

# Delusions of Grandeur

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: Set during the Season 1 episode "House of Luthor." Clark Kent has been committed for thinking he's Superman. Lex Luthor has tightened his hold on Metropolis. Lois Lane is missing. In order to stop his greatest enemy, Clark must face his own demons to save those he loves.

Story Size: 168,381 words (914Kb as text)

A/N: It was all Feli's fault! She wrote this incredibly twisted snippet of "Nobody" in response to Queenie's Mental Hospital challenge and my muse decided to take its own twist on the challenge to get Clark out of the nefarious situation he had been put in. If you haven't read the fic you should.

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## Teaser

Tick Tock  
Tick Tock.

The wave of nausea subsided once more as the greenish hue that ran through the room faded away. Another hour and it would be the same thing. It was always the same thing.

The nauseating pain.

The cold sweats.

It was all the same.

It was always the same.

"Clark?"

He looked up and saw the brunette staring back at him. His face scrunched up, staring at the familiar face. He stared up at the walls once more, trying to manifest some sign of his powers.

"Are you having another episode?"

His head jerked back, staring at the brunette with an icy tone. "I'm not crazy."

"Clark," she tried to soothe.

His vision began to clear and the face came into focus. A familiar smirk crossed his face. "You cut your hair."

"Yeah, well, a lot of things have changed," she said with a shrug.

"Yeah, I'll bet," he replied bitterly.

"So?" She looked at him expectantly.

"So what?" he asked, looking at her in disbelief.

"When were you going to tell me?"

"Tell you wh...at?" Clark asked, feeling a painful wave of nausea hit him once more.

"How did you end up here?" she snapped angrily, looking around the room in disbelief. "Clark?"

The door opened and she jumped back startled. "What's going on here? This patient hasn't been authorized to have visitors." The orderly looked back at him, shaking his head. "Still causing trouble, eh, Superman?"

"Hey, get your hands off of me!" She yelled as the orderly forced her out of the room.

He stood up to try and stop the orderly from manhandling her but found himself too weak to do anything. Every fiber of his being was shouting for him to do something. This was his only shot. His only chance. He had to tell her.

"Lois, wait!"

A hard blow came from behind him and darkness overtook him.

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Lex took a puff from his cigar as he stared at the screen in front of him. A satisfied smirk spread across his face before he turned to the man standing next to him. "I see our research panned out. The new wing of LexCorp's Science Division is well worth the money already." A dark expression crossed his face. "Now all that's left is to track her down."

"I'm still not sure about this obsession you have with Lois Lane," Nigel St. John warned.

"She's the key to his undoing," Lex breathed, looking at the screen and allowing a grin to spread to his eyes as he watched once more as the beam of light green crossed over the room. In the corner Clark Kent sat cradling his head, rocking back and forth, staring at the door that was sealed shut.

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*Three Months Ago...*

<< "I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "If that's what you want Lois then fine get in bed with the devil!" >>

<< "Where are you going? Get back here!"

"Stop! Get out of my way, Lex!" >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

Lois stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her face was stained with tears from where she'd been crying earlier. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and the baseball cap she wore covered her face enough to hide the bruises.

It had been five hours since her confrontation with Lex. Five hours since her entire world had come crashing down around her because she dared to tell the most powerful man in Metropolis 'no.'

'Bastard,' she thought to herself, feeling the swollen redness around her skin from where she'd been struck.

<< "I have been in love with you for a long time...you had to have known." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "Goodbye? We're partners!"

"You don't need a partner, Lois. You never did."

"Maybe not, but I was starting to like having one." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "What?"

"I..I can't. I'm sorry." >>

To think she'd actually been concerned about his feelings when she had readied herself to tell Lex it was over. She couldn't do it. She couldn't go through with it. She couldn't imagine a life with that...

'Vermin,' her mind supplied for her as she grabbed the last of her bags, staring in the reflection at her newly colored locks.

"You ready, miss?" The sound came from the corner where the agent in charge of her relocation was standing, holding the door open for her.

"Ready," she said, readjusting the strap to her bag on her shoulder and making her way toward him. "Just get me out of here."

"What about this?" One of the officers held up the hanger where her wedding dress hung, never worn.

Lois let out a dismal grunt and muttered, "Burn it for all I care."

<< "But that would have to mean that I found you...Clark, you were sprayed. How come you didn't fall for me?"

"I guess I'm just not attracted to you, Lois."

"Liar! You are so attracted to me." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "You think I wouldn't have a contingency plan, hmm? Your precious Superman? Gone. Your partner? Gone. Your career? You won't be able to show your face anywhere without me knowing. I'll make sure you never so much as edit a note on a post-it. You

*never should have crossed me.”>>*

*<<“Clark, whether or not that memory of yours comes back, I just want you to know I think you’re terrific.”*

*“Likewise,”*

*“I mean, I love you...like a brother.” >>*

*<<“You’re mine!”*

*“I don’t belong to anyone, Lex!”*

*“I will not be made a fool of!”*

*“Go to hell!”>>*

*<<“Goodbye, Lois.”>>*

*<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>*

*<<“Goodbye, Lois.”>>*

*<<“What did you do to him? Where is Clark?”>>*

*<<“I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this city without me knowing about it.”>>*

“Everything’s gone.” Lois let out a shallow breath as the door closed behind her.

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The pain appeared to subside as Clark let his head hit the cool cement of the cellar. The green bars disappeared and he saw the golden fields, littered with wheat and grain. The image of his father’s face came as he let out a groan.

Was he hallucinating?

“Son?” his father’s voice called out to him.

The pain from the past few weeks weighed heavily on him as he stared back at his father’s weary face. “You were right dad. I never should have done it. I never should have created him.”

“Created who?”

“Superman.”

“If you’re not Superman then who are you?”

“I’m just me,” he responded in a defeated tone. “Clark Kent. That’s all I’ve ever been.”

A hard blow came to his face and he looked up. The golden fields were gone. In their place were the green glowing bars and hovering over him was none other than Lex Luthor.

Panic flashed through his mind. *‘What have I done?’*

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The red-haired beauty ran a hand through her hair, fingering the strands as she stared at her reflection in her rear view mirror. She could still see the shadow of the bruise from a few days ago peeking through behind the makeup.

*<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>*

*<<“If that’s what you want, then fine! Get in bed with the devil!”>>*

*<<“What do you mean, missing?”*

*“We don’t know, darlin. He just up and disappeared.”>>*

*<<“You’re mine!”*

*“No!”>>*

*<<“You think I wouldn’t have a contingency plan, hmm? Your precious Superman? Gone. Your partner? Gone. Your career? You won’t be able to show your face anywhere without me knowing. I’ll make sure you never so much as edit a note on a post-it. You never should have crossed me.”>>*

*<<“I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this city without me knowing about it.”>>*

“Don’t,” she warned herself, feeling the tears threaten to escape the corners of her eyes. She wanted to give into them so bad. Desperately. She couldn’t afford to break down. She couldn’t lose her edge. He needed her. She knew without a shadow of a doubt he was out there and she was going to find him and bring him home.

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## Chapter 1

*Three Months Later...*

Lois Lane gripped the steering wheel, mentally preparing

herself for what was to come. It had been three weeks since she’d last stepped foot into this city. Three months since everything had come crashing down around her and she’d been forced into hiding.

*<<“Clark wouldn’t just give up.”>>*

She shook her head, recalling the conversation she’d had with Martha and Jonathan. The last few weeks had been difficult for all of them. Missing. The idea that Clark Kent—her partner, her best friend, her...

What? Her mind called out to her, taunting her at how easily she had dismissed his declaration of love to her.

*<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>*

*<<“If that’s what you want, then fine! Get in bed with the devil!”>>*

*<<“Superman, is there any hope for us?”>>*

*<<“There are things about me that you don’t know. That you may never know.”>>*

*<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>*

*<<“Clark wouldn’t just disappear.”>>*

*<<“When did you last see him?”>>*

*<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>*

“I’m an idiot,” she told herself, staring into the rearview mirror as she approached the bridge leading into New Troy. She let out a shaky breath, “I can do this. I can do this.”

With that she hit the gas, speeding across the bridge as the path cleared.

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*Three Months Ago...*

Lois stepped off the elevator leading into the ballroom being decorated by Lex’s design team. It was much more expensive taste than she would have preferred but it made Lex happy. She squashed her initial reaction to the extravagant flower arrangements accented with gold and diamonds.

It was something she’d get used to she supposed. After all, she was marrying the third richest man in the world. He was accustomed to a certain lavish lifestyle that was well beyond anything she could imagine.

“Mrs. Luthor, is there anything we can help you with?” one of the consultants asked, looking at her in surprise.

