breath, fishing a pen light out of another pocket. "Well, that was easier than I thought it would be."

She heard him click off the recorder and he handed it to her.

"Thanks," she said, double checking the tape.

"It was recording," he said, sounding a little maligned.

"I know," she said absently, rewinding the tape. "I always check it. Force of habit."

He raised an eyebrow and her irritation from earlier resurfaced.

"I wasn't implying anything about you!"

He didn't look like he believed her, but he didn't reply. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was intentionally trying to wind her up.

"I wasn't! Please, I have a little more faith in you than that!" she said, condescendingly. "Honestly, you're acting exactly like —"

The air left her lungs.

Clark. She'd been about to say Clark.

She closed her eyes against the slash of pain that lanced through her suddenly collapsing chest.

"Lois?" His voice was soft.

She worked her mouth but no sound came out. Opening her eyes, she pushed the pain down again, relegating her emotions back to the place she kept them hidden during the day. She squared her shoulders, swallowed, and forced herself back to business.

"Are those lead-coated?" she deflected, gesturing to the file cabinets.

"What?" he asked, looking nearly as off-kilter as she felt.

"The file cabinets. Can you see through them?"

He glanced over at them. "Yes."

"Well," she gestured impatiently toward them.

"Well?" he asked, sounding earnestly confused.

"Well, can you scan through them for some kind of ledger or inventory or something related to our guys? I'm sure most of it's outdated, but maybe we'll get lucky."

He had that look on his face again — like he was going to argue. "Shouldn't we be heading to the police now?"

"We're heading to the police next. But the more we can give them, the easier it will be for them to get a warrant for this place," she said convincingly.

"And the more you'll be able to print in tomorrow's edition," he said knowingly.

Could she make it? How much time had passed since he'd pulled her out of the alley? She checked her watch. It'd be tight, but... "If I'm really lucky, I might just make deadline." Looked back at him with pleading eyes, she theorized, "But if I have to search through all five of these, it'll take more time before we can get the police down here, which means more time with those criminals out on the streets before they're arrested." She warmed to her theme, "And that means more drugs potentially in the hands of harmless kids."

She knew she was milking this, but it was worth the chance.

"You're incorrigible," he said, before moving toward the cabinets.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" she grinned, following him as he passed her.

He stopped in front of the first cabinet.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot impatiently.

"Well?" she asked a second later.

He glanced back at her and chuckled. "Lois, I know I'm fast, but this is still going to take me a minute!" Still grinning, he shifted his gaze back to the cabinet in front of him.

She sighed, leaving him to it and glancing around her. There really wasn't anything else of interest in the room. Wandering into the main warehouse, she looked around. *Dusty*, she diagnosed, wrinkling her nose. It wasn't full by any stretch, but it wasn't empty either.

Making her way over to the crate that Blondie opened, she stopped to inspect it. Careful not to touch it and disturb the fingerprints already there, she examined the sides and lid. It had the same marking as the other crates, but its lid wasn't affixed.

She moved to the crate behind her and realized that its lid wasn't affixed either. She pulled the lid off and aimed her light into the box.

Electrical cables.

Innocuous. And therefore boring, she assessed.

She propped the lid back on and moved to the next crate in the same direction. It was also open and upon investigation also held cables. Following the breadcrumbs back toward the door, she examined the next three crates, too. They were identical. She dug around through the one nearest the door she'd come in through. The cables were heavy and didn't want to shift after sitting so long in their positions. She managed to dig nearly halfway down without finding anything suspicious.

She gave up on it and headed back to Blondie's crate again. Stepping past it, she examined the lids on the far side, heading deeper into the warehouse.

They were closed.

Had Blondie just come in and opened crates until she'd found something that piqued her interest? Had it really been that simple?

Did that mean that every single property Lex had owned still held some sort of vice yet to be unleashed upon Metropolis? How many were left undiscovered? Worse yet, how many were out there on the streets already?

