

Rules of Love

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Summary: In the next installment of the “Rules Series,” Clark prepares a special evening for him and Lois. Sheldon Bender, Nigel St. John, and Gretchen Kelly all reappear in Metropolis. Lois is confronted with a very alive Lex Luthor who’s set his sights on reclaiming everything he once had...including her. (5 of 10)

Story Size: 27,721 words (154Kb as text)

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Previously On Rules of Family...

“So, not what you were expecting, huh?” Clark asked her.

“No, I have to say I was pleasantly surprised. I actually enjoyed myself today. I get it now.” She grinned back at him, turning to face him.

“Get what?” he asked curiously.

“The love you have for Christmas. The joy. The hope. I get it now,” she repeated, looking around the room. “Growing up with this...it’s hard not to love it.”

He smiled at her, “I’m just glad I was able to share it with you, Lois.” He brushed a strand of hair out of her face. “After last night, I guess I can understand why you wouldn’t get excited about the holidays. I don’t think I’ve seen a synchronized Christmas dinner like that before.”

Lois groaned, recalling the dinner from the night before, “Mom enjoys putting on a show. It’s not really about the holiday but about the presentation.” Her tone grew sour for a moment, “Probably why she and daddy stayed together as long as they did, too.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories for you,” he apologized.

“It’s okay.” She smiled back at him. “Thanks for not saying anything about last night,” she said, meeting his gaze.

“You seemed like you wanted to avoid talking about it this morning,” he remarked with a knowing expression. “Drunk Christmas Eve dinner is completely forgotten.”

“I wasn’t drunk,” Lois argued.

“You had three glasses of champagne,” Clark pointed out.

“Okay, maybe I was a little.” She giggled. “You were still a perfect gentleman.”

“Of course,” he grinned back at her.

“Kind of a rarity these days.” Her eyes sparkled as she looped her arms around his neck.

“So is being able to fly and bend steel over your head,” he teased, leaning in to kiss her.

“You know, in all the excitement we forgot to exchange gifts this morning,” Lois realized. “I completely forgot yours on the dining table.”

“That’s okay,” Clark said, pulling out a small red box from his pocket. “I grabbed it before we left.” At her surprised expression, he said, “You were a bit distracted this morning.”

“So don’t just sit there. Open it.” She grinned happily, clapping her hands.

“Okay,” he nodded and began to carefully peel back the wrapping paper. Inside was a small velvet box. “What is this?” He peered at her in amusement. He opened the box, and she watched

in anticipation, waiting for him to put the pieces together. “A key?”

“To my apartment,” she said shyly. “I just thought...” she shrugged, “...it would be easier when you’re coming and going.”

He leaned in to kiss her. “Thank you,” he whispered against her lips. “I’ll have a key made for you when we get back.”

Her face relaxed, and she smiled back at him. “I’d like that.”

He pulled out a small box from his pocket wrapped in a blue ribbon and handed it to her. She pulled the ribbon loose and opened the box, revealing a simple silver chain necklace with a small star-shaped pendant on it. “Oh, Clark, it’s gorgeous,” she gasped in surprise. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And you won’t,” he responded carefully. “Every star is different and unique in its own way.” He brushed his hand against her cheek, “Just like you.”

“Star?” Lois asked in surprise.

“Just one of the smaller ones.” He said, fingering the crystalized star with his thumb.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you,” she whispered, leaning against him.

“Merry Christmas, Lois,” he said, stroking her cheek.

“Merry Christmas, Clark,” she murmured against his lips, capturing his mouth with hers.

Teaser

One Month Later...

Murderer Loses Sight!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Lois Lane smiled at the cover photo of Superman holding Dr. Leit and Gregory Munch by the collar. After Dr. Faraday’s murder in her apartment, she and Clark had begun digging into the doctor’s affiliations. Clark was still beating himself up for not being there when Dr. Faraday had been attacked. She was becoming increasingly more aware of just how invested Clark was in the outcome of his rescues. He blamed himself when things went wrong, or he wasn’t there to stop a tragedy. He carried the weight of the world on his shoulders yet was able to show kindness and generosity to everyone he came in contact with - as Superman and as Clark Kent.

Two hands slipped around her waist, and she grinned, looking back at Clark who was standing behind her. “Hey,” she fingered the knot to his tie, “I didn’t hear you come in.”

He smiled back at her, “I used my key.” His eyes sparkled at that statement.

She shared a look with him and looped her arms around his neck. “Your key, huh?”

He tightened his arms around her and whispered, “Best Christmas gift I’ve gotten so far.”

“Really?” She turned to face him, “I must warn you I’m a terrible gift giver.” She let out a mock sigh and teased, “You’ll only be disappointed after this.”

“Not possible.” He murmured, leaning in to kiss her, running his palm against the frame of her face. His other arm rested on her hip. She let out a soft moan against him. A moan escaped his lips, and he broke off the kiss, resting his head against hers.

She had given him a key to her apartment on Christmas. When they’d returned from his parents’ farm, he’d made a copy of his key for her as well. It was a big step in their relationship, but she felt they were ready. Over the last few months, they’d discovered new things about one another and navigated through their budding relationship and Clark’s revelation with a few bumps in the road.

She fingered the silk of his tie, looking up at his heated gaze with a smile. She could feel the butterflies flutter in her stomach when he looked at her like that. Things had definitely heated up in the romance department between them. She teased, tugged on his tie and pulling him back toward her and recapturing his mouth with hers before pulling away once more. “How’d everything go?”

"Dr. Klein said there was no sign of permanent damage."

Everything's back to normal." He reassured her.

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding in.

"Good. That was really scary. You not being able to see."

"I know." He said, whispering a kiss against her forehead.

"For me too."

Clark had spent two days without his sight thanks to Dr. Leit's device. Thankfully, Dr. Klein had been able to reverse the effects, but seeing Clark that vulnerable had scared her. It was a reminder that despite Clark's differences and super abilities he was just as vulnerable—if not more so because of Superman. As long as he put on the cape to protect others, he would always have a target on his back.

It had been four months since their first date—when he'd trusted her enough to tell her everything. She'd gone through so many emotions that night. Hurt. Pain. Mortification. Shock. At the end of the day though, she knew she couldn't walk away. There was something between them. She'd felt it in their first meeting—as Superman and as Clark. Not that she'd ever admit to it at the time. He'd gotten to her in a way that no one else had. He understood her in a way no one else could. The closer they became the more comfortable they both became with one another.

It was different from any relationship she'd been in. Every other relationship ended in heartache—typically from a betrayal of one kind or another. Paul, Claude, and more recently Lex... They had all betrayed her. Clark was different. He'd laid everything on the line and left himself vulnerable knowing she could destroy him with the swipe of a pen if she wanted to. He trusted her with his deepest secret. She knew it hadn't been an easy decision for him. Telling her his secret identity and letting her make the decision to take a chance on their relationship made it easy for her to forgive him.

He proved time and time again how different he was from everyone else. He hadn't pushed her for anything more than their very heated makeout sessions. After the last time, things had gotten too heated at his apartment after the incident with Capone's gang she'd noticed he seemed to pull back. He was still attentive and loving, but he seemed more controlled. He didn't allow them to get carried away like they had before. When things began to tread near dangerous territory, he pulled back. It wasn't until after the incident with Metallo this past month that she noticed his resolve seemed to be wavering. He'd even spent the night with her Christmas Eve because she didn't want to be alone. He'd slept on the couch most of the night, but he'd been there. Then when he'd lost his sight, she'd kept him at her apartment.

Clark let out a low murmur, cupping her cheek with his palm as he spoke. "I don't know how I would have gotten through the last few days without you, Lois. Thank you."

She gave him a watery smile. "Of course." She let out a long sigh, feeling his arms tighten around her. "I'm starting to like Dr. Klein more and more. I'm glad he was able to help."

"Me too." Clark chuckled. "So, I was thinking since we've already filed the story on Dr. Leit, Perry might be open to us having a long weekend."

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Long weekend, huh? What exactly did you have planned for this weekend?"

"Not chasing criminals or leads that end with either of us having guns pointed at us." He said half-jokingly.

"I was minding my own business." She retorted, sensing where his train of thought was. Dr. Faraday had been murdered in her apartment when she'd been coming home from the market. Clark had raced into overprotective mode, refusing to let her do anything or go anywhere without him before Dr. Leit's device had rendered him blind. She knew he'd been coming from a good place, but it had annoyed her to no end.

"I know." He said softly. "I just thought after this past week we could use a little change of scenery. Maybe some food that

doesn't require a packet of seasoning and box directions." His eyes hinted at the humor he was trying to lighten the conversation with.

"I thought you liked the pasta." She pressed, running her hands through the hair on the back of his head.

"I did..." He cupped her cheek. "I think we could both benefit from a weekend away, though."

"A whole weekend?" She raised her eyebrow at him. "What about Superman?"

"He can take a weekend off. You know, as long as no one's trying to blow the planet up or anything." He pulled her closer to him, and she smiled back at him. "What do you say?"

"I think it sounds...promising." She grinned, leaning in to kiss him. "But you have to ask Perry for the time off."

"Deal." He grinned back at her.

Nigel St. John made his way through the abandoned subway tunnels, following the directions he'd been given by Gretchen Kelly. If what she promised was true it would mean a change of power in regards to the criminals in Metropolis. He knew all too well how Lex Luthor would react to the changes that had taken place in his absence.

He reached the corridor where he found Gretchen hard at work at her computer. On the table next to her was the glass case she'd been keeping Lex Luthor's body in for the past few months, trying to resurrect him from the dead. On another table was the body of Johnny Corbin. He frowned looking at the drab surroundings, "Couldn't you have found a place with some heat?"

"Your comfort isn't really my concern at this point, Nigel," Gretchen said, looking at the monitors. "His vital signs are fluctuating wildly. It's been a struggle ever since that close call we had."

"Close call?" Nigel asked, not sure what she was referring to.

"After the run-in with Waldecker's sister I had to move Lex. I was followed to the crypt, and he was almost discovered." She explained, fiddling with the keyboard in front of her. "His vitals still haven't stabilized since the move..."

"Yes, well, I do hope I haven't made this trip for nothing." Nigel mused, looking at Gretchen coolly.

"Gee Nigel, your concern for Lex is overwhelming." Gretchen threw him a disapproving look.

"Mr. Luthor did not hire me for my congeniality." He spoke coldly.

One of the monitors began blinking rapidly, screeching in a loud monotone beeping. Gretchen frantically moved Nigel out of the way to adjust the switches on the electronic equipment behind him. "I've got to stabilize his electromagnetic field. Otherwise, we're going to lose him."

A loud crash came from the glass case. They both looked to see a bright blue glow coming from within. Just as quickly as it came, it went. A long monotone sound came from the monitor on the other side of the room. They both looked up to see the vital machine go flat. Gretchen began to scream in a panic, "No! Lex! No!"

Nigel approached her from behind, placing a tentative hand on her arm to try and calm her down. He sighed, "It was a noble experiment, Gretchen."

"Lex," She cried, burying her head in her hands.

He patted her arm, hoping the display of emotion from her would be short-lived. He knew all too well the effect his former employer had had on the women in his life. Lex Luthor prided himself on his ability to take what he wanted from anyone, not caring about the fallout that came. Each conquest was greater and greater. It wasn't until his engagement to Lois Lane that Nigel had seen Lex show any change in his behavior. The idea of taking something from Superman and winning the war between the Man of Steel created the perfect circumstances for Lex Luthor's

downfall. It was his greatest triumph that destroyed him. Thankfully they wouldn't see him repeat that mistake.

A loud crash caused them to jump. They looked up to see an arm pop through the glass case, searching for the latch to release the lid. Blindly the arm reached up to raise the lid. Before their eyes the figure of his former employer, Lex Luthor rose, covered in goo. His eyes were dark with rage and his hair a mess, soiled in the compound Gretchen had been keeping him in for the past few months. A demonic expression remained on his face as he looked at them.

"Lex..." Gretchen gasped.

"I don't believe it," Nigel said in shock.

"Believe it!" Lex Luthor snarled at him in response.

Clark flew over Metropolis that evening with a sense of relief he hadn't felt in weeks. After his conversation with his dad on Christmas, he'd gone back and forth on whether it was the right time to even ask the question. Four months. It seemed like such a short time, but given everything they'd gone through in that time it felt as if that night she'd shown up on his doorstep and confessed her hidden feelings was a lifetime ago.

Last weekend he'd bought the ring. He'd planned on asking her that night, but when he arrived at her apartment, he'd found Dr. Faraday's body and Lois in a trance. All his plans quickly vanished over the last week as they worked to find Dr. Faraday's murderer and he dealt with the sudden blindness that had been thrust on him.

He mentally kicked himself for that one. He'd done it again. Rushed into a situation without assessing it properly. His confidence that the device Dr. Leit had wouldn't work on him had been his undoing. Lois and the rest of Metropolis had been put in danger because of his short-sightedness. Thankfully Dr. Klein at STAR Labs had been able to help reverse the effects in time.

Lois was safe.

Superman was back.

It had been a close call...again.

He'd made the same mistake with Metallo. Last time, he'd pushed Lois away. That hadn't gone over very well. This time he hadn't. Lois helped him through it all. She helped him figure out how to do the things that had come so naturally before. Now that he was without sight he found himself fearful of what his life would be without sight. Never being able to experience the world as he had before. Then there was the issue of Superman. He couldn't exactly fight criminals without his sight.

Lois had been there for him. She'd been surprisingly patient with him, helping him navigate his way through the emotions that came with the changes. It was a side to her he'd only seen glimpses of before. He'd seen it when she had taken in Amy Valdez during the investigation into Metamide 5 and when she was playing with the orphan, Danielle, during their investigation into the Space Rats.

Though she claimed not to have a maternal bone in her body she had a knack for being the voice of reason through the chaos. It only made him love her more.

Now that things had calmed down again and he had his sight back he wasn't going to let anything get in his way. A weekend away from everything would ensure no story or criminal would get in the way. He still had a few details to sort out, but they were minor details. He'd already talked with Perry about taking a three-day weekend earlier in the week. Given the big story they just handed in he didn't see any reason why the editor would change his mind. It had been a very productive few months for the Planet. It seemed like after Lex Luthor's fall from grace everyone thought Metropolis was fair game.

He smiled as he neared the apartment building on Clinton Street. It appeared the city was quiet tonight. The corners of his mouth twitched into a broad grin as realization washed over him.

He did a flip in the air as he came in to land.

He was going to ask Lois Lane to marry him.

Chapter 1

Lois entered the Daily Planet newsroom, coffee in hand with a copy of the morning edition tucked under her arm. "Hey, Lois!" Jimmy approached her with a smile.

Lois looked at her friend and smiled, "Morning, Jimmy,"

"Crazy few days, huh?" Jimmy said, pointing to the paper tucked in her arm.

"Yeah, I'll say," Lois said, breathing a sigh of relief as she made her way to her desk.

"Who would have thought an eye doctor would be capable of murder." Jimmy mused, walking with her.

"People can surprise you," Lois said, taking a seat at her desk. She frowned, seeing the empty desk next to hers. "Clark's not in yet?"

Jimmy shook his head, "No, he called earlier. Said he had a source to meet this morning." He chuckled, "One big story down and already chasing another one. You two are gonna cream them when Kirth season comes around."

"Yeah," Lois managed with a weak smile.

"Lois, good to see you. Everyone doing okay?" Perry asked with concern.

"Yeah," Lois forced a broad smile for her editor to prove everything was fine. Truth be told she was anything but fine at the moment.

Less than twelve hours ago Clark had been blind as a bat, and he'd already gone back to his Superman duties full time. Though she knew things needed to return to normal, she couldn't shake the feeling of dread that hung over her.

For so long she had come to think of Superman as invincible. Earlier this year she'd discovered Kryptonite was very real and could hurt him. Then she'd discovered the superhero that flew around protecting Metropolis and her partner, her best friend, were one and the same. It seemed everyone had a vendetta against Superman, but now it wasn't just Superman that was in danger when he was attacked. It was Clark.

"How you two can manage to land a story this big on your day off is beyond me," Perry said with a heavy sigh.

"Yeah, I guess we just have a knack for it." Lois managed as Perry looked over a copy of the morning edition. "Though I'd prefer to spend my vacation doing something much more enjoyable than getting kidnapped and held at gunpoint."

