"Kent! Listen to this! The state workers for Kansas have network filters and software checks in place to make sure they can't play Solitaire or access non-work-related email or blogging sites. The state claimed productivity was down fifty percent due to games, web-surfing and online journals, so they shut down all access." Clark dragged his eyes open to see Chloe waving a newspaper over his head. "It's the end of Western civilization as we know it!"

Resisting the urge to bury his head under his pillow and completely ignore the entirely too perky blonde, Clark groaned, "Good morning to you too, Chloe." He was going to have to re-think the whole 'emergency key to his apartment' idea if Chloe continued to insist on waking him up entirely too early and with more energy than anyone should have at the ungodly hour of 7:00 AM. He just couldn't face it after too many nights of falling into bed after 3:00 AM.

"I made coffee but you have to get out of bed to get any." She waved a cup under his nose, an
accomplished mistress of torture. "I think I'm going to do an article on this little tidbit, so I'm out of here," she gave him a shove, eliciting another pitiful groan before whirling around and heading for her coat and messenger bag. "I'm telling you Clark, you think this machine's your friend..." she gave the laptop on his desk a disdainful shove, "...but it's not. It's a useful tool, but it is also removing the printed word from existence, relegating man to the role of input device, eliminating originality." She stopped at the apartment door for a final profound observation. "Physical books will someday be a thing of the past, and then where will you be?" A slam of the door, and his vibrating friend was gone.

Clark listened intently for returning footsteps and then sprang into action. Throwing on a robe over his boxers, he scanned the building for Chloe's skeleton before striding over to the laptop and turning it on. He headed to the bathroom for a fast shower while he waited for it to return from hibernation and connect to the internet. He knew that by the time he had cleaned up and gotten dressed, all his favorite blogs would be up and refreshed and his email ready to read. Grabbing a cup of the coffee that Chloe had so kindly left for him, he sat down at his desk and began another day.

Tues, 22 Sep 2009 07:02:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Brinkley

Brinkley is my dog. He loves the streets of Metropolis as much as I do, although he likes to eat bits of pizza and bagels off the sidewalk and I prefer to buy them. Brinkley is a great catcher and was offered a tryout on the Hawks farm team, but he chose to stay with me, so he could spend eighteen hours a day sleeping on a green cushion the size of an inner tube.

Don't you love Metropolis in the fall? It makes me want to buy school supplies. I would send you a bouquet of newly sharpened pencils if I knew your name and address. On the other hand, this not knowing has its charms.

Following his golden retriever into the kitchen, Lex grabbed a jug of orange juice from the refrigerator and carried it over to the table. He poured a tall glass as he sat down, glancing at the newspaper in front of him. He ignored the muttered commentary from his girlfriend in the bedroom until it was loud enough to require response. "I'm in a terrible hurry, Lex. Can you start my espresso?"

Sighing, Lex got up. Stepping over the dog lying on his green cushion, Lex pushed the required button on the complicated machine and returned to his seat.

A querulous voice called, "Did you turn it on?"

Sipping his juice, Lex continued to read the headlines and absently yelled back, "It's on, Lois!"

A whirlwind with long, honey-colored hair blew into the kitchen. "I'm really late!" She threw a folded newspaper on the table, nearly upsetting Lex's glass and scurried to the espresso machine. "Random House fired Dick Atkins, good riddance." She flipped her hair over her shoulder as she stood in front of the machine. "Murray Chilton died, which means one less person I'm talking to...hurry, hurry, hurry!" She ran back into the living room and gathered her briefcase and coat, then bustled back to grab the small cup and sip. "Vince got a great review, he'll be insufferable." Setting the cup back down, she turned to Lex and pointed, "Tonight, P&N dinner!"

Lex grimaced, "Am I going?"
Lois frowned back at him. "Lex Luthor, you promised!"

Throwing down his newspaper, Lex protested. "It's black tie..." Lois thrust her lips out in an exaggerated pout. "Can't I just give money instead?" He shook his head in disgust. "What is it this week? Free Kirschwellian writers?"

Lois snickered, rushed over to the table and straddled Lex's lap, bouncing as she rubbed herself against her reluctant boyfriend. He laughed, and lifted her back up. "OK, OK, I'll go. You're late."

"I know." He was rewarded with a quick peck on the top of his sleek, bald, head before Lois blew out of the apartment.

Waiting a minute or two for any sign that Hurricane Lois was returning for missing accessories, Lex picked up his glass and carried it into his study where his laptop was open. Entering his password, he sat back in his comfortable leather chair and sipped his remaining orange juice while his email loaded and spam filters finished clearing out claims for larger penises and/or breasts and opportunities to assist foreign dignitaries with their money troubles. Brinkley, who had followed him in, laid his head on Lex's leg and made himself available for gentle ear tugging until the email Lex was waiting for was opened.

Tues, 22 Sep 2009 08:05:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"
To:     "MET152"
Subject:        Dear Friend

I like to start my notes to you as if we're already in the middle of a conversation. I pretend we're the oldest and dearest friends as opposed to what we actually are; two people who don't know each other's names and met in a chat room where we both claimed we had never been before.

'What will MET152 say today?' I wonder as I turn on my computer and wait impatiently for the notification that tells me I have mail that isn't an opportunity to claim a prize for a contest I didn't enter or the revolutionary new secret to prolonging the male orgasm.

I hear nothing, not even a sound on the streets of Metropolis, just the beat of my own heart and I smile. I have mail, from you.

...  

At the chime of the reminder on his laptop, Clark checked the time and jumped up. He snapped the laptop shut, grabbed his denim jacket and glasses and ran out of his apartment. Taking the stairs two at a time, he burst out onto the street and headed for his shop at a jog, enjoying the crisp fall air. His infectious grin brought waves from his neighbors as he passed their apartment buildings and storefronts during his ten-block run to work. He arrived at the small bookstore just as Lana, one of his three part-time employees at the 'Shop Around the Corner', walked up. "Isn't it a beautiful day?" Unlocking the metal gate that covered the door and plate glass windows, he rolled it up. "Don't you just love the city in the fall?" He opened the door with a flourish and a dazzling smile, treated to a giggle from the petite brunette. "Apres vous, mademoiselle!"

Lana performed a perfect curtsy, "Merci, m'sieu," before preceding the charming young man into his shop.

...  

Carrying his briefcase and wearing a perfectly fitted black suit with a lavender shirt and stylish tie,
Lex was smiling as he arrived at the newest LuthorBooks acquisition. His head assistant, Damian, met him at the door for an inspection of the construction work going on. "The electrical contractor called, his truck hit a deer last night so he's not going to be here until tomorrow. The upstairs shelves have been delayed because the shipment of pine has beetles."

"Very good. Very good." Lex was absently looking at plastic-covered piles of lumber and concrete blocks as they walked through the first floor.

"And we have a fifty thousand dollar ticket for construction workers peeing off the roof."

Lex stopped walking and passed his hand over his smooth head. "Great. Has the electrician arrived yet?"

Damien frowned. "I just told you he hit a deer. I knew you weren't paying attention."

Walking towards the sunken center of the building, Lex grinned as he agreed. "You're right. I wasn't listening. I hear nothing, nothing, not a sound on the city streets, just the beat of my own heart." He looked at Damien, his blue eyes alight. "I think that's how it goes...something like that."

Damien came to a complete stop. "You and Lois got engaged, didn't you?"

"Are you crazy?" Lex's mouth dropped open and his eyes were wide with disbelief.

"What, I thought you liked Lois?"

"I do. I love Lois. Lois...Lois is amazing." Lex winced. "Lois Lane makes coffee nervous." They resumed the inspection, passing by a number of construction workers who waved to them. "You know what? We should announce ourselves to the neighborhood. Just let them know that 'Here we come!'"

Damien shook his head, "No, this is the Upper West Side. We might as well tell them we're opening up a...a crack house. They're going to hate us. As soon as they hear, they're going to be lining up..."

Lex reversed and started walking backwards, looking at Damien. "...to picket the big bad chain store..."

"...that's out to destroy..." Damien shook his finger at Lex.

Lex stopped and threw his arms wide. "...everything they hold dear."

Damien's eyebrows rose. "Exactly."

Lex waited for Damien to come up to him and then threw an arm over his shoulders. "Do you know what? We are going to seduce them. We're going to seduce them with our square footage, and our discounts, and our deep plush armchairs, and..."

Lex and Damien grinned at each other and chorused, "Our cappuccino."

"That's right. They're going to hate us at the beginning, but..."

Like an old vaudeville act, they turned to each other and threw their arms open, "...but we'll get them in the end."

Lex grinned. "Do you know why?"

"Why?" Damien fed Lex the question, already knowing the answer.
Lex picked up his briefcase and started heading for the door, calling back, "Because we're going to sell them cheap books and legal addictive stimulants. In the meantime, we'll just put up a big sign: "Coming soon, a LuthorBooks superstore and the end of civilization as you know it."

Lana placed the small pumpkin she was carrying on the counter and watched with curiosity as Clark picked the vase of marigolds and actually twirled with them before he carried them to the back for fresh water. "Clark, what is going on with you?"

Coming back out, face buried in the flowers, Clark murmured "Perfect."

"You're in love!"

"In love? No, no...I'm not in love, just excited about the possibilities that exist for love." Clark set the vase down on the counter by the pumpkin and pulled off his jacket, tossing it on a hook. "Do you think we could get our Christmas mailings out this week?"

"I know, I should have them started already, but I have this paper due Friday..." Lana started opening a carton of books as Clark set up the register. "Just one more year, and I'll have completed my masters. Hard to believe..." Looking back over her shoulder, she sighed and abandoned the carton to stand at the other side of the counter. She frowned; examining the young man she had known for years and loved like a brother. "I'm just going to stand here until you tell me what's going on."

Rolling his eyes, Clark pretended to think about it, and then leaned forward eagerly. "Do you think you could possibly be attracted to...someone you met online?"

Lana's eyebrows rose. "Have you had sex?"

"Lana Lang! No, of course not! I don't even know him." Clark's cheeks were fire-engine red as he protested.

Lana giggled. "I mean cyber-sex."

"No!" The blush wasn't going away.

Lana nodded her head knowingly. "Well, you know what? Don't do it, because the minute you do, they lose all respect for you." She wandered back to the open carton and started sorting books.

Clark shrugged and pushed away from the counter. "It's not like that. We just email each other. It's really nothing." He walked around the counter and started tidying up the books scattered on the small tables in the center of the store. "On top of which I am definitely thinking about stopping because it's getting..."

"Out of hand?"

"...confusing. But not, because...it's...nothing." Grabbing the coffeepot, Clark walked to the back room to fill it with water.

Lana was waiting when he walked back out. 'Where'd you meet him?"

"I don't really remember." Clark stepped around his friend so he could reach the coffee maker. Lana stepped back in front of him and stood silently with her arms folded. "OK, it was my birthday and for kicks I sort of entered this over-thirty chat room, because you know I prefer slightly older men,
and he was there and we started chatting..."

Lana moved out of Clark's way. "About what?"

Clark finished filling the coffee maker and turned it on. "Books, music, how much we loved Metropolis...harmless, meaningless..." His green eyes softened. "Bouquets of sharpened pencils..."

"Excuse me?"

Clark wrinkled his nose and laughed at himself. "Forget it, it's nothing." Setting out coffee cups, he began to fill the containers of sugar packets and creamers. "We don't talk about anything personal, so I don't know his name or what he does or where he lives exactly...so it'll be really easy for me to stop seeing him because...I'm not."

"I think it's amazing that he could be the next person to walk into this store, and you wouldn't know it. He could be..."

They both glanced at the front of the store as the bell over the door rang and a young black man stumbled in, carrying a large coffee cup and backpack. He carefully closed the door behind himself and then looked at the two standing at the counter. "What?"

Lana grinned at her co-worker. "Pete, do you spend much time online?"

He scowled at her, "To me the internet is just another way of being rejected by women." He turned without another word and stomped towards the back room, muttering under his breath.

Another ring of the bell and an older woman came in. Clark and Lana greeted her together, "Good morning, Nell."

Taking off her coat, Nell studied them and asked, "What are you two talking about?"

Lana pointed at Clark, grinning. "Cyber-sex."

Nell chuckled as she entered the small office behind the counter. "I tried to have cyber-sex once, but I kept getting 'page not found' errors."

Laughing at her aunt, Lana went back to sorting books while Clark opened the door for the first customers of the day, greeting them by name.

..."

"Well, we should be able to open on time, but Damian and I are concerned about the neighborhood response." Lex turned away from the impressive view of Metropolis and sat on the couch in his father's office. "What kind of fabric is this?"

Lionel didn't look up from the papers he was reviewing. "Its name is money."

"Oh, Victoria picked it out."

"You got it. By the way, I'm getting married again."

Lex shifted on the couch trying to get comfortable. "Is it love?"

"Possibly."

"Don't you think you should be sure first?"
"Lex, your brother Julian is four years old. Don’t you think it would nice for him if he knew his parents were married?"

Dismissing his father's news, Lex gave up on the couch and walked over to the scale model of the newest store. "Listen, I have a sad announcement to make. City Books on Twenty-third Street is going under." Lex couldn't repress a smirk as he conveyed the news.

"Aww, another independent bites the dust." Lionel got up and went to the bar that extended along one side of the office.

Lex declared, "I'm going to buy out their entire inventory of architecture and Metropolis history for the new store."

"How much are you paying, son?" The amber whiskey in Lionel's tumbler swirled before he sipped.

"Whatever it is, it will be significantly less than that...mohair monstrosity of a couch there...," he looked down at his pants in dismay, "...which is now all over my suit!"

"Here you go." Lionel walked back to his desk, where reached into a drawer and pulled out a lint brush, tossing it to Lex.