Her shoulders slumped at the dour future that laid itself out before her. She hadn't married Lex, but she was still stuck with him. Tonight proved to her that she'd be hunting Lex's ghost for years — tracking down other crates like Blondie's, ferreting out a story if there was one, and keeping all of Pandora's many boxes out of the wrong hands. Even with all her skills, her confidence in her own talent, and the inside track on Luthor, the job already felt like an insurmountable climb.

She didn't want to do it on her own anymore.

Alone, in the dark, ensconced in silence, she desperately wished for her partner back.

When had her life become this waltz of specters? She was doggedly chasing down one ghost and plaintively yearning for another.

The wave of missing him caught her off-guard and easily pulled her into its undertow.

It was an emotion she had spent hours learning to tamp down. Every day, she craved the indulgence of missing him. But she'd discovered that if she gave in, it would effectively be the end of her day. So she only let herself slide into the obsidian melancholy sea of those memories once she was alone in her apartment at the end of her day. As the sun drowned below the horizon line, she would give way and ardently bury herself in her graveyard of regret. It was past that time now, and her mind and body were insisting upon their usual routine.

Already overwhelmed, she let herself succumb.

Clark, she thought reverently, swaying slightly on her feet as she let darkness and the memories of Clark Kent weave around her.

She missed his solid presence, his dependability, his teasing grin. She missed his ability to stumble upon useful clues. His arm folding around hers as they walked down the city streets. The amused look in his eyes when she was saying something completely outlandish. The safe haven as he stood at her shoulder in the midst of whatever tempest she'd tossed them into. The warmth of his hand on her lower back. The light in his eyes as she stepped off the elevator. His easy camaraderie. His innate kindness. His better angels screaming down all of her inner demons. His ability to make her feel better about anything, even herself. Just... him.

She'd realized agonizingly late that she didn't want to be just Mad Dog Lane anymore. She wanted to be Lane and Kent.

She missed her old life acutely.

The one with him in it.

In this new colder, colorless life, missing Clark Kent was the best part of her day.

"Got it!"

Spinning toward the sound, she realized belatedly that her eyes were expressing her still-raw sadness.

"Lois?" His voice became soft again.

Getting sloppy, she thought, already compartmentalizing. She dropped the penlight, using her movement in retrieving it as a cover to dash the tears from her eyes. It gave her the moment she needed to compose herself and reaffix her endlessly exhausting, but convincingly normal Lois Lane persona.

"What did you find?" she asked, in a passably normal tone.

"What were you doing in here?" he asked gently, not answering her question.

"I was looking through the crates to see what other trouble Blondie might be getting herself into," she said with deliberate wryness.

She headed toward him, leaving Clark's memory in the darkness behind her. It would still be there for her later. He was always waiting for her. Even in death, she could rely on him for that.

"Nothing worthwhile in the other open crates," she pressed on before he could speak. "We'll let Henderson's boys sort out the unopened ones. What did you come up with?"

Not waiting for an answer, she stopped by his side and shone her light onto the papers in his hand.

"Names? And dates and correlating numbers and — are those license plate numbers?" Interest lit within her.

“One of them matches the car that you followed here tonight,” he told her.

“A list of distributors!” She patted him on the shoulder with mounting excitement. “That’s perfect!”

He materialized her camera from somewhere and held the pages out to her. She turned on her flash and photographed them one at a time.

She practically beamed at him. “Now we go to the police. Let’s get those back into place.”

“Already ahead of you,” he said, blurring out of sight.

“Show-off,” she muttered, and heard his answering laugh from the small room in front of her. She headed back toward him and used her penlight to zero in on the outer door.

Zippering her camera back into her pocket, she triple checked her recorder — again — and reached for the door.

“Ready?” she asked.

The door opened before her hand could touch it.

“Ladies, first,” he said gallantly, ushering her through. His hand landed lightly on her lower back as she passed him.

The sensation of familiarity was undeniable.

She stopped dead and twisted back to look at him.

And she really looked at him for the first time that night.

“What?” he asked, studying her face.