Perry chuckled, "Well, there's always next time." He scanned the front page with a frown. "I'm just glad you and Clark made it out of there in one piece."

"Kind of makes you wonder what was on that device that Dr. Leit was willing to kill for it." Jimmy mused.

"Well, thankfully it's been destroyed," Lois said with a sigh of relief. "So it can never fall into the wrong hands again."

"Yes, thankfully," Perry agreed. "Technology and human nature are a volatile mix, aren't they?"

"Like Frankenstein?" Jimmy looked at Perry quizzically.

"...and gene-splicing, and gender-selection, and atom-splitting..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "Somethings should be left alone."

"Amen," Perry agreed, handing the paper back to Lois. "Staff meeting at nine," he reminded her, heading to his desk.

Lois watched him leave and sighed, looking at the still very empty desk next to hers.

Clark glanced at his watch, looking around the diner. His friend, Roger Templeton from the FBI, had called this morning stating he had some information that he thought Clark should look into. Normally, his and Roger's professional lives didn't cross. When it did it usually resulted from orders for Roger to let a case

go that he felt needed someone to kick some doors in. Luckily for him, Lois was an expert in that field.

He spotted a tall man in a navy blue suit enter the diner and stood to greet him. Roger nodded to him and approached, briefcase in hand. "Hey, Clark, good to see you, man." He held his hand out for Clark to shake. "Feels like it's been ages."

Clark shook his hand. "You're the one that wanted to play with the big dogs." He smiled at his friend good-naturedly as they took their seats.

There was a long silence between them as Roger scanned the crowd. He seemed to relax and began opening his briefcase. "You remember that doctor that disappeared after Luthor jumped to his death last summer?"

"Vaguely," Clark recalled the mention of key members of Lex Luthor's inner circle who had disappeared during the FBI's investigation into his criminal activities.

"Seems she's been busy." He pushed a photo toward him of a familiar looking blonde sitting with none other than Nigel St. John exchanging a napkin with a note written on it.

Clark immediately recognized the woman in the picture. "I've seen this woman before." He said with a grimace. "She's the one that broke into STAR Labs and kidnapped Johnny Corbin."

"Dr. Gretchen Kelly. Lex Luthor's personal doctor. Arianna Carlin gave her name up during questioning a few weeks ago. We've been keeping tabs on her." Roger shuddered at that thought. "She's the one that stole Corbin's body from the morgue."

"What?" Clark felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The memories of what he'd almost done flashed through his mind and his grip on the file in his hand tightened.

"Hey, Clark, you okay, man?" Roger waved his hand in front of him.

"Fine," Clark lied, trying to force himself to focus on anything but the memories of the terror Lex Luthor had put him and Lois through in Lex's last moments on Earth. The pain from the Kryptonite cage still haunted him. He'd come so close to losing everything...

"You sure?" Roger asked, looking at him in concern.

"Luthor's just a sore subject for me." Clark said grimly.

"Yeah, for all of us. To think of everything he'd gotten away with for so long..." Roger shook his head in disgust.

"Yeah," Clark said grimly, pointing to the photograph. "What's the connection with Nigel St. John?"

"That's what I was hoping you could help with," Roger said with a sigh.

"I don't follow." Clark looked up confused.

"I've stepped into something big here. I know it." Roger said with a pained expression, "But my orders have come from way up to back off. All my notes on Nigel and Dr. Kelly are in this file."

"You're walking away from a case this big?" Clark looked at him in surprise. "That's not like you."

"When the orders come from the president you gotta fall in line." Roger shrugged. "If you've got any questions call me on my personal cell. I don't want anyone knowing I passed this off."

"Okay," Clark nodded. "Thanks,"

"No, thank you." Roger said standing to his feet.

Clark watched his friend leave then turned his attention to the photo in his hand. He lowered his glasses and zoomed in on the photo with his enhanced vision. On the napkin being exchanged written in bold pen was, 'Sheldon Bender. 1605 Bessolo Boulevard.' He set the photo down, frowning as he contemplated what that meant.

Lois glanced at the time. It was a quarter till nine and Clark still wasn't back. Just when she was about to give up on him and head to the staff meeting solo, the ping of the elevator pulled her attention back to the balcony. She smiled when she saw Clark step off the elevator with a very large file folder in his hand.

"Hey," She looked to the conference room that was quickly filling up. "You're late."

"I know. I called in earlier." He waved the file in his hand.

"What is that?" She asked.

"Something Roger Templeton wants us to look into." He said, pointing to the conference room. "I'll catch you up on the way."

"Roger? From the FBI?" She looked at him curiously.

"One and the same." He said grimly, handing the file folder to her.

She took it and began scanning through the notes he'd made. Lois came across the black and white photo from earlier, "Nigel?"

His jaw tightened, "And Luthor's doctor. The same woman that stole Metallo's body from STAR Labs."

"What do you think they're up to?" Lois asked.

"I'm not sure, but according to that file Nigel St. John is a whole lot more than Mr. Belvedere." He said, opening the conference room door for her. "According to the FBI, he was an agent with Her Majesty's Secret Service who turned bad."

Lois read the report in her hand and frowned, "It says this picture was taken recently here in Metropolis." Her brow furrowed as she continued to read, looking back at Clark in concern, "And the agent who took the photo has disappeared."

"And Roger's been ordered off the case," Clark said grimly. "He wants us to look into it."

"Why do you think the FBI is backing off?" Lois asked.

"I don't know, but I figured we could start with Luthor's lawyer, Sheldon Bender." He whispered, taking his seat at the conference table next to her. "His name is on that napkin." He pointed to the photo in her hand.

"I guess it would make sense for Sheldon Bender to be involved. All around slime-ball." Lois muttered. "What do you think they're up to?"

"I don't know." He said, his mouth tightening into a thin line. "Whatever it is it can't be good, though."

Lex Luthor sat at a table, dressed in a worn out t-shirt and black jeans. His hands hammered at the keyboard furiously, searching for any sign of the fortune he'd had before his death. "It's gone. That weasel Bender swindled me out of my entire fortune." He said in a controlled tone.

He looked up to see Nigel, cleaning a hand crossbow with an old cloth. Gretchen approached him, reaching for his arm, "Lex, you should be resting. This can wait."

"What about the Swiss bank accounts?" Nigel asked, not looking up from his polishing.

"Empty!'" He slammed the notebook computer closed. He let out a frustrated sigh, accepting his fate. "I'm broke." He rose to his feet, crossing the room in an uncertain daze. "Death I could deal with, Nigel, but to be without money...Without power. That's something I wasn't prepared for."

"Knowing you, sir, I'm sure it's just a temporary condition," Nigel said in a reserved tone.

"The money perhaps, but true power?" Lex shook his head in disgust. "Gone. Everything I've worked for is gone."

"Not everything, Lex," Gretchen soothed, running her hand over his face. "The Kryptonite we recovered from the Vale brothers' failed experiment is surely worth something."

"Yes, the Kryptonite Emmet Vale stole from LexLabs." Lex grimaced, looking at Nigel. "A visit to Mr. Vale will be in order for that betrayal. Wouldn't you agree, Nigel?"

"Yes, sir," Nigel smiled back at him.

"Well, if I clawed my way up from nothing before I can do it again." Lex mused. "Nigel, arrange a meeting with Mr. Bender. We'll see if he has any of my billions hidden away somewhere."

"Yes, sir," Nigel nodded.

"And you can drop the 'sir,' Nigel. There's no need for facades anymore. Look at us. We are what we are." Lex looked down at

the rags he wore with a grimace. How he'd fallen so far he couldn't understand.

"And what's that?" Nigel asked.

"Ordinary street fighters. Just like the old days." Lex shook his head as Gretchen ran a hand through his hair. It was apparent her affection for him had not wavered...even in death.

"I've never thought there was anything ordinary about you, Lex," She murmured affectionately.

He took her hand in his and kissed it, "Thank you, my dear." He looked down at her hand and noticed the hair between her fingers. "Oh, what's this?" He moved to the dusty mirror that hung over the rundown sink in the corner. "What the? I'm losing my hair." He turned back to Gretchen who was staring at him nervously. "What have you done to me?"

"Lex," She tried to soothe, but he didn't give her a chance to finish.

"I said, *WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME!?*" He raged, getting in her face as he raged, grabbing her by the collar.

"Lex, your body went through a tremendous ordeal. You're bound to experience some temporary side effects. You need to rest." Gretchen soothed.

He released her then moved back to the mirror, running his hands through his hair once more. He grimaced when he saw more clumps coming out with each motion. "Shave it off!" He ordered. He turned to see Gretchen standing there, unmoving. "Don't just stand there. I said, shave it off!"

Gretchen grabbed a pair of scissors and pointed to the chair across the room. He took a seat, and she began cutting. Lex looked up to Nigel as he was gathering his things, "Oh, Nigel, do me a favor. Find out whatever you can about Lois Lane..."

A sharp jab against his scalp caught his attention. "Ow!" He growled, looking back up at Gretchen, "It's a good thing you're not a surgeon."

Chapter 2

Clark looked over at Lois' bored expression as they powered through another staff meeting. They'd already given Perry the latest on their investigation into Nigel St. John's reappearance stateside, and the meeting was now dwindling down, focusing on announcements. For the most part, those consisted of budget forecasting and subscription revenue. It wasn't that Clark didn't care about the charts and numbers his editor was going over, but rather he had so many other things he could be doing with his time right now.

He had already talked with Perry early this morning about the time off for him and Lois, and had made the reservation for two rooms at the hotel. He still needed to pick up Lois' ring from the jeweler. How he was going to manage getting to the jeweler without tipping Lois off, he wasn't sure, but he'd figure it out.

Clark was eager to get started on their investigation into Luthor's doctor, Gretchen Kelly. It couldn't be a coincidence that the woman who stole Luthor's body and Metallo had shown up with his old butler. They were up to something, and he was going to find out what.

"That's it, folks," Perry called out as everyone gathered their things and headed toward the exit.

Clark let out a sigh of relief when he heard Perry dismiss the meeting. "So, where do you want to start?" He asked, following Lois to her desk.

"With Sheldon Bender," Lois said with a grimace.

Clark nodded his agreement. "His office is just around the corner. You want to walk it?"

"Sure." She nodded. "We could use some fresh air."

Outside the Planet, Lois approached the crosswalk with Clark, waiting for traffic to clear. All morning long she'd felt a sense of dread come over her. She couldn't shake the feeling that

something bad was about to happen. She'd never felt like this before. No matter what the danger was, she was always able to brush it off. So what was different now?

"Lois?" Clark waved a hand in front of her face, and she turned back to him.

"Huh?" She looked back at him, seeing the worry in his eyes.

"You okay?" The lines on his forehead creased.

"Fine. Just a little tired." She said, forcing a smile. "You were saying?"

"I said, the fact that the FBI is trying to pull away from this is a bit concerning. What could be so big that they pull their agents off a case on an international spy?" He wondered aloud.

"I don't know." Lois shook her head, "But maybe we should start talking to the people we know and find out." Lois said as they crossed the street when the light on the crosswalk changed.

"I'm not sure the Metropolis P.D. or the DA's office will be much help on his one." He pointed out as they reached the other side of the street. "This is bigger."

"It's a start." She shrugged, turning the corner where Sheldon Bender's office was.

The brass sign hung on the awning with green trim. The letters in gold shone brightly from the sign reading, '*Law Offices of Sheldon Bender*' Right outside the office was none other than Sheldon Bender, fiddling with his keys to unlock the office door.

"There's Bender," Clark nodded in the balding man's direction.

Lois watched as Bender walked past a group of homeless men who were sifting through the trash can outside the building. His nose was buried in the file he held in his hands, unaware of his surroundings as he bumped into one of the men.

"Typical." She muttered to herself as they walked toward where Bender was standing at the crosswalk. Just as she was about to shout out his name to get his attention a white construction van pulled up, blocking their view.

"Hey, what are you...?" Bender's voice could be heard from the other side.

Lois looked to Clark who had already disappeared from behind her. She looked up in the window of the driver's side and saw it was empty. She frowned, "That's odd."

"Lois?" She heard Clark's voice from the other side of the van. She walked to the other side of the van and saw him standing in front of it in his Superman suit, arms crossed over his chest with a perplexed expression on his face.

"What happened? Where's Bender?" She asked.

He pointed to the open doors of the van and shook his head, "That's a good question." He tapped on the van doors, "Whoever took him knew what they were doing. This van's been painted in lead paint."

Lois looked toward the driver's seat and saw an electronic device blinking on the steering wheel, "What is that?"

Clark reached in to remove it from the steering mechanism. The engine immediately turned off. "Looks like our kidnapper left us a clue." He held up the device, tapping at the antenna attached to it.

"Seems to be what was driving it." He looked up at the tall buildings around them. "Unfortunately there's no telling where it's being controlled from."

"Why go to all this trouble to kidnap Bender?" Lois asked, pulling her phone out to dial.

"I don't know." He frowned.

The operator's voice came in on the other end of the phone line, and she turned her attention to her phone, "Hello? Yes, I'd like to report a kidnapping..."

Lex stood in the corner, with a pair of sunglasses on and baseball cap to cover his now bald head. Gretchen had assured him the baldness would be temporary. The sound of Sheldon

Bender's whining could be heard from the tunnel as Nigel's accomplice, Ramin.

"Hey! Watch the suit." Bender squealed. "Who are you, people? Do you know who I am?"

"Shut up." Nigel sneered, shoving Bender forward.

"If you're with Intergang..."

"What's Intergang?" Lex asked, stepping out from the shadows.

"A new crime organization in Metropolis," Gretchen answered, stepping out of the shadows with him.

"Just a group of thugs." Nigel responded unimpressed. "All substance and no style."

"Well, it didn't take long for the jackals to move in." Lex mused.

Bender narrowed his eyes at him, "Look whoever you are, you can't..."

Lex removed the glasses and baseball cap, staying out of the shadows to face Bender. He smiled to himself when he saw the recognition on Bender's face. "Oh, yes I can!"

"I...Lex?" Bender gasped in shock.

"Luthor." He finished for him. "Your worst nightmare."

Detective Ryder walked through the station, escorting them back to his office. "Remote control you and Superman found only had a two hundred mile radius according to our lab, which isn't very far. Guys in the lab think it could have come from any spyware shop or online store."

"Well, there goes that idea," Lois sighed, glancing back at Clark. Her face was tense with concern.

It had been a long afternoon. They'd given their statements on Bender's kidnapping and filed the story with Perry. Then made their rounds back to the police station to see if there had been any new information in the case. Clark wasn't sure, but he had a nagging feeling that Bender's kidnapping was related to Nigel St. John and Gretchen Kelly's meeting last week.

"Someone had to have grabbed Bender." Clark pointed out. "How did they get out of there so fast?"

"Trap door," Ryder said, taking a bite from an apple as he took a seat behind his desk.

"Pardon?" Lois asked, not sure what he was referring to through the mouthful of apple the detective was eating.

"There was a trap door in the bottom of the van. Pulled right over a manhole cover." Ryder explained. "We're sending a team to check it out, but I don't think we'll find 'em. Metropolis Sewer System is nothing but tunnels and wrong turns. No one knows for sure what's down there. Used to be used to smuggle in alcohol during the Prohibition. Not exactly the place you want to get lost in if you know what I mean."

"Seems to be a lot of trouble to go through to kidnap a lawyer," Clark said, running a hand through his hair. "Do you have any suspects?"

"The usual suspects I'm afraid," Ryder said, leaning back in his chair. "He wasn't exactly beloved by his clients. Seems he enjoyed ripping people off. Not uncommon for a lawyer but it doesn't exactly make you Mr. Popularity."

"So, no suspects?" Lois gathered. "Great."

"We're trying to track down where the signal was coming from on this thing." He pointed to the radio controller that was in an evidence bag on his desk. "But right now we're stumped."

"Were you able to get a list of his current clients from his office?" Clark asked, treading carefully with his line of questioning. He wanted to ask him point blank if Bender was involved with Nigel, but he couldn't do that without something pointing him in that direction first. He'd promised Roger he'd keep the information he'd been given confidentially.

"Yeah," Ryder nodded. "A bunch of big wigs. Not really anyone you want to mess with though. I can get you a copy if

you'd like."

"Please," Clark nodded firmly.