‘Mrs. Luthor?’ Lois heard the name and felt as if the ground had opened up beneath her, pulling her in. True, she would be Mrs. Luthor in a matter of sixteen hours, but hearing the name spoken aloud felt like a punch to the gut, knocking the wind out of her. Gone were the days of her being known as Lois Lane, independent woman, career woman, and journalist. In its place would be someone known as ‘Mrs. Luthor.’

A panic began to set in and she swallowed the lump that began to form in her throat. “Um, any word on the guest list?”

“No update on the guests you asked me to follow up with yesterday, Mrs. Luthor,” the woman responded with a friendly smile.

There was that name again. She blanched, hearing the name ‘Mrs. Luthor’ echo in her mind.

“I can try to call again...?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Lois said hurriedly, backing away from her. The enormous room suddenly felt as if it were closing in on her. She darted out of the room and headed toward the stairs, intent on getting as far away from this woman and the horrendous room that felt like it would swallow her up at any moment.

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Jimmy turned the key Clark had given him to the apartment, suddenly assaulted by the strong aromas of spices from whatever the Chief was stirring in that larger than man sized pot on the stove. He did a double take, looking around the apartment for Clark.

“About time,” Perry commented, not looking up from the food he was cooking.

“Where’s Clark?” Jimmy asked in concern.

Perry shrugged. “I don’t know. He should have been here.”

Jimmy frowned, looking around the apartment. Clark had been leading this investigation into Lex Luthor from the get go. True he did disappear at times but not showing up at the agreed upon time seemed out of character.

Perry took the wooden spoon he’d been stirring with and scooped up a bite of the grub he’d been making. A red liquid with a white meat looking substance sat on the edge of the spoon and Perry asked, “Crawfish etouffé anyone?”

Jimmy, for the moment forgot his concern for his friend and exchanged a look with Jack who looked equally uncertain of the Chief’s cooking skills as he was. Jack piped up, “Actually we just ate.”

“You’ll eat again,” Perry said unphased, tapping the jar of paprika over the pot. “You gotta use the sweet paprika, not the regular. And cayenne pepper, plenty of it. ‘Course the secret is the apple juice, half a cup.” He pointed to the plates and Jimmy and Jack nodded, taking the hint. They weren’t getting out of this.

Jimmy sighed, following Jack’s lead, and began to set the table. His mind kept drifting back to the statement Perry had made earlier. ‘He should have been here.’ With everything he’d discovered from John Black and Clark’s insinuation that Lex Luthor could be the boss running the crime in Metropolis it made him wonder if his young friend might have gotten into trouble with the subject of their investigation.

He knew Lex Luthor had a reputation in the business world as being cut throat and menacing. Perry had told him about what Fuentes had said when Lex Luthor offered them money to leave. ‘He’d be better off with the police after him.’ A chill ran down his spine. He had a bad feeling that he just couldn’t shake.

Silently, Jimmy and Jack prepared the table, setting the plates and bowls with spoons and glasses. Perry brought the pot over, taking a sniff of the aroma as he turned and asked, “So, what’d you two find out?”

“Plenty,” Jimmy said, holding up a handheld microcassette recorder he’d borrowed from Clark. He’d taped John Black’s confession on it, implicating a ‘boss’ as the triggerman behind the Planet’s bombing and framing Jack. “John Black’ll do just about anything he’s paid to do: break in, plant explosives...” Jimmy glanced toward Jack who wore a sour expression. “Just like he did in the case of our young Jack here.”

“Beautiful,” Perry cheered, scooping out a serving of the hot liquid into the bowls at the table. “We’ll get that tape down to Inspector Henderson first thing in the morning along with Jack’s statement.” He then turned toward Jack. “Looks like you’re off the hook, son. Congratulations.”

Jack beamed back at him and pulled out the video camera Perry had let him borrow. “Thanks, I’ve got something too. Mr. Simon Truesdale, former Daily Planet board member, has had a sudden attack of conscience. He’s now willing to confess to receiving a substantial cash ‘inducement’, I think he called it, to support the sale of the Planet to Luthor.”

Jimmy caught the glint in Jack’s eyes and asked, “Any particular reason for this sudden attack of conscience?”

“It might be related to a certain video tape he’s hoping his wife never receives.” Jack smirked.

Perry let out a loud laugh. “Poor woman.”

“Not after the divorce settlement,” Jack said with a wry grin.

“What about you, Chief?” Jimmy asked.

“Well, now, as it turns out, Lexel Investments *did* have additional insurance on the Daily Planet building,” Perry said evenly.

“How much?” Jack asked.

“About twice what it would’ve cost to repair it,” Perry spat out

in a grunt. “Lex Luthor cleared a cool seventy-five mil on the deal.”

Jimmy’s eyes widened and he shouted out, “That’s motive. He’s nailed.”

“So, what are we waiting for?” Jack looked at Perry in confusion.

The question was obvious. Why hadn’t they taken this evidence to the police? His mind reminded him once more of his missing friend. He knew something was wrong.

“Clark,” Perry pointed to the table. “Sit. Let’s eat.”

Jimmy stared at the mixture in his bowl uncertain if he should risk tasting what the Chief had offered up as dinner. At least when Clark cooked, he knew it was edible...more than edible. The Chief had never brought lunch in the entire time he’d worked for him as a copy boy. Not once did he see Perry White bring in any meal from home. Did he really trust what was in that bowl?

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Lex stared at the young redhead, uncertain how to respond to the news of his missing his fiancée. He took in a deep breath and responded, “Gone?”

“She just turned white as a ghost and ran toward the elevator an hour ago.” The woman offered a forced smile as she looked back at him nervously. “I wouldn’t worry, Mr. Luthor. I’ve seen this all before. It’s just a case of pre-wedding jitters.”

“Worried? What makes you think I’m worried?” He stood to his feet, crossing the room to where the young petite woman fidgeted nervously under his gaze.

“I...I...didn’t mean any—”

“I run a multi-billion-dollar empire. I have over nine hundred ninety-nine thousand people at my beck and call. I can go anywhere in this city and people stand to attention. Do I look worried?” His eyes widened as he stared her down.

“N-no, Mi-Mister Lu-thor.”

“Because I’m not,” he hissed angrily. “I want to know the second she reappears. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” she stammered out.

“Good.” He smoothed out the front of his shirt. “Now, don’t we have a wedding to plan?”

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Lois parked the Jeep outside Clark’s apartment. Why was she here? She stared at the familiar brick exterior of the building that she’d run to so many times before. Ever since she’d met Clark Kent there had been a shift in how she reacted to danger. No more holding in her fears and not letting it show. She’d come here at least a dozen times in the past few months when she was scared or needing to talk.

Not once had she entertained the thought that there might be something more to the fact that it was Clark she saw herself turning to.

‘*Not Lex,*’ her mind reminded her.

Mrs. Luthor. The name felt...wrong. Out of place as she slowly began to grasp something her heart had already realized. She didn’t *want* to be Mrs. Luthor. She didn’t want to plan parties or hold functions or be known as just someone’s wife. She wanted to do things. She wanted to be the one making headlines not be a footnote in someone’s life story.

<< “Clark, can’t you see what’s happening? You’re driving us further and further apart.”

“I’m not the one doing the driving, Lois. You are.”>>

“What am I doing here?” she wondered aloud, letting out a shaky breath. Her last conversation with Clark had ended horribly. Gone were the days of being able to laugh together. A line had been crossed and there was no going back.

<< “I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>

<< “I just don’t feel that way about you...romantically.”>>

<< “If that’s what you want then fine! Get in bed with the

devil!">>

<<"I'm not the one doing the driving, Lois. You are.">>

"I said yes." She reminded herself with a shaky breath. "What am I doing? I'm..." She let out a sob, giving into the emotions that continued to hit her like a wave. Flashbacks from the past few weeks and the numerous fights she'd had with Clark continued to plague her mind. How had she gotten here?

<<"I'm not the one doing the driving, Lois. You are.">>

<<"I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.">>

<<"I'm not the one doing the driving, Lois. You are.">>

<<"I just don't feel that way about you...romantically.">>

<<"I'm not the one doing the driving, Lois. You are.">>

<<"If that's what you want then fine! Get in bed with the devil!">>

<<"I'm not the one doing the driving, Lois. You are.">>

Lois swiped the tears in her eyes, determination crossed her features as she stepped out of the Jeep and made her way to the familiar apartment building. "This ends now," she muttered under her breath.

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Lex picked up his mobile phone as he locked the metal door leading to the cellar. A smirk crossed his face as he recalled the distraught Superman, struggling to breathe as he had taunted him over and over with the sweet victory that would soon follow. Lois Lane would soon be his and Superman would be nothing more than a red stained memory.