Yes, *what?* her mind asked. What was happening?

She was transported back a lifetime ago.

Clark’s hand on her lower back, warm through the red organza layers of her dress, as they slipped together past the bouncer at the door. The noise of the casino made it hard to hear him as they entered, so he’d guided her through the warm press of bodies toward a slot machine where they could pause to get a look around. They had stopped, just like this, and she had caught an appreciative look in his warm, darkening eyes before he’d hidden it. It was in that moment she’d decided that her flirty red dress had just become her new favorite.

“Lois?” The gentleness in Superman’s voice led her out of the casino, though it resonated in a discordantly familiar way.

“I was just thinking…” she said, still staring starkly at him in the dim alley, tracing the lines of his face with her eyes.

He waited patiently for her to continue.

She snapped herself out of the daydream.

Things that seem too good to be true usually are, she told herself ruthlessly.

“We should lock the door,” she said, willfully dislodging his hand by bending down to kneel beside the rusted lock. She rummaged for her kit, and finding it, fished out two picks and got to work. “If they come back

before we do, they’ll realize someone’s been here. We don’t want them moving the evidence before the MPD can get back to it.”

“Lois Lane, the only person I’ve ever known to use a lock-pick to LOCK a door,” he chuckled.

“I’m a woman of many skills,” she retorted, finishing the easy lever-lock swiftly and moving to the deadbolt.

She looked at him askance. There was a devil on her shoulder tonight, which was a pity because they’d finally fallen back into their old routine.

But… that wasn’t right. This had never been her routine with Superman.

Something pushed her to ask, “So, how did you enjoy your first night moonlighting as an investigative reporter for the *Planet?*?”

His expression froze.

“You’re good at it, too,” she said daringly, forcing her voice to stay casual.

“Thank you,” he said politely.

“So?” she prodded.

“So…?”

“So, how did you like it?”

“Well… it’s not how I usually work.” It sounded like he was hedging.

The lock turned over into place and she pocketed her pick. She stood, facing him and tucking her hair behind one ear. “It’s nice having a partner, though.” Her voice had lowered without her permission. “Isn’t it?”

Their eyes met and held.

“It’s nice to have a partner,” he agreed, his tone low and intense.

She took a small step closer. “Ever consider going under cover as a reporter?” she asked.

He could never say ‘yes,’ of course. But even as she asked it, she was absolutely sure he wouldn’t say ‘no.’

He hesitated before replying quietly, “It’s tempting.”

His response hung in the air between them.

There was been something there, so tangible she could almost, almost grasp hold of it.

Finally, he cleared his throat. “We should head over to the precinct.”

She nodded and he slipped one arm beneath her knees, another around her back. As they alighted into a star-filled sky, she couldn’t help but wonder…

How tempting?

“…and,” Lois was saying with undisguised glee, “the last three shots on the roll are copies of her distributor list.”

The flight to the precinct had been a short one, and the superhero’s presence had garnered them a meeting with Inspector Henderson more quickly than she’d ever been awarded one on her own. They were currently in an unused

interrogation room, her camera and recorder on the table between them.

“Her?” Henderson asked.

“Yes,” Lois replied, picturing Blondie in her mind. “Get me a Luthor Corp look book and I can ID the leader of this. She was one of his outer office secretaries. She would have had easy access to the warehouse location, and probably the false versions of the shipping manifests, too.”

“Luthor Corp?” Superman said, with tightly bound surprise.

Lois carefully cast her gaze to the floor.

Henderson’s expression didn’t quite change but his voice was even more languid as he said, “Yeah. Lois didn’t tell you that part, did she?”

“I wasn’t sure until I got a good look at her,” she said innocently.

“Lois...” Her current partner’s tone conveyed a deep displeasure. He looked at her, arms crossed, and waited.

They didn’t call him the man of steel just for his invulnerability, she thought. The look in his eyes showed steel right now, too.