"I'll have Marge make you a copy on your way out," Ryder said, standing to his feet. He sifted through the file on his desk, pulling out a six-page list from the file. "Here we are." He motioned for them to follow him to the cubicle outside his office.

Lex held Bender over a large pit with rats scampering about. Nigel sat on one end of the pit tossing a meaty bone inside. The rats scurried toward the meat to devour it. "Lex, please!" Bender cried out.

"A billion dollars, Mr. Bender. Where is it?" Lex fumed angrily.

"I-It's tied up." Bender stammered panicked. "Real estate, foreign investments. I could give you a few thousand now, but..."

"Wrong answer!" Lex hissed angrily, pushing Bender further into the pit.

"Look, I know people in Intergang." Bender stammered, "Maybe I can talk them into bringing you in..."

"Oh, sorry. Wrong answer again, Mr. Bender." Nigel interjected, tossing another rib into the pit for the rats to devour.

"You know, these rats have a voracious appetite." Luthor hissed at Bender.

"But will they eat one of their own?" Gretchen asked in mock concern for Bender's well-being.

Bender pleaded with him, "Please, Lex, I'll get it back. Every cent. I promise you."

Lex looked to Nigel then to Gretchen, "What say you?"

"A rat's feast is too good for him in my opinion," Nigel said, narrowing his eyes at him.

Lex pulled Bender up to his feet, grabbing him by the collar, "The money, Bender!"

"Y-yes, Lex," Bender stammered. "I just n-need s-some time. Y-you were d-dead."

"Obviously a misconception all around." Nigel piped in.

Lex pushed Bender toward Nigel, "Make sure he gets back every last cent."

"Of course," Nigel nodded.

"And Bender?" Lex called out. "If you cross me again I'll cut open your chest and sew a rat up inside!"

Lois took a long sip of her tea, glancing over at Clark who had his head buried in the list of clients they'd gotten from Detective Ryder. All in all, their visit to the police station had been informative. They had a call in to Jimmy to see what he could pull up from the van's license plate.

"Anything on Nigel?" Lois asked, setting her tea down on the table in front of her. She pushed her plate to the side, making room for her notebook she'd been writing in before their food had arrived.

"No, but I've written down a few names that could have been aliases. Same initials." He handed the list to her.

She scanned the list he gave her and frowned when she spotted a name she recognized. "Clark," she pointed to the name at the top, "Nicholas S. Janacek is an alias Nigel used to use when he worked for Lex."

"You're sure?" He asked, looking at her for confirmation.

"Positive." She breathed, shaking her head. "The question is what would Nigel want with Bender?"

"Well, he was in Luthor's inner circle. Maybe there's something there the authorities never found? Hidden assets maybe?" Clark guessed.

"Yeah, but how does this all connect to that doctor stealing Lex's body?" Lois wondered aloud.

"I don't know." He said, wrapping an arm around her. She relaxed against him, savoring the feel of his touch. The more they dug into this, the more uncomfortable she became. Rehashing

anything related to Lex reminded her of a time she wished to forget. She didn't want to remember the mistakes she'd made back then or how close she'd come to losing Clark.

<< "All those things about Lex you couldn't prove?" >>

"Conversations with him and Superman."

"You should have told me."

"I tried." >>

<< "You disappeared. After our fight about Lex when you stormed off. I tried calling you, and you never returned my calls. I tried calling for Superman, and he never showed... You abandoned me and I..." >>

"Lois, I would never abandon you....ever." >>

<< "It was a trap. I got arrogant and never thought he'd get his hands on it after it was destroyed in Smallville." >>

"What was destroyed?"

"Kryptonite...Luthor had a cage of Kryptonite. I was trapped in there for a day and a half. Listened to Luthor taunt me about how he'd finally won and what he was going to do to me...and everyone I cared about. I used up all of my strength to get out of there...had to hide behind the barrels of wine when he came in there with an ax."

"Clark..."

"I made the mistake of being overconfident when I confronted him. I never scanned the wine cellar. Never thought to check for Kryptonite. I never thought he'd get his hands on it. It was destroyed...so I thought." >>

"Hey," He tilted her chin to look at him. "We'll figure this out. We always do." he leaned in to kiss her.

She let out a sigh of relief, returning the kiss with enthusiasm. Clark always knew just the right thing to say or do to make her smile. His fingers lingered in her hair as he slowly pulled away, resting his forehead against hers. She looked up at him, meeting his dark eyes and saw the same worry and concern she'd been feeling. She moved her hand to stroke his cheek and murmured, "The idea of getting away from it all is growing more and more appealing."

He chuckled, pulling away from her, "Well, I did have a chance to talk to Perry. As long as neither of us ends up kidnapped or anything we should be all set for Friday."

An impish grin crossed her face, "So where exactly are you taking me?"

"Somewhere I don't have to worry about either of us getting into trouble." He answered with a twinkle in his eye.

She threw him a slightly annoyed expression. "How am I supposed to pack?"

"Just wear what you want." He smiled back at her.

"That doesn't tell me anything," she retorted with a raised eyebrow.

"The idea is just to have a good time and not worry about all of this." He gestured to the papers in front of them.

"I don't like surprises." She reminded him.

"Too bad." He leaned in to kiss her once more. "I love them."

Chapter 3

Lex watched as Gretchen worked on replacing the chunk of glowing green kryptonite that was keeping Metallo powered. In its place, a circular disc was placed. She chipped off a small chunk of Kryptonite and placed it in the center of the disc. The circular disc illuminated in green and she turned back to him and smiled. "It's working."

Lex moved to where the Kryptonite sat and lifted in his hands with awe, "My Excalibur." He breathed in awe, feeling the power that came from holding Kryptonite in his hands.

<< "You live in a fantasy world, Luthor. Neither Clark nor I will ever do anything to support your marriage to Lois." >>

<< "Bars won't hold me... Luthor." >>

<< "I love Lois, but she's much too independent, don't you

think? Well, I'll take care of that..." >>

"Clark Kent knows where I am."

"That's right. I'll have to kill him, too." >>

<< "Luthor..." >>

"How strange. Strange to hear you say my name and know It might be the last words you speak."

But am I making a mistake? Will the pain of losing the challenge you represent be worse than the pain of constantly losing to you?" >>

He had had everything in the palm of his hands. Superman's destruction and the knowledge that he had won Lois Lane. He had won the rivalry with Superman for her heart. He had won. Just as quickly as it had come to him...victory. It had been snatched away in a blink of an eye.

"We'll need to test it to verify its authenticity given the exchange of hands," Gretchen said from behind him. "Perhaps a field test?"

"Yes," Lex nodded. "A test." He looked to the corner and saw Nigel standing in the doorway. "Nigel, I assume Mr. Bender is hard at work locating the stolen money."

"Ramin is keeping a close eye on him. We should know something within the next hour or so." Nigel reassured, pulling out a notebook.

"Excellent," Lex set the Kryptonite down on the table in front of him. "And what were you able to find out about Lois Lane?"

Nigel looked at him carefully before responding. "I'm still checking into things, but it doesn't appear that any major changes have occurred." Lex noticed his former butler look away as he said this, "There was an incident with Arianna earlier this year, but that loose end is being handled."

"Incident?" Lex furrowed his brow.

"Arianna made a lookalike of Lois Lane and tried to frame her for the murder of Superman." Gretchen piped in with a sigh. "You can guess how well that turned out."

"Arianna always was creative when she got angry." Lex mused. "Anything else?"

"I'm told she's resumed her position at the Daily Planet. Still partnered with Clark Kent..." Nigel's eyes did a little dance at the mention of her partner's name.

"Something you want to tell me, Nigel?" Lex asked.

"I'm still verifying some...rumors." Nigel responded quietly. "Nothing more."

"In my experience rumors always hold an ounce of truth," Lex said, taking a step toward him. "What aren't you telling me?" Nigel looked away, and he turned to Gretchen who shrugged. "Very well. I'll find out for myself."

"Lex!" Gretchen called after him, but it was too late.

Clark wrapped his arms around Lois from behind, leaning in to kiss her as they approached the Planet building after their late lunch. He wasn't sure what had brought it on, but he could tell something was bothering Lois. Given the subject matter of their latest story, it didn't surprise him that she was distressed. He felt there was a large piece of the puzzle that they were missing. He could feel something in the air, a hypersensitivity that made him more aware of his surroundings. Everywhere they went today he felt like someone was watching...waiting.

Lois giggled as they walked through the revolving doors of the lobby together. "You know we keep it up and people are going to talk..."

"People always talk." He pointed out, whispering in her ear as they crossed the lobby together. His arms rested loosely around her waist, holding her close.

She reached out to press the call button on the elevator then turned in his arms, looping her arms around his neck as she faced him. "You do have a point." She reasoned aloud, running her hands over his shoulders. "No point in worrying about human

nature.”

“Uh-huh,” He leaned in to kiss her, running his hand over her cheek. He smiled when he felt her body relax against him. Her hand moved to the knot of his tie, twisting it with her hand as he slowly broke off the kiss.

She smiled against him and whispered, “Thank you.”

“For what?” He asked, brushing a strand of hair out of her face.

“For somehow always knowing just the right thing to say or do.” She murmured, holding his gaze. “I love you, Clark.”

“And I love you, Lois.” He wanted to say so much more in that moment, but knew now was not the time or the place. “I know this isn’t easy.” He whispered, cupping her cheek.

“For either of us.” She said solemnly. “Clark...” She began but was cut off by the soft ping of the elevator doors opening behind them. A large crowd stepped off, and they stepped to the side to allow them room to exit. A reminder to them both that they were in public. “I guess that’s us.” She said hurriedly, stepping on the elevator.

“Yeah,” He followed her into the elevator, noticing a balding man pushing a broom in the corner of the lobby that appeared to be watching them. He met the man’s gaze for a brief moment before he turned away, pushing his broom toward the exit as the elevator doors closed behind them.

Lex stared at the elevator doors, unable to hide his contempt for the public display he’d just seen. Not only had he lost his fortune and good name but it seemed Clark Kent had wasted no time in moving on what was once his.

His hand tightened on the broom in his hand. To lose her to Superman was one thing, but to lose her to someone like Kent? No, this would not do.

Lois let out a long sigh, watching as Clark continued to wait on hold with Detective Ryder for information on the client file for Nigel. It was probably a long shot, but it was worth a shot. “Still on hold?” She asked, knowing the answer already from the expression on his face.

“Yep,” He grimaced, handing her the paper in his hand. “Why don’t you try the DA’s office and see if anyone over there is familiar with any cases against Nigel or his aliases?” He suggested with a pleading look.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Lois shared an amused expression with him. There was only one person at the District Attorney’s office they’d done business with.

“We don’t have any other leads.” He pointed out.

“Okay,” Lois nodded, grabbing her purse to head downtown. Though her history with Mayson Drake wasn’t the best; they were both professionals. Hopefully, it had been long enough for both of them to put the past behind them and work together. After all, putting criminals behind bars was what Mayson did, right?

“Hey, Lois,” Jimmy approached her with a paper in his hand.

“What is it, Jimmy?” Lois asked, looking back at him as she walked toward the elevator.

“I got that information you wanted on the van from earlier? DMV says it’s registered to someone named, Carl Wright. Park Ridge address. Police are questioning him now.” Jimmy said excitedly.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Lois said happily, taking the paper from him.

“Kent?” Lex hissed angrily, pacing in front of his former butler. “How long?”

“From what I gather they’ve been in a committed relationship for over four months now,” Nigel said coolly.

Lex’s brow furrowed, “Four months?” The exchange he’d witnessed earlier had been troubling. He hadn’t expected Lois to

remain in mourning after his passing, but he never thought she’d move on so quickly either. He certainly didn’t expect her to move on with someone as lowly as her partner either.

“Yes, from what I gather they’re quite happy.” Nigel’s tone remained emotionless as always, looking at him expectantly.

“Yes, I’m painfully aware,” Lex growled angrily, recalling the encounter he’d witnessed in the Daily Planet lobby. In the entire history of his relationship with Lois never had she displayed public affection to him like that. Never had she allowed him to...

“Obviously, Ms. Lane has moved on, sir,” Nigel said, throwing in the sir as a gesture to soften the blow of his words.

Lex shook his head, unwilling to accept defeat. “No. Obviously this...fling is unexpected, but I’m willing to move past it. We need to move forward with our plans. How is Bender coming with the transactions?”

“It’s proving to be a bit more difficult to get the money back without declaring you living.” Nigel pointed out. “Many of the banks still have a hold, but thankfully you did make me executor of your estate.”

“How fortunate.” Lex smiled at him. “When can we expect the deposit?”

“We should have close to a hundred thousand by the end of the week. Anything more than that will raise red flags.” Nigel explained.

“And the Kryptonite? Are we ready for the first field test?” Lex pressed.

“Gretchen is sorting through the final details as we speak,” Nigel reassured him.

A long pause fell between the two of them, and Nigel finally spoke. “She won’t come as easily as she did before.”

“Who?” Lex looked back at him innocently.

“Lois Lane,” Nigel said, meeting his gaze. “It nearly destroyed you trying to chase after her before. Are you willing to take that chance again?”

“I underestimated Superman last time,” Lex admitted with a long sigh. “I won’t be making that mistake again. As far as Lois Lane is concerned, I will not be denied. I’ll give her the chance to come willingly, but if she won’t, I’ll take her by force.” His eyes darkened, “I will be the last man standing in this battle.”

Mayson Drake sat behind her desk, staring coolly back at Lois. It had been a few months since the two women had been in the same room together. She recalled all too well their last meeting. The night Mayson showed up on Clark’s doorstep after the debacle with Professor Hamilton’s resurrected Capone gang. After Clark had explained where he stood to Mayson she had rushed out of his apartment in a huff. Though Lois had never gotten along with Mayson, she knew Clark had thought of her as a friend. It had been hard for him to lose that friendship - despite the fact that Mayson had seen the friendship as much more. During their recent investigations, they had gone out of their way to avoid one another and allow a cooling off period. It seemed now was the end of that cooling off period. Mayson was the Metropolis contact for the investigation into Lex Luthor’s criminal activities as well as the ongoing investigation into his accomplices—namely, Nigel St. John.

She could feel the Mayson’s stare piercing through her skull but didn’t dare look away for fear it would give Mayson the upper hand. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Mayson,” Lois began, clearing her throat to break the silence.

“Of course,” Mayson nodded, offering a tight-lipped smile. “You said you were working on a story that involved Lex Luthor’s doctor?”

“The woman that stole his body.” Lois nodded, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “Dr. Gretchen Kelly.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Mayson said, pointing to the file folder on her desk. “I’m just not sure what you think she has to do with

Nigel St. John." She looked back at Lois expectantly.

"According to a, uh, confidential source she and Nigel were seen together recently in Metropolis," Lois said cautiously. "I was hoping you might be able to provide some insight into your involvement with him. You've been tailing him for most of this past year after all."

"Among other criminals."

Mayson peered at her quizzically, "I'm not aware of any meeting. When was this?"

Lois bit her inner lip, uncertain how much information she wanted to divulge, given that it seemed she and Clark had more information at the moment than the DA's office. "It was within the last week." She said evasively.

"I see," Mayson said, setting her pen down. "And you want to know what the DA's office has on Nigel St. John to help with your story?"

"Exactly." Lois nodded, getting the feeling Mayson was being a bit too forthcoming at the moment.

"No," Mayson said, scrunching her face and jutting her chin out in defiance.

"I see." Lois tapped her pen in her notebook. "Any particular reason?"

"You mean other than the fact that the case against Nigel St. John is a pending investigation?" Mayson looked at her with an arched eyebrow, giving a smug smile as she stared back.

"A pending investigation that the DA has yet to build a solid case on and seems to be several steps behind everyone else." Lois pointed out as she stood up, gathering her things and heading for the door. "You had no idea about the meeting between Gretchen Kelly and Nigel. What else are you missing?"

"Wait!" Mayson called after her.

"Yes?" Lois looked back at her expectantly.

"Maybe I was a bit too hasty." Mayson began hesitantly. "You do have information that could be helpful to our case."

"And you have information that could be used for this story," Lois said cautiously, watching as Mayson twiddled with her pen in her hand.

"So what is it going to take for us to work together?"

"You tell me," Lois said, crossing her arms over her chest and staring back at Mayson expectantly.