"We're also going to have a section dedicated to writers who've lived in Metropolis." Lex frowned at the amount of gray fur the brush was removing from his clothes.

"That should keep those West Side, liberal, pseudo-intellectuals..." Lionel dropped into his chair as he began to rant.

"Readers, Dad, they're called readers."

Lionel waved Lex's reproach away. "Don't do that son, don't romanticize them. It'll keep them from jumping down your throat." He sipped his drink again. "What's the rest of the competition?"


Lionel's face softened. "Martha's store..."

"Who?" Lex was curious about the woman who could make his father look like that.

"Martha Kent. Lovely woman, her family, the Clarks, lived in Metropolis. She had married a farmer and was living in Smallville when..." Lionel ran his hand over his substantial head of hair while looking at his son, "Her husband was killed that day. She'd found a young boy in a field out there, in the middle of that hell. She was headed to town when she picked us up, you and me, by the side of the road. She got us to the hospital, may have even saved your life. I helped her with the boy's adoption and that was really the last time I saw them." His eyes were distant as he recalled that day. "She sold the farm and moved back to Metropolis with the boy to open a little bookstore. I...very lovely woman."

Thrusting his hands in his pockets, Lex walked to the window to look out over the city again. He didn't like to think about that day, so he wasn't surprised that he didn't remember her. After all, it was the only time they had been to Smallville; a fluke that he'd accompanied his father out to look at some plant he was thinking about buying, to diversify his holdings. Afterwards, Lionel had decided to stick to what he knew, books and communications, and leave manufacturing to someone else. Lex had been sent around the country to help build his father's company, their company, into one of the biggest print and media outlets in the world and now he was back in the city where it all started.
Frowning at his reflection in the window, he reminded himself that he wasn't going to let sentiment stop him from owning it all in Metropolis too.

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Weds, 07 Oct 2009 18:35:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"
To: "MET152"
Subject: Nature's mysteries

Once I read a story about a butterfly in the subway, and today, I saw one. It got on at 42nd, and off at 59th, where, I can only assume it was going to Fordmans to buy a hat that will turn out to be a mistake - as almost all hats are.

Thurs, 08 Oct 2009 08:02:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Re: Nature's mysteries

Listen to this. Every night a truck pulls up to my neighborhood bagel place, and pumps about a ton of flour into underground tanks, and then the air is filled with white dust that never seems to land. Why is that?

Fri, 09 Oct 2009 07:15:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"
To: "MET152"
Subject: Book lust

Confession time. I am a complete and utter romantic. I have read 'Pride and Prejudice' about 200 times. I get lost in the language - words like 'thither' and 'mischievous' and 'felicity'. I'm always in agony over whether Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are going to get together. Read it. I know you'll love it.

Fri, 09 Oct 2009 07:45:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Defining moments

The whole purpose of places like Starbucks is to force people, with no decision-making ability whatsoever, to make six decisions just to buy one cup of coffee. Short, tall, light, dark, caf, decaf, low-fat, non-fat, etc. So people who don't know what the hell they're doing or who on earth they are, can, for only $2.95, get not just a cup of coffee but an absolutely defining sense of self. Myself? I'm tall, decaf, cappuccino.

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Clark, Pete and Lana stood together on the chilly corner opposite the newest LuthorBooks store and stared at the ongoing construction.

Pete's shoulders drooped. "A LuthorBooks Superstore. Three short blocks away from us."

"What a nightmare." Lana groaned.

Clark shook his head. "It has nothing to do with us. It's big, impersonal, overstocked and full of
"But they discount," Pete pointed out.

Clark refused to be discouraged. "But they don't provide any service. We do." He threw his arms over their shoulders and gave them both a little shake. "So really, it's a good development. You know how in the flower district there are all those flower shops in a row so you can find whatever you want? Well, this is going to be the book district. If they don't have it, we do."

Lana tilted her head and winked at Clark. "And vice versa."

"Absolutely!" he agreed enthusiastically.

Chloe breezed into Clark's apartment and dropped a large pile of flyers on his kitchen table. "Clark, when you are finished with LuthorBooks, the Shop Around the Corner is going to be responsible for reversing the entire course of the Industrial Revolution."

Picking up one of the printed sheets, Clark glanced at it. "That is so sweet, Chloe. Thank you for doing this."

"My pleasure. Only too happy to do my part to hold back the unwashed hordes." Chloe pulled up a chair and the table and started folding the flyers in thirds. She looked up at Clark, who was standing there, looking pensive. "What's wrong?"

He sighed. "I've been wondering about my work. I'm just...what is it really that I do? All I do is run a tiny bookstore..."

Chloe jumped up and hugged her friend. "You...you are doing an incredibly noble thing." She pushed away from him and squinted as she thought. "Clark, you...you are a lone reed." She grabbed one of the flyers, flipped it over and started scribbling on the back. "You are a lone reed, standing tall, waving boldly in the corruprt sands of commerce." She picked up the flyer and stuck it to Clark's refrigerator with a magnet. "Hey, I've got to go. Got a lead on some big guy who's been seen around the city at night lately, running off muggers and helping old bag ladies cross the street." She grabbed her coat and was out the door. "Later!"

Clark shook his head at his friend's departure. She'd always been a bundle of energy for as long as he'd known her, providing the majority of any excitement during his rather ordinary years at college. He went into the bathroom to brush his teeth before leaving for work. "I'm a lone reed." Scowling at himself in the mirror over the sink, he muttered, "I might be happier about being one, if I understood what that meant."

From: "shop_freak"
To: "MET152"
Subject: A life - incomplete

Sometimes I wonder about my life. I lead a small life. Well, valuable, but small. And sometimes I wonder, do I do it because I like it, or because I haven't been brave? So much of what I see reminds me of something I read in a book, when shouldn't it be the other way around?
I don't really want an answer. I just want to send this cosmic question out into the void. So good night, dear void.

..."Lex!" The piping voice of his young brother brought Lex around in time to catch his hurtling body and lift him in the air. "You came!"

"Well, of course I did Julian. I promised I would. Who would want to miss the West Side street fair?" Lex tucked the youngster under his arm and tickled his ribs to hear his infectious giggle. "Besides, I have my favorite little man to keep me company!"

"Don't I get a hello?" The tall brunette in the fur coat came up behind Lex and tapped him on the shoulder. The grin dissolved from Lex's face. "Hello, Victoria."

"Kiss me, Lex. I'm going to be your wicked stepmother." Her carefully made-up face sneered at the man holding her son.

Lex ignored Victoria to introduce himself to the woman following her. "Hello, and who do we have here?"

"Oh, that's Nanny Maureen. I brought her along in case Julian gave me trouble. Maureen's getting a divorce."

Lex's eyebrow rose at the non sequitur. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

Smiling, the amiable redhead shrugged, "It's my own fault. Never marry a man who lies."

Lex nodded. "That is so wise. Yes, Victoria, you should remember that." Putting Julian down, he took his hand. "Listen, I've got this covered. I'm sure you must be late for something, volunteering at the Henry Street Settlement, or rolling bandages for refugees."

"I am. I'm having my eggs harvested," Victoria spat out before wheeling around to leave.

Lex rolled his eyes and murmured. "And getting those eggs harvested." Waving at the backs of the two retreating women, he called "Don't worry about a thing. We're going to have fun!" He looked down at his brother. "Come on, Julian. I feel a real need for some hot dogs and balloons."

..."Where do you want to go next, Julian? A movie?" Lex was balancing clown sunglasses, a plastic bag containing a goldfish won throwing darts, several balloons and juggling balls in one hand while the other was held by the four-year-old. Both were sporting belled jester hats and their upper lips had matching Snidely Whiplash moustaches from the face-painting booth.

"No, I want the storyteller! See there he is!" Julian pointed across the street and Lex looked up to see The Shop Around the Corner with a cluster of children entering. He thought for a moment and then nodded. "OK, let's go."

Walking through the door, Lex could see they were not the only people who had strolled over from the street fair. The cheerful atmosphere had children reading books, coloring at tables and in the farthest corner, someone was reading to a semi-circle of children, eyes wide as they listened. Julian pulled away and ran to join them, Lex following behind more sedately.
The young man reading the story wore casual clothing and a gilt-covered crown atop dark curls. When he raised his head from the book to look at his enraptured audience, Lex was stunned by his beautiful face, brilliant green eyes shining, even behind heavy black eyeglasses and finally, a dazzling grin. The crown seemed very appropriate for such an enchanting prince.

"...it was I, and I alone, that had the idea for the Great and Scary Mouse Plot. We all have our moments of brilliance and glory, and this was mine. Why don't we, I said, put this into one of Mrs. Cratchit's jars of sweets and then, when she puts her dirty hand in to grab a handful, she'll grab a stinky dead mouse instead." Lex chuckled at the gasp from the listening children. "Everyone stared at me in wonder and then as the sheer genius of the plot began to sink in, they began to celebrate. They all cried out, we shall put the plan in place tonight and since you were the one to think of the fabulous plot, you should get to put the mouse in..." Lex stood leaning against a set of shelves as caught up in the story and storyteller as any of the children.

... Who belongs to this fish?" A young black man was standing in the center of the store holding a goldfish in a plastic bag.

Lex looked up from the book he was flipping through and raised his hand. "That would be mine." He walked over and retrieved the bag. "Is there anyone who can help me in the used book section?"

"That would be me. I'm Pete. How can I help you?" As Pete walked back to the section with him, Lex noticed the storyteller bent over Julian who was busy coloring at one of the child-sized tables. Both looked quite content, so he felt comfortable spending some time getting his questions answered. He showed Pete the book he was looking at and Pete pointed out that the illustrations were hand-tipped.

"And that's why it costs so much?" Lex questioned.

Pete corrected him. "No, that's why it's worth so much."

"I see. Well, I'll think about it." Lex looked over to the table and saw Julian pointing at him as he spoke to the storyteller. He moved in that direction to make sure he wasn't needed.

"No, this picture is for my Dad. It's a lion, like him."

"Your dad is a lion?" The storyteller grinned at him and looked up at Lex who was standing over them now. "You're a lion?"

Julian giggled. "That's not my dad! That's my brother!"

The storyteller straightened up and offered his hand. "Hi, I'm Clark Kent. I guess I should know better. Families come in all shapes, sizes, colors and ages these days." He looked at Lex and Julian and grinned, touching the crown he still wore and pointing to his lip. "I can certainly see the resemblance."

Lex was taken aback for a moment when he realized he was meeting the owner of the store he was planning to put out of business. The very attractive owner. Reaching up to snatch off the jester hat, he changed his mind when he realized it was an effective disguise. "Perfectly understandable. I'm...Alex." He pointed to his headwear. "I'm afraid I've promised to wear my silly hat until bedtime, leaving me open to many funny jokes at my expense." He grinned back at Clark.

"Well, promises to children must certainly be honored, especially when it comes to wearing silly hats...and moustaches." Clark noticed some customers waiting and excused himself.
"He's nice, Lex." Julian tugged on Lex's sleeve to get his attention. "He told me his favorite flowers are daisies and he drew one by my lion. See?"

Lex admired the picture before he urged Julian to his feet. "Are these the books you wanted to buy?" At Julian's nod, he gathered them up and headed for the register. He handed them to Pete since Clark was still busy with the other customer.

"Excuse me, you're going to come back, right?" Pete asked. Lex was surprised, but answered in the affirmative. Pete reached over and touched Clark's shoulder, "See, that's why we're not going to go under, because our customers are loyal."

Clark had finished with his customer and turned to Lex and Julian. "Pete's talking about the LuthorBooks store that's opening just a few blocks away."

"LuthorBooks, My daddy..." Julian found himself giggling as Lex ruthlessly tickled him.

"Likes to buy discount. We don't need to share that, do we? You know, I think you need a pop-up dinosaur book, like this one." Lex handed Julian one of the books displayed on the counter, showing it to Pete so he could add it to the total. "Why don't you take the dinosaur book over to the table and read it until I finish up. OK?" Lex gave Julian a little nudge in the direction of the table they had just left.

Clark was bagging Lex's purchase. "You know, the world is not driven by discounts." He accepted the cash that Lex handed him and began counting out the change. "It seems like I've been in this business forever. I started helping my mother here after school when I was six years old and I used to watch her. It wasn't so much that she was selling books as she was helping people become whoever it was that they were going to turn out to be." Clark handed Lex his bag, but continued to talk to the blue-eyed man who was listening so intently. "Because when you read a book as a child, it becomes a part of your identity in a way that no other reading in your whole life does and...I've gotten carried away haven't I?"

Lex, who had been fascinated by the passion for books and life in front of him, realized he had been asked a question. "Yeah, yeah, you have." He searched for the words. "You've made me feel...enchanting...your mother was enchanting and...lovely."

Green eyes lit and the grin was back in full blinding force. "Yes, she was." He cocked his head, puzzled. "How did you know that?"

Lex was rescued when he looked at the wall behind the counter. "The photograph." He pointed to the picture showing a red-haired woman with a dark-haired boy standing by a telescope. "Is that you in the picture? What are you doing?"

Clark took the picture down and touched the woman's face gently. "That was my telescope. We used to take it out to the country on clear nights and look at the stars. She always said that she loved the stars because they brought me to her. They fell from the heavens the day she found me." His eyes were sad when he looked back up at Lex. "You know, I haven't taken it out since she died." He shook off his gloom and smiled again at Lex, although not as widely as before. "Anyway, she left the store to me, and someday I'll leave it to my children."

"Ahhh, how old are your children?" Lex couldn't believe Clark was old enough to have one child, let alone more.

"Oh, I don't have any children. I've never even had a boyfriend. Eventually." He wrinkled his nose adorably.
Lex let out the breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"So anyway, big bad LuthorBooks can go to..." Clark raised his eyebrows and restrained his language in front of Julian who had appeared next to Lex.