She felt herself give in. “I’d been working their case from the other end. I just asked Bill what he knew. When it sounded like drugs had new routes into neighborhoods that didn’t have much traffic before, I thought our investigations might meet.” She turned to the detective beside her to gloat, “And I was right!” Turning back to Superman she said, “But when I heard that kids were dying because of it, I pushed a little further. It led me to the warehouse tonight. And it’s a good thing, too! We got them!” she finished with more zeal than she’d anticipated.

But then again, she’d felt good tonight. It felt like she was finally getting back into the groove of her life after months of being wrong-footed. They’d gotten the story and were about to get the bad guys, too! Why shouldn’t she feel good?

“How does Luthor fit in?” Superman asked in an uncompromising tone.

Henderson jumped in then, “Lois hasn’t mentioned that she’s been the unofficial Luthor Corp clean-up crew these last few months?”

Superman’s eyebrows jumped to his hairline. “What?!”

“Bill!” she protested.

Henderson waved her off. “Lois here has been in my office every couple weeks with proof that one Luthor lackey or another is racking up felonies like it’s a new hobby.” She could nearly see Henderson’s smirk poking through. “We’re getting pretty used to it, too. She’s saving my guys a lot of field work.”

Henderson looked like he was really having fun with this. At her expense!

Actually, that was kind of a relief, she thought, though she’d never admit it. He’d been walking on eggshells around her for months, just like Perry and Jimmy. She’d been sick of it, but nothing she’d said or done had made a change. The return of her favorite precinct sparring partner evoked a sense of normalcy that she hadn’t felt since — Well, that she hadn’t felt in months. She’d have to bring Superman along more often on visits to Henderson.

“That’s dangerous,” Superman said to her disapprovingly, breaking into her thoughts.

Or not, she immediately recanted.

“It’s my job,” she said stiffly, remembering those times he’d undercut her stories by dropping her off halfway across the city when she’d been perfectly positioned in the middle of the action. Looking back at Bill she asked, “So what can I print?”

“Everything but the distro list. I don’t want to tip them.”

“Your *job* isn’t to go after *Luthor*,” Superman said, steel still in his voice.

“I’m not going after Luthor. I’m going after his secretaries,” she said archly. To Bill, she said, “Will you let me know when Blondie’s in custody?”

Henderson ran a hand over his five o’clock shadow, then picked up her recorder and camera. “Yeah. It’s about time to hand this over to my old partner. It’s his case. I’ll have him get with you on that employee list. Wait here.”

He left her with a righteously indignant superhero.

“You’re going after dangerous people, Lois. Not just secretaries.” His voice was like flint.

“The *Planet* expects copies of that roll of film, Bill!” she shouted to the Detective’s retreating back. When he didn’t reply, she shouted, “Bill! I have a deadline!” He didn’t turn, but his hand came up in a lackadaisical wave. She sat back in one of the chairs, satisfied. From Henderson, that was as good as a written agreement.

“Why are you going after the House of Luthor?” he asked, quoting one of her first articles after her disastrous almost-wedding.

“I’m not,” she said.

“You are, too.”

“Am not,” she rejoined.

“*Lo-is*,” he sighed.

Her breath caught in her suddenly burning chest. There it was again. A reminder of what she’d lost. It hit her like a punch to the gut. His head was down, as if in despair over her stubbornness. Now that they were under bright fluorescents, instead of a dull crescent moon, she took him in again.

Trying to block out the spandex and bright colors, she instead concentrated on his face. Most of the time, he held his features so still and his posture so poised. She tried to

imagine him more relaxed, even with a slouch. Her gaze traveled over his high cheekbones. His hair was the right color, but its texture and length were masked under the gel.

She told herself again that wishing didn't make things so. She'd had that fact reinforced daily over these past few months. Then again, his upper lip had a freckle that she hadn't seen in the weak moonlight, but couldn't deny now.

Suddenly she had to know for sure.

Her hand moved toward his face, intent on mussing his hair.

He looked up then. "What are you doing?" his voice pulled her out of her single-minded daze.

She dropped her hand. The image she'd been conjuring — and the hope — dropped out at the same time.