Chapter 4

Perry leaned back in his office chair, drumming his fingertips across the woodgrain of his desk. Clark let out a sigh, throwing a glance at the empty desk in the newsroom. It had taken him almost an hour to track down the information he needed from first the DMV and then Detective Ryder. Lois still wasn't back from the DA's office yet.

"Still no sign of Sheldon Bender?" Perry asked, looking over his front page mockup for the evening edition.

"I'm afraid not," Clark said with a frown. "The police said the owner of the van loaned it to a friend of his. An ex-con named Ramin Tarbush. I talked to Ramin's parole officer. He hasn't seen Tarbush for weeks. But he gave me a description. It's an exact match with the homeless man that was standing outside Bender's office before the van pulled up."

Perry frowned, tapping his index finger against his chin, "Sounds like a lead to me." He grunted, "If you can track him down."

"I've already put out word with both mine and Lois' sources. I'm just waiting to hear back. If he hasn't gone underground, that is." Clark shrugged.

"Sounds like you two have your work cut out for you," Perry observed.

"I'm sure Tarbush will show up, Chief," Clark sighed, glancing at the elevators with a sigh. "I think I may head over there to make sure she hasn't gotten herself into any trouble."

Perry let out a hearty laugh, "You do that." He tapped the copy of the story Clark had turned in, "This looks good. Why don't you two go ahead and call it an early night? It's been a rough few days for the both of you."

"Thanks, Chief," Clark called over his shoulder, heading out.

"Thanks for your help, Mayson," Lois said, walking with her down the City Hall steps. "This information on Nigel will hopefully help us track him down."

"Just don't go in without notifying authorities." Mayson countered as they reached the bottom of the steps. "A lot of planning has gone into this operation. I don't want it ruined because you're chasing a lead. Need I remind you of what happened at Georgie Hairdo's Casino?"

"We'll remain inconspicuous during our investigation," Lois promised. "Believe me, nobody wants a repeat of what happened at that casino."

"Yeah," Mayson offered her a friendly smile. A quiet lull fell between them as they stared back at one another awkwardly. "This is weird, isn't it? Working together?"

"Yeah," Lois admitted, "I guess with everything that's happened..."

"It seems so...petty." Mayson blurted out at the same time.

"Petty?" Lois echoed, crinkling her eyebrows at her.

"Well, I mean I seem petty." Mayson corrected herself. "Truth be told, I've been avoiding you."

"Oh." Lois looked down, uncertain how to respond.

"It seems silly to act like this. I mean we're grown adults." Mayson continued. "Professionals. We should be able to work together without letting our jealousy get the better of us."

"Right." Lois said, tight-lipped, doing her best not to go down that path. She may not like Mayson as a person, but she was a good source to have. It wasn't something she would have admitted to herself a few months ago due to her own insecurities when it came to her relationship with Clark, but now that some time had passed she could see where forging a relationship with Mayson was beneficial to both of them.

"Well, good night, Mayson. Good luck." Lois nodded, turning on her heel and heading to where she had parked.

She reached the crosswalk when an old man in a wheelchair approached her, "Excuse me, miss? Would you mind helping an old man across the street?"

There was something strange about the way he looked at her. His eyes felt familiar and unnerving all at the same time. "I, um, sure," She finally settled on an answer, taking hold of his wheelchair handles and helping him through the busy crosswalk.

"Say, aren't you... that woman who almost married Lex Luthor?" The question hit her like a ton of bricks.

She swallowed hard, trying not to react. Today was not the day to revisit her failed engagement to Lex. Everything about today seemed to jog memories from that day. "Uh, yeah," She managed to squeak out.

"Lois Lane." the man said her name with a smoothness that seemed younger than his age appeared to be. They reached the other side of the crosswalk, and he turned to face her, "Tell me, what was that fella Luthor like?"

"You read the papers." She said uneasily. "He was a criminal." Her tone turned to ice as she met the man's gaze warily. "A dangerous criminal who hurt a lot of innocent people."

"Yes, but..." He began to interject, but her attention was pulled away by her name being called.

She turned to see Clark approaching and let out a sigh of relief. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something inside told her she needed to get away from this man. "Excuse me, that's my boyfriend. Have a good night."

She didn't notice the dark expression that crossed over his face as he wheeled himself away. She did notice the smile on Clark's

face as he took her in his arms, "Hey," said as he approached her.

She smiled leaning in to kiss him, "Hey," She let out a soft sigh as she broke the kiss off.

"What was that for?" He asked curiously.

"I have to have a reason?" She gave him a flirtatious smile, running her hands up the front of the lapels to his suit jacket.

"No," He ran a hand against her cheek. "Were you able to get any information from the DA's office on Nigel?"

"Yeah, but we have to promise not to interfere," Lois answered with a knowing look. "That goes for caped superheroes and well-meaning reporters." She cut him off before he could jump into a reminder about how she always found trouble around every corner.

Clark frowned, the creases in his forehead tightened, and he looked at her quizzically, "No caped superheroes?"

"I'll explain on the way," She said, pointing to the parking place her Jeep was parked in. He still wore a quizzical expression but nodded as they approached her vehicle. She let out a sigh, feeling the uneasy feeling that had come over her earlier dissipate. Clark always seemed to have a way of making everything better—most of the time without even trying. He had a way of putting everyone around him at ease. In the early days of their meeting and working to one another, she had found herself divulging personal feelings and details about her life to Clark without even realizing it.

Lex Luthor did his best not to react under the disguise he wore, covering his face beneath rubber cosmetics and baggy clothes as he did his best to probe Lois Lane on her feelings toward him. He looked back at her with a smile as she pushed his wheelchair through the crosswalk. "Lois Lane." They reached the other side of the crosswalk, and he turned to face her, "Tell me, what was that fella Luthor like?"

She seemed taken aback by his question. He did his best not to react, taking her expression in as he listened. "You read the papers." She crossed her arms over her chest. "He was a criminal." Her tone grew cold as she added, "A dangerous criminal who hurt a lot of innocent people."

It seemed many of his criminal dealings had been discovered by the police and by Lois. He had fallen from grace in her eyes. "Yes, but..." He stopped, turning his head when he heard the sound of Lois' name from an all too familiar voice.

He looked up to see Clark Kent approaching. Lois seemed all too eager to excuse herself, beaming at the lowly journalist in a way he wished to see her look at him. She mumbled a quick goodbye, "Excuse me, that's my boyfriend. Have a good night."

His eyes darkened as he watched her join Clark Kent on the side of the street, allowing him to take her in his arms. He snorted in disgust, wheeling himself away. He looked back in time to see the couple embrace into a clinch. He groaned to himself, unable to wash the distaste from his mouth.

"She's moved on, sir," Nigel said, approaching from behind and beginning to push the wheelchair.

Lex let out a sigh, unable to help himself. "She's as beautiful as ever... How she can..."

"Focus on the task at hand." Nigel reminded him.

"Yes, once we've authenticated the Kryptonite we can begin plans to finally get rid of Superman." Lex spat angrily. "With him out of the way, rebuilding my empire and taking back what is mine will be child's play."

"Mr. Bender's assured me the first deposit should be hitting your offshore account by morning," Nigel added.

"Excellent," Lex sighed, "These rags are beginning to leave a rash..."

Clark nodded to the waiter as he set the basket of bread on the table for him and Lois to share. He'd finally picked up the ring. It

had been pure torture today working side by side with Lois and not being able to say what he had been dying to say for weeks now. After his talk with his dad, he felt more confident about his decision. He was prepared for her not to say yes even though he really hoped she would. He knew it was still a long shot asking her so soon after starting their relationship, but he also knew he'd never been so sure of anything in his life. He had to let her know how he felt. He had to try. In the past few months, they hadn't exactly done anything by the books when it came to their relationship. Of course, there had been nothing normal concerning the circumstances of their finally dating either. They'd overcome so much in such a short period of time.

He looked over at Lois who was still very quiet. He frowned, realizing she was still upset over what was bothering her earlier. After a quick patrol around the city and stopping by the jewelry store he'd met up with Lois outside City Hall and found her very distraught. She'd been quiet on the ride over to her favorite Italian restaurant for dinner and to exchange notes.

He handed her a bread roll from across the table as he caught her up on what he'd found out about the kidnapper, Ramin Tarbush. "So, we finally got a name and face to the kidnapper. I've got some feelers out with the usual sources to see if anyone's heard from him."

"What about Bobby?" Lois asked, twirling the pasta on her fork as she looked up at him curiously.

"I left a message for him but haven't heard back yet. That'll be first on the agenda in the morning." Clark explained with a warm smile. Lois appeared to be calming down. She seemed almost desperate to leave when he'd caught up with her earlier. Something appeared to have spooked her.

"That's good." Lois nodded, taking a sip of her water.

"You okay?" Clark asked cautiously. He already knew the answer of course, but he still didn't know what was bothering her.

"Just a weird day is all," she said with a smile.

"You want to talk about it?" He inquired, keeping a close watch on her facial expression as it changed between uncertainty and the need to divulge whatever was tormenting her internally. "Lois?" He ran his hand across hers, stopping the incessant tapping she was doing with her index finger against the table. She looked up at him with a pained expression, wrenching his heart as he croaked out, "What's wrong?"

"It just feels like no matter how long it's been and no matter how hard I work... I still can't escape it." She said with a scowl.

"Escape what?" He asked.

"My ignorance." She said with a sigh. "The biggest mistake of my life... well, almost."

"Luthor?" He guessed, noting the distaste in her tone.

"Everywhere I go today there's the reminder of my stupidity," Lois said bitterly. "It's been months, and I thought I was over it. I thought I could actually forget how close I came to losing everything..."

He took a deep breath before responding. Talking about her almost-wedding to Lex Luthor wasn't something he enjoyed rehashing but considering the subject matter of their current investigation he knew it was something both of them had to discuss. "Lois, you haven't lost anything. Perry and Henderson got there in time to warn you. The Planet got rebuilt..."

"What do you mean got there in time?" Lois looked back at him in surprise.

Clark shrugged, looking at her quizzically. "Perry said they got there in time to stop the wedding."

"No, he didn't." Lois shook her head. "I stopped the wedding."

His eyes widened, and he looked at Lois in surprise, "You stopped the wedding?"

"Lois, you haven't lost anything. Perry and Henderson got

there in time to warn you. The Planet got rebuilt..."

Lois listened to the words Clark was saying but wasn't sure how to respond. She looked over at him in surprise, "What do you mean got there in time?"

Clark's eyebrows scrunched, and he looked back at her quizzically. "Perry said they got there in time to stop the wedding."

"No, he didn't," Lois whisper. She shook her head, finally finding her voice. "I stopped the wedding."

She watched as the pieces came together and realization washed over him. His eyebrows rose in surprise, and he responded, "You stopped the wedding?"

She took his hand, smiling up at him shyly, "Remember? I told you I couldn't go through with it." She said, with a shy expression on her face, "I said, 'I can't', and then the police and Perry busted in before Lex could react."

His brow furrowed as he recalled the conversation they had many months ago. "You said "I can't"?"

"I stopped the wedding because I realized it hurt more to lose you – my best friend – than it would have hurt to lose Lex. That's when I knew I couldn't do it. I couldn't go through with it. I couldn't go through with it because all I could do was think about that day at the park and wonder...." She nodded, meeting his gaze. The whole time I was getting ready, all I seemed to be able to think about was you." A tear rolled down her cheek and Clark brushed it away. "I know it seems stupid that I still let that day get to me."

"It's not stupid," he said reassuringly. "Luthor put everyone through a lot."

"I don't know what I would do if I ever lost you," Lois confessed, looking up at him tearfully.

"I'm not going anywhere," Clark reassured her, running a hand against her cheek. "You never cease to amaze me, Lois Lane," he murmured, leaning in to kiss her.

In the corner of the restaurant, Gretchen Kelly watched as the couple she'd been watching embraced. She rolled her eyes, trying not to gag. How Lex could see anything in this woman who had obviously moved on without a second thought was beyond her comprehension. Yet here she was, demoted to spying on Lois Lane for Lex and keeping an eye out for Superman while the big boys had all the fun. Soon all this would be over though. Once Lex got back his money and escaped they'd be living a life of luxury far away from the traitors that had destroyed him.

Sheldon Bender held a file folder in his hands, fidgeting nervously as he looked around the abandoned subway tunnels he'd been led down once more. Nigel St. John stood behind him with a rugged man who looked like he hadn't showered in almost a month. His hair was mangy, and eyes were bloodshot. The way he kept moving from side to side with a wild expression made Bender wonder just how trusting he should be that he wouldn't accidentally shoot him.

He turned the other corner and found Lex waiting for him. "Ah, Mr. Bender, I assume you've come with more than just excuses?"

"The, uh, account's been set up for transfer." Bender handed him the file. "I'm still waiting for more of the assets to be unfrozen, but there's \$500,000 in there now. The rest..."

"How convenient you were able to find such a large amount in such a short amount of time, hmmm?" Lex peered at him with a sinister gaze.

"I'll get it back, Lex, I promise," Bender squeaked out as Lex grabbed him by the collar.

"No one steals from me and lives to tell about it!" Lex snarled angrily.

"Every last red cent, Bender..."

"I-I just ne-need some time," Bender pleaded. He felt a hard blow to the side of his head and fell to the ground.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Jimmy logged into his workstation at the Planet ready to run a search on the main systems he'd been monitoring for various stories reporters were working on. Just as the final search began to load, a familiar name appeared on his screen, and he frowned, looking at the name in confusion. He waited for the search to finish then double clicked on the item.

Lois and Clark walked with Bobby Bigmouth through the crowded diner he'd agreed to meet them at. "Ramin Tarbush? Yeah, last I heard he was living on the street and getting his meals at the homeless shelter on Union Street." Bobby said taking a bite of the pastry in his hand.

"His probation officer said he hadn't shown up in over a week," Clark commented, looking back at Lois who was eying the less than sanitary table Bobby had chosen to sit down at uncertainly.

"Yeah, word on the street is his old lady kicked him out, and he fell off the wagon about a month ago." Bobby shrugged, "That's the way it goes sometimes."

"Yeah," Lois nodded, "Any idea what Tarbush would want with Sheldon Bender?"

"From what I gather it was a hired job. Came from way up the underworld food chain if you know what I mean." Bobby said, taking a loud gulp of his orange juice.

Clark exchanged a look with Lois, "Intergang?" He wondered aloud.

"Nah, something or someone bigger." Bobby said with a shrug. "Whoever it is is making waves." Bobby let out an involuntary shudder.

"Who's bigger than Intergang?" Lois questioned.

The loud simultaneous chirping from their beepers going off caused her to put that question on hold. Clark frowned, looking at his beeper. "Jimmy."

"Same here," Lois said, holding up the screen for him to see the same message in digital format.

"I guess we better get going and see what he wants." Clark reasoned.

"Thanks for the information, Bobby. Enjoy your breakfast."

"Always a pleasure doing business with you," Bobby said with a mouthful of food.

The office was quiet, and the room was dim. The only light was a small lamp in the corner that needed the bulb changed and flickered. Sheldon Bender tugged on his tie nervously, watching as Lex Luthor paced in front of him. "Are you sure about this, Lex? I mean, once you do this there's no going back and I—"

Lex stopped mid-pace and glared at him, "Are you seriously trying to argue that you're protecting me, Bender? You're the last one I'd trust, but it seems fate has left all the cards in your hands —Just be grateful I haven't ordered Nigel to take care of that situation."

Bender looked over to the corner of the room where Nigel sat with his arms crossed over his chest and a dark expression crossed his face. "I—Y-yes, Lex."

"Now, make the call," Lex ordered, leaning in to glare at him with a piercing stare that he was sure would burn any remnants of a conscience that remained.

Lois stared at the sheet of paper in front of her, uncertain how to respond to the information Jimmy had presented her and Clark when they'd arrived at the Planet. The financial holdings for Sheldon Bender showed requests to unfreeze the personal assets of Lex Luthor pending. Another request to unfreeze LexCorp's assets

was listed as ‘under review.’

“I guess now we know why someone wanted to kidnap Bender,” Clark said, breaking the silence. “He had access to the finances of some of the biggest corporations in the world.”

“Yeah, but this request says certificate of death is a fraud.” Lois pointed to the reason listed in the report. “He’s got to know this will get denied. Why would he put his reputation on the line like this?”