"Well, we better get going, right Julian?" Lex grabbed the fish bag, the book bag, the balloons and Julian's hand. "It was very nice meeting you, Clark." He and Julian headed for the door and he fumbled it open with his hands full.

"Bye, Clark," called Julian, he walked through the door, and Lex nodded at Clark, trying to balance everything. The door closed behind them, balloons caught inside. Lex opened the door again to pull them through, sheepishly grinning. "Good thing it wasn't the fish." The bell above the door rang goodbye and they were gone.

Clark sighed. "Alex was nice, wasn't he?"

Pete, busy with another customer, didn't hear him, but Nell poked her head out of the office and winked. "Yes, he was, Clark. Yes, he was."

... 

Lex and Damien led Lionel through the new store, enjoying the Grand Opening crowds. Damien waved his hand at the counters and racks, aisles full of people. "No protests, no demonstrations."

Lex sipped from the coffee mug he was carrying. "The neighborhood loves us."

"They're wondering where we've been all these years," gloated Lionel, "Wondering how they ever did without us." He rubbed his hands together. "How's the children's department?"

Lex knew there were still so changes to be made. "Well, it's still early, school's not out yet and there's that children's store nearby, The Shop Around the Corner."

"Yes, you had mentioned that. Martha Kent's store." Lionel nodded, remembering.

Damien pointed out, "Her son owns it now."

Lionel growled. "We'll crush him."

...

Nell and Clark were hovering over the accounting program. "Look, they've been open six days and we brought in 15% less than last year at this time." Nell pointed to the totals on the display.

Clark stood up and winced, hoping his bookkeeper was wrong. "That could be a fluke, right?"

Nell shook her head. "Or not."

Clark wished he could just dismiss Nell's concerns. She had been keeping books for the store since Martha offered her the job over fifteen years ago. She and Lana had moved to Metropolis after the cream corn factory closed in Smallville and Nell's flower shop failed. She had needed the job in order to support her niece, who was left orphaned by the same meteor shower that killed Jonathan Kent. Clark had always been happy that he had Lana when he was growing up; it was a lot less lonely when you had an almost sister around. Now he had to face the fact that he might lose both of them. But not yet.

"The store is new, it's a novelty. It'll all shake out and meanwhile...I'm putting up more twinkle
lights." Clark pulled another string of lights out of the holiday decorations box and headed for the front display window.

Nell followed him with a box of ornaments. "That's a fine idea."

"What if we have to close?" Lana wrapped her arms around herself as if the thought chilled her. "I'm not sure I can find another part-time job that would work around my class schedule and I won't be able to pay my rent." Her face fell and she pouted. "I might have to move back in with Nell..."

"Ah, the joy of rent control," boasted Pete. "I can cover my rent even if I have to work asking if someone wants fries with their burger." He grinned at Lana. "Maybe we could work something out. I have a second bedroom."

"Are you kidding? You were in Smallville too many years before you started at Met U. I'm still waiting to find out what mutation you ended up with." Lana was teasing Pete, but there was an underlying truth. Smallville did have more than its share of odd occurrences since the meteor shower. Clark was glad he hadn't grown up there. He'd been able to hide his differences in Metropolis where people weren't looking for them.

Pete wasn't taking the teasing well today. "You know, this place is a tomb. I'm going to hang out at the nut shop for a while for some fun." He grabbed his coat and left, the bell jangling wildly over the slammed door. Lana just looked sheepish and started dusting shelves.

Reaching up to attach the lights at the top of the window, Clark looked out and saw a familiar face. He smiled and tapped on the window, pointing to the door. The bell rang and a woman stepped inside, shaking the snow from her coat. Clark walked over to greet her. "Miranda, how are you? How's the new book coming?"

"Oh, it's being published in January. We'll be doing book signings then. How are you doing? Surviving? Are you still going to be open in January?"

"We're doing great!" He smiled and raised his voice. "Aren't we?"

Nell's hand came out of the office with an OK sign. "No difference whatsoever!"

"Thank God! Well you know you can count on me for anything. Support, rallies, picket lines. We can get the Planet to write something or that nut from the Inquisitor."

Clark had difficulty suppressing a frown. "What 'nut' in the Inquisitor?"

"You know, Chloe something...Sullivan. That's it, Sullivan! The one who's always writing about computers being the death of civilization. This is the sort of thing that would outrage her!" Miranda buttoned her coat back up and waved as she left.

Clark could hardly wait to tell Chloe.

..."A nut? She called me a nut?" Chloe was bouncing indignantly around Clark as they walked down the street together.

Clark held up his hand in protest. "Chloe, that's not my point. She thinks my business in trouble. Now why would she say that? There's enough business for us all." They both walked up the steps of an old brownstone and stood waiting to be buzzed through the outer door.
"There's no question, there's enough business." Chloe patted Clark's arm.

"We're fine." Clark pushed the door open when the buzzer sounded.

Chloe nodded with her entire body. "You're more than fine. You're absolutely fine." The inner apartment door opened and they joined the party of writers, publishers and booksellers.

. . .

Lex stood behind Lois as she laughed and flirted with the latest writer to top the bestsellers lists. His eyes wandered around the room, cataloging the crowd automatically, identifying possible contacts. As his gaze slid past a small group by the fireplace, he noticed a head of dark curls above a tall, broad-shouldered form that seemed tantalizingly familiar. Moving a few feet back, Lex was almost able to see the face of the mysterious man and then another person moved and laughing green eyes behind black frames appeared. Lex stepped back to Lois and offered to get her a refill for her drink, allowing him to duck into the next room before Clark could see him.

"Stoli on the rocks in a fresh glass." Lex fidgeted at the bar waiting for Lois' drink when he heard, "White wine and a club soda, no twist, please." He angled his body away from the newcomer, hoping to escape notice, but his luck had run out.

"Hello!" Clark smiled as he recognized the attractive customer he had such a nice conversation with a few weeks ago. "How are you? Do you remember me from the bookstore?"

Lex knew he wasn't going to be able to avoid speaking to Clark, so he tried to make the best of it. "Oh, hi...yes, of course I remember you."

"How's your brother? He was such a cute little boy."

"Oh, he's fine." Lex nodded, feeling like an idiot, grabbing at the fresh drink as if it was a lifeline. "I better go deliver this to my date, she's part camel." He gestured vaguely towards Lois and began backing away.

Clark made another attempt. "It's Alex, isn't it?"

"Yes, and you're...Clark." A sharp nod from Lex and the crowd approaching the bar swallowed him.

Clark accepted his two drinks and muttered under his breath, "Clark Kent, nice to see you." He made his way around the edge of the room, heading back to Chloe, when she met him halfway, accepting the wine glass with a frown.

"I can't believe you were speaking to Lex Luthor!" she hissed at him.

Clark tipped his head and looked at his friend, puzzled. "As in..."

"As in he's trying to put you and every other bookstore out of business!" Chloe glared past Clark and he turned around to see 'Alex' watching both of them, his face revealing nothing.

"Oh. I didn't know. He was wearing a hat."

"You OK, Clark?" Chloe reached out to touch his hand, her concern apparent.

Clark shrugged. "I'm fine, Chloe. Just a little surprised, that's all. Nothing to worry about." He sipped from his glass. "Say, isn't that Gina over there? You were saying you wanted to talk to her tonight."

"Gina?" Chloe looked to where Clark was pointing. "Perfect! I'll catch you later." She hurried away.
to catch her intended victim.

Clark searched the room for Lex, intending to have a few words with him. He spotted the distinctive bald head entering the next room where a buffet was laid. He walked up behind Lex and waited until he had a plate before attempting to speak. "Lex, or should I say 'Alex'...ander Luthor? As in LuthorBooks?"

"Yes." Lex didn't look at him, choosing to place a few items on his small plate instead.

"I never realized, I didn't know...", Clark struggled to find the right words.

Lex stepped back from the table and raised his eyes to Clark's face. "...who you were with?" He lowered his voice to a throaty growl. "I didn't know who you were with."

Clark raised an eyebrow at the odd response. "Excuse me?"

"From 'The Godfather'." When Clark still didn't seem to understand, Lex laughed and tried to explain. "Sorry, it's from 'The Godfather'. It's when movie producer realizes that Tom Hagen is an emissary of Vito Corleone. It's just before the horse's head ends up in the bed all the bloody sheets, you know, wakes up, and it's..." Lex waved his hand dramatically and imitated a wide-eyed scream, with no response from Clark. "Never mind." He returned to filling his plate.

Clark folded his arms and stood in Lex's way. "You were spying on me, weren't you? You probably rented that cute little boy."

Forced to look up in Clark's face, Lex shook his head. "Why would I spy on you?"

"Because I'm your competition, which you know perfectly well, otherwise you wouldn't have put up that sign saying, 'Just Around the Corner'.

Lex protested, "The entrance to our store is around the corner and there's really no other way to say that. It's not the name of our store, it's where it is. You don't own the rights to the phrase, 'Around the Corner'." He set the plate down. "Look, the reason I came into your store was I was spending the day with Julian and I was buying him presents." Faced with Clark's unrelenting frown, he rolled his eyes. "I'm the kind of guy who likes to buy his way into the hearts of children who are his relatives. There was only one place to find children's books in the neighborhood...that will not always be the case. And it was yours and it was a charming little place." He stepped closer to Clark, who retreated a step. "You probably sell what...three hundred fifty thousand dollars in books in a year?"

Clark's arms dropped just as his mouth did. "How did you know that?"

"I'm in the book business."

Thrusting his face forward, Clark pointed to his own chest. "I am in the book business."

Lex didn't back away from the larger man. "I see...and we are the Price Club, but instead of selling 10 gallon vat of olive oil for $3.99 that won't even fit under your kitchen cabinets, we sell cheap books. Me a spy?" His scarred lip curled in contempt. "Oh, absolutely. I have in my possession, a printout of the super-duper top-secret sales figures of a bookstore that is so inconsequential, and yet so full of its virtue, that I was immediately compelled to rush over there in fear that it's going to put me out of business."

Clark, who had straightened up and was now leaning back to avoid the venom being spewed at him was left speechless. "A..."
"What!"

Chloe came up to the pair and thrust her hand out to Lex, "Hi, Chloe Sullivan."

Lex shook her hand politely, "Lex Luthor."

"Lex Luthor, of course. The inventor of the SuperStore, the enemy of mid-list novels and destroyer of City Books. Tell me something, really, how do you sleep at night?"

"I use a wonderful over-the-counter drug called UltraDorm." Lois' head appeared over Lex's shoulder smiling at the group. "Just take half and you'll wake up without the tiniest hangover." As Chloe and Clark began to move away, Lois moved around Lex and reached out to touch Chloe's arm. "Chloe Sullivan, right? That piece in the Inquisitor on changing communication methods was brilliant." Chloe's face lit up at the compliment to her writing. "I'm Lois Lane, Lane Books." Shaking Chloe's offered hand, she spoke over her shoulder to Lex, "This woman has the most incredible views on the myriad ways humans continually mutate their means to transfer information."

Lex nodded and gestured, "This is Clark Kent." His eyes never left Clark's face, watching the brilliant eyes that had dulled with pain.

Chloe began gushing, "You know, I'm flattered. You write these things and you think somebody's going to mention them and a week goes by and the phone doesn't ring and you start to think, 'I'm a fraud, like a failure or something'..."

Lois jumped into the pause, "You know, I'm so happy to have finally met you! We should talk. Have you ever thought about doing a book?" Lex took her arm and began subtly to move her away, still watching silent Clark.

"Well, I guess I've got a few ideas..." Clark echoed Lex's movement, pulling Chloe in the opposite direction, his face troubled as he looked at Lex. "Maybe I can give you a call?" Chloe waved goodbye to Lois who was disappearing around the corner. "Clark, did you hear?"

...

Lex left Lois snoring peacefully in bed, her nightly sleeping aid working effectively as usual. Brinkley laid on top of his feet as he sat at his desk and tapped out his latest email missive.

Fri, 20 Nov 2009 23:02:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Mr. Nasty

Do you ever feel you've become the worst version of yourself? That a Pandora's box with all the secret, hateful parts, your arrogance, your spite, your condescension has sprung open? Someone provokes you, instead of just moving on...you zing them. Hello, it's Mr. Nasty. I'm sure you have no idea what I'm talking about.

Fri, 20 Nov 2009 23:15:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"
To: "MET152"
Subject: Re: Mr. Nasty

No, I know what you mean and I'm completely jealous. What happens to me when I get provoked is I get tongue-tied and my mind goes blank. Then I spend all night tossing and turning trying to figure
out what I should have said. What should I have said, for example, to a bottom-dweller who recently belittled my existence? Even now, I can't figure it out.

Fri, 20 Nov 2009 23:34:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Re: Re: Mr. Nasty

Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could pass all my zingers to you and then I would never behave badly and you could behave badly all the time and we'd both be happy? Then on the other hand, I must warn you, that when you finally have the pleasure of saying the things you mean to say the moment you mean to say it, remorse inevitably follows. Do you think we should meet?

Clark stared at the words on the screen. "Meet? Oh my God..." He closed the laptop and went for a walk.

...While Clark politely declined the suggestion to meet online, Clark and Lex spent the next few days diligently avoiding each other as they went about their daily routines in the West Side neighborhood. One came into the coffee shop, the other slid out. Bouquets of flowers and newspapers were favored for screening faces and each tended to walk on different sides of the streets they shared. It was tiring, trying not to see someone who was quite obviously there, in the middle of your life.

...The grocery store was packed with shoppers preparing for the holiday. Clark carefully maneuvered his cart around clusters of shoppers, aware that it would be easy for him to injure someone by accident. As he reached the end of the cereal aisle, he saw the profile he had been evading and panicked. He quickly ducked into the closest checkout lane. His delight at successfully escaping dimmed when the cashier asked him for cash. "Cash? All I have is my credit card."