"Sorry," she said. Unable to tell the truth, whatever the truth even was now, she said instead, "Old habits."

She put both her hands in her lap and stared at them, willing time to keep moving on.

"Listen, Lois—"

"You Lane?" a thick voice interrupted.

She looked up at the detective at the door, and her brow creased, her mouth going unexpectedly dry. "I know you," she said, standing unsteadily.

"Detective Woolf," he introduced himself to the room.

She had to grip the back of her chair for support as his name hit her like a dart. She knew exactly where she'd seen him before. At the *Planet*. Six months ago. He'd been there to follow up on — She swallowed. He'd used her message pad and pen. She'd been in sweats and an oversized shirt. She'd written the last piece she'd ever really cared about that day and then left early. After that, it had taken her over a week to drag herself back to the *Planet*.

"Woolf," she said, suddenly unmoored. "You—" she started, then took a step back, knocking into her chair. She felt Superman rise to stand beside her in response, a steady presence over her shoulder. "*You're* Henderson's old partner?"

"We were only paired up for a coupla' months," he said gruffly, not quite looking at her. "Then I moved over to narcotics."

"When?" she heard her voice ask.

He looked at her steadily then. "About 5 months ago." Apparently, he remembered their first meeting, as well.

"Oh," she said inadequately, still reeling from seeing him.

"Detective Woolf," Superman greeted, stepping slightly between them.

He looked at the pair of them, both still silently looking past the other. Unable to shift her gaze, she was vaguely

aware of the hero, the crease cementing at his brow line, no doubt trying to work out what he'd missed.

"Lois?" he tried, leaning in closer to her.

She finally looked over at him, eyes skittering over that freckle at his lip, and came back to her surroundings and the present. "Hmm? Oh. Right." Without meeting Woolf's eyes again, she asked him, "Did Henderson fill you in?"

"Yeah," he grunted, making his way over to the table with a laptop. "I've got the Luthor Corp company look book on here for you. Though by now you should have it near memorized."

Superman frowned at that, as Woolf set the laptop down, keyed in the password and stepped toward the other side of the room.

Glad for something else to focus on, she sat down heavily in the chair in front of the laptop and leaned in toward the screen.

She was familiar with this document, once housed on the Luthor Corp intranet and now copied onto myriad precinct hard drives all across Metropolis. It showed the name, position, office phone extension and photo of every official Luthor Corp employee.

Lex had often chosen his employees for their intangible qualities — initiative, innovation, discretion, and a smattering of larceny in their hearts. Unfortunately for Metropolis, with their leader's little fiefdom now unlocked and ripe for the picking, some of the former employees had begun using their special skills to liberate Lex's most dangerous assets and wreak havoc with them. It was turning into a criminal's 'finders keepers' free-for-all. Like Blondie finding her drugs to hawk to high schoolers.

As she scrolled through the digitized corporate directory for at least the fifth or six time in as many months, she recognized a number of the faces and names. Her eye always stopped on a woman on the second page; her working as a housekeeper in the penthouse had made her face familiar. A few faces she'd made contact with during her time at LNN. A face on the fifth page caught her eye because she'd been in the same chair looking for him just a few weeks earlier. He was now awaiting trial for attempting to smuggle firearms. Having nearly memorized the first six pages by now, she skipped quickly to the seventh page and scrolled more slowly from there.

Woolf's glib comment had been right. She *had* been committing more employee's faces to memory every time she looked through this. With the bent her investigations had been taking recently, she thought it might come in handy. She'd been right so far.

A blonde shock of hair in the third column of the fourteenth page caught her eye.

"There!" she and Superman said together.

She glanced back at him, stifling another rush of emotion. She hadn't realized that he'd been leaning over her shoulder to look along with her. Couldn't he see this from a city block back? Why lean in? She could feel the heat from his hand on the back of her chair now that she'd leaned back. She shifted in her chair.

Woolf turned the laptop to face him fully and read the caption below the name. "Mercy Graves?"