“Maybe he thought he’d get lucky?” Jimmy shrugged, uncertain how to respond to her question. “I’m not really sure. As of last night, these cases weren’t active. As of 8:01 this morning petitions were filed and at 8:30 this morning the review board changed the status of this one to ‘in review.’ Which means they’re looking it over.”

Clark sighed, placing a tentative arm around her shoulders, “Maybe we should look into the original assets that were frozen after Luthor’s death and see why someone would go after them.”

“I’ll pull up everything I can find on LexCorp’s assets.” Jimmy nodded, standing up to head back into the bullpen.

“Not just LexCorp’s,” Lois interjected. “Pull up his personal assets along with everything you can find on Dr. Gretchen Kelly, Nigel St. John and his butler—Asabi...”

“You got it.” Jimmy nodded, leaving to deliver on their research request.

“Bobby said it was someone bigger than Intergang calling the shots.” Clark reasoned aloud.

“I guess this is the first shot,” Lois grumbled irritably, heading back into the bullpen.

“I left a message at the shelter,” Clark said, following her back to their desks. “Ramin’s still a no-show, but the direction said he’d call if he comes in.”

“Well, there’s some good news,” Lois said with a half-smile.

“Yeah, we just need to find—” Clark’s face stiffened, and a faraway expression crossed his features.

“What is it?” Lois looked at him in concern.

“There’s a jumper on the Metropolis Bridge.” He whispered, already tugging on his tie.

She sighed, “Be careful.”

He nodded, leaning in to kiss her before he headed toward the stairwell. She watched him leave, trying to squash the inner doubts that were creeping into the forefront of her mind. ‘*He’ll be fine. He’s Superman after all.*’ She told herself.

She took a seat at her desk and booted her computer up. Jimmy said he’d be gathering what information he could find on Lex’s personal holdings. Maybe she could do some research on her own. There was a lot she and Clark had found out since Lex’s death. Hopefully, she could find a clue of some sort to—

The phone on her desk rang, and she sighed, leaning over to answer it, “Lois Lane.”

“Ms. Lane? I do hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time...” She heard Sheldon Bender’s oily voice from the other end of the line.

“Mr. Bender?” She said louder than necessary, motioning to Jimmy to come to her desk and listen with her as she placed the phone on speaker. “There are quite a few people looking for you.”

Jimmy hovered on the side of her desk, listening with her as Perry approached mouthing to her, ‘*Sheldon Bender?*’

“Yes, I’m aware there have been rumors of my kidnapping,” Bender spoke evenly. “I can assure you it’s all just a misunderstanding. An old prank from some of my old fraternity brothers that were in town.”

“I see,” Lois said, giving a ‘*yeah right*’ expression to Perry. “Well, we’re just glad you’re safe and sound.”

“Yes, so it would seem.” Bender’s voice dripped of ambivalence. “Which leads me to why I’m calling, Ms. Lane.”

“Oh?” Lois feigned surprise. “You didn’t call just to let us know you were okay?”

“No, no, Ms. Lane, I think you and I both know the only

reason I’d be calling you is to negotiate terms for a client,” Bender replied smoothly.

“Yes, how is Mr. Thorp?” Lois shot back smugly.

“Still serving time.” Bender’s tone was bitter, and he cleared his throat. “I have information for you on something you’ll find fascinating I’m sure.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure your idea of fascinating will meet my standards, Mr. Bender.” Lois looked back at Perry and Jimmy who were listening in with her. “But I’ll bite. What have you got?”

“My client wishes to share information with you on the woman that stole Lex Luthor’s body,” Bender said coolly.

Lois’ eyes widened, and she did her best to remain calm. “Oh?”

“I’d like to arrange a meeting for you at my office....in say half an hour?” Bender proposed.

Lois looked back at Perry who was shaking his head, ‘no’ to her. She waved him off, “Yes, I’ll be there.”

“I’m sure you remember where my office is, right?” Bender asked before hanging up the phone.

Lois sighed, hanging up the phone. “Great,”

“Lois, what in tarnation do you think you’re doing?” Perry barked at her gruffly as she stood up gathering her things.

“I’m going to find out what’s really going to meet Sheldon Bender and find out what his connection is to Gretchen Kelly,” Lois said matter-of-factly as she walked toward the elevator with Jimmy and Perry on her heels.

“Lois, now slow down here. Let’s talk about this.” Perry reasoned, “You and I both know Bender’s a weasel...” He looked around the newsroom. “Where’s Clark?”

“He had to run and meet a source.” Lois lied quickly before adding, “Which is what I’m about to do right now. I appreciate your concern, but I’ll be fine.”

“Just the same, Jimmy go with her,” Perry ordered.

“Perry!” Lois looked back at him with an irritated expression as she watched Jimmy race to his desk to grab his camera. She sighed, realizing there was no talking either of them out of it.

“Fine. But you better not slow me down.”

“Be careful.” Perry hollered after them.

Gretchen Kelly stood on the Metropolis Bridge with a red wig and colored contact lenses to disguise her appearance. A few feet away beneath where she stood Nigel was perched beneath the bridge with the Kryptonite sealed tightly in a small lead-lined box, ready to test it on Superman when he arrived.

She smiled to herself when she heard the sound of Superman’s arrival from up above. ‘*Showtime.*’ she thought to herself as she took a step toward the edge of the bridge, bracing herself for the jump.

The brass sign hung, creaking in the wind as Lois and Jimmy climbed the steps. The gold letters reflected brightly from the sun, reading, ‘Law Offices of Sheldon Bender.’ Lois frowned at the door handle that looked to be scratched. The rest of Sheldon Bender’s office exterior seemed to be in pristine condition.

“Everything okay?” Jimmy asked from behind her.

“Fine.” Lois lied, forcing the bile in her throat down. She wasn’t sure, but she had a feeling it wasn’t a client that had arranged this meeting. What if it was Gretchen Kelly? What would she do if she came face to face with her? There were several questions that had been plaguing her since Lex’s body had been stolen from the morgue. More questions arose after Dr. Kelly tried to kidnap Wandamae. What was her connection to Nigel?

“Lois?” Jimmy called her name again, and she took a deep breath.

“You’ve got your camera ready?” Lois asked, looking over her shoulder, turning the handle to the door.

“Yeah,” Jimmy patted the camera hanging from its strap

around his neck.

"Let's go." Lois turned the handle and pushed the door opened. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw the empty waiting room. 'See? You're just making yourself crazy. Everything's fine.'

"Doesn't look like anyone's here," Jimmy said, looking around the room. "Come on, Lois, this place is giving me the creeps. Let's get out of here."

Lois frowned, looking around the room. Jimmy was right. It was creepy, but it was also an ample opportunity to find out what Sheldon Bender knew. She squared her shoulders and headed to the door at the end of the hallway that was slightly ajar. The name Sheldon Bender was etched into a gold plating on the door. "I'm not leaving here till I get some answers." She said, looking back at him. "You can leave if you want...."

Jimmy followed her down the hall, "This is not a good idea, Lois. This guy's a lawyer."

"A crooked one with connections to Intergang and other criminals. Don't you want to know why he lured us down here?" Lois asked, opening the door to Bender's office.

"Not really," Jimmy muttered, flipping through the files on Bender's desk as she turned to look through his planner. There was a red circle around today's date with the words 'test' written in all caps. "Hey, Lois?"

She turned to Jimmy who was holding up a passport and New Troy driver's license with a very familiar face on it. "What in the world?" Lois gasped, grabbing the passport to get a better look. There in front of her was the face of Lex Luthor —albeit a very bald and disheveled looking one.

"I see you've made yourself at home, Ms. Lane," a voice from behind her spoke.

She turned to see Sheldon Bender standing in the doorway, "Bender," She waved the passport in his face. "What kind of scheme are you trying to play here? Stealing your dead clients' identities?"

"Still sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong, eh, Ms. Lane?" Bender chided, pulling a gun out and aiming it at them. "How about we have that chat with my client now?"

She and Jimmy held their hands up, following Bender's directions to go back into the waiting area where two very large thugs stood on one end of the room, and a familiar looking man in a wheelchair sat across from them. It was the man from last night. "Ms. Lane, so good of you to join us."

Jimmy took a step closer to her as she eyed the office door that was a few feet away from them. She peered at the man, feeling the same uneasiness she'd felt when she'd encountered him last night outside City Hall. She felt a chill go down her spine. "Who are you?" she asked.

The man motioned to Bender to step aside. Lois noticed the fear in Bender's eyes as he moved away from the man. Could this be the person Bobby had warned them about? She glanced back at Jimmy who stood nearby, placing a protective hand on her shoulder. She smiled at the kind gesture, knowing he was probably as nervous as she was.

"What's he doing here?" the man asked, turning his head toward Jimmy.

"A miscalculation on my part," Bender said, eyeing Jimmy with mild irritation.

"It's no matter," the man said, waving him off.

It had taken her hours to calm down after her encounter with him last night. The reminder of her almost-wedding to Lex was like an anvil, weighing on her mind and heart all day. Clark like always knew what to do to make her feel better. In the end, they both felt closer to one another —Clark. How far away was the Metropolis Bridge from here? Could he hear her if she screamed?

"Do you know the story of the Phoenix?" the man asked, removing his hat and setting his hat down on the wheelchair. It

seemed he had no trouble standing on his own. The disability he'd feigned had been for show.

"Of course." Lois found her voice. "The sacred bird that was reborn, rising from its own ashes." She gasped noticing he was now tugging at his neck as if to remove more of his disguise.

The man's jaw jutted out firmly as he tugged at the prosthetic skin from the bottom half of his face. "When I was a little boy my mother told me that story."

"Lois..." Jimmy whispered in her ear, but she couldn't respond. All she could do was stare in horror as she came face to face with the man that had caused her and Clark so much pain. The man that had taken so much from her—nearly killed Clark.

"I always liked the part where he came back from the dead," Lex said, his voice just as smooth as it had always been. "It's good to see you again, Lois." He smiled at her.

She stared at him in shock, unable to fathom what her mind was screaming at her was impossible. "Lex?" She barely spoke his name unable to say more.

He smiled, stepping toward her, "Did you think I wouldn't come back for you?"

Memory after memory came back to her as she tried to process what was happening. "Just stay back," Jimmy whispered to her.

"Lois, I've lost everything. My fortune, my reputation... everything but my feeling for you. We must take the miracle of my resurrection as a sign that even death can't keep us apart." Lex said, reaching his arm out toward her.

Jimmy grabbed it, "Don't even think about it."

"How... how did this... ?" Lois stammered, looking up and down, trying to fathom what was happening. Lex was alive. He was alive and standing in front of her.

"Never question a miracle. We're together again, and that's all that matters." Lex stated with a warm smile. She could feel her skin crawl, and her nerves go on edge. How was this possible?

She didn't know what made her do it. Maybe it was all the emotions that had been stirred up over her investigation into Nigel and Gretchen Kelly. Maybe it was the reminder of how close she'd come to losing the one person that meant everything to her. Or it could have been the fact that he'd single-handedly destroyed her life and nearly killed Clark. Either way, it didn't matter. What did matter was how good it felt when her hand came in contact to deliver the hard blow across his face.

Just as Clark flew over the bridge, the redhead standing on the ledge leapt into the air. He quickly flew down, scooping her into his arms and carrying her to safety on the bridge where paramedics and officers were standing by. "It's okay, miss, I've got you."

She didn't respond.

He looked at her with concern as they landed in the middle of the bridge. He watched in concern as paramedics began looking her over. He walked with one of the officers he recognized away from the small crowd that had begun to gather. "Thanks, Superman, no clue what happened. One minute she's fine and about to come off the ledge and the next she jumps."

"Did she seem upset?" Clark asked, frowning as he watched the woman from a distance. Something didn't feel right.

"No, like I said she was about to climb down — or that's what she was making us believe." the officer said with a grunt.

Clark felt a familiar pain wash over his body and shook his head, trying to find the source of it. 'Trap.' He thought to himself, cradling his head in his hands.

"Superman? You okay?" the officer asked in concern.

Just as quickly as the pain came, it left. He looked up and nodded, "Sorry. You were saying?" He glanced over to where the woman had been a moment before and frowned when he saw two paramedics cradling their heads and no sign of the woman.

Chapter 6

Lois stared back at Lex seething in anger. He tapped the cheek she'd just struck and commented mildly, "I guess I deserved that."

"You rotten, despicable, disgusting sociopathic killer..." She fumed angrily as Jimmy pushed her back.

"I see Superman wasted no time in turning you against me." He replied coolly.

"Don't you dare try to turn this around on him. You have no right after what you did!" Lois shouted venomously.

"Oh, don't I?" He took a step toward her and Jimmy stretched his arm out to protect her from whatever Lex might try to do.

"You stay away from her," Jimmy said, trying to muster a confidence in his voice that would be equal to Lex's menacing gaze.

"Still the errand boy, eh, Mr. Olsen?" Lex looked to Bender, "Get him out of here."

Lois' eyes widened when she saw the two thugs stand up as Bender motioned to Jimmy, "No!"

Bender nodded to the two men, and Lois pulled Jimmy back to allow room for her to deliver a hard kick to the first thug's abdomen as he advanced toward them. He fell down fast, and Lois took advantage of his distraction to make a run for it. She heard a fumble from behind her. Lex raged, "After them!"

"Run!" she heard Jimmy yell from behind her as she flung the door open and raced the few blocks to where she'd parked.

"Help! Superman!" She yelled between panting breaths, as she reached the other side of the street. One block then two... Why did she park so far away? She didn't dare look behind her.

She felt a cold burst of air against her cheek, and two arms grab her from behind. She gasped in surprise, turning to see Clark's look of concern. She looked to the side and saw Clark had grabbed Jimmy as well. "Just hold on." He said coming in to land next to her Jeep.

She let out a deep breath, holding in tears as her feet hit the ground. She didn't dare look up at Clark for fear she'd give his identity away to Jimmy. "Lois?" She did her best to stifle a sob to no avail, and he turned to Jimmy, "Jimmy, why don't you see if you can call..."

Clark. She could tell from the tone of his voice he was going to try and switch identities. It would have been fine any other time, but right now Superman needed to find Lex. He needed to... "Wait!" She croaked out.

"Lois?" Clark looked at her in concern.

Jimmy was still panting heavily but managed to squeak out, "Luthor...He-he's alive."

Clark looked at Jimmy in disbelief then back at Lois. She nodded tearfully, "It's true."

"Bender." Jimmy panted, pointing back to where they'd been running from. "Two big guys. I...I broke his nose."

Lois and Clark exchanged a look as Jimmy straightened up, catching his breath. "Where was this?" Clark asked.

"Sheldon Bender's office. Lex was there with Bender and his thugs." Lois explained.

"Stay here," Clark ordered, disappearing into a blur of red and blue.

Jimmy looked back at her in amusement. "You're going to make me go back there, aren't you?"

Lois shrugged, "Well, it's safe now."

Every turn seemed to be bringing them further and further into the Metropolis sewer system. A fact Sheldon Bender was painfully aware of as the stench from the sewers burned his eyes, causing them to water. He stole a glance behind him at Lex who was fiddling with the mobile phone in his hand.

"Still nothing!" Lex fumed, as Bender heard the scurrying sound of rodents around them.

He was quiet, and Bender let out a sigh. Ever since they'd

escaped out the back door of his office, Lex had been dialing a number on his phone relentlessly. When the person on the other end didn't answer, he slammed it down and grumbled under his breath about incompetent people. He knew he was in trouble. It was only a matter of time before Lex decided to get rid of him. He had to make his move if he was going to survive this.

He heard a grunt from behind him before he was shoved against the cold metal ladder leading above ground. "Get moving," Lex ordered, pointing above them to the manhole cover that had three holes in it, letting in just a smidgen of sunlight for him to see with.

"Yes, Lex," Bender replied coolly, grabbing hold of the metal ladder and beginning to climb.

Mayson Drake walked into her office, deep in thought as she read over her notes on the latest case. Another sighting of Nigel St. John had been reported along with Lex Luthor's doctor, Gretchen Kelly. This time it was in the middle of the day.

She reached her desk and frowned when she saw an unmarked package sitting on the chair. She wasn't expecting any deliveries. She set her file down and poked her head outside her office, "Doris?"

The blonde haired secretary looked up from her keyboard, "Yes, Ms. Drake?"