"Listen, mister. See that sign? It says CASH ONLY."

"It was a mistake, could you just...," The customers behind Clark began to grumble at the delay. It was agony for Clark, the disappointment of his fellow shoppers warring with his need to leave as soon as possible. "I'm so sorry. Just this once?"

"You'll need to get in another line." The cashier was not going to allow Clark to circumvent the rules.

Just as Clark was ready to abandon his groceries, he heard a dreaded voice. "Hi, do you need money?"

Clark's shoulders slumped in defeat. "No...No, I don't need any money, thanks."

The cashier repeated, "Get in another line."

Head down, Clark began to pick up his items. "I'll just..."

Lex was unable to see Clark's eyes, but he was sure that it would hurt to see them. He turned to the cashier. "Rose. That's your name, right? Such a lovely name." He smiled, confident in his ability to charm. "This is Clark and I'm Lex. Very nice to meet you."

One of the impatient customers grumbled, "And my name's Henry. Now can you just get in another
Lex ignored the complaint and continued to address the unhappy woman behind the counter. "Happy Thanksgiving, Rose." The woman just stared at with a blank face. "Now it's your turn to say "Happy Thanksgiving back."

"Happy Thanksgiving back," she replied in a monotone. Clark's head began to rise in curiosity.

"Knock, knock." Lex's raised eyebrow dared the woman to ignore him.

A small smile began to appear. "Who's there?"

"Orange." Clark's eyes were wide. He couldn't believe that Lex had her eating out of his hand with such a simple joke.

She was definitely smiling now. "Orange who?"

"Orange you going to be nice and swipe this gentleman's credit card through this machine so we can all enjoy Thanksgiving?" Lex's grin was irresistible and the cashier took the card Clark handed her. "Rose, that is a great name." Lex tilted his head and looked into Clark's face, his smile wavering just a little. "So...you're fine."

Clark nodded. "Fine."

"Happy Thanksgiving. Henry, Happy Thanksgiving!" Lex waved and sauntered out of the store as if he owned it.

"I'm so sorry..." Clark began to apologize again but was waved away by the cashier after she reclaimed her pen. The customers behind him continued to mutter angrily as Clark picked up his bags and left. Somehow, he reflected, it was easier to deal with angry people in a dark alleyway than in a brightly lit market.

... 

Thanksgiving passed with food and songs and laughter.

Lex found himself removing Victoria's unwanted hand from his knee, under the table at his father's house, and drinking a little too much scotch while listening to Lois discussing books and authors and commissions.

Clark looked at his friends sitting around the table, in the apartment he had shared with his mother, happy than he still had his 'family', at least for a while longer.

... 

The West Side shop windows were awash with lights and glitter as snow sifted down from chilly skies. One display in LuthorBooks drew Nell's eye as she strolled past. Drawing nearer, she discovered that Miranda would be signing books for Clark's competitor in January. She shook her head sadly, as she walked away, counting all the people carrying bags from LuthorBooks. They were the same people and bags that passed by The Shop Around the Corner everyday, leaving the bells silent above the door.

... 

Mon, 14 Dec 2009 18:02:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"

To:     "MET152"
Subject:        The Season

It's coming on Christmas, they're cutting down trees. You know that Joni Mitchell song, 'I wish I had a river I could skid away on'. That song is not really about Christmas but I was thinking about it the other night while I was decorating my Christmas tree, unwrapping funky ornaments made out of popsicle sticks and missing my mother so much I almost couldn't breathe. I always miss my mother at Christmas, but somehow it's worse this year because I need some advice from her. I need her to make me some cocoa and tell me that everything that is going badly in my life will sort itself out.

Mon, 14 Dec 2009 18:13:25 EST
From: "MET152"

To:     "shop_freak"
Subject:        Re: The Season

What kind of advice do you need? Can I help?

Mon, 14 Dec 2009 18:22:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"

To:     "MET152"
Subject:        Re: Re: The Season

Can you help? I wish you could help. I wish

MET152: I had a gut feeling you'd be online now.

shop_freak: Hi.

MET152: I can give you advice. I'm great at advice.

shop_freak: If only you could help.

MET152: Is it about love?

shop_freak: No. My business is in trouble.

MET152: I'm a brilliant businessman. It's what I do best. What's your business?

shop_freak: No specifics, remember?

MET152: Well, minus specifics it's hard to help except to say, 'Go to the mattresses'.

shop_freak: What?

MET152: It's from 'The Godfather'. It means you have to go to war.

shop_freak: What is it with some men and 'The Godfather'? I'm beginning to feel my education is sadly lacking.

MET152: Well, 'The Godfather' is the I Ching, the sum of all wisdom if you discount 'The Art of War'. 'The Godfather' has the answer to any question. What should I pack for my summer vacation? Leave the guns, take the cannoli. What day of the week is it? Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Wednesday. The answer to your question is 'go to the mattresses'. You're at war. It's not personal, it's
business. Recite that to yourself every time you feel you're losing your nerve. I know you worry about being brave enough. This is your chance. Fight, fight to the death.

Clark sat in the dark after he logged off and thought about bravery and fighting and mattresses. He didn't have a problem with physical fighting, he'd yet to find someone who was stronger or could even hurt him. Bravery? How much bravery did it take to walk down dark streets looking for people to help when you knew you would always be safe? No, this was a different kind of fight. One that would take his brain, the business skills he'd learned from his mother and at college, and the courage to take a chance that might fail, out where everyone could see.

. . .

"I've been thinking, Chloe."

Chloe looked up from the cup of coffee she was pouring. "What?"

Clark stretched after he rolled out of bed, still tired from his sleepless night. "I've decided to go to the mattresses."

"Excuse me?" Chloe's eyebrows rose as she looked between a Clark, clad only in pajama bottoms, and the bed he had just vacated.

"Chloe! Not that!" Chloe was intrigued to see that Clark blushed all over. "It's from The Godfather. He grabbed his robe in a belated attempt to be discreet. He was so used to Chloe walking in and out of his apartment that he hadn't realized what he had done. After all, Chloe was a girl, and he was definitely not interested. "Do you think it would be a gigantic conflict of interest if you wrote something about the store?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"I mean no."

"So you'll do it?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what it means to go to the mattresses?"

"Of course. It's from The Godfather. You're going to war."

. . .

Lana and Pete had their hands full, handling more customers than the store had seen in weeks, while Clark paced in the back room, reviewing answers to possible questions from reporters.

"Clark, Channel 2 truck just pulled up in front of the store!" called Lana.

"In a second!"

Pete rolled his eyes as he took the next customer. "I think everyone's read the article."

In the office, Nell was reading the article while Chloe looked over her shoulder, repeating the words with her. "...usual places where good and evil face off, called the happy land of absolutes. We have a perfect example here on the West Side where the cold cash cow, LuthorBooks, threatens the survival
of one of the twenty-first century's most profound truths; you are what you read."

Chloe nodded, "I really believe that."

Nell just looked at Chloe bouncing behind her chair and finished. "...save The Shop Around the Corner and you will save your soul." Nell set the paper down. "Charming."

Chloe tilted her head and asked, "Do you think it's a little bit over the top?"

Pete hung up the phone as Clark walked out to meet the television news crew, "That was the West Side Voice. I told them to come on over."

Clark took a deep breath and entered the ring.

"One, two, three, four! We don't want your Super Store! Five, six, seven, eight! Close the store and bar the gate!"

Lex dodged children with bright picket signs and mothers handing out flyers in front of LuthorBooks. One sign, carried by a young angel with blond hair and blue eyes cracked him across his shins. "Ow!"

Lionel met him as he entered. "This is really pissing me off. Fix it."

"Do you want the West Side to turn into a big, gigantic, strip mall?"

"No!"

"Do you want to get off the subway at the West Side station and not even know you're in Metropolis?"

"No!"

"Can we save The Shop Around the Corner?"

"Yes!"

Lex stood in the back of the crowd watching Clark rally his supporters and thinking he was one of the most attractive men he had ever met when his face was lit up like that. He'd seen him shine in the shop when he spoke about his mother and selling books to children, but now he *glowed* as he drank in the sunlight and the crowd's enthusiasm.

"We're here outside The Shop Around the Corner, the famed West Side children's bookstore, now on the verge of having to close its doors because of big, bad wolf, LuthorBooks has opened up only a few hundred feet away, wooing customers with its sharp discounts and designer coffee." The reporter held the mike towards Clark, who was waiting.

"They have to have discounts and lattes because most of the people that work there have never read a book." Clark's statement was crisp and to the point.

Lex glanced over at Damien, who was watching the interview with him. "He's not as nice as he
seems on television."

"You've met him?"

"Yeah. He's a pain in the ass."

"Probably not as handsome as he looks on television either."

"Oh, no. He's gorgeous, but...he's a pain in the ass."

Damien swept Lex with an assessing look from head to toe. "You keep using that particular term and I'm going to start thinking it's a literal description."

Lex glared at his assistant before turning back to the television.

Damien folded his arms. "You don't feel the least bit sorry that you're sending that 'gorgeous' man to the cleaners?"

"It's not personal."

Damien rolled his eyes. "Right. It's business."

"Hey, here's another handsome guy." Lex nodded at the screen where he was being interviewed. "...I sell cheap books, I do, so sue me." Lex's jaw dropped.

Damien looked at Lex in disbelief. "That's what you said?"

"Well yeah - but that's not all I said. I can't believe those bastards. I said we were great, I said you could sit and read for hours and no one will bother you. I said we have 150,000 titles. I showed them the Metropolis section. I said we were a god damn piazza. A place in the city where people can mingle and mix and be..."

"Piazza?"

"I was eloquent! Fuck!"

"Piazza." Damien left the room shaking his head.

... 

"Well?" Clark lowered himself into the child-sized chair next to the table Nell was sitting at, peering at the papers she had spread out. Hearing Pete coming out from the back room, he signaled Nell to wait.

"First, I'm going to buy some eucalyptus candles because they make my apartment smell mossy..." Pete wrapped his scarf around his neck flamboyantly, "...then I need to decide whether to put sausage in the meat sauce or chopped meat...

Nell covered her eyes with one hand. "Spare us."

Pete threw his backpack on his shoulder and opened the door, setting the bells jingling. "No, I think clam sauce because this date is import..." The bells cut off his last words and he was gone.

"OK, we're alone." Clark gently pulled Nell's hand away from her face. "Don't tell me. Not the slightest difference?"
Nell shook her head sadly, handing Clark the final sales figures.

"How could this be? All this publicity and not one bit of difference?" Clark rose from the tiny chair and ran his fingers through his curls, grabbing the ends and yanking. "Nell, what am I going to do?" He bent and placed his hands in the low table and looked into Nell's face. "What would Mom have done?"

"Martha?" Nell thought about it for a minute, and then rose to stand next to the picture of Martha and Clark on the wall. "Let's ask her." She touched Martha's face and whispered, "Martha, what should we do?" She listened for a moment before turning to Clark, who had straightened up in puzzlement. "She says she has no idea, but she thinks that the window display is lovely." She put on her coat and hat, picked up her purse, patted Clark on the cheek and left, heralded by bells.

. . .

shop_freak: I need help. Do you still want to meet me?

MET152: I would love to meet you. Where and when?

. . .

"So I suppose he'll be carrying a book and wearing a flower in his lapel?" Damien and Lex were strolling down the street after work, on the way to Lex's rendezvous location. Lex turned his head to glare at Damien. "Not really? You're kidding, right?" He shook his head. "He could be a disaster, Lex."

"I'm only staying ten minutes." At Damien's look of disbelief, he was emphatic. "I'll say hello, have a cup of coffee, and then leave." He thrust his hands in his coat and hunched his shoulders against the wind. "I hope he isn't 300 pounds with a squeaky voice like the mice in Cinderella." Damien snickered. "What? I watched the movie with Julian last weekend. He likes the fairy godmother." Lex ran one hand down his face. "Why am I doing this? Why am I so compelled to meet him? Why?"

Damien patted him on the shoulder. "Lex, relax. You're just taking it to the next level." He smiled at the nervous man in front of him. "That's the natural progression, and if that works out, you take it to the next level beyond that. That's what I do, I keep taking it to the next level until it becomes necessary for me to leave."

"Huh. And I thought I was cynical about relationships." Lex looked up and read the sign. "Cafe Lava, this is it. Boy, we got here fast." He put his arm to stop Damien from walking any further. "This guy is the most wonderful, witty, adorable person I have never met and if he looks even remotely better than a mailbox, I'd be crazy not to turn my life upside down, take him home and spend the rest of my life with him."

Raising his eyebrows at Lex's intensity, Damien pointed out, "He could be ugly as sin." He shook hands with Lex. "Well, good luck."

Lex frowned and took two steps back. "Would you...go and look for me?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, just go look through the window and check him out."

"OK..." Damien climbed the three stairs up to the cafe and peered through the window towards the rear.
"Do you see him?"

"Hmmm...wait, oh yeah, I see a gorgeous man. He is incredible."

"I knew it! I knew he had to be attractive!" Lex's grin was blinding.

"But no book."

"Damien!"

"Wait, the server just moved and there's a book on the table. It has to be him. Rosebud on the lapel and book on the table."

"And...what does he look like!"

"Give me a second. Well, he sort of reminds me of that Clark Kent guy."

"Kent? Like The Shop Around the Corner Kent?"

"Well, you were the one that called him gorgeous. I mean, right before you called him a pain in the ass."

"Well, of course he's good-looking, gorgeous, even beautiful...but who cares about Clark Kent!"

"I can guarantee that if you don't like Clark Kent, you're not going to like this guy."

"Why not?"

"Because it is Clark Kent."

For the first time since he'd lost his hair in Smallville, Lex was searching for the inhaler he used to carry with him at all times. He couldn't breathe.