"That's her, Detective," Superman affirmed.

"Ok, then," he said, shutting the lid with a snap and heading toward the door. "Henderson said to keep you in the loop once the arrest is made since you positively ID'd her for us. Thanks for bringing your information in."

He turned to leave.

"Detective Woolf?" Her reporter's intuition reared its head in the ugliest way.

He stopped at the door.

"Why did you leave homicide?" she asked, voice unsteady.

She had a feeling the answer would hurt, but she had to ask it anyway. She'd become such a glutton for anything connected to him, even if she had to wipe the blood off later.

"I, uh..." Woolf folded the laptop under one arm. He put his other hand on the door jam, leaning into it. "There was a murder a few months back. Wasn't gruesome or anything. I didn't even get a look at the vic. ...but sometimes, something about a crime scene stands out."

She felt dread settle over her.

Woolf shifted to leave, but she couldn't not ask, "What stood out?"

She could see him freeze at her question. She already knew what crime scene he was talking about. Every detail of the casino was cast in hideous, luminous detail in her mind. That night had been the start of her nightmare, but she didn't see how it really could have affected Woolf.

Turning back to her, the Detective settled more heavily into the door frame, letting it surreptitiously hold him up, eyes clocking the room for another way out. "Ah, one of the witnesses had been there with the guy. She was sobbing when the uniforms questioned her. Kinda out of it, they said. But by the time I got to the scene, she was..." He shook his head, as if to clear it, eyes cast down now, avoiding her. "All my time on the force, I've never heard anything like her screaming his name. Pain like that... Got into my bones." His knuckles were white from gripping the door jamb, she noted absently. "Couldn't get it out of my head." He cleared his throat. "I put in for a transfer that next week."

She couldn't speak.

He still didn't look at her.

"I was sorry for your loss, Ms. Lane," he said gravely.

Superman looked at her sharply.

She didn't move or reply.

"We'll courier the photos and the recorder over to the Planet in an hour or two. I'll make sure one of the uniforms gives your city desk a call when we've picked up Graves."

"Thank you, Detective Woolf," Superman said for her, once it was clear she wasn't going to respond.

Woolf made the escape he'd been craving since he'd heard who was waiting in the room for him.

The room was still again.

She tried to force herself to breathe.

She couldn't help that her thoughts flashed over to the red dress that she couldn't bring herself to throw away but couldn't bear to look at. It never failed to strike her as ironic that she'd bought it because it was the color of passion, but the color had instead always brought to mind blood. That night she had gently, carefully wrapped it, and then stuffed it far out of sight beneath her bed.

It didn't matter where she hid it. It haunted her every night anyway.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and became conscious of a careful pair of eyes studying her.

"Would you like me to take you home?" he asked.

Home... She winced.

She really ought to go to the Planet. Write this up in the dim overnight lighting and trudge through on dying embers of the day and stale coffee. As unappealing as that was, home sounded even worse. But at least at her apartment she could go straight to sleep as soon as she'd sent a draft to the night editor.

Tonight had been too much.

She'd go home to memories and finally sink into the best part of her day, she decided. Her familiar pain could tuck her into bed again, as she lay above that harbinger of a dress. Maybe she'd get lucky and actually fall asleep this time.

Out loud, she just said, "Sure."

His hand moved to her lower back as he guided her from the room. She fought the accompanying wave of emotion and insisted to herself it was just wishful thinking.

Together, they exited the precinct and took to the night sky.

It seemed like he was taking the scenic route over to Carter Street tonight. She didn't mind. The night was quiet and her thoughts were jumbled. They unspooled in different directions, but she didn't have the energy to chase any single one to its conclusion.

Her senses had been in overdrive after running into Woolf, reliving the night that Clark hadn't made it through.

She felt more numb now. The cool spring air and the silence of their altitude were helping.

She looked up at the stars blankly. They were so much clearer here, above the lights of the overly bright city.

If only her life could be clearer, too.

“Can I do anything for you?”

She shook her head mutely.