"There's a package on my desk," Mayson stated, frowning at her in disapproval.

"Yes, a gentleman came by earlier with it. He said he was an old friend of yours..." Doris said with a wide grin. "Quite a cutie too."

"Did you get a name?" Mayson asked, looking at Doris impatiently.

"Yes, he said it was a gift from a 'Mr. Snell.'" Doris said with a grin. She held up a note on a familiar looking stationery. Mayson had seen the stationery countless times in her investigations into Inter gang. It was the calling card left on the victims.

"Call the police," Mayson ordered.

"But don't you want to read the note?" Doris asked.

"No!" Mayson barked, "Call the police now!"

Clark stood inside Sheldon Bender's law office, staring at the two burly men that looked to be unconscious. There was no way Jimmy alone had done that to them. One of the men had a bloody nose but the other was bruised and bloodied all over, and both looked to have injuries to the back of the head. After a quick scan with his x-ray vision, he found no internal bleeding. 'Well, they've got that going for them.' he thought to himself. From the disarray of papers and knocked over file cabinets, it was apparent that some kind of struggle had occurred here.

<< "Luthor...He-he's alive." >>

No three words struck so much fear into him as those that Jimmy had spoken earlier. He had scanned the entire building and found no sign of Sheldon Bender or the supposed resurrected Lex Luthor. Still, he believed Lois and Jimmy. If Luthor was alive he knew it was only a matter of time before he tried to get his empire back...

'Lois.' Fear filled his mind with all the worst case scenarios of what would happen if Luthor tried to come after Lois again.

"Looks like they left quite a mess." a familiar voice said from the doorway.

He looked up and saw Bill Henderson with Lois and Jimmy right behind him. He shot an annoyed expression to her but knew he couldn't even pretend to be mad at her for not listening to him. She had called the police.

"What have we got here, Superman?" Henderson asked, surveying the scene with a tight jaw before looking to him for guidance.

"I found Ms. Lane and Mr. Olsen a few blocks from here."

Clark took a deep breath, uncertain how to even begin to explain the story he'd been told. "They said they were running from these guys," he gestured to the unconscious men, "and apparently a resurrected Lex Luthor." His face tensed, preparing himself for the look of disbelief he was sure to come.

Henderson let out a long sigh, "So I've been told." He glanced back at Lois and Jimmy. "Almost didn't believe them until I was showed the brand new passport for a Mr. Levi Lockhart." He held up the passport for Clark to inspect. "Looks like he's trying to make a run for it."

"I've searched the building. They're not here." Clark frowned, staring at the image of Lex Luthor staring back at him from the passport in his hand.

"I'll call this in." Henderson said, pulling out his phone and stepping outside.

Lois walked up to him, running her hands up and down her arms, "Where do you think they disappeared to?"

"Wherever it is, let's hope they stay gone." Jimmy interjected, looking back at Clark with anger. "That guy was unbelievable! After everything he did and he's acting like nothing's changed..."

"I know." Lois said uneasily, pacing around the room.

"Like nothing's changed?" Clark asked uncertain that he wanted the answer.

Lois looked down, unwilling to divulge the information. Whatever it was he could tell it had shaken her. "Jimmy, we should head back to the Planet." He saw her wipe her hand across her cheek. He wasn't certain but the wavering of her vocal cords told him she was trying to hide the fact that she'd been crying from him.

"Lois?" He called out, "Are you okay?"

"Fine." She said curtly, turning on her heel. "I just need to get going." She motioned for Jimmy to follow. "Come on, Jimmy, Perry's probably worried sick and I'm sure Clark's looking for us too." Her voice rose an octave on his name and Clark nodded, watching them leave with a sigh.

The sound of the ambulance outside could be heard and he sighed. It looked like it would be a little longer before he had any real answers from Lois. Right now, Superman needed to finish giving his statement to Henderson.

Lex slammed the phone closed, hearing the voicemail message from Nigel once more. Gone. His last message from Gretchen had been confirming the authenticity of the Kryptonite and the go-ahead with the plan to escape separately. Unfortunately, he'd be traveling much lighter than he'd originally intended. Sheldon Bender had been picked up on his way to make the withdrawal from his account.

Now all he had to his name was what he'd been able to pull out this morning. It seemed he was now without the Kryptonite. He'd placed his trust in the wrong person once more. Now it was time to reclaim what belonged to him. His revenge on Nigel would have to wait.

Survival was what mattered now.

Nigel moved swiftly through the crowd at the Metro Train Station. Passengers getting off the train scurried toward the stairwell leading up to the streets of Metropolis. He scanned the crowd, looking for the familiar face.

A tall man in an Armani suit and a cigar in hand stood in the corner a few feet away from where Nigel stood. He recognized him immediately, tipping his hat down over his brow as he approached. The man looked up and smiled when he saw him, "I trust you didn't come empty handed?"

"Dr. Kelly is just as easy to manipulate as before." Nigel nodded, patting the box in his hand.

"She still thinks we were testing the Kryptonite for her to use?" the man asked, lighting his cigar.

"Something to that effect." Nigel mused, uncertain if he wanted to divulge Lex Luthor's miraculous resurrection to his business partner or not.

The man stood, motioning to the box, "So this is the last of what was at LexLabs?"

Nigel nodded, opening the case, feeling a slight thrill as the green light hit his face. "The very last of it, Mr. Church."

"How interesting that something so powerful could come from somewhere so ...mundane like Kansas." He took a puff from his cigar, leaning in to examine the Kryptonite more closely. "Your efforts won't go unnoticed, Mr. St. John." He straightened up, looking at Nigel with a broad smile. Nigel slammed the box shut and moved to follow as Church motioned for him to walk with him. "Loyalty like yours is rare to find among criminals these days. I can see why Mr. Luthor kept you around."

"Yes, I suppose," Nigel mused aloud. He looked up, seeing a hidden doorway behind the staircase. A path he knew all too well.

"With Superman gone and Lex Luthor out of the picture Intergang can do what it does best." Church let out a loud laugh as they reached the end of the staircase. "Destroy everything and make money."

Lois looked around the crowded room of officers, searching for the familiar face in the crowd. They hadn't even pulled into the Daily Planet parking lot when she'd gotten the call. Mayson Drake's life had been threatened. She knew Clark would probably be on his way as Superman, so she'd made a detour and headed right over with Jimmy in tow. Ready to cover the story for the Planet, but also to check and make sure Mayson was okay.

In the corner she found Detective Ryder standing next to Mayson who was sitting in a chair with her head in her hands. She'd never seen her look like that before. Terror-stricken and distressed. Her hair looked like she'd run her fingers through it at least a thousand times, her eyes were blotchy, and worry lines were visible in the corner of her eyes.

"Mayson?" Lois cleared her throat, trying to prepare herself for the worst. She didn't like the woman. She thought she was loud and opinionated and unfairly critical of Superman. Still, she knew how it felt to be targeted. Given that they had both agreed to put the past behind them and work together she figured this was a step in the right direction. "I heard what happened." She said carefully, glancing around the room. "I wanted to make sure you were all right."

She could tell Mayson was debating internally on whether or not to respond. There was a tapping on the wooden table from where the ADA was drumming her fingertips against the grain. Finally, she spoke, "I guess good news travels fast."

Lois wasn't sure how to respond, "Perry said you got a package from Intergang?"

"Kiss of death." Mayson held up a familiar looking monogrammed notecard. "There was a bomb on my desk." Lois' eyebrows rose, but she didn't say anything. "I'm still not sure how anyone could have gotten through the security here."

"Could it have been someone you knew?" Lois guessed, knowing all too well the disagreement they'd had with Mayson regarding Bill Church's association with Intergang.

"I don't know," Mayson whispered shakily.

"Lois?" She turned to see Jimmy standing behind her.

"Detective Zymack said he needs to see you outside."

"Uh, can't it wait?" Lois asked, unsure what Zymack could be needing at that moment.

"It's about earlier." Jimmy reminded her. "Bender's office."

"Oh, right." Lois frowned, recalling Inspector Henderson telling them that Zymack would be assigned to this case.

"It's okay." Mayson let out a sigh. "I'm a big girl. Not my first death threat." Lois still wasn't sure, but followed Jimmy to where Detective Zymack was to give her statement on what had

happened with Sheldon Bender and Lex.

Gretchen Kelly walked through the security checkpoint, looking over her shoulder with a smile as she saw the bag she'd left had been mistaken for the man she'd intended it for. Enough of a diversion to ensure no hiccups arose on the escape plan. She still hadn't heard from Lex yet but had received the deposit in her offshore account as promised. As far as she was concerned the plan would continue as intended.

She made her way to the waiting area for her flight, checking the time on her watch when she saw the flight was already beginning to board. "Right on time." She said to herself.

"Enjoy your flight, Ma'am. We should be leaving for Zürich within the half hour. Here's a complimentary set of headphones for your inflight movie." The stewardess said to her, handing a plastic bag with black foam headphones and a cord connected.

"First class," Gretchen commented. "I could get used to this."

The screen in the front of the plane lowered, and she let out a long sigh, plugging her headphones into the console as she leaned back in her seat, enjoying the extra leg room.

"Hot towel?" She heard a voice say.

She looked up and saw a stewardess with a white towel in hand and nodded, "Sure."

"This is an LNN Special Report..." the familiar voice from the announcer came through the speakers. "Authorities have taken Sheldon Bender into custody in connection with...No, I'm not joking. Helping Lex Luthor escape. It seems the elusive billionaire is alive and well and trying to flee the country..."

"Oh no..." Gretchen dropped the towel in her lap, staring in shock at the news coverage.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?"

Clark set down his cup of coffee on the conference room tale. He glanced to Jimmy's and his left where Lois was tapping her pen against her notepad as Jimmy updated them with the latest information on Sheldon Bender and Lex Luthor. Shortly after Clark had finished giving his statement to Henderson, he heard about the bomb at City Hall. Thankfully he was able to get it out of there before it could go off. He'd finally met up with Lois as she was finishing being questioned by Detective Zymack. It had been one thing after another.

"Police picked up Sheldon Bender outside Metropolis Savings and Loan. He's not talking." Jimmy said, looking down at his notes. "No sign of Luthor, but the Feds have put a hold on all of Bender's assets to prevent any money being sent to him."

"Any sign of that Dr. Kelly?" Lois asked, looking up at Jimmy. Clark noticed her face had fallen into a permanent frown throughout most of the afternoon and evening as they'd been working on the latest story on Luthor's rise from the dead.

"No," Jimmy shook his head. "It's like she disappeared. There was a receipt for three passports in Bender's office though. They're just waiting to hear back from them on who the other two were for."

"Great," Lois said, looking down at the conference table.

Clark sighed, placing an arm around her shoulders, unsure what to say at this point. He turned to Jimmy, "Thanks, Jimmy."

Perry looked up from the Planet's mock-up with the headline reading, 'Lex Luthor Alive And On The Run!' He cleared his throat, tapping his hand against his chin as he found his words, "Lex Luthor rises from the dead?" Perry snorted, shaking his head, "I never thought I'd see the day." He shot a look to Lois and Clark, "Think there's hope for Elvis?" He half-joked.

Lois cracked a smile, but Clark couldn't afford one at that moment. All he could think about was the fact that Lex Luthor was back. His last encounter with the monster weighed heavily on his mind as he watched Lois out of the corner of his eye.

<< "I know this must be hard for you. Seeing me all decked

out, on my way to marry Lois Lane, while you lie here helplessly and suffer." >>

<< "I love Lois, but she's much too independent, don't you think? Well, leave that to me." >>

<< "Sorry, Superman, no time to chat. I'll just take my pound of flesh and..." >>

"Clark?"

He heard his name and shook his head, forcing himself to focus on the present, looking from Perry to Lois who was giving him a concerned look. "Sorry, what was that?"

Perry peered at him with a perplexed expression and then added, "I was saying you two better keep a close eye out. With Lex Luthor on the run there's no telling where he'll show up."

"I'm sure we'll be fine, Chief," Clark began to interject.

"Well, Clark, no offense but after the stunt he pulled on the Planet last time I'm not taking any chances." Perry argued. "I've arranged for police protection for both of you..."

"Perry, that's really not necessary." Lois interjected, throwing Clark a worried look. "We're both grown adults and are capable of..."

"I'll be the judge of that." Perry wagged his finger at her.

"Need I remind you about the recent kidnapping Superman had to rescue you both from...on your day off?"

They both exchanged a look, but didn't say anything. "We don't need a babysitter." Lois quipped.

"Lois, it may not hurt..." Clark finally spoke up.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Lois glared at him.

"You said yourself Luthor was chasing after you and Jimmy. What would have happened if he'd caught up to you?" Clark reminded her, trying not to let his mind wander too far down the what-if scenarios that had been plaguing his mind all afternoon. He'd gotten there in time – this time. What if he wasn't next time?

<< "I love Lois, but she's much too independent, don't you think? Well, leave that to me." >>

Lois met his gaze, her anger slightly wavering as she relented, "Lex is on the run. If he's smart, he'll be trying to get out of the country, not come after me."

"We don't know that." He said, running his hand against her cheek. "We still don't even know how he was able to come back to life and until we do..."

She let out a long sigh, then finally caved. "Okay. I guess we'll be one a first name basis with Metropolis' finest before all of this is done and over with."

"Good." Perry nodded, "I'll make the call and have the police chief send the first patrol over."

Bill Church Jr. made his way into the underground office with Nigel in tow, holding the large metal box under his arm. He grabbed a remote off the table and clicked it, exposing a wall of television monitors that came to life with different lieutenants within the Intergang organization. The first monitor had the head lieutenant, Mr. Darryl, sitting at his desk, "Good evening, Mr. Church."

"Good evening. I'd like you all to meet our newest lieutenant, Nigel St. John. He's already proven his loyalty is where the money is. He'll be heading up our newest takeover in New Troy." Bill Church Jr chuckled slyly as he spoke.

"I can assume this means everything went well with the exchange in Metropolis?" Mr. Darryl inquired, giving a knowing look.

"Yes, we are moving forward with the drug market in Metropolis. Project Nirvana will be on the shelves by the end of the month. We're pulling our resources there to play ball with Gables and hopefully use his experiment against him." Bill Church Jr turned to Nigel. "With the latest resource from Nigel, the Superman problem will be no more."

"Excellent news, Mr. Church." Mr. Darryl commented. "I'm

just sorry your father isn't around to see how well you've stepped into his shoes."

"Yes, that heart attack came at just the right time, didn't it?" Bill Jr. looked to Nigel and wagged his finger at him, "Just don't forget who's really in charge when the old man comes back."

"Of course, Mr. Church," Nigel nodded, smiling back at him.

"We're all aware of who's been running things, Mr. Church." Darryl piped in. "It sounds like this will be Intergang's year. Metropolis won't know what hit them."

Luthor Alive and On the Run!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Lois looked over the evening edition of the paper with a proud smile, "Hopefully we can write a happy ending to this one soon." She rolled the paper up and tucked it into her bag, glancing up at Clark who was standing by her desk, waiting for her to shut her computer down.

"Yeah, the idea of Luthor being out there..." He shook his head as she stood up, taking his arm in hers. He looked around the newsroom as they began to walk and spoke in a hushed whisper as they made their way to the elevator. "I keep checking the police radios but so far no luck in finding him. There are roadblocks set up everywhere. It's just a matter of time."

"Are you sure you want someone watching your every move right now with..." She gave a flying gesture with her hand that both of them had come to associate with 'Superman' after his revelation to her a few months ago.

"I'll risk it." He said, leaning over to press the call button. "I'm not putting anything past Luthor."

"Okay," Lois said cautiously, uncertain how to respond. They stepped on the elevator in silence, listening to the mundane elevator music that played in the background as they waited to arrive in the lobby. She knew something was bothering Clark. He'd been distracted all afternoon. Though she wasn't exactly engrossed in their investigation of Lex either. She'd found her mind drifting to those weeks before her wedding and what Clark had told her about what Lex had done to him. How close she'd come to losing everything...She could feel a lump in her throat forming and pushed it back. She wouldn't give in. She wouldn't give Lex that power over her.

"Lois?" Clark broke the silence as the light moved from the third to the second floor. He turned to face her, "How are you... really?"

She looked up at him, seeing the concern in his eyes and sighed, "I'm fine." She lied, not wanting to get into this conversation right before they were supposed to meet their assigned protective unit.