"Lex...Lex, are you OK? Lex, do you need an ambulance?" Damien was patting Lex on the cheek, holding him up as his knees started to collapse. Suddenly air started rushing in and the dark edges receded from his eyesight.

"I'm all right. For a minute there, I was sure you said he was Clark Kent and I panicked."

"Lex, take it easy. Calm down. Don't freak out on me again, OK?" Damien's face was fearful. "It is Clark Kent waiting in the cafe with a flower and a book."

"Fuck."

"More eloquence?"

"Shithead."

"Who? You, me or Clark Kent?"

Lex shook off Damien's hand and began to pace in front of the cafe, muttering.

"Lex, what are you going to do?"

Lex froze. "Nothing."

"You're just going to let him sit there, waiting, all night?"
"Yes. Yes I am. That's exactly what I'm going to do." Lex's face had become expressionless. "Good night, Damien. I'll see you in the morning." He walked away, head down, stopping at the nearest trash container to drop a book and flower inside.

...  

"Do you mind if I borrow this chair?"

Clark looked up at the young man who was asking if he could take the empty chair across from him. "Yes, I do mind, sorry. I'm waiting for someone." He rubbed his hands on his thighs, as he looked around the cafe once again, still unable to spot anyone with a flower or book. Surrounded by couples and groups, all chatting and laughing together, it was apparent that no one else was there alone.

"Would you like another tea?" Clark nodded politely and reached for his book, flipping idly through the pages as he waited. He heard the door open and looked up to see an older man being greeted by a much younger man. He sighed, deciding he would only wait a little while longer. He resumed reading random pages of the book, until the door opened again, the cold air pushing a familiar face and head inside. He caught his breath and raised the book in front of his own face, hoping he hadn't been seen.

"Clark Kent. Hello, this is a coincidence." Clark raised his hand in a polite wave, but kept the book in place. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

Clark dropped the book, narrowly missing his refilled teacup. "No, you can't! I'm...someone is going to be here. Soon. So you can't...sit down." He reached across and held on to the back of the chair before Lex could pull it out. Lex yanked on it, only to look surprised when it didn't budge.

Abandoning the chair, Lex picked up the book. "'Pride and Prejudice'. I bet you read this every year." Lex casually turned a few pages. "I bet you just loved that Mr. Darcy and your sentimental heart beats wildly at the thought that he and whatever her name is, are truly, honestly going to end up together." Clark, infuriated, grabbed the book from Lex, letting go of the chair. Lex immediately pulled it out and sat down, ignoring a look that should have set him ablaze.

A hovering waiter came over to the table. "Can I get you something?"

"No, he's not staying!"

"Mochaccino, decaf, non-fat. Thanks."

"No, no, no. You are not staying!"

"I'll just stay here until your friend arrives." Lex looked at his watch. "Are they late?"

Green eyes narrowed behind heavy black frames. "The heroine of Pride and Prejudice is Elizabeth Bennett. She is one of the greatest and most complex characters ever written." He lifted his teacup for a sip. "Not that you would know."

"As a matter of fact, I've read it."

"Well, good for you."

"I think you'd discover quite a few things if you really knew me."

"If I really knew you I know what I would find. Instead of a brain, a cash register. Instead of a heart, a bottom line."
Clark stopped in shock and then a smile began to replace the frown.

"What."

"I had a breakthrough! I have you to thank for it. For the first time in my life, when confronted with a horrible, insensitive person I knew exactly what I wanted to say, and I said it."

"I think you have a gift for it. It was a perfect blend of poetry and meanness."

"Meanness? Let me tell you something about meanness."

"Don't misunderstand me. I was trying to pay you a compliment." He stirred his mochaccino before reaching across and fingering the rose on Clark's lapel. "Is this a red rose? Oh no, it's crimson, isn't it. It's something you read in a book, no doubt."

"Everything's a joke to you isn't it." Clark's eyes were drawn to the door opening, only to fall again when two older women entered. "Please leave," he pleaded. "Please, I beg you."

Lex raised his hands in a mollifying gesture, stood up, retrieved his drink and coat and then moved to the empty table behind Clark. Clark watched in disbelief and then turned back around in his chair, refusing to acknowledge Lex any further.

After sipping his drink, Lex turned sideways in his chair and leaned to speak into Clark's ear, stirring the dark curls with his breath. "Talking about books reminds of the first day we met."

Clark would not give him the satisfaction of moving. "The first day you lied to me."

"I did not."

"Yes, you did."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Not."

"I thought you were so charming asking about my mother and playing with that little boy."

"Well, that wasn't lying."

"Alex? You gave your name as Alex, as if you were one of those silly girls with only one name. Hi, I'm Alex."

Lex got up and moved back to the first chair so he could look into Clark's face. "I am not a twenty-two-year-old girl."

"That's not what I meant."

"And when I talked about the Price Club and olive oil, I didn't expect to end up looking like a fool on television."

"Oh, you poor, sad, multi-millionaire." Both of them stopped to watch a portly gentleman wearing a cape walk through the door.

"I take it that's not him either. So who is he I wonder and will you be mean to him too?"
"No I will not! Because the man who is coming here tonight is completely unlike you. He is kind and funny, he's got the most wonderful sense of humor."

"But...he's not here," Lex observed with his snide remark.

"Well, if he's not here he has a reason. There's not a cruel or careless bone in his body. But I wouldn't expect you to understand anybody like that. You with your theme park, multi-level, homogenize the world, mochaccino land. You've deluded yourself into thinking you're some kind of benefactor delivering books at a discount...but no one will remember you." Clark's voice rose as he warmed to his protest. "And maybe no one will remember me either, but there are plenty of people who remember my mother, and they thought she was wonderful, and they thought her store was something special. You are nothing but a suit."

Lex blinked at Clark's vehemence, rose from his chair and made a small bow. "That's my cue." He put on his coat. "Goodnight." He walked slowly to the door, opened it and left Clark looking after him and wondering why his heart felt so hurt.

....

Clark threw his rosebud into the trash container outside the restaurant, never noticing his was the second flower discarded there that evening. His walk back to his apartment was slow, his mind preoccupied by his encounter with Lex. He trudged up the stairs and fumbled his door open by feel because the landing light had blown out again. His laptop was open and he quickly checked for an email from MET152 to explain his absence, but he'd received nothing. Dropping his coat on the floor and kicking off his shoes, he climbed into bed and pulled the covers over his head, shutting out the world.

....

"...so then the agent asked for six hundred dollars." Lex shuffled by Lois who was flipping through a fashion magazine while filling him in on her day. "I said to her that if you think I'm going to even talk to you about giving that kind of advance to an author..." He hung up his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. "...whose last book didn't make any of the top review lists, you're insane..." Discarding his clothes in front of the closet, Lex climbed into bed and turned out the light, Lois still venting without an audience in the next room.

....

Lex slid his empty cup across the bookstore's coffee bar counter before walking away with Damien. "He was insulting and provocative and the only pleasant thing about him was the way his hair fell across his forehead."

Following behind Lex as they made their way through crowded aisles, Damien attempted to placate Lex. "Underneath that disagreeable exterior, he might turn out to be a..."

"...a real bastard!" Stopping, Lex grumbled over his shoulder at Damien. "Let's not talk about it anymore. I'm going to go back to the office and I'm sure you have some work to do."

"Not really. This place is a well-oiled machine, my friend." Damien stopped following when he saw the dangerous glint in Lex's eyes. "On the other hand, I probably have some sales projections to mull over..." When he was sure that Lex was out of earshot, he continued, "...find someone to chat with Kent, maybe arrange a little arson..."
"So, what happened?" Lana stood waiting for Clark to open the shop, clasping her hands in excitement.

Clark pushed the door open so slowly the bells didn't chime. "He didn't show up."

Lana gasped. "He stood you up?"

"I would put it that way exactly." He hung up his coat and grabbed the coffee pot. "I think something happened, something terrible and unexpected that made it impossible for him to..." He screwed up his face with another thought, "What if he showed up, took one look at me and left."

"Not possible." Lana rubbed Clark's shoulder as she laid her head against his arm. "I can't believe any guy who saw you would do that. If they did, they'd be missing the best thing that could ever happen to them."

Clark's eyes softened and he hugged Lana before heading to the back room to fill the pot. "Maybe it was a subway accident," he called back.

"Absolutely!"

His words were muffled by the sound of running water. "A train got trapped underground with him inside..."

"...and no phone!"

The bells sounded as Pete bustled in. "Morning!"

Clark was grinning as he came back to the front of the shop. "...and you know how those express trains..."

"He fell on the third rail!" Lana smiled, certain she had solved the mystery of the missing blind date. "He's toast."

"What happened?" Pete dropped his backpack on the counter while he shrugged off his coat.

Clark sighed. "He was unable to make it."

"He stood you up?" Pete frowned.

Shaking his head, Clark disagreed. "Maybe he had a car accident. Those cab drivers are maniacs."

Lana took up the speculation and ran with it. "They could have hit something and he slammed into that plastic partition."

"His elbows are in splints so he couldn't really dial." Clark held his arms out stiffly, demonstrating the problem.

Lana nodded. "Or he's unconscious. In a coma!"

"Intensive care, heart monitor beating..." Clark's distressed eyes widened and he and Lana both gasped, "No phone."

Pete looked between the other two with wild eyes and choked as he waved his hand.

Clark looked at him in concern. "What?"
Grabbing the morning’s newspaper from his backpack, Pete slammed it down on the counter so that Clark and Lana could see the headline. ‘Cops Nab Rooftop Killer’.

"So do you think?" Clark looked for reassurance from his friends.

Pete shrugged. "It could be. He was arrested two blocks from the cafe."

"Is there a picture?" Lana started flipping through the paper until she reached the page with a man holding his coat over his head, as he was lead into the police station. "So that explains it."

Pete jabbed at the photograph. "He was in jail."

"And there was a phone." Lana contributed.

"But he only got one call so he called his lawyer," explained Pete.

Lana patted Clark's hand. "You are so lucky."

Pete agreed. "Yeah, you could be dead."

"He couldn't possibly be the Rooftop Killer." Clark was almost sorry his missing date wasn't the killer; at least he could have been useful in apprehending the murderer last night.

Lana asked sympathetically, "Did you sit there alone for a long time?"

Clark wrinkled his nose. "Not long. Lex Luthor came in."

"Lex Luthor!"

Clark shivered at the memory. "I don't want to talk about it. Let's just get to work."

The bells jangled. "So?"

The three turned and looked at Nell. Pete spoke up. "He was...unavoidably detained."

"He stood you up?"

Clark stomped into the back room without a word.

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Wed, 24 Feb 2010 21:03:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"
To: "MET152"
Subject: Missed You

I've been thinking about you. Last night I went to meet you and you weren't there. I wish I knew why. I felt so foolish. As I waited, someone else showed up, a man who has made my professional life a misery. Then an amazing thing happened. I was able, for the first time in my life, to say the exact thing I wanted to say at the exact moment I wanted to say it. Of course, afterwards I felt terrible, just as you said I would. I was cruel, and I'm never cruel. Even though I can hardly believe what I said mattered to this man (to him I'm just a bug to be crushed), what if it did? No matter what he's done to me, there was no excuse for my behavior. Anyway, I sure wanted to talk to you. I hope you have a good reason for not being there last night. You don't seem like the kind of person who would do something like that. The odd thing about this form of communication is you're more likely
to talk about nothing than something, but I just want to say that all this nothing has meant more to me, so much more than so many somethings from someone else. So thanks.

Thankful that Lois was at her own apartment, Lex opened his email, anticipating he would be deleting it right away. Instead, he read it twice before closing his laptop. He got up and got a bottle of water, Brinkley following him from room to room, nails ticking on the hardwood floors. He checked his mail and wrote a few checks, changed into pajamas, brushed his teeth and finally gave in and opened his laptop again. His first attempt at a reply was a blatant lie, claiming he was in another country. The second detailed a power outage in a very tall building with no phones working and out of cell phone range. Ashamed, he decided to be as truthful as he could be, for now.

Wed, 24 Feb 2010 23:34:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Re: Missed You

Dear friend, I cannot tell you what happened last night, but I beg you, most sincerely, to forgive me for what happened. I feel terrible that you found yourself in a situation that caused you additional pain. However, I'm absolutely sure that whatever you said last night was provoked, even deserved. Everyone says things they later regret when they're worried or stressed. You expected to see someone you trusted and met the enemy instead. The fault is mine. Someday, I'll explain everything. Meanwhile, I'm still here. Talk to me.

"Did he say anything about wanting to meet you again?" Lana and Clark were heading to Nell's for tea, enjoying the brisk air.

"No...no...not really. But it doesn't matter. We'll be like George Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell and write letters our whole lives."

Turning in at the gate, they went up the stairs, where Nell was waiting. "Thank you for the scones, they look lovely." She led them to the sunny nook where tea and cakes were ready. "So, have you decided what you're going to do?"

"We're going to close," was Clark's resolute answer.

Lana sighed. "Close."

"Closing the store is the brave thing to do." Nell nodded as she arranged the tea service.

Clark chuckled. "You are such a liar, but thank you."

Nell's bright eyes argued with him. "You are daring to imagine that you could have a different life. Oh, I know it doesn't feel like that. You feel like a big fat failure right now, but you're not." She waved a teaspoon at him. "You are marching into the unknown, armed with...nothing." Handing him a plate, she smiled. "Have a sandwich."

Selecting several, Clark disputed Nell's statement. "Not nothing. I have a little money saved."

"If you need more, ask me. I'm very rich. I bought Intel at six." Tilting her head, she winked. "Milk or lemon?"
The bells rang continuously as old and new customers took advantage of the closing sale. Clark and his friends kept busy bagging purchases and answering questions.

"What are you going to do now?"