“Would chocolate help?” he asked.

She shook her head again.

“Even chocolate from Switzerland?”

She quirked her mouth in a failed smile. She’d already tried chocolate to solve this problem. It sat on her tongue like ash every time.

But if he really wanted to help... “I don’t suppose you can race around the earth so fast that you could turn back time?”

He seemed to consider the idea.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said wistfully. “Time isn’t always exactly linear, but I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way.”

She took that in. “Then, no.”

A moment passed.

“Can I give you a quote?”

“What?” He’d caught her woolgathering again.

“For your story,” he said.

He seemed so earnest, so eager to please, so desperate to make something right for her tonight.

She shrugged.

She wasn’t thinking about the story at all. Something that had been bothering her finally surfaced to the point where she could articulate it, so she followed her hunch and asked about that instead.

“How did you know that I would need to photograph the distributor list?”

“What?” he looked down at her.

“Her list. You didn’t try to take it with you. You handed me the camera to photograph it. And then you put it back.”

He looked like he was trying to follow her logic.

“Alright. And?”

“And how did you know to do that? A cop would have gathered it as evidence. Bagged it and tagged it. You work with the police, so why don’t you work like they do? Why didn’t you take it to them?”

“Lois, what does that—”

She cut him off. “You’re a crime-fighter, right? Well, you didn’t do what a cop would do to fight the crime. You did what a reporter would do,” she said accusingly.

He stopped their flight forward and hovered in place.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

She thought that maybe she did.

Maybe for the first time.

She changed tracks. “How did you know where I was?”

“I was flying by and saw you—”

“How do you always know where I am when I’m in trouble? You *always* know exactly where to go to save me. How?”

“You usually call for help,” he said weakly.

It was the correct answer.

But not the right one.

She regarded him.

“Can I ask you a question?”

He exhaled, as if he’d been holding his breath. “Sure.”

“Off the record?”

He paused so long that she thought he wasn’t going to answer her.

“Sure,” he said, again.

She gestured to his hair, her hand poised at his temple. “May I?”

“Is that your question?” he asked, sounding wary but somehow relieved at the same time.

“No,” she said, suddenly feeling more sure of herself than she had in months.

He paused again, then seemed to come to a decision.

“Sure,” he said for a third time.

She ran her fingers through his hair. It was thicker than it had looked underneath the gel and impossibly, unimaginably soft. Ignoring the ripple of electricity that sprinted down her arm to her spine, she did it again, this time working it out of the carefully slicked back style that held it in place. There was something surreal about running her hand through Superman’s hair. She did it again, working to make sure that she wasn’t merely indulging in a caress, but intentionally mussing it.

A lock of hair fell across his forehead.

She examined him. She saw the pulse jump in his throat.

“I usually ask forgiveness afterward, instead of permission first.” She took a quick breath and it spurred her candor. “But I can’t lose both of you to one of my hunches, so I’m asking permission first the time. Will you forgive me?” Her voice broke, so she tried again. “Will you forgive me if I’m wrong and this is just the grief finally winning?”

His eyes changed at that, as if he was reassessing how fragile the woman in his arms really was. Was that grief of his own that flitted across his eyes? Or guilt?

But instead of addressing any of that, he asked, “Is that your question?”

“No,” she said firmly.

“Yes,” he said. “I would forgive you.” His arms tightened around her almost imperceptibly. She felt it.

“Will you forgive me?”

Her heart raced. “I think so.”

“Ask me, then,” he said.

It was harder than she expected, to ask for the one thing you wanted most.

She put her hand to his cheek and looked into his warm, aching familiar, chocolate eyes.

“Clark?”

“Is that your question?”

“Yes,” she said, holding back a sob, existing on a hope.

“Yes,” he said simply.

“Yes?” she asked again, surprised even though she thought she’d already had the answer, pleading with the universe that he’d understood, that her hunch was right, that every emotion in her body wasn’t betraying her.

“Yes, Lois, yes,” he said, his carry-hold becoming an embrace as she dissolved in his arms.