"Find her?" Lex asked, not even bothering to greet the caller.

"She's sitting outside Clark Kent's apartment," Mrs. Cox informed him.

"Kent?" Lex scoffed, feeling his blood boil at the mention of Lois Lane's former partner. No matter what he did, it seemed the bond Lois shared with this hack continued to hold on. What she saw in her partner and why she insisted on constantly trying to repair what had already been damaged, he couldn't understand. He did know the time had come for Clark Kent to meet a similar end as his flying friend in red and blue.

"Take care of it," he ordered.

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"When was the last time you heard from him?" Jimmy asked, taking a sip of water as he looked across the table at Perry.

"About the time we all called to check in." Perry answered, shaking his head. "I'm sure he's fine. You know how hard this has been on him. The wedding's tomorrow. I'm sure he's just... drowned a few too many sorrows at Heartbreak Hotel."

"I don't know, Chief," Jimmy grimaced, running a weary hand through his hair. "Something doesn't feel right about any of this."

The phone rang.

Jimmy and Perry both looked at it but neither moved.

Jack cleared his throat, reaching over to answer it, "Hello?" He listened for a moment then responded, "No, I'm sorry, Mrs. Kent. He's not in. Hasn't been in all afternoon. Oh, this is Jack. Yeah, that's the one....I'm glad I've turned a new leaf too. Uh-huh, I'll tell him you called. Bye."

Jimmy and Perry looked at Jack with a prompting expression. Jack sighed, leaning back in his chair. "Clark's mom. Apparently, he was supposed to call them back with..."

"See?" Jimmy pointed toward Jack as if it would help make his case more clear. "Clark was supposed to call his parents back. He didn't call."

"Now, Jimmy, calm down," Perry tried to soothe.

"It's been twelve hours, Chief," Jimmy said wearily, glancing at the clock.

A sharp knock at the door followed by the frantic yelling, "Clark, open up! I know you're in there!"

Jack glanced at Jimmy, "Is that...?"

"Lois," Perry said, standing up and heading toward the door to

answer it.

"Clark, I know you're in there. Open the—!" she stopped when she saw Perry standing in the doorway. "Chief?"

"Uh, Lois, what are you doin' here?" Perry asked, stepping outside the apartment.

Jimmy felt a surge of anger envelop him when he saw Lois standing on Clark's doorstep. He was grateful Perry didn't invite her in. She didn't deserve to be invited in. Not after what she'd done.

Lois had turned her back on all of them. She had literally gotten into bed with the enemy. After everything that had happened and the pain that had been caused by her fiancé he couldn't look at Lois Lane the same.

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From a distance, a dark figure watched as Lois Lane made her way up the steps leading to the apartment building. The dark-haired beauty held her gaze on the brunette, ensuring that she hadn't been seen. She couldn't afford to be recognized. Having Lois Lane see her in the midst of carrying out Lex's orders wouldn't do well for her career...or her life.

She let out a long breath, turning to the man behind her. "Everything's set?"

He handed her a small palm sized remote. "Five-hundred-foot range. Be sure to wear some protection if you're nearby. The blast can leave a nasty side effect otherwise."

"Thank you, Pete." She turned, running the back of her hand against his cheek. "You always were so creative with your work."

"Thanks for springing me early." He grinned brightly, showing his gold tooth. "Bad luck that kid escaping before we could get acquainted."

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Lois got out of her Jeep, making a decision as she slammed the door behind her and headed up the steps to Clark's apartment. She needed to talk to Clark. She needed to put everything out there and talk this through. That was the only way. She reached his door and beat on it repeatedly, beginning to holler, "Clark, open up! I know you're in there!"

<<"I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.">>

<<"I just don't feel that way about you...romantically.">>

"Clark, I know you're in there. Open the—!" she stopped when she saw Perry standing in the doorway. "Chief?"

What was Perry doing at Clark's apartment? She peered behind him and saw Jimmy in the corner. Her frustration at Clark not getting to the door fast enough hit a bump as her mind raced to process the reason Perry or Jimmy might have for being here. Perry was supposed to be down in Florida enjoying his retirement. Jimmy was...

"Uh, Lois, what are you doin' here?" Perry asked, stepping outside the apartment.

She frowned when she saw the stern expression on Perry's face, blocking her entry into the apartment behind him. "I...I'm looking for Clark." Lois explained, uncertain how to explain why she was here on her former partner and best friend's doorstep the night before she was supposed to be getting married.

"I gathered that," Perry said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"We had a fight." Lois said hurriedly, not meeting his gaze. "I just...I can't...I mean, I..." she continued to stammer, unable to get out the words she was trying to say in a coherent sentence.

"Darlin' Clark isn't..." Perry responded with a frown.

"Don't, Chief," Jimmy's voice came from behind Perry as he stepped out of the apartment with Jack following behind him. "Don't tell her anything. She'll probably go run back and inform her low-life fiancé." Jimmy snorted. His features were hard with anger and his eyes were cold as he stared back at her.

"What?!" Lois gaped at Jimmy in surprise, uncertain where the hostility toward her had come from.

"Now, Jimmy, hold on here," Perry tried to intervene unsuccessfully as Jack piped in.

"You're not welcome here," he crossed his arms over his chest. "Especially not after what you put Clark through these past few weeks."

"I want to hear that from Clark," Lois countered, narrowing her eyes at the duo, sending the silent message that she wasn't going anywhere.

"Why? You didn't twist the knife in his back hard enough? You came by for seconds? Unlike you, I'm actually loyal to my friends. I stick by them no matter what." Jimmy shot back in a cold tone. "I thought you were different. I thought you wanted to make a difference and change the world. What happened to the Lois Lane that never backed down? Did she ever really exist?"

"Jimmy," Perry warned but Jimmy ignored him.

"No, of course not! She's gone. Just like the Planet! Just like CK! Just like everything!" Jimmy raged angrily.

"Gone?" Lois looked at him confused, but Jimmy cut her off, ignoring her question.

"So what's the plan now? Sit around planning parties and become the new face on the society page?" Jimmy taunted.

"Maybe if you're lucky Luthor will let you play reporter at one of his media conglomerates so you can pretend like nothing's changed. Maybe he'll buy you that Pulitzer you've always wanted. I mean, you've got the dough now, right?"

"It is not like that!" Lois yelled back at him angrily. "You have no idea how hard this has been on me or how much I wish that..."

"That what?" Jimmy scoffed bitterly. "You wish things would have been different? You wish you hadn't up and abandoned your friends when we needed you most? I can't believe I actually thought you were my friend. Friends stick by one another. Friends are there. Friends listen to one another. Friends don't disappear from one another's lives like they never existed!" Jimmy continued to raise his voice growing more and more angry with each word as his voice rose. He shot a look of disdain toward Lois then sneered, "Why don't you go back to planning your wedding, *Mrs. Luthor*?"

That was the last straw. Lois lifted her hand and struck Jimmy hard across his cheek. She could feel the burn against her hand from how hard she struck him. Her arms were shaking from the anger raging in her veins.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that, you ungrateful little brat!" Lois moved to jab her hand in his chest, knocking him down. "You don't get to decide what I feel or what I..."

"Okay, both of you back it up!" Perry ordered, grabbing Lois by the shoulders. "Now obviously there are a lot of high emotions right now. Why don't we all just calm down and take a breath."

"What are you even doing here?" Jack snapped.

Lois stared at him with a snort. "I don't even know anymore." With that she turned on her heel and Perry chased after her.

"Lois! Get back here!"

She made it halfway across the parking lot when Perry caught up with her. Jimmy and Jack were a few feet behind him. "What?" She glared at him. "Obviously I'm not welcome here. So, I'm leaving. Thank you so much for reminding me why I don't trust easily and why I don't have friends."

A loud rumble filled the air and they turned to look toward the sound. The glass on the windows of the apartment building began to crack and a low whine could be heard as fire erupted from below.

"Run!" Perry yelled, pushing her back as they raced to get as far away from the blast as they could. Lois stared at the yellow, orange, and white flames that engulfed Clark's apartment building in shock.

"Call the police!" she heard Jimmy say.

"No!"

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### *Three Months Later...*

Lois parked her car outside the familiar parking lot. The blackened brick and ash covered concrete that remained still haunted her. She took a deep breath, staring up at the building that had now become condemned. The yellow police tape, marking the area off hung halfway on the ground.

A tap on her window caused her to jump, turning to see the friendly face staring back at her, "Bobby, don't scare me like that!" she scolded, rolling her window down.

"Sorry, kid," he said, opening up the passenger seat and climbing inside. She glanced out the window and rolled her window up. "A little jumpy today, I see."