Clark smiled. "I haven't really decided. I'm sort of looking forward to some time off."

"Are these chairs for sale?"

"Anything not nailed down." Pete replied as he unloaded another box from the back room.

"I came here every Saturday when I was little. I remember when your mother handed me 'Anne of Green Gables'. 'Read it with a box of tissues' she said."

Clark's eyes went to the photo on the wall. "Thank you for sharing that."

"Clark, come here a minute." Nell waved from the office. "I found these in the bottom drawer of that file cabinet we don't use. They were your mother's." Nell handed Clark three small journals. "You should take these with you."

Clark stood inside the brightly lit store and turned around slowly, taking in the coffee bar, the busy registers and the aisles of books. Ascending the staircase to the second floor, he found the children's section. It was crowded, the children sitting on small chairs reading, playing with stuffed animals and blocks, laughing at a television playing a cartoon. The children's voices tugged at his heart and he sank into one of the small chairs, leaning against the table shared by a large stuffed bear reading a book of fairytales. Reaching into the pocket of his coat, he pulled out the string of bells he had taken down, as he locked the shop door for the last time.

Lex was shocked when he caught sight of Clark walking up the stairs and he followed him, keeping out of sight. He watched the pain in Clark's face change to a melancholy smile as he sat listening to the children, looking at something he held in his hand.

"Do you have the shoe books?" A woman approached a salesperson, not far from Clark.

The salesperson was unsure. "The shoe books? Who's the author?"

"I don't know. My friend told me my daughter has to read the shoe books, so here I am."

"Noel Stipfield." Setting the bells down on the table, Clark turned to the woman, offering the information. "Noel Stipfield wrote 'Ballet Shoes', 'Skating Shoes', 'Theater Shoes', and 'Dancing Shoes'. I'd start with 'Ballet Shoes'. It's my favorite."

"Noel Stipfield," repeated the woman.

"Although 'Skating Shoes' is perfectly wonderful, but it's out of print."

"How do you spell the name."

"S-T-I-P-F-I-E-L-D." His voice broke a little on the last few letters, making Lex wince. Rising, he nodded to the salesperson and customer and retreated down the stairs.

The salesperson, having directed the customer to the correct aisle, saw something on the table. He
picked it up and walked quickly to the stairs, hoping to see the man who had just helped him.

"I'll take that."

"Mr. Luthor. I was just..."

"I know. I'll see that he gets it back." Lex accepted the item and sent the salesperson back to work. Walking to the office he was using, he looked at what Clark had left behind. It jingled softly in his hand, reminding him of the day they met, of silly hats, moustaches, crowns and goldfish. No one was around to hear him say, "We belong together, even if he doesn't know it yet."

... Martha Kent didn't write in her journals daily. She recorded occasions of importance in her life, Christmases, birthdays, getting engaged and getting married. Clark sat curled up on the sofa, reading bits of her and remembering. He sat up straight when Martha's beautifully looped handwriting recounted the day of the meteors, the day she lost a husband and found her son.

*// I can't be sure, but I thought I saw something move away through the smoke and ash just as my little boy came walking towards me, naked and smiling. I came back later, but found nothing to tell me where Clark came from that day. Thank goodness, Lionel Luthor was able to help arrange the adoption. I assured him that he needn't reward me for something anyone would have done, but he insisted his little boy Lex might have died that day if we hadn't taken him straight to the hospital. //*

His mother had never spoken much of that day, so Clark was fascinated by the account.

*// I've sold the farm and Clark and I will be returning to Metropolis and opening the bookstore I've dreamed about. It will be safer for him there, away from those rocks that hurt him. He is all I have now. //*

*// Clark is special. I need to teach him to be careful, because I don't want him taken away and examined to find out how he does those things. I don't want him to be afraid, just cautious. I've heard some stories about other people affected by the meteors. Maybe Clark is the same. We'll be careful, my sweet boy and I. //*

Closing the journal, Clark set it aside to finish later. He needed to arrange an out-of-town trip. He was going back to where it all began. Smallville.

... "Everyone was talking about it today, that whole Clark Kent situation. I always thought he'd make a great children's book editor." Lois leaned towards Lex in the cab, as it stopped in front of Lex's apartment building, intense in her opinions as always. Lex nodded and reached across to open the door for her. "He knows everything, he has flawless taste just like his mother's, he's famous for it and the salesmen swear by him. If he likes a book, it sells, period."

Lex held the door of the building as Lois passed through. "So you're going to offer him a job?"

"Well, what else has he got to do?" retorted Lois.

"Now that he's destitute," muttered Lex.

"Thanks to you."

Lex frowned at his sarcastic girlfriend. "I don't see him working for you."
"Why not?"

"Because he lacks the killer instinct. He'd never fire anybody. Look at that little shop of his, his employees have been there forever. Until recently. When they all lost their jobs."

"Again, thanks to you. Hold the elevator!" Lois scurried across the marble floors, unwilling to wait for the next trip. Lex didn't bother to hurry, knowing the elevator operator wouldn't leave without him.

"Hello, Mr. Luthor."

Lex gave a polite nod to the smiling man. "Hello, Charlie."

Lois sagged against the railing at the back of the elevator car. "I love how you've totally forgotten you had any role in his current situation. So obtuse. So insensitive." Lois closed her eyes and her lips quirked. "There's someone you remind me of. Me!" Lois' laughter reminded Lex of a cackling hen.

Lex's remained silent until a clank reverberated through the elevator and it jerked to a stop. "What is going on?" he grumbled.

Charlie shrugged "Could be stuck." He began to push the button for every floor. "I hope it doesn't plummet to the basement."

"Can it do that?" Lois squeaked.

Pushing Charlie out of the way, Lex opened the control panel and pulled out the emergency phone. "It is not going to plummet to the basement." When the phone was picked up, he began talking calmly. "Hello, who is this? Hello Juan, we're stuck in the elevator between the sixth and seventh floor." Lois began pawing at Lex in panic while Lex continued. "Can you please call for help?"

Lois grabbed the phone and screamed. "If you don't get your ass up here in two seconds..."

Lex yanked the phone away from Lois. "That's right, elevator. Please call the super and then 911. 9-1-1. Yes, the fire department. That's right. Thank you very much." He replaced the phone carefully before turning around to the hyperventilating Lois.

Charlie, who had been thinking at the rear of the elevator made a suggestion. "Everybody should jump in the air."

"What?"

"We jump and the elevator thinks no one is here and it opens," Charlie insisted.

Lois rolled her eyes while Lex simply shrugged. "One, two, three, jump!" All three passengers jumped at once. The entire car shook, but the doors did not open. Lois and Lex glared at Charlie who raised his hands up in defeat.

... 

"If I ever get out of here, I'm marrying Maria. I love her. I don't know what's been stopping me." Charlie pulled out his wallet and showed a photo to Lex.

Lois looked at Lex for a moment before declaring with a pout, "If I ever get out of here, I'm having laser surgery so I can get rid of these contacts."

After a few minutes of silence, "If I ever get out of here..." Lex was interrupted.
"Where are my TicTacs!" Lois began to empty her purse on the floor. She looked up at a choking noise from Lex. "What!"

Fri, 26 Mar 2010 22:14:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To:     "shop_freak"
Subject:        Cleaning House

I came home tonight and got into the elevator for my apartment. An hour later, I got out of the elevator and walked back downstairs minus the apartment key of someone who had become a bad habit. Suddenly, everything had become clear. It's a long story, full of the personal details we avoid so carefully. Let me just say, there was man sitting in the elevator with me, who knew exactly what he wanted and I found myself wishing I were as lucky as he.

Fri, 26 Mar 2010 23:20:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"
To:     "MET152"
Subject:        Re: Cleaning House

People are always telling me that change is a good thing. All they're really saying is that something you didn't want to have happen at all has happened. My store closed today. I owned a store. Did I ever tell you that? It was a lovely store and next week it will be something really depressing, like a Baby Gap. Soon it'll be just a memory; in fact, someone foolish might think it's a tribute to this city, the way it keeps changing, the way you can never count on it or something. I know, because that's the sort of thing I'm always saying. The truth is I'm heartbroken. I feel as if a part of me has died and my mother has died all over again and no one can ever make it right. I'll be leaving the city for a while and I'm not sure when I'll be back. Until then, thank you for listening.

MET152: Hello? Are you there?
MET152: Where are you going? Please let me help. MET152: Hello?

The Greyhound bus rumbled away leaving Clark standing by the side of the road with a duffle bag and a long tubular case. He looked at the battered billboard welcoming visitors to Smallville, the Meteor Capital of the World, picked up his belongings and started walking towards the buildings he saw in the distance.

Before he left Metropolis, Clark had asked Pete about Smallville. With a few names and the address of the town newspaper, Clark thought he should be able to find some information about the meteors' arrival and the aftermath. The town had suffered the loss of businesses and people that day. It declined still further when the town's major employer shut its doors. Pete was reluctant to talk about his family's creamed corn factory, saying only that he was glad he hadn't had to work for the company.

Dropping his bags off at the only hotel in town, Clark walked to Main Street, headed for the offices of the Smallville Ledger. Once daily, it now ran weekly, with a focus on farming articles and store
specials. It was open and Clark was pleased to see a smiling face when he entered. "Hi! I'm Clark Kent. My mother used to live here in Smallville and I was wondering if I could look through some back issues from around then?"

"Glad to meet you, young man. Kent, did you say? There hasn't been a Kent hereabouts for over twenty years." The elderly woman nodded as she tried to remember details. "He was killed by one of the meteors and his widow moved away. That your mother?"

"Yes, ma'am. She was Martha Kent. I was adopted right before she left."

"That would explain why you don't look a thing like Jonathan." She smiled at him. "So what years are you interested in?"

"The year of the meteors to start. Later, I might want to look at about six years ago. My friend Pete Ross said there were a few odd things that started happening around then."

"Well, follow me and I'll take you to the file room."

. . .

Rubbing his neck, Clark glanced at the time and closed the final file drawer. He'd been lucky the editor had left him alone so he could read quickly instead of slowing down to 'normal' speed. He'd found articles about the death and destruction from the meteors and the work needed to clean up afterwards. Jonathan Kent's obituary supplied the address of the old farm and he noted that as well as the address of a crop-dusting pilot who claimed he had seen a shape flying during the fall. What he hadn't seen was any mention of Martha finding him or any indication of a search for his parents. He guessed that was Lionel Luthor's doing, based on the information in Martha's journal.

The bizarre occurrences Pete had mentioned had been reported, but oddly enough, the articles were short and lacked detail. It was as if the town didn't want to know about the young adults who had changed into dangerous creatures and attacked their classmates. Pete had told Clark he'd almost been killed by a girl who sucked all the fat out of people and animals, had only escaped because she killed herself. That was just one example and Clark wasn't sure how he would go about investigating whether his powers were caused by the same thing, whatever it was.

"Thanks for letting me look through the back issues." Clark thanked the woman with a smile. "Can you recommend somewhere for dinner?"

"The diner at the corner of Main and Beale is reasonable. Are you staying long?"

"At least a few more days. I'd like to see where the old Kent Farm was and maybe walk around the countryside. It's sort of a vacation for me."

"Well, I hope you enjoy yourself, young man. It was nice talking to you."

. . .

The meatloaf at the diner wasn't bad and the hotel room was pleasant enough. Clark slept well and after a country-style breakfast, he had set off to walk to the Kent Farm. As soon as he was out of sight of the town buildings, he started running, using his speed to arrive at an abandoned farm a few minutes later. It looked like there had been a fire in the yellow farmhouse and no one had made any repairs. He walked out to the barn that was in better shape and poked around inside. Spying a loft, he climbed the wooden ladder to find a large door that opened on rusty hinges. He stood there looking over unplanted fields and decided he would bring his telescope back that night to see if he could locate some of the stars he and his mother used to watch on lazy summer evenings, so many years
ago.

The pilot mentioned in the paper had died several years before, but his widow was willing to talk about that day and show Clark some drawings of the object he claimed flew away. Clark thanked her for her time and just as he was leaving, he remembered to ask if she knew where Jonathan Kent had died. She wasn't able to help him and suggested police or volunteer ambulance records. Clark nodded and headed back to town.

Lex checked his email again. Two days and still nothing from shop_freak. He was going to have to see if he could get some information from Clark's friend Chloe Sullivan without revealing his true interest. Not knowing was driving him crazy.

Brinkley started barking the minute the doorbell rang. Lex shoved him out of the way so he could open the door to his father carrying a suitcase and garment bag. "Dad?"

"Hello, son. May I come in?"

Lex pulled the door open wide enough to let the older man through. "I'm sorry, of course. I was just so surprised to see you. You've never visited me before."

"Well, it should be a short one. I just needed to get out while Victoria cleared out her belongings, which is probably going to be just about everything in the mansion." Walking into the living room, Lionel dropped his bags. "Got anything to drink?"

Lex had already headed to the bar to pour a tumbler of the scotch they both preferred. "Here." He handed it to his father who had collapsed into the corner of the couch. "So I take it the wedding is off? That's too bad." He took a seat in the chair opposite Lionel. "What number would this have been? I lost count years ago. I get them mixed up with the affairs you had when you were married."

"Very amusing, Lex." Lionel examined the color of the liquor in his glass before sipping. "Well, let me see, first there was your mother. Then was Lorette, the ballet dancer..."

"My nanny." Lex noted sardonically.

"She was the nanny?"

Lex's eyebrows rose in disbelief. "Yes."

"I forgot that. Ironic. Then there was the ice skater."

Lex nodded. "Also my nanny."

"Really? That's incredibly ironic." Lionel took another sip before balancing the tumbler on his knee. "And then there was Sybil, the uh... it's an A word..."

"Astrologer."

"That's it."

Lex smirked. "Whose moon turned out to be in someone else's house, as I recall."
"Just like Victoria."
Lex was amazed. "Victoria left you for someone?"