It took her a few minutes. To grieve. To release the last few desolate months. To breath him in.

To adjust to the new axis her world now revolved upon.

When she felt steady again, she pulled back from his firm hold just enough to look at him.

“You could have told me,” she said seriously.

He nodded back. She could see the regret written across his face and reflected throughout his whole body. “I know. I should have. I’ve been... a little lost.”

She knew exactly how that felt.

“Ok, then,” she said. She wiped her face with her sleeve.

The sheer enormity of that understatement nearly drove her to laugh out loud. But then again, the surreal feeling hadn’t worn away, yet. Her hero wasn’t off the hook, not by any stretch, she acknowledged to herself. And Swiss chocolate wasn’t even going to make a dent in this one. Once the shock wore off, she’d probably be as angry as she’d ever been.

And then he could explain what in the *hell* he’d been *thinking* in putting her through this absolute agony.

He could also take the time to really introduce himself, this new partner-superhero hybrid whom she knew intimately but couldn’t quite predict. They would have time for that now. And that in itself was enough to hold onto. Because in the end, despite the deception and miscommunication and lost days apart, she would rather have a life with an imperfect, lunkheaded, super-powered Clark than a life with no Clark at all. It made her sure that whatever it took to get them there, they would end up on this new adventure together.

She had, in fact, learned caution this year. Right now, that caution was telling her not to explode. It was telling her that forever letting her temper take the reins wasn’t a sustainable means for a relationship. And it was telling her that her partner might have been lost in agony, too.

Maybe they’d both spent the last six months trying to outrun ghosts.

All of the other awful, difficult life lessons that had been seared into her vulnerable young skin had taught her to be competitive, stubborn, suspicious and brash. But those wounds had all been cauterized as they were inflicted. She’d adapted her behavior to protect herself from them and moved along. The lesson of Clark Kent’s death was easily the hardest thing she’d ever tried to overcome. In fact, she hadn’t overcome it, and the wound had bled sluggishly until she was faint and paling. This lesson overshadowed the others by a mile.

So instead of six rounds of ‘who was right,’ and a week of the silent treatment, maybe, just maybe, starting tonight, they could just be happy. Together. Maybe it could be simple.

Time wasn’t endless and they weren’t immortal. His death had taught her to be cautious. But his life had taught her to live in the moment. To be grateful instead of vindictive.

She wouldn’t forget.

Although maybe she would ask for that Swiss chocolate anyway.

And so she said, “We have work to do.”

His brow furrowed in return. “What do you mean?”

She launched in. “We have to write up the drug story, send it to the night editor, and make sure he gets it to Perry if we’re going to have a shot at bumping the front page. Then we have to start drafting the other story for page eight.”

“Lois, slow down. I can’t. I want to. It’s tempting — it’s *more* than tempting,” he said, calling back to their earlier conversation. “But I just can’t. Clark Kent is dead.”

“That’s what the page eight story is for,” she replied, her usual authority finally returning after months of lying dormant. “Let’s head back to my place, partner. You can grab some of that Chinese food for us — I’ve been dreaming about it for months, and you can get there a lot more easily than I can. Then we’ll get started on my laptop. I’ll pull my notes together for you to read when you get back from China.”

He was still shaking his head. “Lois, I don’t understand how this can possibly work.”

She grinned at him, feeling the world right itself around her.

“That’s what you have me for.”

She already saw the story starting to form inside her head. Together, they could sort this out believably, make things right again. After all, they were the hottest team in town. They could take on anything.

Her newfound optimism must have been infectious because she could almost viscerally feel it affecting her

partner. She watched as Clark's despair in their situation lightened and shifted into a renewed faith in *them*. In the team of Lane and Kent.

She felt her future slide indelibly into place.

With the confidence of someone who knew firsthand that impossible things could be made real, she said, "We'll come up with something."

And that's exactly what they did.

~~THE END~~

THE BEGINNING

This story continues in "[Undercover Reporter: Resurrection](#)."