"Well, having to change everything about myself in order to stay under the radar does that," Lois shot back snidely, handing him the brown bag from Marco's she'd picked up. "One Bobby special with the works. Now, what did you find out?"

"Ah, girl, you always deliver," he cheered, taking a bite of the enormous sandwich. He reached over and took a slurp from his soda, swallowing with a big gulp.

"Bobby?" she prompted, looking back at him with an annoyed expression.

"So, your boyfriend was last seen at his apartment just like your contact said," Bobby said in-between mouthfuls. "But no one can confirm he was inside the building when it blew like the STAR said."

"I know that, Bobby," Lois said hurriedly.

Bobby looked at her with a worried expression. "You really think...?"

"I don't know," Lois lied coldly. "Anything's possible I suppose." She flipped her hand through her hair. "What about Lex?"

"Guy's got an army like Fort Knox around him at all times. I'm not sure how you think you'll get to him," Bobby responded.

"I'll find a way," Lois reassured him. "What about your sister? Was she able to get anything from that tape?"

"No, it's completely damaged." Bobby shook his head. "But I did spot your guy Truesdale sporting a new car last week."

"Lex." Lois grimaced.

"That's what I'm thinking," Bobby gave her a worried look. "You sure about this?"

"It's the only way I'm going to know what happened to Clark," she said, staring at her reflection in the rear view mirror. She caught the glimpse Bobby gave her and gave him a weak smile, "Hey, don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"This is dangerous even for you, kid," Bobby reminded her. "And there ain't no Superman to come to your rescue this time. No one's seen the big guy in months. He just up and disappeared and..."

"I know." Lois glanced back at him. "But with any luck when I find out what happened to Clark I'll find Superman."

"You seem awfully sure of that," Bobby observed.

"I have to be." Lois smiled weakly.

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### *Three Months Ago...*

The smoke cleared as the firehose blasted the flames at full blast. Lois stared at the scene of wounded families being tended to. On the edge of the crowd she spotted, Linda Monarch, one of the anchors from LNN setting up equipment to cover the news of the fire. The nurse tending to the cut on her arm seemed just as rattled by the event as she was. Her hand trembled against her arm as she attempted to wipe it with antiseptic.

She looked around, hoping to see a familiar face. Over by the congestion of officers and firemen, Perry was talking to one of the officers. From his face, she could tell the news wasn't good.

"It's gone," she heard Jimmy say as he walked past her. Jack walked a few steps behind, shaking his head.

"I'm fine, really." She gave a weak smile, standing to her feet

and moving to follow them. She waited a few moments before she approached them and asked, "What's gone?"

"What?" Jimmy looked back at her evasively, unwilling to meet her eyes.

"You said *'it's all gone'*. 'What's all gone?' she repeated, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Nothing, Lois. Don't worry about it." Jimmy waved her off.

Jack glared at Jimmy for a moment then turned to Lois, "Clark's missing."

"What?" Lois looked at him in surprise. She heard the words but it still seemed foreign to her mind as she heard Perry repeat what Jack had already said.

"Clark's missing."

"Missing?" Lois looked behind her, seeing Perry's solemn face. "What do you mean, *missing*?"

"We don't know, darlin. He just up and disappeared," Perry explained, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"But..." she frowned, unsure how to process the information she'd just been given. Her mind continued to race as she recalled her last conversation with Clark this morning. The painful words they'd said to one another and the image of him walking away. How could he be missing? "I just saw him!" She made the statement louder than she should as if that would change the fact that Clark was missing.

"What are we going to do?" Jimmy asked, pointing toward the burning building behind them.

Her eyes moved to the blackened brick that was slowly being revealed as the fire from the explosion began to fizzle out. How many times had she pulled up to this building and shared a laugh, a movie and meal? Now, it was gone. She felt a tear escape her eyes as she realized how that part of her life was gone forever. The door on that part of her life had been destroyed the moment that bomb had gone off.

"We'll figure something out," Perry reassured him. His words seemed empty as he continued, trying to give them a false sense of security. "The first thing we need to do is..."

"Find Clark," Jack piped in, throwing darts at her with a glare. "Maybe we should start with Luthor's dungeon."

Lois immediately went on the defensive. "Lex would never..."

Jimmy was quick to cut her off, "Oh, please, Lois, for all of our sakes don't even bother finishing that statement. Don't you dare defend him! After everything he's done? CK is *missing*!! Do you get that? He left and he never came back!" Jimmy snorted, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared back at her.

It felt like he was twisting the knife in deeper as he spoke, avoiding her gaze. No matter what Jimmy had always been by her side. He'd been her support system and friend for the longest time. Now he looked at her as if she were a bug in need of squashing.

She felt a lump in her throat as she listened to her friend tear into her with such malice. Of course she understood Clark was missing but that didn't mean Lex had anything to do with it. She swiped at the tear in her eyes as Jimmy continued his verbal assault.

Jimmy looked at her with disdain, shaking his head at her. "You know he was killing himself trying to prove all of this ...not to bring down Lex Luthor. No, to stop you from marrying this... psychopath! This murderer that you somehow agreed to ...to...marry! You don't even know the guy!"

She could feel the goosebumps rise on her arms as she stared back at Jimmy. The white, hot anger steaming from his words as he continued his verbal assault on her. She wanted to respond but found her brain unable to form a response. Tears of anger ran down her cheeks as her throat closed up on her.

Psychopath.

Murderer.

How could Jimmy think these things about Lex?

She knew Jimmy was angry and feeling lost after the loss of

the Planet but projecting that onto Lex wasn't fair. "That is not fair!" she finally managed to respond in-between sobs of anger.

"Fair?" Jimmy scoffed, letting out a mocking laugh. "You want to talk about fair? Lex Luthor basically made us jobless and homeless for some pocket change! You know, I lost my apartment? I was living in my *car*. For what?"

Lois felt her features harden as she stared back at Jimmy. The anger in Jimmy's eyes bore a hole in her as she finally found her words. The painful words he'd lunged at her hung in the air but she could focus on was the unfounded claims against Lex whom had done nothing to deserve his harsh judgement. "That doesn't make any sense!" Lois argued on instinct. "He has money. Lots of it. Why would he...?"

"Gee, that answers everything, doesn't it?" Jack asked sarcastically with the roll of the eyes. "He has money so he couldn't possibly be behind a conspiracy to get more! I mean, we've never heard of a case of a good businessman doing dirty deals to keep the cash flow coming in, right? You of all people should know that everyone puts on a front."

Lois narrowed her eyes at Jack, feeling her blood boil at the implication of Lex being less than trustworthy. It seemed Clark's mistrust of him had spread among her former friends.

Now, Clark was missing.

Clark was *missing*.

That thought sent a range of emotions through her as she struggled to rationalize against the empty accusations being leveled at her fiancé. Though she still felt uncertain imagining herself as Mrs. Luthor she still felt compelled to defend him against the verbal assault thrown toward him.

"There has to be a reason. He..." Lois stopped herself, recalling her last conversation with Clark.

<<"Clark, *can't you see what's happening?* All you're doing is driving us further and further apart."

"I'm not the one doing the driving, Lois. You are.">>

"Of course, you'd defend him!" Jimmy snorted.

"What is your problem?" Lois shot back angrily.

"What's our problem? Look around!" Jack jumped in, and pointed to the burning building. "Our friend—Your partner—supposedly your friend is missing. The place we were staying at just blew up and a whole lot of people are homeless and all you seem to be able to do is defend the lowlife behind everything!"

Lois glanced from Jack to Jimmy who was staring down at the ground, shaking his head. Remorse washed over her and she sighed. "I'm sorry you lost your job, Jimmy, really I am, but the Planet bombing was not Lex's fault and..."

"Well, it certainly wasn't my fault either!" Jack interjected angrily.

"Well, the evidence sure does say differently, doesn't it?" Lois snapped back angrily.

"You know what?" Jack jabbed his finger in her face. "You deserve everything that's coming to you."

"Okay, that's enough, both of you!" Perry barked. "Now, Lois, I know you have a lot of strong emotions right now. We all do." He looked at her with a stern expression before he continued, "but I swear to God if you try to blame the Planet bombing on Jack one more time you're going to see a side of me you're not going to like."

"Fine, I'll sit here and say nothing while everything goes to hell," Lois muttered just loud enough for Perry to hear. He gave her a look but didn't say anything.

"In case you all have forgotten, we've got a serious problem here." Perry pointed to the burning building behind them.

Lois immediately backtracked, catching herself as she realized how petty she was being, fighting with Jack and Jimmy when everyone in Clark's building was now homeless. She glanced down, feelings of guilt washing over her as she took in her surroundings. People were homeless. Clark was missing and here

she was arguing about what may or may not have happened to a place that had become all of their home for so long. They all lost something that day.