"The nanny."

"Nanny Maureen?"

"Yes."
Lex dropped his head to the back of the chair, laughing. "Victoria ran off with Nanny Maureen."

"Yes." Lionel scowled at his unsympathetic son.  

"You're right, Dad. That is amazingly ironic." Lex finally controlled his laughter. "So here we are together, father and son."

"I just have to meet someone new, that's all. That's the easy part."

"Oh right, yeah, a snap to find the one single person in the world who fills your heart with joy." Lex's humor dissolved as he thought about his empty life.  

Lionel sat silent for a few minutes, looking around at his son's apartment. "Who did you say you broke up with?"

"Lois. You've met her."

"Would I like her?"

. . .

"Here Clark, you have to drink something, you're burning up." Chloe sat on the edge of Clark's bed helping him to sit up and drink the orange juice she was offering. "If this fever doesn't break soon, I'm going to call a doctor whether you like it or not. It's been three days and I'm really getting frightened."

Clark finished the glass of juice and laid back down. "No doctor Chloe. You promised." His voice was scratchy and raw sounding and the effort of speaking triggered a coughing spasm that left him breathless. "You promised."

"All right, Clark. I won't, but only because I'm afraid you'll take off on me again and this time you won't come back."

"Thanks, Chloe. You're the best." Clark's words slurred off into regular breathing as Chloe replaced a cool cloth on his forehead. Chloe brushed back sweat-damp curls and wondered if the green mushroom patch that Clark claimed he had fallen into outside Smallville was real or just a fever dream. She was sure that breathing in some green dust wouldn't cause something like this.

. . .

Sun, 04 Apr 2010 19:05:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Wish you were here
It seems like forever since you've written and I'm honestly a little worried. I hope everything is all right and that I'll see an email from your soon. My life was turned a little upside down recently, when my father stayed with me for almost a week. His latest marriage failed before it began and in a reversal of roles, he moved back in with his son. I just saw him off, pushing him back into his lonely house, and Brinkley and I may now breathe a sigh of relief. Dog biscuits and a mochaccino are called for in celebration. I wish I could share one with you, the mochaccino not a dog biscuit, because Brinkley refuses to share. Meanwhile, I'm waiting and hoping I'll see your name in my Inbox.

Clark had decided that sunlight was wonderful. He would be quite content to lie here on his bed inside his little personal patch of sunshine forever. Or, at least until he had to get up for something to eat because he thought he was quite possibly hungry. He wondered what day it was. He had a feeling some time had passed since he stumbled off the bus at the Metropolis station and took a cab to his apartment. He didn't remember much after that.

"Hey, sleepyhead. Want some juice?" Lana came in from the kitchen with a glass of orange juice, happy to see him awake.

"Only if I don't have to move." Clark returned his friend's smile as he sat up and reached for the glass. "What day is it?"

Lana sat on the edge of the bed looking concerned. "It's Wednesday, the seventh." She placed her hand on his forehead to check his temperature. "You were really out of it, Clark. Chloe and I were afraid..."

"Hey, you know how tough I am. I never get sick either, so I must have saved it up for a real doozy." He finished his juice and started to get up. The room tilted for a moment before leveling back out. "Whoa, guess I better take it slow."

Lana stood up and watched Clark for a moment before she glanced at her watch. "Are you going to be OK for a while? I'll be late for class if I don't leave now." She looked torn between school and taking care of her friend.

"Hey, I'm fine, just a little weak." He flashed a smile that went a long way towards quelling her concerns. "I'm going to shower because I reek..." He laughed at her vigorous nodding in agreement, "then I'll do something exciting like get dressed and take a look at my email. OK?"

"All right, you do seem so much better. I'll change the sheets while you're in the shower and then I have to run." She stood on tiptoe to kiss his stubbled cheek. "Call if you need anything, Chloe will check in this afternoon. Bye." She gave him a little shove towards the bathroom before she started removing the sheets.

Lex held the door for the woman struggling with the baby stroller and was rewarded with a smile and entry into Clark's building. He walked up several flights of stairs and stood in front of Clark's apartment door, bouquet of flowers in hand, trying to gather the courage to knock. He'd been concerned when he'd overheard his friend Lana speaking to his newest employee, Pete Ross about Clark's illness. Her distress was apparent as she explained how she and Chloe Sullivan had been nursing him for days. Lex had decided he needed to try to see Clark himself. After she had left, Lex grilled Pete for information, learning Clark had visited Smallville and had returned feverish and coughing.
He heard Clark's voice as he knocked for the second time, laughing as the door was thrown open. "What did you forget, La...Lex?" It was clear he wasn't expecting visitors since he was dressed in just a towel loosely knotted around his hips, shaving cream half removed from his face and razor in hand. His hair was still dripping, a few trails of water sliding over his golden skin and sculpted muscles making him even more appealing. "What are you doing here?"

Lex slid past the Clark into his apartment, hoping his innate courtesy would prevent him from throwing Lex out right away. "I came by to see how you were feeling, I heard you've been sick and...I was worried." Lex could see signs that Clark had been ill, the sunken eyes were noticeable and it was clear he had lost weight. "I can wait until you finish?"

Clark, still in shock at Lex's appearance, let the door close. He started to speak, then shook his head and returned to the bathroom where Lex heard the sound of running water. As he waited, Lex looked around at the small apartment divided into a sleeping area, a combined dining and living area and a small kitchen. He smiled when he saw the laptop open on the desk.

Clark came back out of the bathroom dressed in pajama bottoms, his plaid robe hanging open so that Lex could catch tantalizing glimpses of his impressive abs. His hair, longer than usual, had been toweled dry and was curling gently. Heading for the refrigerator, he pulled out a carton of orange juice and poured a glass. He raised it to Lex in a silent offer that was declined by an equally silent shake of the head. He drank half as he walked over to where he had left Lex waiting. "You put me out of business."

"Yes, I did."

"Did you come to gloat?"

"No."

"Offer me a job?"

"I would never insult you..."

"Because I have plans, I have plenty of plans. Did you know I got offered a..."

"A job working for my former girlfriend?" Lex cocked one eyebrow.

"...by your...your former?"

"We broke up."

"That's too bad. You were so perfect for each other." Clark winced, a hand covering his unruly mouth. "Ohhh, I don't mean to say things like that. No matter what you've said, there's no excuse for my saying anything like that. But every time I see you..."

"Things like that just fly out of your mouth," was Lex's sardonic observation.

"Yes!" Clark finished his juice and set the glass down on the nearby table, glancing at his laptop. Lex followed his eyes and reminded himself why he was here. "I brought you flowers." He thrust the paper wrapped bouquet at Clark, who was forced to take them in self-defense.

"Oh. Thank you." He peered inside and looked back at Lex with the first genuine smile Lex had seen from him since that day at the shop. "I love daisies."
"You told me. I mean you told Julian, who told me."

Clark winced as he remembered the day he met Lex and pushed the flowers back into Lex's hand. He turned and stomped to the door, yanked it open and pointed outside, glaring at Lex.

"I'll just put these in water." Lex walked into the kitchen, calling back out, "Where's a vase." He popped his head back out. "Vase? You should sit down. You've been sick."

Temporarily out-maneuvered, Clark let the door close and hoarsely called back, "On the shelf over the refrigerator." He heard the sound of water running and Lex walked back out and carefully placed the vase in the center of the table, the daisies nodding as they came to rest.

"Pete says hello, by the way. He's the one who told me you were sick."

Clark left the door, stepping further into the room, drawn by the name of his friend. "How is Pete?"

"He's great, really great. He's revolutionizing the place. You can't work in his department unless you have a PH.D in children's literature." Lex tilted his head and grinned at the notion.

Eyes softening at the news about his friend, Clark moved forward to reach out and touch a petal. "They're so friendly. Don't you think daisies are the friendliest flower?"

"I do." Lex desperately wanted that sweet smile directed at him, not a flower.

Still looking at the daisies, Clark asked softly, "When did you break up?"

Lex shrugged, "A couple of weeks ago."

Clark turned his head just enough that he could glance at Lex under his lashes. "You know, another person I know just broke up in an elevator, after it or just inside it, got stuck I think." Clark blushed when he confided, "When I saw you at the cafe I was waiting for him and I was..."

"Charming."

Clark huffed in disagreement. "I was not charming."

"Well, you looked charming." A high-pitched whistle sounded in the kitchen. Lex had obviously filled the teakettle as well as the vase. "Tea?"

Clark sighed and nodded. "Yes."

Lex prompted, "Honey?"

"Yes."

Bringing the teacup out, Lex placed it on the table near Clark. "I was the horrible one."

"Well that's true, but I had no excuse."

Lex's eyes narrowed and his face began to harden. "Oh, I see what you're saying. That's interesting. Whereas I am a horrible person, therefore I had no choice but to be horrible. That's what you're saying." He made a visible effort to rein in his temper. "I put you out of business, so you're entitled to hate me."

Clark's face was dismayed at that thought. "I don't hate you."
"But you'll never forgive me." Lex walked around to the other side of Clark as he stood beside the table. "Just like Elizabeth."

"Who?"

"Elizabeth Bennett in 'Pride and Prejudice'. She was too proud."

"I thought you hated 'Pride and Prejudice'?"

Lex continued flippantly, "Or was she too prejudiced and Mr. Darcy too proud? I can't remember." Seeing Clark getting ready to argue again, he grew serious. "It wasn't... personal."

Clark turned to Lex and folded his arms across his chest. "What is that supposed to mean? I am so sick of that. All that means is that it wasn't personal to you. But it was personal to me. It's personal to a lot of people." His voice grew querulous. "And what's so wrong with being personal, anyway?"

Taken aback, Lex was left with no argument. "Uh, nothing."

Clark's eyes bore into Lex's. "Well, whatever else anything is, it ought to begin by being personal."

Suddenly, the bright color in Clark's cheeks was gone and his knees started to buckle. Lex darted forward, caught him around the waist, and helped him to the bed. He left Clark sitting on the edge, using one hand to steady him, while he reached to pull back the quilt and top sheet. Urging Clark to lie back on the pillows, he helped him to swing his legs up on the bed. Lex caught his breath at the otherworldly beauty in the pale face, black lashes brushing high cut cheekbones, the hollows beneath accentuating the full red lips. Seeing him lying there so still, Lex could almost believe Clark was simply waiting for a prince's kiss to lift an evil spell. The lashes fluttered then lifted to reveal bewildered green eyes.

"What...? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"Shhh, it's OK, you've been sick. Remember? Do you think you're some kind of super man that can get up and have everything be back to normal right away?" Lex patted Clark's nearest hand in sympathy. "I'm sorry I disturbed you. You should rest." He stood and looked down at Clark who was still speechless. "Can I get you anything before I leave?" Clark shook his head. Lex smiled sadly and walked to the door.

"Lex, why did you stop by again?"

"I wanted to be your friend."

"Oh."

"I knew it wasn't possible...what can I say? Sometimes a guy just wants the impossible." Lex opened the door, stopping halfway out. "Can I ask you a question?"

Clark coughed before answering. "What?"

Lex was hesitant. "What happened with that guy at the cafe?"

Clark's mouth quirked. "Nothing."

"But you're crazy about him..." Lex let the door close as he was drawn back to the sad young man on the bed.

"Yes. I am." Clark shrugged hopelessly.
"Then why don't you run off with him? What are you waiting for?"

Clark's eyes dropped in embarrassment. "I don't actually know him."

"Really?"

"We only know each other - oh, God, you're not going to believe this..."

"Let me guess. Through the internet."

Clark looked up in surprise. "Yes."

"You've got mail."

Clark agreed. "Yes."

"Three very powerful words. I can't think any three more momentous words, except..."

Clark interrupted. "Yes."

Lex was beside the bed once more, looking down at Clark. "Well, I'm happy for him. Although, could I just make a little suggestion? I think he should meet you." He turned to leave only to look back, brow furrowed. "No, I take that back. Why would you want to meet someone you're crazy about?"

"Hey, I hardly think I need to take advice from a person who..." The hand Lex placed over his mouth abruptly muffled Clark's retort.

Lex squatted down next to the bed to bring his face to Clark's level. He spoke evenly, "Now I can see I bring out the worst in you. Let me just help you to not say something you're just going to torture yourself about for years to come." Clark's eyes conceded and Lex removed the hand, resisting the impulse to caress the full lips. He straightened up. "I hope you feel better soon. It would be a shame to miss Metropolis in the spring."

Clark's voice was quiet. "Thank you for the daisies."

At the door once more, Lex glanced at Clark. "Well, you take care." He opened the door and walked through.

"I will."

"Goodbye." The door closed behind him.

Clark touched his lips. "Goodbye."

...

Sat, 10 Apr 2010 14:18:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"

To:     "MET152"
Subject:        Meeting

I've been thinking about this, and I think we should meet.

Sat, 10 Apr 2010 16:45:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Re: Meeting

I agree and we will meet. But I'm in the middle of a project that needs tweaking.

... 

Hearing a tap on the plate glass window, Clark looked up from his book and saw Lex standing outside waving and then miming drinking from a cup. Clark blinked, surprised, and then watched as Lex entered the coffee shop and stood in line. After getting his drink, Lex joined Clark at the small table by the window. "I hope you don't mind. I couldn't resist stopping in when I saw you there alone."

Clark smiled and reassured him. "No, I don't mind at all. I was just enjoying the sun for a while before I went back to my apartment. How are you?"

Lex grinned. "I'm happy to see we've advanced to polite conversation. Maybe next time we can start with the weather? Oh, but wait, you did. You're enjoying the sun."

Clark decided to take the teasing in good humor. "Yes I am. And I'm much better now. Thanks for asking." He pushed his glasses back up and his eyes laughed at Lex.