He sighed, reaching over to pull the emergency stop. "No, you're not."

"Clark!" She gaped at him in surprise, "What are you doing?"

"You're not fine." He repeated, taking a step toward her. "I'm not fine." He reached over to cup her cheek, feeling the tears she'd been suppressing escape as he spoke. "This is not fine." He whispered, cupping the other side of her face with his other hand.

"He was dead." Her voice cracked as she let her defenses down, feeling the tears she'd been holding back for most of the day release.

"I know." Clark's hands hesitantly moved through her hair, fingering the silky strands as he rested his forehead against hers. "He's not going to get away."

"You don't know that." Her voice squeaked through the muffled sob as he held her. "After everything he..."

"What?" He asked, looking at her with his dark brown eyes. "What is it?"

<<"Lois, I've lost everything. My fortune, my reputation... everything but my feeling for you. We must take the miracle of my resurrection as a sign that even death can't keep us apart.">>

<<"Never question a miracle. We're together again and that's all that matters.">>

She swallowed hard, looking down as she recalled Lex's vain attempt to draw her back under his spell before she'd delivered a hard blow across his face. She looked back up at Clark who was watching her with concern in his eyes. She let out a sigh, "After everything he did he still acted like nothing had changed." Clark nodded in understanding, not saying anything as she cried, "How he could think...after everything..."

"Luthor never was very good at accepting defeat." Clark tried to joke, brushing her hair behind her ear. "Lois, we're going to get him. We're going to get him and make him pay for everything he's done. We'll figure out how he rose from the dead in the first place and get Luthor and whoever he's working with behind bars before he can hurt anyone else."

"You promise?" Lois asked, meeting his gaze with a half-smile.

"Promise." He leaned in to kiss her.

She smiled against his lips, sighing happily as his arms wrapped around her. Her arms looped themselves around his neck as he leaned into her. She felt a slight jolt as he pressed against her. He let out a soft moan against her lips as his hands moved up and down her sides. She felt the heat from his touch begin to take effect on her. In the back of her mind, she could hear the soft hum of the elevator moving. They should probably stop, but she really didn't want to...

Her hands wandered up the back of his head, wedging her fingers into his hair as her lips parted ever so slightly. She could feel the stress and weight from the day disappear with each caress. His body molded against hers and his hands buried themselves in her hair. She could feel the uncomfortable tightness in the pit of her stomach the deeper their embrace went. Her legs felt weak, and her body was on fire. Her skirt and blouse felt like anvils weighing her down. She lifted her left leg, running her calf against the side of his knee.

He tensed for a moment. She thought he was going to pull away again...like he always did when things became too heated between them, but this time he didn't. His hand moved to her hip, tracing a circular pattern on her hip as he hiked her skirt further and further up before letting out a shaky breath, "I love you, Lois."

Before she could voice a response his lips were on hers once more. She could feel his fingertips moving dangerously up her skirt as his body molded itself against hers. There was something different about the way he kissed her...touched her. She could feel the desire and need behind every caress. Each touch and caress against one another was a reminder of how unbearably hot the elevator car was becoming. They really needed to get out of here, but doing so would require stopping, and that wasn't something she could convince herself to do at the moment.

He let out a low moan against her lips before moving his attention to her jawline, raining a heated trail down her throat. She let out a soft moan, unable to voice the thousands of thoughts that were racing through her mind. "Clark..."

The sound of someone clearing their throat from behind them pulled her back to the present. They both pulled away, neither of them showed any signs of regret as they turned to face the two officers standing by the elevator. The first officer was a man in his early forties with a thinning hairline. He extended his hand to them, "I'm Detective Mark Davis. This is my partner, Detective Juliette Gray." He pointed to petite red-haired woman in her mid-thirties with green eyes.

Lois nodded her recognition to them both, recalling the names Perry had given them earlier. "I guess this means there's still no word on Lex?" She let out a sigh, following Clark out of the elevator and further into the now almost vacant lobby of the Daily Planet.

"Our car's parked right out front." Detective Davis informed

them, pointing to the unmarked sedan parked in front of the Daily Planet building. Lois nodded, following them both to the undercover patrol car. So much for forgetting about everything.

Chapter 7

Bill Henderson watched from the double paned window as Detective Ryder worked on questioning Sheldon Bender. The Police Chief walked up behind him, "Any luck?"

Henderson turned to face him, "Nothing yet. Bender has no clue where Luthor's hiding but keeps yammering about Nigel St. John and someone named Gretchen Kelly."

"Dr. Gretchen Kelly?" A voice behind them spoke.

They both turned to see Mayson Drake standing there with a stern look on her face. Henderson's brow furrowed, "Mayson, what are you doing here?"

"This is my case. I'm not going to be scared into hiding just because I've been a little inconvenienced." Mayson said, walking up to them with a hard tone. It was clear she was trying to prove herself to everyone, but he could sense the hesitation in her voice.

"Mayson, you don't have to do this." The Police Chief countered gently. "Intergang just put a mark on you less than six hours ago..."

"And Bender knows who did it." Mayson countered, pointing to the man in the box with Ryder. "I want answers, and I want them now."

Lois waited with Clark parked outside her apartment waiting for Detective Davis to return. She glanced up at the moonlit sky, trying to focus on anything but how close Clark was standing next to her at that very moment. It wouldn't take a lot of convincing on either of their parts to pick up where they'd left off earlier. Still, there was a part of her that still had qualms about crossing that final threshold. Every time she did, it found a way of ruining the relationship.

With Claude, she discovered the next morning that she'd been used. With Paul, she discovered she'd been betrayed. Though in her mind she knew Clark wasn't like either of those men there was a part of her that wondered if it was her curse to go from one federal disaster to another. Clark himself seemed hesitant about crossing that line. Was he having doubts too?

"All clear!" Detective Davis said, coming down the steps leading up to your apartment.

Lois let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding in. The coast was clear. She could go home to her apartment...alone. She looked back at Clark who was walking a few steps behind her with both detectives behind them as she reached the final step leading up to the corridor where her apartment was.

They reached her apartment with the seven deadbolts tightly locked, and Lois began unlocking them one by one. She noticed Clark lower his glasses to check the coast was indeed clear. "Thanks." She said, unlocking the final lock and swinging the door open. She motioned to the detectives who were noticeably looking elsewhere and hanging back. She couldn't help but giggle, "I guess they think we need some privacy."

His eyebrows rose into a suggestive wiggle, "Well, they did interrupt us earlier."

She bit her lip, suppressing another chuckle and meeting his gaze as she fingered the tail end of his tie. "Yeah," she could feel a slight blush fill her cheeks. "About that..."

He looked like he was about to say something but stopped himself, moving to cup her cheek before he leaned in to kiss her goodnight. Her lips tingled against his, feeling the warmth they'd been craving ever since their encounter in the elevator. It would be so easy to lose themselves in one another's arms right now. So easy to...

She let out a soft moan as he pulled away and murmured in her ear, "As much as I would love to pick up where we left off..."

He gave a flying motion with his hand, and she nodded her understanding. As tempting as it was, Superman was needed.

"I know." She whispered back, running her palm suggestively over his chest once more. "Goodnight, Clark." She leaned in to kiss him once more before pulling away. She turned to look at him before closing the door behind her.

She let out a sigh, feeling the tingle from his kiss still on her lips. She made her way into the living room and set her things down. Despite how many doubts still plagued her about crossing that final threshold with Clark she couldn't deny the pull that was there. She knew if that encounter in the elevator had happened at any other time it wouldn't have been hard for either of them to resume the heated embrace and forget the rest of the world. But that was the problem. It did happen in the middle of one of the biggest investigations of the year. It happened right after Lex had risen from the dead and threatened her.

Neither of them were thinking clearly at this point. Neither were immune to the threat Lex posed against them. Lex made his intentions all too clear earlier. She could only imagine what he'd try to do to Clark if given the opportunity. They knew Gretchen Kelly was behind the break-in at STAR Labs. If she was working with Lex, there was a very real possibility he had Kryptonite. That thought made her skin crawl.

<< "It was a trap." >>

<< "Kryptonite...Luthor had a cage of Kryptonite. I was trapped in there for a day and a half. Listened to Luthor taunt me about how he'd finally won and what he was going to do to me... and everyone I cared about." >>

<< "Lois, I've lost everything. My fortune, my reputation.. everything but my feeling for you. We must take the miracle of my resurrection as a sign that even death can't keep us apart." >>

<< "I used up all of my strength to get out of there...had to hide behind the barrels of wine when he came in there with an ax."

"Clark..." >>

<< "I see Superman wasted no time in turning you against me."

"Don't you dare try to turn this around on him. You have no right after what you did!"

"Oh, don't I?" >>

<< "I never thought he'd get his hands on it. It was destroyed...so I thought." >>

<< "Never question a miracle. We're together again and that's all that matters." >>

Lois blanched slightly, recalling her conversation with Lex earlier. After everything, he still thought she would succumb to his charms. She snorted slightly, recalling her almost wedding.

<< "Lois Lane...Kent." >>

<< "And do you, Lois, take this man to be your wedded husband from this day forward, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?"

"I..."

"Lois?"

"I... can't." >>

<< "Stop the wedding! Lois, you can't marry this man!"

"What, is there an echo in here? I just said that." >>

<< "Where's Clark?" >>

"Right here." >>

Lois ruefully shook her head, recalling the look of daggers she'd received when she'd finally spoken the scariest words at that moment. 'I can't.' After all the planning and waiting and lists and fights she couldn't go through with it. Staring at her reflection in the mirror she couldn't imagine a life with Lex. She'd come so dangerously close to making the biggest mistake of her life because she'd been too afraid to say anything. A calm washed over her, and she reached for the phone to dial the number she now knew by heart.

After a few rings, she heard the familiar voicemail on the other end and smiled hearing the sound of her boyfriend's voice. "Hi, you've reached Clark Kent. I can't get to the phone right now. Please leave a message at the sound of..."

"Hello?" she heard Clark interrupt his own voicemail.

"Hi," She grinned into the phone. Hearing his voice on the other end sent a flutter down her spine. "I guess you made it home okay?"

"Well, I had to wait for Detective Davis to leave me alone. God, that guy can talk... I was just about to do my patrol." He responded. She could hear the humorous tone in his voice as he paused, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," she said with a sigh, not sure how to put into words the emotions her mind had been putting her through. "I guess... considering."

"We're going to get him, Lois," He reassured her.

"You don't know that," Lois said, letting her defenses down a bit. "No one knows that."

"No you're right but..." She heard him say before a knock echoed from her front door.

"Hold on a sec," Lois interrupted, getting up from the couch. "I think that's Detective Gray checking in. They're supposed to have a new officer rotate the shift about now." She glanced at the clock, noting the time.

"Just be careful," Clark warned from the other end of the phone.

"I am." She grinned into the phone. "Here." She peered through the peephole and saw Detective Gray through it. "It's just the detective, Clark. Everything's fine." She reassured him as she finished unlocking the final deadbolt and opened the door.

"I'm so sorry." She heard Detective Gray whisper before she fell to the ground.

"Lois?" she heard Clark's voice through the phone line, but couldn't make out the words to tell him what had just happened. In front of her, Lex stood with a pistol aimed at her.

"Lois, when will you ever learn. I always get my way." Lex said, stepping into the doorway. "You're coming with me." He reached over to hang up the phone.

"You need to leave." She warned. "The police are looking for you."

"They'll keep looking." Lex shrugged, "Right now, you need to pack."

"Pack?" She looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, Switzerland is quite cold this time of year."

"Switzerland?!" Lois gaped at him in surprise. "I'm not going to Switzerland."

"Yes, you are." He looked at her with a dark gaze, and she took a step back.

"Lex after everything you've done how could you expect...?" Lois looked at him in disgust.

"Yes, I've done terrible things. But I did them for you."

Provoked by the blinding light of your beauty." Lex attempted to sway her.

"I'm not going with you." She said adamantly, trying to keep her voice as even as she could considering he still had a gun trained on her.

"I see..."

"Lex, please before you make things worse..." Lois pleaded backing away from him.

"I've already been through the worst," Lex growled, raising the gun to point it at her chest.

She prepared herself for whatever calamity Lex would throw at her. Would he shoot her? Try and kidnap her? She wasn't sure. Then she felt it. The cold burst of air that came when Clark arrived. She looked up and saw Clark floating in the corner of her apartment, holding Lex against the wall by the throat.

Clark leaned back into the couch, listening to Lois on the other end of the phone. "I guess you made it home okay?" she asked.

"Well, I had to wait for Detective Davis to leave me alone. God, that guy can talk... I was just about to do my patrol." He answered with a chuckle before pausing to ask what had been plaguing him since he left her apartment, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," she sighed tentatively. "I guess...considering."

"We're going to get him, Lois," He reassured her, sitting up on his couch. He knew this had to be nerve-wracking for her. Luthor being on the run and not knowing where he was, but he also knew he wouldn't rest until Luthor was behind bars paying for every life he'd taken and wronged.

"You don't know that," Lois said quietly. "No one knows that."

"No you're right but..." He stopped when he heard a knock at her door through the phone.

"Hold on a sec," Lois interrupted, "I think that's Detective Gray checking in. They're supposed to have a new officer rotate the shift about now."

Clark looked at his clock on the wall, recalling the schedule they'd been given earlier. "Just be careful." he reminded her.

"I am." She said happily. "Here." He heard some rustling and then she said, "It's just the detective, Clark. Everything's fine." He heard the final lock on her door click and the creaking of her front door open.

"I'm so sorry." he heard a voice say before a loud thud followed.

"Lois?" He called out, already standing to his feet, ready to fly into action.

"Lois, when will you ever learn. I always get my way. You're coming with me." He heard Luthor say through the phone line. There was a click, and in an instant, Clark disappeared into a blur of red and blue. He didn't stop to see if anyone had seen him. He didn't slow down for the plane in his path, darting as fast as he could to Lois' apartment on Clinton Street.

"Lex, please, before you make things worse..." Lois pleaded backing away from Luthor as he held a gun on her.

He wanted to crash through the window and strangle Luthor with his bare hands, but he knew he couldn't. He had to be careful. If his history with the man had taught him anything, it taught him to never underestimate Luthor. He scanned the apartment for any lead-lined boxes or meteorites. It looked to be clear but just the same he scanned again. Nothing.

"I've already been through the worst." He heard Luthor say.

Clark smirked to himself, 'That's what you think.'

He moved at super-speed through the apartment, grabbing Luthor by the throat and glared at his enemy with a rage he'd never felt before. "I believe you were just leaving!" He held up the pistol and crushed it with his hand.

"Always so smug!" Luthor shot back. "You and I both know that without those powers you're nothing!"

He ignored Luthor's taunts, turning to Lois, "Are you all right, Lois?"

"Fine," Lois said, helping Detective Gray to her feet. "Just get him out of my sight."

Detective Gray held up her phone, "I'm going to get a unit over here to pick him up." She wagged a finger at Luthor, "Keep a tight grip on him, Superman."

"With pleasure, Detective," Clark growled, giving Luthor a menacing look.

"You can put up a front all you want, Lois, but I know you still have feelings. I know you still care." Luthor called out to her. "You loved me once..."

"Leave her alone!" Clark snarled, "You've done enough damage."

"What's wrong, Superman, afraid I might be right? The great Lois Lane in love with your greatest enemy. Tsk Tsk Tsk. A hard

pill to swallow, isn't it?" Luthor taunted.

"How about the truth? That seems to be the pill that's hard for you to swallow, Lex." Lois interjected angrily. "I never loved you. I was manipulated by you. There's a big difference. I know that now." Lois gave a disgusted snort, "You don't get it, do you? You act like nothing's changed. Do you remember the wedding? Do you remember me saying the words 'I can't' to you?"

"A bout of cold feet. I'm sure you would have seen to reason." Lex snorted. It took everything in Clark not to tighten his grip on Luthor's throat at that comment.

"Try a reality check." Lois shot back. "The entire time I was getting ready that morning all I could think about was everyone and everything I had lost because of you...Namely one person. My best friend. The man that tried to warn me about you over and over. Clark." Luthor snorted at that and her voice took a venomous tone as she added coldly, "I know what you did. I know what you were planning to do. Trust me on this, any qualms I might have had disappeared after I discovered what a true monster you really are. If you ever come near me again, prison will look like a five star retreat when I'm through with you."