“Yeah, CK is missing.” Jimmy ran a hand through his hair, throwing a disapproving look toward Lois.

She wanted to say something, do something to break down the iron gate prison walls Jimmy had up, keeping her at arm’s length. “Jimmy,” she began at the same time Jack threw a sarcastic remark toward her.

“And big surprise,” Jack snapped irritably. “Lois couldn’t care less.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve you little...” Lois lunged forward to swing at him and Perry grabbed her from behind and placed his arm between the three of them.

“That’s enough out of all of you,” Perry ordered, looking back at Jack and Jimmy. “We’ve got more important things to do than argue amongst ourselves.”

“Fine,” Jack shrugged, under Perry’s glare.

“Fine,” Jimmy agreed, staring at his feet.

“Lois?” Perry looked at her expectantly.

“Fine,” Lois repeated, crossing her arms over her chest and looked back at Jack and Jimmy, taking a deep breath. “I may have been a little out of line.”

“A little?” Jack glared at her.

“Can it!” Perry ordered, preventing the tension from escalating any further. “Now, let’s just calm down here and see if we can figure out what happened to Clark...” He looked up toward the burning building. “And who’s behind this.”

Lois followed his gaze, uncertain how to react. She felt numb. She let out a low breath and turned back to him. “How long?”

“What?” Jimmy asked.

“How long has Clark been missing?” Lois asked.

“We think since about mid-morning,” Perry responded with a defeated sigh. “Last time we heard from him was when we all checked in after...” He stopped, glancing at her uncertainly.

“After what?” Lois asked, looking back at him expectantly.

“Well, there’s no easy way to say this,” Perry said, staring back at her. “We’ve been looking into the bombing of the Daily Planet.”

“...and Lex Luthor,” Jack added darkly.

Lois let out a muttered curse. “Why am I not surprised?” She stared back at Perry in shock. “*You’re* investigating Lex? Really, Perry?”

Perry ignored her, continuing on, “We have been investigating the bombing of the Planet which, yes, led us to investigating Lex Luthor.”

Jimmy nodded, shrugging his shoulders. “He was the owner at the time and the one with the most to gain.”

“Right.” Lois shook her head. “Glad to see Clark’s spreading his distrust of Lex amongst friends.”

“I’ll be the first to admit I don’t like him, Lois, but right now we’re just going where the evidence is pointing,” Perry responded.

“Which is where?” Lois asked. “LexCorp? Chief, you can’t seriously think that...”

Perry sighed, then continued, cutting her off. “We have evidence linking the Planet’s bombing to someone...”

“Well, had,” Jack interjected, pointing to the building behind them.

Lois stared back at the building simmering with white smoke as the firefighters put the rest of the fire out. She felt a lump in her throat as she stared at the blackened brick. All the memories of the fights and late night talks came rushing back to her. Everything was different now. No more chasing down stories. No more investigations that would lead to their dual by-lines on the front page of the most prestigious newspaper in the world.

She felt tears running down her cheeks and choked out a sob, “I can’t even be angry at him because he’s...”

“Gone,” Jack scowled at her.

“Yes, Clark’s gone. Everything’s gone.” Lois groaned angrily. “The Planet is...gone. Everything is...” She felt her throat tighten up as a sob escaped.

“That’s the first time you mentioned losing the Planet,” Jimmy acknowledged, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I didn’t know you cared.”

“Of course, I care,” Lois scoffed, looking back at him. “The Planet was home.”

“Yeah, it was,” Jimmy smiled softly. The hardness of his features began to fade and he sighed. “I can’t believe we lost everything.”

Lois recalled what Perry was trying to tell her earlier. She turned to him, “Chief, you said you found evidence in the Planet bombing?”

Perry placed a hand on her other shoulder. “We, uh, think the boss was behind the Planet’s bombing.”

“The boss?” Lois asked, glancing back toward him. “The boss that everyone whispers about but no one has a name or a face? *That* boss?”

“The one and the same,” Perry responded with a sigh.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and her throat went dry. “No one has been willing to point the finger at this guy. All he is is whispers and innuendos. No name. No face.”

“Clark was looking into a possible lead on who he thought the boss was,” Perry explained, looking her square in the eye.

“What?” Lois shook her head, realizing just how much trouble her former partner may be in. “Is he out of his mind? Do you have any idea how dangerous this could be? Did he at least let Superman know where he was going?” she began to ramble, feeling a panic rise inside her. “What if he...?”

“Easy, easy, easy,” Perry placed both hands on her shoulders and tried to calm her down. “Just take a breath.”

Clark was missing.

The boss of all people was behind the Planet bombing.

Clark went after the boss.

Clark was missing.

“Who did he think it was?” Lois asked, afraid to find out the answer. He looked away, staring back toward the building that was covered in white smoke from the fire that had been ablaze for the last half hour.

“I’m not going to get into this now, Lois.” Perry shook his head. She watched in surprise as Perry ran a hand across his forehead, his face full of anguish. He let out a low growl, “Everything! It’s over! It’s all gone! The board member’s testimony, the guy that framed Jack, the insurance policy...”

“Wait, what? What are you talking about?” Lois asked, not following how he’d gotten from the boss to the mention of an insurance policy and Jack.

<< “*You’re an investigative reporter. Investigate.*” >>

Realization crossed her mind and then it clicked. “You think the boss is behind this, don’t you?”

“What do you think?” Jimmy asked, his eyebrow arched at her. “Clark’s missing. The evidence we gathered against the boss is gone.”

She opened her mouth to respond but stopped herself when she spotted something...someone in the corner of her eye that was out of place. There against the edge of the crowd was a familiar figure running toward an awaiting SUV parked on the corner. “Is that...?”

Mrs. Cox.

“Lois?” she heard Perry call after her but she brushed him off, racing to catch up to the SUV as it pulled away. She frowned, narrowing her eyes when she saw the custom license plate on the vehicle as it pulled into traffic. As the SUV turned she saw the face of Mrs. Cox staring back at her from the rear window.

What was Lex’s personal assistant doing at Clark’s apartment

building?

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Four hours.

Lex did his best to control his emotions as he stared at the clock in his study. No sign of her at her apartment. No phone calls. She'd been seen outside of Clark Kent's apartment. The eve of their wedding and she'd gone to his apartment.

'Never again,' he thought to himself, reaching for the glass of bourbon on his desk. After tonight those days would be over. He'd made sure that once Lois was finally his wife she would learn her place. Showing up at her former partner's apartment was a sure way to have the papers talking. Thankfully, Mrs. Cox had been quick on her feet, taking care of three problems in one.

"Where do you want these, Mr. Luthor?" a voice called from the hallway.

He looked up to see Nigel standing in the doorway with a group of movers behind him.

"This way," he instructed, pointing them toward the hallway that led to the master bedroom.

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Lois had done her best to keep up but the driver of the SUV had disappeared behind a tractor trailer and she'd lost him. She still couldn't come up with a reasonable excuse for what Mrs. Cox could possibly be doing at the scene of the bombing that had taken place this afternoon.

All the residents of Clinton Street were now homeless.

Clark was missing.

Who was this boss?

Lois reached for the door handle to her apartment, turning the locks, on autopilot as she entered the familiar surroundings of her apartment and slammed the door behind her.

She turned to put her things on the side table and stopped when she noticed it was missing. Her eyes narrowed when she looked around the apartment. All her furniture was gone. Her knick knacks and pictures on the wall were gone. She stared at the empty apartment, feeling the hair on the back of her neck stand up and reached for the door knob behind her. A sound came from the bedroom and she tensed, uncertain what she'd walked into.

"Hello?" she called out, tightening her grasp on the knob. She should run but she didn't have anywhere to go. She didn't have anyone to call. Perry was supposed to call her once he and the guys checked into a room,

"Oh, I see you've caught me," the sinister voice of Mrs. Cox came as she entered the room. "I thought I was going to have to take a detour on the way back. Thanks for saving me a trip."

Lois stared at the woman in shock, trying to figure out how she had gotten into her apartment and what she was doing here as she glanced around the empty apartment once more. "What is this?" Lois finally found her voice.

Mrs. Cox smiled, "Lex wanted to make sure you didn't have to lift a finger."

Lois narrowed her eyes at the woman. "Is that so?"

"I would have gotten this done sooner but something came up." The woman smiled back at her, letting out a gleeful laugh. "You understand?"

Lois thought she heard a hint of something sinister behind her laugh. She stared at her, uncertain how to respond. "You were following me," Lois accused, her eyebrows narrowed as she stared back at the woman.

"Just doing my job," she responded smoothly.