"Oh, I could see that for myself. You actually look like you could stand up for more than ten minutes without keeling over." Lex sipped his coffee. "How's your online friend?"

"Well, I suggested we meet and he agreed he would as soon as he finishing tweaking a project he's working on." Clark blushed a little at revealing that he'd taken Lex's advice.

"Hmmm. A project that needs tweaking." Lex smiled enigmatically. "Tweaking. T-W-E-A-"

"K-I-N-G. That's what he said." Lex leaned his head back and contemplated the wall above Clark's head for a moment. "Sounds to me like he's married. Married with three kids."

"What a terrible thing to say! He couldn't possibly be married." Clark dismissed the idea.

"How do you know? Did you ask him? Have you written to him 'Are you married?' and gotten an answer?"

"No," Clark protested. "No, I'm not going to..., that's ridiculous."

Lex twisted so he could look at the book Clark had closed as he entered. "So, what are you reading? Is it good?"

... 

Clark found he'd missed his nightly walks and resumed them just as soon as he was cleared by 'Dr. Chloe' and 'Nurse Lana'. His reputation hadn't faded during his illness; the smart felons left the scene when they caught sight of his huge dark figure on the streets. Clark found himself wandering farther each night as he searched for anyone needing assistance. He wondered if he would be able to trust his online friend as much as he trusted Chloe and Lana.

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Thur, 22 Apr 2010 12:01:25 EST
From: "shop_freak"
To:     "MET152"
Subject:        A Question

I know this is probably a little late to be asking, but are you married?

Thur, 22 Apr 2010 16:45:25 EST
From: "MET152"

To:     "shop_freak"
Subject:        Re: A Question

Am I married? What kind of question is that? How can you ask me that? Don't you know me at all? Oh wait, I get it. Your friends are telling you the reason we haven't met is I'm married. Am I right?

. . .

"So he didn't answer the question."

"Yes, he did. He did answer." Clark leaned over the cafe table to glare at Lex, insisting that he was right.

"No, he didn't. Think about it."

They were seated outdoors, enjoying the unseasonably balmy weather, the breeze ruffling Clark's dark hair. The curls were even longer than before, Clark apparently deciding that longer hair was acceptable now that he wasn't running a store. Lex could understand that reasoning since the long waves made him look a great deal younger, certainly too young to have run a successful business, that is until Lex destroyed it. He reached across and brushed back a strand of hair that had blown across Clark's mouth. Startled, Clark leaned back in his chair and then smiled an apology for the reaction.

"Yes, he...he nailed me. He knew exactly what I was after..." Clark reached for one of his french fries which he used to point at Lex, "...which is, by the way, exactly like him." The fry ended up being dipped in ketchup and devoured with gusto.

Lex shook his head laughing. "He did not answer the question, did he?"

Rolling his eyes, Clark sighed. "No."

Spearing his salad, Lex ventured, "Maybe...he's fat." He took a bite and swallowed. 'He's fat. He's a fattie."

Clark's eyes roamed over Lex's trim figure before answering. "I don't care about that."

"You don't care that he's so fat that they'd need to use a crane to remove him from his house?" Lex snorted. "You don't care."

"That is very unlikely. That is completely ridiculous." Clark finished his burger before starting on the rest of his fries.

"Hey, maybe he's that big guy wandering around the city taking on muggers and petty thieves. That could be cool, your own personal hero!"

Lex's suggestion came at the same time Clark was drinking his iced tea. The resulting gasping and choking occupied both of them for a few minutes. Spills mopped up, they tried to pick up the thread of their conversation.
"So what's his email address?"

"Uh-unh."

"I'm not going to write him. Is that what you're worried about? Think I'm going to email him?" Lex grinned. 

Looking around for eavesdroppers, Clark whispered, "All right, MET152."

"MET152. one five two. One hundred and fifty-two. He's... 152 years old. He's had 152 moles removed, so now he's got 152 pock marks on his face."

Clark wrinkled his nose at his tormentor. "The number of people who think he looks like Clark Gable."

Lex snickered. "152 people who think he looks like a Clark BAR."

"Hilarious. Like I haven't heard that one before." Clark dropped his forehead into the palm of his hand and groaned. "Why did I ever tell you that?"

... 

"152 stitches from his nose job. The number of his souvenir shot glasses that he's collected in his travels." Meeting by chance, Lex had kept Clark laughing all through the farmer's market in a plaza downtown. The vendors smiled to see the two of them giggling as they picked out a bouquet of flowers, including daisies, for Clark and some fruit for Lex.

"The number is... his address?" Clark shook his head, sneering at the idea. "No, no. He would never do anything that prosaic." Clark never noticed Lex wincing behind his back as he calculated how quickly he and Brinkley could move to another building. "The only thing I really care about, aside from the married thing, and the maybe in jail thing, the boat thing..."

"What boat thing?"

"I could never be with someone who owned a boat."

Lex halted. "I have a boat." He shrugged in resignation. "That clinches it, we'll never be together."

Clark looked up from the kaleidoscopes he was examining and a little half-smile appeared. He held up one of the toys and looked through it, then removed his glasses so he could see more clearly. Lex reached for the dangling eyewear and held them up to his own eyes. He looked through them at Clark, who was standing there warily. "You don't really need these do you?" He handed them back and smiled. "If you're wearing them to disguise your beautiful eyes, it's never worked with me." He winked and walked to the next table, leaving Clark to fumble his glasses back on and abandon the kaleidoscope on the table.

"I could never be with someone who likes elevator music, for example, Joni Mitchell. 'It's clouds' illusions I recall, I really don't know clouds at all.' What is that? Is she a pilot? Is she taking flying lessons? It must be a metaphor for something, but I don't know what it is." Lex grinned at Clark, who was still speechless.

... 

"So how's your book coming?" Lex and Clark had appropriated a bench in the park for their purchases and had split a large warm pretzel from the nearby cart.
"Well, there's this children's book editor I knew from the shop and she said she'd like to read it when I finish."

"Yeah?"

"Who would ever expect that I would write? I mean that if I hadn't had all this time...you know what?"

"What?" Lex was picking pieces off his pretzel half and throwing them to the sparrows.

The green eyes were dazzling in their delight. "The truth is that he's the one who started me thinking about writing!"

Lex rolled his eyes. "Mr. 152 Felony indictments."

"Mr. 152 insights into my soul." Clark leaned and nudged Lex in the ribs with an elbow.

"Oh yeah." Lex groaned dramatically. "No competing with that."

Clark stood and started gathering his bags. "You know, it's funny how we keep bumping into each other."

Lex very carefully avoided looking at Clark. "Yeah. It is."

"Hope your mango's ripe."

"I think it is." Lex rose to his feet and smiled at Clark. "Hey, you want to maybe bump into me again say, Saturday around lunch time?"

Clark tilted his head and looked at Lex with narrowed eyes. Satisfied with whatever he found, he agreed. "Sure."

"Over there?" Lex pointed at grandstand in the park. Clark nodded with a grin. "Good." They both walked away in opposite directions, Lex's stride almost jaunty.

. . .

Getting ready for bed, Clark suddenly found himself wishing he could share the night's adventures with someone. Lying there looking up at the ceiling, he was surprised to realize that someone was...Lex. Sleep didn't come easily as he wondered whether his recent illness had affected his ability to reason.

. . .

Fri, 21 May 2010 21:40:25 EST
From: "MET152"
To: "shop_freak"
Subject: Time to try again

How about meeting tomorrow? Four o'clock? There's a place in Riverside Park at Ninety-First Street where the path curves and there's a garden. Brinkley and I will be waiting.

. . .

"Today?" Lex added relish to his hotdog and contemplated the hot sauce.
Clark had chosen sauerkraut for his gourmet meal, fresh from the hotdog vendor parked by the grandstand. He nodded before taking a bite. "Today."

"Wow."

"I know. In Riverside Park."

They walked across the plaza, heading towards Clark's apartment as they ate and chatted.

"Riverside Park...well, that would mean he's a West-Sider," Lex pointed out.

Clark's eyes widened. "Isn't that amazing? Maybe I've seen him and don't even know it."

"You could have seen him everyday and not know it."

"It's very possible."

"He could be anybody." Lex pointed at a young man walking by. "It could be that guy right there and those flowers are for you!"

Discarding their trash in a nearby bin, the two men, one with dark curls, the other strikingly handsome despite his lack of hair, bantered as they sauntered down the sidewalk.

"Could be the zipper man." Lex was unable to keep a straight face as he offered the solution.

"Who's that?"

"He's that guy who repairs zippers on Amsterdam Avenue."

Clark turned around and walked backwards so he could grin at Lex. "Cut it out."

"You'd never have to buy new luggage."

"Stop!" Clark's laughter had brought an attractive rosy glow to his cheeks and he'd left his glasses at home, so Lex was treated to an unobstructed view of his twinkling green eyes. Laughter fading, Clark resumed walking next to Lex, only a few scant inches of space between them.

Lex's tone grew serious. "You know, the timing here is everything. He's waited until you're primed, until you are absolutely convinced that there's no other man that you could possibly love."

"Yes?" They had reached Clark's apartment building and they stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking at each other, Clark's face showing concern at the change in Lex.

Lex ran his hand over his head, something Clark had never seen him do before. "You know, sometimes I wonder..."

"What?"

"Well... if I hadn't been LuthorBooks and you hadn't been The Shop Around the Corner, and you and I had just met..." Lex was looking down, unwilling to meet Clark's eyes.

"I know." Clark's voice was soft, with a sense of wonder.

"I would've asked for your number." Lex's head rose, his eyes searching Clark's. "And I wouldn't have been able to wait 24 hours before calling you up and saying, 'Hey, how about... oh, how about some coffee, or drinks, or dinner, or a movie...?'" Lex shoved his shaking hands in his pockets. "...for
as long as we both shall live'?

Clark's eyes lost their twinkle, becoming cloudy with unease. "Lex..."

"And you and I would never have been at war and the only thing we'd fight about would be which DVD to watch on Saturday night."

"Well, who fights about that?" The catch in Clark's voice brought a matching lump to Lex's throat.

"Not us."

Clark's attempt to smile failed. "We would never."

Lex's blue eyes pleaded. "If only..."

Eyes shimmering, Clark turned to climb the steps. "I've got to go."

"Wait, just let me ask you something."

"How can you forgive this guy for standing you up, and not forgive me for this tiny little thing... of putting you out of business?" The hand on Clark's arm slid down to his hand in a gentle caress.

"God, I wish you would."

"I really have to go." Clark whispered, pulling his hand from Lex's grasp.

Lex blinked a few times before nodding with a bleak smile. "Yeah...well, you don't want to be late."

Clark stopped at the top of the stairs to look, but he only saw Lex's back as he walked away rapidly, leaving the scene of his defeat behind.

Clark found it difficult to keep himself to a normal pace as he walked through the flower gardens. He arrived at the spot his online friend had chosen and paced as he waited impatiently. Each face that rounded the corner was scrutinized and then discarded as they showed no sign of recognition. He began to feel discouraged.

"Brinkley!" The call brought Clark's head around as he remembered the name of his friend's dog. Barking, a golden lab came frisking up to Clark, bouncing as he invited Clark to play. "Brinkley!"

The voice was nearer and then a familiar profile was visible, striding along with leash in hand, grinning at Clark's surprise.

As Lex drew nearer, Clark's immobility caused him to slow, the grin fading. He was only a few feet away when Clark began to lose his puzzled look. He blushed and took the last remaining steps to bring him close to Lex. He swallowed his tears and a slow sweet smile began, prompting Lex's to reappear. Clark's large hand cradled Lex's jaw, his thumb sliding over lips that parted on a sigh. "I wanted it to be you. I wanted it to be you so badly." His lips replaced his thumb and Lex's eyes closed in relief as he answered Clark's soft question with lips and hands and heart.

Brinkley, tugged impatiently on Lex's jacket until they parted, laughing. "I'm sorry, but he actually thought we came out here for a walk."

"I think we should be able to manage that." Clark took Lex's hand as they started down the path.

"Besides, I have some things I've been hoping to share with you. I don't know if you realize I'm from Smallville and..."
Epilogue

"Lex?"

"Mmmm. What?"

"Are you sure you're OK with being with someone as freaky as I am? I mean you could have anyone else who's normal, maybe even as normal as a woman who could give you kids. You must want kids someday; you're so great with Julian."

Lex rolled over and turned on the light beside the bed. Propping himself up on an elbow he gazed into the beautiful green eyes that had enchanted him from the start. "Clark, you're not a freak. You are a wonder and you have an incredible gift. It's not your special skin or your speed. It's not how strong you are or even your unique ability to find things under the couch without getting on your hands and knees. You make me smile. You make me happy. You make me think about things I've never even dreamed about before." He brought one of Clark's hands up to his lips and kissed the palm. "You make me wish I'd met you years ago and I'm thrilled that I have still have years left to be with you, with or without children."

The distress in Clark's eyes had lightened to simple concern. "But I still don't know who I am or maybe even what I am."

Placing Clark's hand on his chest, Lex brushed his curls back, his fingers lingering in the ebony strands. "You're Clark. And if that's not enough for you, because it's plenty for me, then we'll go back out to Smallville and investigate some more. We're in this together now and I'll do whatever it takes to make you as happy as you make me."

"Lex?"

The brilliance of Clark's smile took Lex's breath away. "Clark?"

"I know a way you can make me happy right now." Clark stretched and then pulled Lex over to lie on top of him. His hips lifted as he demonstrated his point, a very large and insistent point.

Lex's chuckles vibrated parts that were most definitely interested in the pursuit of happiness. "Again? Already? Maybe I should re-think my definition of freaky."

Clark looked up into the laughing eyes of his lover and decided Smallville could wait.

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Thanks to cezmail for the suggestion!

Feedback is both welcome and appreciated.

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