The sound of sirens outside reached his ears, and Clark smirked, seeing the look of defeat on Luthor's face, "I think that's your ride, Luthor."

He set him down, smiling with satisfaction when he saw Bill Henderson leading the squad that had come to arrest him. "There won't be any escape this time." Henderson slapped the cuffs on Luthor with a satisfied grin.

Clark chuckled watching with relief as Luthor was escorted away in handcuffs, "Justice is finally served."

Lois turned to face him, "Thanks for the, uh, rescue." She smiled at him. "I don't think I've ever seen you move that fast."

"I wasn't going to let him get away again." He said, eyeing the audience they had at the moment. It was one of the hardest parts about being around Lois as Superman...the hiding. He had to hide how he felt about her from the outside world. Whereas Clark could easily wrap her up in his arms and never let go after something like this Superman had to remain aloof and distant.

"Still." She looked at him with a soft gaze, "Thank you." She laid a tentative hand on his arm before removing it.

"I should..." He gave a flying motion with his hand. A smile spread across her face, and she gave him a knowing look.
"Goodnight, Lois."

"Goodnight, Superman." She said, tightening her arms around herself as she watched him leave out the window he'd opened.

Chapter 8

The next morning Lois and Clark sat in Perry's office going over what had happened the night before with Lex. Perry was looking over his copy for the next edition, marking up the section for their follow-up on Luthor's rise from the dead.

"Nice work you two." Perry congratulated them, "Now I've said this before, but this time it's an order. Take a few days off..." He looked at Clark and winked. "Both of you. I don't want to see you until Monday ya hear?"

Lois smiled, sharing a look with Clark before taking his hand in hers, "You don't have to ask me twice."

Perry let out a chuckle, watching as the duo disappeared into the newsroom. He smiled to himself, turning to his mockup in front of him. He had a feeling things would be quite different when the couple returned on Monday.

Jimmy walked down the long corridor with a large box in his hands, "Mr. Raul Borges?" He asked as the maid opened the door for him to enter the spacious home office.

The man sitting at the desk didn't say anything, pointing instead to his desk. Jimmy nodded, then nervously chattered, handing Borges the clipboard and pen to sign for the delivery.

"I'm sorry I got here so late, but you know how it is, working two jobs. The first one goes later than you thought, so the second one's always a scramble. I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't need the money, but you gotta do what you gotta do, right?"

Borges gave him a dubious look and asked, "Is there something else?"

"I guess not," Jimmy said backing out of the room. He nodded to the maid and shook his head, "Tough crowd."

Lois sighed, staring at her very full suitcase. She still had no idea where Clark was planning on taking her which made it impossible to pack. Clark himself seemed nervous about this trip. After last night she knew they both needed to get away and recharge. Her mind, however, wasn't letting her do so.

A soft knock at the window caught her attention, and she turned to see Clark floating outside her window in his Superman suit. She smirked at him, walking over to unlock the window for him. "Superman, this is a surprise," She teased.

He grinned at her, looking over his shoulder as he stepped inside, "Very funny." He disappeared into a red and blue blur and reappeared in front of her in a t-shirt and khaki shorts. "You almost ready?"

"Not really. Someone won't tell me where we're going so it's making it impossible to pack." She gave him a pointed look.

"Okay," he relented, "It's warm." He held up a hand to stop her, "And that's the only clue I'm giving you."

"I hate surprises." She glared at him.

"So I've been told." He teased, ducking as she threw a scarf at him.

Nigel waited patiently with Lucky Leon and his co-conspirator, Gregor, who were watching one of the most notorious arms dealers through a hidden camera. "Amazing what you can sell to anyone on TV, no?" Lucky Leon asked, handing him a banana, "Banana?"

"No, thank you." Nigel said curtly, "I'm trying to cut back."

He turned his attention to Borges who was answering his phone, "Borges." A moment later he jotted down a note. "Good. When can I expect delivery?" He paused then responded, "One p.m.? Fine. I've decided we'll take Route 128 to 15. Don't worry. I stand to make a lot of money off this shipment. No one's going to know."

"Except for us." Lucky Leon chuckled to himself.

"Yes, and now we have the information we need from Mr. Borges," Nigel said. A flicker showed on the screen, and he turned to Gregor and Leon, "What was that?"

"A short?" Gregor guessed.

Nigel groaned, watching as Gregor reached over to fiddle with the 'short' in question. "And now he knows someone was watching." He looked at Leon, "Take care of it."

Leon pressed a button and said, "Adios yourself, Mr. Borges." A tiny red dart shot out into Borges' neck. He slumped over on his desktop.

Clark held Lois in his arms, hearing the Polynesian music already as he flew through the light fog that hung over the islands below. He did his best to keep calm but knew it would be impossible to hide the anxiety that was slowly building inside him. Lois turned to him with a smile as they flew in closer, "Hawaii?"

He smiled up at her, "A change of scenery, remember?"

She awarded him a smile as they landed behind a wooded area and large hill with trees and flowers around them. He quickly changed into his t-shirt and khaki shorts from earlier, donning a pair of sunglasses as he scooped her back into his arms which elicited a cry of laughter from her. He smiled, gazing at her in almost a trance as she looked back up at him uncertainly.

"What?" She asked, running a hand through her hair

nervously.

"Nothing," He said warmly, "Just admiring the view."

Her cheeks turned a slight pink shade as she looped an arm around his neck, "I think you're looking in the wrong direction, Farmboy."

"No, I'm not." He whispered, leaning in to kiss her.

Mayson threw her notepad across the room in disgust. Every account number she'd gotten from Sheldon Bender had already been closed. Every last red cent was missing, and now she had nothing left to track Gretchen Kelly and Nigel St. John.

Bill Henderson knocked on her office door, "I hate to be a bother,"

"Then don't!" Mayson snapped irritably.

"Well, I just got a case fall in my lap that doesn't jive right with me." He laid the file on her desk, and she scanned it.

"Jimmy Olsen?" She scowled, shaking her head. "No, this doesn't sound right at all."

Lois stared out the room-length window by the queen-sized bed in her hotel room. She finished changing into a simple floral-patterned sundress and sandals. Clark was across the hall, getting ready for dinner. Today had been incredible. It was hard to believe that just a few hours ago she'd been in Metropolis and now here she was vacationing in Hawaii for the weekend.

After checking into their respective rooms, they'd done some exploring of the main island. Clark had even talked her into trying to scuba dive. Though the gear was heavy and uncomfortable, it was amazing to see all the underwater creatures up close. The atmosphere here was so different from Metropolis. Where in the city everyone was in a hurry to go somewhere or do something here, they all were at ease. It was a much-needed change of pace for both her and Clark.

The past few months had taken a toll on both of them. It was hard to believe it had only been four months ago that he'd let her in on his secret. It felt like a lifetime ago. Everything had changed between them that night. She felt closer to him than she had with anyone.

She felt ...ready. Ready to take that next step in their relationship. They'd come very close last night, though she suspected a lot of that had been fueled by fear of the unknown on both their parts. She knew it wasn't entirely fear, though. They'd come close on many occasions –many occasions where Clark had pulled back and stopped. Last night he didn't though. The desperation and desire that had fueled their embrace had no end until they realized they had an audience. She had wondered countless times last night what would have happened if they hadn't accidentally released the emergency stop. Would either of them have hit the brakes or would they have been checking into one room instead of two today?

"You ready?" She heard Clark's voice behind her and turned to see him freshly showered and changed into a casual button-down shirt and khakis standing by the open door. Her eyes wandered up and down him, taking note of how well he seemed to fit into just about anything.

"Um, yeah, ready," She said, meeting his gaze with a smile.

Mr. Darryl looked around the familiar looking office, taking note of the new occupant. A tall man with a white mustache and beard sat in the corner of the office and his boss—the boss, Bill Church Jr. sat at the desk. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Church?"

Church motioned to the seat in front of him, "Darryl, take a load off."

Darryl did as he was instructed and Church leaned forward, grabbing a file in his hand, "We've got a new project we want you to takeover. Seems this Leon guy isn't as bright as he seems on paper. He's got the technology, but it's murky at best. If we're

going to be using his technology to siphon information from these arms dealers and the NIA, we'll need someone overseeing things."

The man in the corner of the room—his name escaped him—interjected, "We can't kill everyone that notices a glitch. The body trail will set off red flags."

"Yes, no need to bring the police on our trail any more than they already are." Darryl agreed. "I'll setup a meeting and get Mr. Leon on board with our adjustments."

"Oh and Darryl?" Church called after him, "Keep Leon happy, but if he starts to get squirrely, you know what to do."

"Always a pleasure, Mr. Church," Darryl chuckled, standing to his feet, file in hand. "Till next time?"

Lois stared at the fire rings that lit up from the live luau show. She watched in awe as the hula dancers moved around them as the band played music in the background. The dancers were beautiful with long dark hair and the dark sun-kissed tone skin with the traditional coconut bras and long grass skirts swaying to the music. She noted some of the male patrons seemed to be ogling the dancers a bit longer than was necessary, but not Clark. Every time she looked at him, his focus was on her. Another thing that made him so different from any other man she'd met.

It was so different from what she'd expected when Clark had suggested getting away from it all. Though she was finding it was hard to know what to expect. Every time she thought she had him figured out he'd take her breath away with something new.

"So, not what you expected, huh?" Clark teased, looking over at her with a broad grin.

She looked up at him from her glass and smiled, "No, definitely not."

"Good." He flashed her another smile before fiddling with his glasses, "I was thinking after the show we could go over to Mt. Mauna Kea. It's supposed to have a great view."

"Okay," She nodded, reasoning aloud, "Not sure how much we'll be able to see in the dark though. If you haven't noticed, there are no lit walkways leading up the mountain...at all."

"Let me worry about that." He answered with a knowing look. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something Clark was nervous about. He kept fiddling with his glasses like he was nervous about something. She watched him cautiously over the top of her glass, trying to figure out what he could possibly be up to.

A tall man with curly red hair that identified himself as 'Gregor' handed Mayson the log book for Lucky Leon's deliveries that day. She silently cursed when she saw the familiar name assigned to the delivery of Raul Borges' delivery that evening. Usually, this was done by the detectives. Usually, she didn't get involved with investigations until the case arrived on her desk, but given who the suspect was there was nothing usual about this investigation.

"Thank you, Mr. Gregor. I can assume you'll be available to testify as to when Mr. Olsen left the factory for his delivery route?" She prompted, watching his face tense slightly then spread into a smile.

"Anything to help, Ms. Drake." He looked over his shoulder, "If you'll excuse me?"

Henderson walked up to her with a sigh, "What do you think?"

"I think we need to talk to Mr. Olsen," She sighed, "but it's not going to be a pretty conversation." She frowned, looking over at the man she'd just been interviewing. There was something off about his reaction, but that wasn't enough to hold her boss off on going forward with the case if he decided to make the arrest. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place, and she wasn't sure how to prove what her gut was screaming at her: Jimmy Olsen didn't do this.

Lois stared up at the large white globe shaped building in front of them. "You brought me all the way to Hawaii to look at an observatory?"

"Not just any observatory. Mauna Kea Observatory. It's supposed to be the best place in the world to look at the stars." Clark said with a smile. "Besides your last visit to an observatory didn't turn out that bad, did it?"

"Well, no..." She said, following him up the steps. "Is this one of those weird Smallville quirks?"

He laughed, holding the lantern in his hand as they approached the front door. To her surprise, a man was waiting at the front who seemed to recognize Clark. "Makai Kent. Everything set." He pointed to a door in the dimly lit lobby they stood in and nodded.

"Thank you," Clark said with a smile.

Lois watched the man return to his desk and then looked at Clark suspiciously as he led her to the door that would open up to who knew what. "Something tells me you planned this mysterious adventure."

"Well, I can't give away all my secrets." He grinned back at her as he opened the door for her.

She stepped inside, taking a breath as she looked up at the large circular glass pane ceiling where hundreds of stars shone brightly back at her. "Wow." The entire room was lit up by the white sparkling gems painting the clear night sky through the glass.

"Pretty amazing, huh?" He whispered in her ear.

She glanced to the corner of the room and saw a picnic basket set up in the corner—much like their first date at the Metropolis Observatory several months ago. "A picnic, huh?" She smiled back at him, "You don't have any other earth shattering news to share, do you?"

"It's just dessert. Come on," He tugged her arm gently, pulling her into the center of the room. Lois took a seat next to him on the blanket that was folded out next to a large telescope. He pulled a small box from the basket and opened it, revealing several assorted fruits dipped in chocolate of one kind or another. "Here." He offered her a chocolate covered strawberry dipped in crushed nuts.

"These are delicious." She took a bite, looking around at the starlit room then turned back to Clark who was watching her with a smile on his face. "What?" She asked, self-conscious under his gaze.

"Nothing." He murmured, taking a bite of his own chocolate covered fruit. "Enjoying the view."

She blushed, seeing his gaze was still directed at her and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. He'd done the impossible on this mini-vacation. He had made her forget the trauma from last night and this past week. He'd recreated their first date in the middle of paradise and had been the perfect gentleman throughout all of it. She had come to discover that was just Clark. He found joy from doing things like this that made her happy. She had fallen for him so completely and sitting here with him underneath the starlit sky she couldn't think of anywhere else she'd rather be.

"This is incredible that you put all this effort in for one evening." She began cautiously, feeling her heart rate hike a bit. "Thank you. I think we both needed to get away and this..." She gestured to the room, "...is amazing."

"You're amazing, Lois".

. She met his gaze, feeling the heat from it hit her like a wave. His hand brushed against her cheek again, and he whispered, "I love you, Lois."

"I love you too." She said, looking up to meet his gaze.

"I don't think I could have gotten through these past few days without you." He cracked a smile, "Or even these past few months. I know it's only been four months since I brought you to

the Metropolis Planetarium and let you in on my biggest secret."

"You trying to go for a do-over?" She asked, looking at him quizzically, trying to break the tension with a joke. He seemed really nervous about whatever it was he was trying to say.

"No, it's nothing like that." He reassured her, taking her hand in his.

"What is it?" she asked, looking at him in concern.

"Lois, you're everything to me." His fingers wedged themselves between hers, tightening into a joined fist as he continued, "You save me from myself so many times. Everything I'm able to do...every life I save, I'm able to do that because of you. I honestly don't think Superman would exist without you."

She awarded him a smile, "Somehow I doubt you'd be able to stand by and not help when needed." She reached up to stroke his cheek.

"Yeah, maybe," He looked up at her, meeting her gaze slowly, "Lois, these past few months have been the best months of my life. I can't imagine my life without you in it. You've been my best friend for so long. For a long time, I thought the scariest thing would be to let you in on what I thought to be the most dangerous secret known to man. You could have walked away, but you didn't." He stroked her cheek, and she felt a flutter in her stomach as she let him continue.

"You forgave me." He whispered, running his palm along her jawline. "I know it couldn't have been easy, and I know we've had our ups and downs these past months, but I want you to know how much I love you...how much I need you. Every day I wake up, and I still can't believe how lucky I am to have you in my life." He cracked a smile at her as he continued, "Even if you did try and push me out repeatedly in the beginning.

She laughed, toying with the collar of his shirt, "You were beginning to get to me. I wasn't very good at letting people in back then."

"I noticed." his eyes twinkled with laughter behind them, but his tone remained serious as he continued, "I love everything about you, Lois Lane. I love how passionate you get when trying to right a wrong that's been done. I love the way you never give up on anyone...even if they don't deserve it. I love your laugh, your smile...every tear and frown that makes you, you."

He ran his hand down her shoulder and smiled ruefully at her as he took her other hand in his. "I know there are probably a thousand reasons why I should just stop there..." His voice wavered slightly. "But I can't because..." he took a deep breath, "We agreed no more secrets. This is something I've wanted to ask for months now. I love you, Lois. I always have and I always will. I told you before I want forever, and I want it with you." He pulled out a small velvet box from his pocket.

"Clark," She moved her hand to her mouth in surprise, uncertain how to process what was happening.

He opened the box and pointed it at her. The solitaire diamond stared back at her with a glimmer. She met his gaze, still trying to process what was happening, when she heard him finally speak the six word phrase she knew to be coming. "Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

He lowered himself to where he was supporting himself on one knee. "Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

To Be Continued in "[Rules of Guilt](#)"