"And what is that exactly?" Lois asked.

"Whatever is required," the smile that smoothed across her face seemed far more sinister than the one she'd seen the other day. The woman's lips pursed and her jaw tightened as her eyes narrowed at her. "Come now, Ms. Lane, surely you aren't naïve to think you could go traipsing around town without Lex catching wind," Mrs. Cox stared her down coldly.

Something in her eyes, reflected a darkness Lois had never seen before. She'd never liked the woman. Not from her first meeting, but there was something more. Something darker. She felt a chill run down her spine as her mind raced to process what Mrs. Cox was implying.

"What are you ...?" Lois felt her mind begin to race as the pieces fell into place. "Lex had you follow me?"

<<"You're an investigative reporter. Investigate.">>

"I believe it's time to get back to the Penthouse. We wouldn't want any more accidents to happen, now would we?" Mrs. Cox smoothed a sinister smile across her face.

<<"Whatever is required,">>

What did that mean? The longer she stood here under Mrs. Cox's gaze the more her reporter's instincts began to go off. Normally when that happened she was sparring off with a known criminal, not staring down her fiancé's personal assistant and suspecting she was behind something far more sinister than following her to Clark's apartment. Had Lex told his assistant to follow her or had she done that on her own?

<<"From what I've heard, I'd be better off out there with the cops on my tail than you, Mr. Luthor.">>

<<"You're an investigative reporter. Investigate.">>

<<"We, uh, think the boss was behind the Planet's bombing.">>

Something wasn't right. She blanched slightly as the pieces began to fall into place. The buried memory came to the forefront of her mind along with those from her conversations with Perry and Clark today. If Lex had put Mrs. Cox on her tail and he was dangerous enough that a known criminal didn't trust having him on his tail... What if...

'No, that's crazy,' she told herself quickly squashing the doubt that had rose up in her mind. 'Isn't it?'

<<"You were following me,"

"Just doing my job,"

"And what is that exactly?"

"Whatever is required,">>

<<"We, uh, think the boss was behind the Planet's bombing.">>

"Pretty convenient timing." Her eyes narrowed as she stared back at Mrs. Cox, realizing the person behind the bombing could be standing right in front of her. "You showing up at the scene of the arson and then disappearing when you've been spotted."

"The same could be said about you as well, Ms. Lane," Mrs. Cox gave a warning glare.

"What did you do?" Lois' eyes narrowed as she reached for the door behind her.

"I wouldn't do that," Mrs. Cox held up a 9mm. "Don't make me do this the hard way, Ms. Lane."

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## Chapter 2

Clark doubled over in pain as he felt the searing pain from the poisonous bars that surrounded him. The room was spinning. The bars around him were closing in. He had to get out of here.

He had to get to Lois.

He had to get her away from that monster.

He had to...

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

<<"I live in a fantasy world? Perhaps, but my fantasy's about to come true,">>

He let out a low groan as the pain from the radioactive poison burned against him. "Lois..."

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Perry checked the time on the digital clock once more, letting out a heavy sigh as he paced around the hotel room. Jack and Jimmy had gone to the corner store to get something to eat, but food was the last thing on his mind. Lois believed him. He knew

she did. He had called her apartment over a dozen times now but each attempt he was met with an automatic unable to connect the call message.

Something was wrong. He could feel it in the pit of his stomach. The problem was he didn't know what to do. Should he wait here for Lois to call? Should he try and track her down? What he really needed was to track down Superman but unfortunately the two people he normally went to to track him down were missing.

He let out a short plea, praying it would be heard, "Superman!"

"Chief?" He turned around to see Jimmy and Jack staring at him with a bemused expression. "You okay?"

Perry shook his head, uncertain how to respond.

"Mr. White?" Jack looked at him in concern.

"Let's go," Perry said, finally making a decision as he reached for the keys to his car.

"Where are we going?" Jimmy called after him, racing to keep up.

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The room felt like a thousand degrees. Lois let out a short gasp as she narrowed her eyes at Mrs. Cox staring back at her. A million thoughts raced through her mind as she slowly found her voice, "You never answered my question."

Mrs. Cox thinned her mouth into a devilish smile, "I think you already know the answer, Ms. Lane."

"You set the bomb, didn't you?" Lois asked, uncertain if she wanted the answer.

The woman smirked at her and she felt a chill run down her spine. The silent response sent Lois' mind racing. No matter which way she asked the question Mrs. Cox had deflected. She didn't deny she'd set the bomb. She didn't deny Lex had instructed Mrs. Cox to follow her. She didn't deny it.

An innocent person would have denied it all, right?

<< "Clark, can't you give up on this ridiculous idea that Lex Luthor is the root of all evil in Metropolis?"

"Why should I give it up, Lois, it's true." >>

<< "We, uh, think the boss was behind the Planet's bombing." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois."

"Goodbye? We're partners!"

"You don't need a partner, Lois. You never did."

"Maybe not, but I was starting to like having one." >>

<< "Incredible."

"What?"

"You. Prize winning investigative journalist."

"Is there a point?"

"How can you be so blind? I mean, you look right at the guy and you don't have a clue as to who he really is." >>

<< "Clark was looking into a possible lead on who he thought the boss was." >>

She didn't deny it.

"All those people," Lois heard her voice crack as she stared at the woman's dark gaze.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mrs. Cox lied.

"I think you do," Lois challenged.

Mrs. Cox shrugged nonchalantly. "I was told to take care of a problem and I took care of it. I always do." She held her gaze on Lois as she squinted her eyes at her. "I'm a woman of my word, Ms. Lane. When I say I'm going to do something I actually *do* it."

"Loyalty to the wrong person can get you killed," Lois warned, inching her way toward the door. Just a few more feet and she'd have the doorknob within her grasp. She had to get out of here. The tightening in her abdomen grew as she stared back at Mrs. Cox. "Whose problem were you cleaning up after?"

"You reporters." Mrs. Cox frowned at her. "You always were too curious for your own good. I never understood the attraction."

"What problem?" Lois repeated as she tightened her jaw, uncertain she wanted to know the answer. She wouldn't be distracted by the jabs Mrs. Cox threw at her.

"Did you really think you could double cross him with that partner of yours and not pay the consequences?" A sinister laugh escaped her lips.

"What are you talking about?" Lois snapped angrily. The woman's lips tightened and her eyes darkened as a sick feeling washed over her. Realization hit her like a ton of bricks. "The bomb." She felt her insides churn. *'It was meant for Clark.'*

The glint in Mrs. Cox's eye told her she was correct. "A tragic accident. Those old buildings never do keep up with the building code. Tsk, tsk, tsk... Lucky you weren't inside, Ms. Lane." Mrs. Cox shook her head. "Lex didn't want any distractions tonight and keeping you out of trouble appears to be a full-time job."

Lois felt her knees go weak as her mind continued to race, trying to make sense out of Mrs. Cox's admission. Lex had put her on Lois' tail. Lex didn't want her in any trouble. The insinuation she'd made about her being at Clark's apartment building. What if...?

*'No, that's crazy!'* her mind shouted at her. *'Is it?'*

Could Lex have been behind the bombing? Mrs. Cox didn't do anything it seemed without his okay. There's no way she had packed up Lois' apartment and followed her to Clark's apartment without him knowing. There's no way he *didn't* know.

<< "Lex and I don't have secrets." >>

<< "I have been in love with you for a long time...you had to have known." >>

<< "The truth is that Lex Luthor may be hiding from you what really happened to the Planet. I've been doing some digging and..."

"I know why you're doing this." >>

<< "Sometimes, out of jealousy or frustration, I've overreacted. I've been ruthless toward my enemies. But, as God is my witness, I swear to you, from this moment on, I will change. I no longer want to hurt anyone." >>

<< "You told me your feelings and you were hurt. I'm sorry about that, Clark, but all this is just sour grapes."

"Lois, what if I find evidence?"

"Clark, you're talking about a man I trust and admire...who's always been completely truthful with me." >>

Clark had tried to warn her about Lex and his nefarious deeds but she didn't listen. Was this the dark side of him Clark was trying to warn her about? A sick feeling washed over her as she wondered to herself, *'She thought Clark was inside when the bomb exploded.'*

<< "I thought you were different. I thought you wanted to make a difference and change the world. What happened to the Lois Lane that never backed down? Did she ever really exist?" >>

<< "I'm no saint, Lois. I've done questionable things in pursuing success. Unfortunately, that's the nature of big business." >>

<< "What exactly does a personal assistant do?"

"Whatever's required." >>

<< "You were following me."

"Just doing my job."

"And what is that exactly?"

"Whatever is required." >>

Lois tightened her hand on the built-in bookshelf behind her. The door was just another few feet. Another few feet and she could make a run for it. The longer she waited here the more she felt like a sitting duck. Every warning Clark and Perry had given her over the last few months continued to race through her mind.

<< "Sometimes, out of jealousy or frustration, I've overreacted. I've been ruthless toward my enemies." >>

Was Lex really capable of killing hundreds of innocent people just to send a message?

<<“Clark was looking into a possible lead on who he thought the boss was.”>>

‘She thought Clark was inside.’ The thought crossed her mind once more and she swallowed hard, unsure if she wanted to think too far down that path.

<<“You think the boss is behind this, don’t you?”

“What do you think? Clark’s missing. The evidence we gathered against the boss is gone.”>>

She reached for the door handle and let out a short gasp when the door opened and she turned to see Lex standing in the doorway. “Lex, what are you doing here?”

He looked to Mrs. Cox, “Have the car brought around, hmm?”

Lois watched in surprise as Mrs. Cox exited the apartment, leaving her alone with Lex. A smooth smile spread across Lex’s face as he closed the door behind Mrs. Cox and turned his attention to Lois. “Well, it appears we have some things to catch up on, don’t we, darling?”

“Like your setting a bomb off on Clinton Street?” Lois asked, feeling her insides turn to ice when she saw the recognition across his face. “Don’t deny it. I know it was you.”

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Bill Henderson bit off a bite from his burrito, looking over the latest report from the crime lab. He glanced over at the time and to the phone casually. It wasn’t like Kent not to show up for an appointment. He’d promised to bring everything he had on the boss and a statement from Superman regarding the boss’ criminal activity. So far, Kent had been a no-show.

The phone on his desk rang and he reached over to pick it up. “Henderson.”

Becky, the dispatcher smacked her lips over the phone. “Hey, Bill, I got a live one for you. Some southern guy with an accent and a bad attitude talking about taking down the boss. He claims to know you. I think it’s a prank caller...”

“Nah, put him through Becca,” Henderson interjected.

“Your funeral,” she warned. A beep could be heard through the handset and Perry White’s voice came on the line.

“Bill? Is that you?”

“Hey, Perry, what’s up?” Henderson asked.

“I need your help,” he pleaded. “I think Lois is in a lot more trouble than she realizes and...”

“Look, as I told Kent I can’t just throw Luthor in jail because he doesn’t like the guy. If he’s committed a crime, I’ll investigate but I can’t do anything without any evidence.” Henderson explained calmly on the phone, peering around the empty police station. He stood up and crossed the office he was in to close the door.

“Well, that’ll be hard to come by given that everything we had is now in ashes,” Perry remarked bitterly.

“What?”

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“Don’t deny it. I know it was you.”

Her accusation hung in the air as she watched Lex’s face change through the different emotions. A stone-cold expression washed over him and he reached behind him to lock the door. “I think all this stress is beginning to get to you, Lois.” He shook his head. “Why don’t you let me call Dr. Kelly and ...?”

“Why so you can drug me into submission?” Lois accused, taking a few steps back as he approached her.

“Lois.” His face fell and hurt crossed his eyes. “I would never do such a thing. Now, it’s been a long day for everyone. We have a big day tomorrow. We’ll go back to the penthouse. I’ll have Maria make that chocolate soufflé you love so much and then we can just take a breath and...”

“I don’t need to take a breath, Lex,” Lois snapped at him angrily. “You can’t possibly think that I would go anywhere with you after what you’ve done!”

“And what is it you think that I’ve done?” Lex asked calmly,

taking another step toward her. “Arson is a bit of a reach, don’t you think, Lois?” He took another step and she felt the wall next to the kitchen hit her back. “Come now, darling, you know me.”

“I *thought* I did.” She shook her head angrily. “You had that despicable woman follow me.”

“To make sure you were all right,” he crooned, reaching for her wrist but she stepped out of his grasp. “I couldn’t have anything happening to you on the eve of our wedding.”

“There is no wedding,” Lois spat the words out like venom as she stared back at him angrily.

His eyes narrowed at her. “What?”

“I...I can’t.” she swallowed hard, watching the range of emotions change across his face. A small part of her felt guilty and she offered a meek, “I’m sorry, Lex, but I can’t do this. I can’t and I won’t be a part of whatever this is.” She tugged the ring off her finger and threw it on the ground.

She let out a muffled cry as the first blow came across her face. She felt her knees go weak as she struggled to remain standing, supporting herself at the last minute on the wall behind her. Her fists tightened as she felt the sting against her face. “That was a mistake,” She warned evenly.

Panic crossed his face momentarily before he responded in an eerie calm voice, “You are the one that made the mistake, Lois. Did you really think I wouldn’t respond to such a blatant slap in the face?” He grabbed her by the wrist and slammed it against the wall behind her. “All the months of patience and you think you can play me for a fool with that hack!”

“Let go of me!” she warned, struggling to free herself from his grasp.

“No!” Lex hissed angrily, tightening his grasp on her. “You’re mine!”

She pushed him back with her other hand and responded with a venomous, “I don’t belong to anyone, Lex!”

“I will not be made a fool of!” he warned.

“Go to hell!” she snapped, lunging toward the exit in a half-sprint only to be knocked down to the ground this time. She felt the sting from the blow across the right-side of her face and she let out a gasp, instinctually reaching up to cover her face to ease the pain.

His breathing was heavy as he stood over her with a predatory glare before he reached down and grabbed her by the arm. “You’re mine!”

“No!” Lois shouted vehemently as she glared back at him. She spat in his face, forcing him to loosen his grasp in order to wipe the saliva off of his face. She took advantage of the distraction and sprinted to her feet.

“Where are you going?” he called after her. She’d barely made it a few feet before she found him, the human wall, blocking her from exiting the apartment. “Get back here!” He reached over and grabbed her by the wrist.

“Stop!” she struggled to free herself from his grasp. “Get out of my way, Lex!”

“One year of being patient and playing second to that freak in a cape.” He glared at her with his menacing eyes, grabbing her jaw and forcing her to look at him. “That I could deal with but Kent? You will pay dearly for betraying me, my dear.”

“Let go of me, you bastard!” she growled at him angrily through gritted teeth. It hurt as his grip tightened on her and he leaned into her.

“How dare you betray me like that!” he accused venomously. “I sure hope you enjoyed yourself, Lois, because now I will make sure all my attention is focused exactly where it’s apparently needed ...on the wandering eyes of my bride-to-be.”

“I’m sure I speak for every woman whose held your attention before when I say, go to hell, Lex.” With that Lois lifted her knee up between his legs, rendering him motionless as he let out a loud curse.

She turned around to deliver a verbal blow, “Next time you want to level a building in revenge you might want to get your facts, Lex. You killed ten people and injured at least twenty... Because you thought I was cheating on you? You ignorant bastard! Clark is my friend. That’s it! I was trying to talk him into coming to the wedding... Not that it matters anymore.” She gave him a look of disgust. “I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last man on Earth. Clark was right about you. You’re a monster!”

The wheels began to turn in his head and realization washed over him. “Affair or no affair, I still won’t have you walking out on me.” He staggered to his feet and lunged toward her, grabbing her by both wrists. “You had no business running to Kent the night before our wedding.”

“You have no right to tell me what I can or can’t do, you controlling psychopath,” Lois snapped angrily as he leaned into her.

“Well, it’s no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that,” Lex warned in a menacing tone.

‘*He thinks Clark was in his apartment,*’ she realized staring back at him in shock. “What did you do?” She could smell the expensive bourbon from his breath as he let out a light chuckle. “Where is Clark? What did you do to him?”

“All this pity and emotion over a worthless hack...” Lex sneered.

“You can call Clark a hack all you want but you proved just how much you don’t compare to him *or* Superman,” she growled back angrily.

His grip on her tightened and panic began to rise within her. Lex’s harsh words dripped with acidity and malice as he sneered. “Oh, don’t I? Such passion and rage over your lowly partner. Really, Lois? You expect me to believe you worked side by side without a smidgen of attraction? I’m no fool!” His other hand moved to grip her jaw, forcing her to look at him. An amused expression washed over his face and he leveled his deadly warning, “I can destroy everything in your life with the snap of my fingers.”

“Like there’s anything left to destroy?” she accused, realization finally hit her. “You did it, didn’t you? You bombed the Planet. You framed Jack. It was all you.”

At first she thought he would deny it. He was so good at deflecting her questions and putting the blame on others, but he didn’t. A slow smile crossed his lips and his eyes grew dark. “A few calls to the banks and I was easily able to create a financial crisis within a month’s time. Something even you never questioned, my dear.”

Lois fought back tears, unwilling to let him see how shaken she was by his admission. “You scum-sucking, pathetic excuse of a man... Clark was right.”

“Yes, I never was able to fool that partner of yours,” Lex mused with a shrug. “He never quite understood how things work in Metropolis. My power in this city is unlimited.” His tone grew dark as he hissed in her ear, “That hack and Superman never could take a hint.”

“You framed an innocent kid.” Lois snapped through gritted teeth as she struggled to free herself from his grasp.

“Innocent is not what I’d call him,” He accused darkly. “I really found it so amusing that I was able to continue to keep this city... and most of all *you*... fooled for so long.” He let out a sinister laugh and taunted her, “How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis... and fail?”

Her eyes widened as realization hit her. The boss. He was the boss. Lex was the boss. Lex was behind everything. His thumb caressed the side of her face as he hissed in her ear. “I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this city without me knowing about it.” He let out a laugh. “That idiot Kent never

could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I’m unstoppable.”

<< “*You think the boss is behind this, don’t you?*”

“*What do you think? Clark’s missing. The evidence we gathered against the boss is gone.*”>>

<< “*Clark was looking into a possible lead on who he thought the boss was,*”>>

<< “*Sometimes, out of jealousy or frustration, I’ve over-reacted. I’ve been ruthless toward my enemies.*”>>

“Why are you telling me all this?” Lois snapped angrily. “You know I’m just going to go to the police.”

“Oh, and here all this time I thought you actually cared about someone other than yourself,” Lex whispered in her ear, closing his hand around her throat as he ridiculed in her ear. “You have far too many people in your life that I can snuff out of existence.” His gaze grew dark and his breath felt like lava against her cheek. “Like snapping a twig. Each and every one of them. Useless pawns that can be snuffed out at any second.”

“If you hurt any of them I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” he challenged, reaching behind him, pulling out a Smith and Wesson, pressing the barrel against her throat. She felt his grasp on her tighten and she let out a yelp as he brought her closer, hissing in her face before throwing her to the ground. “You never should have crossed me.”

Lois winced as she hit the floor, seeing spots as she lifted her head up from the floorboards. She let out a whimper when the cold barrel pressed against her chin. Lex pinned her arms over her head, holding them in place against the floor above her head. She felt the heat of her former fiancé’s breath against her. Her arms grew tired from the strain of fighting against him. “Let...go...of...me,” she hissed out angrily.

“Why? So you can run to your caped hero.” He laughed in a menacing tone, taunting her as he tightened his grasp on her, “Go ahead and call him. Let’s see if he shows up.” The confidence with which he threw out the dare. It was almost as if he knew Superman wouldn’t come.

‘*Why would he?*’ her mind screamed at her, reminding her of the last time she saw the man of steel.

She could feel tears burning in the corners of her eyes as she struggled against him. “Get off of me!” she let out a half-plea, “Somebody help!”

“Now, those aren’t the famous words he taunted her, pinning her hands against the floorboards. “Say it. I know you want to.”

“Help, Superman!” she cried out, gasping in surprise as she felt the cold barrel of his gun pointed under her chin as his bony fingertips ran down the front of her dress. Nothing. She didn’t know how but she had a sinking feeling Lex was behind Superman’s absence.

His breath reeked of old bourbon as he whispered in her ear, “Whoops! I guess he’s found other things to do tonight. It appears it’s just you and me.” His grip tightened on her and he growled in her ear in a menacing tone, “You think I wouldn’t have a contingency plan, hmm? Your precious Superman? Gone. Your partner? Gone. Your career? You won’t be able to show your face anywhere without me knowing. I’ll make sure you never so much as edit a note on a post-it.”

“Rot in hell you sociopath!!” she spat angrily at him, struggling against him. “Let...me...go!”

She tensed up as his mouth pressed against her neck. “Oh, Lois, darling, such a waste to have waited all this time and not reap the award that was promised to me,” he breathed in her ear.

Panic ran through her mind as he pressed himself against her. His grasp on her tightened and to her horror she felt the rough tips of his fingers slipping beneath her dress. “Get...off of...me...you bastard!”

The derogatory term was met with a slap across the face. She winced as she felt the blow but smiled inside when she felt his

grasp on her loosen. She fought against him, trying to get free of his grasp but found herself slammed against the hardwood floor beneath her. She could see spots in her peripheral vision as her head throbbed. Lex hissed in her ear, pressing against her with his body.

She continued to struggle, hoping to gain some leverage in order to escape his grasp. The more she struggled the tighter his grasp became. She opened her mouth to scream but found herself silenced by his cold palm, tightly pressed against her mouth, silencing any cries. “Did you really think I would let you just walk away?”

He ran the pistol against the fabric of her dress and she let out a yelp when the barrel pressed into her hip. She let out muffled cry as she felt a sharp blade press against her throat. She swallowed hard, doing her best to hide the panic she now felt. “You think you can just leave?” An eerie calm washed over him and she felt a chill run down her spine. “Tell me something darling,” his fingers slipped up her dress, kneading the flesh as she struggled against him “Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I’ve had you?”

“Get off of me you monster!” She struggled against him, trying to find the leverage she needed to escape his grasp.

A sharp object came in contact with her side and she whimpered, feeling the fabric from her dress give way. The cutting of fabric could be heard and the pain of a sharp object against her side could be felt. “Sweet nectar of the forbidden fruit,” he crooned as he ran his tongue against the newly exposed skin. The red droplets of blood still remained on his lips as he stared at her.

He removed his hand from beneath her dress, gripping her jaw to force her to look at him as he shoved her with a menacing whisper, “You chose this, Lois.”

“Get ....off...of...me!” She spat angrily, finally finding the leverage against the floorboards to push him off of her. She delivered a swift kick between his legs, causing him to keel over in pain. He fell to the ground and she scrambled to the door, praying to make it out of her apartment before....

“You aren’t ...going...anywhere...” He raged, throwing her against the built in bookcase. She fell to the ground in pain, struggling to pull herself up. Another blow knocked her down and she found herself pinned to the ground as Lex hovered over her, pointing the barrel of the pistol at her temple. He grabbed her jaw with his fist as he tightened his grasp on her. She gasped for air, struggling against him. It wasn’t enough. She felt her limbs begin to give out as she struggled for air.

He was going to win.

“I always get what I want.” He let out a sharp hiss in her ear as a painful stab filled her side and she cried out.

“Lex!”

Lois felt his grasp on her loosen as he looked behind her. She never thought she’d welcome the presence of Mrs. Cox until now. His fury-filled eyes softened and he released his grasp on her.

“She isn’t worth this, Lex. Let her go,” Mrs. Cox warned from behind her. Mrs. Cox’s tone was cold and menacing as Lex pushed himself off of her. “You’re letting your emotions cloud your judgement, Lex.” Lois didn’t dare move as the two stood over her. “You said you had the situation under control.”

“I am always in control, Mrs. Cox,” Lex responded. “You should know that.”

“What do you want to do?” Mrs. Cox asked.

“Leave her,” Lex responded with a sneer. “She won’t talk. Not while she thinks there’s a chance to save her Superman.” Lois clamped her eyes shut, suppressing the urge to cry out as a hard thud came in contact with her side. “She’ll bleed out in no time anyway.”

Lois let out a sigh of relief when she heard the back door close. She let out a short gasp, muffled by her tears as she reached down, holding the tattered fabric against her side where Lex had

cut her. She could feel the pain from Lex’s assault on her resonate throughout her body.

*‘Don’t panic, ‘she told herself. ‘I’ve gotta get help!’*

Slowly she began to drag herself toward the door. She was in trouble. She had to get help. She winced as the pain from her side burned against her. “Hel...!” she tried to call out, barely able to make a sound as her swollen vocal chords proved to be as valiant an enemy as her bleeding side.

After what felt like an eternity, the sound of pounding on the door could be heard and she let out a quiet sob. “Hel..p!”

“Police! Open up!”

Lois opened her mouth, trying to find her voice but her vocal chords felt like sandpaper as her response escaped in a frail whisper, “He...lp!”

\*\*\*

Bill Henderson kicked the door to the apartment open. He did his best to cover up his shock at the empty apartment as he went into action. “Lois?” He spotted her in the corner, holding a bloodied fabric to her side. Blood dripped on the floor around her as he knelt down next to her. “My God, what happened?”

“Get me...out of...here,” her response came through short gasps. Her teeth began to chatter and he immediately went into action, removing his coat and laying it over her.

He reached for his radio and pressed the call button to respond, “10-4, dispatch. This is Henderson. I’m at 1058 Carter Avenue, Metropolis. New Troy. Apartment 105. I need a bus. Victim is twenty-six year old. I have a possible 220. I need an ETA.”

“Back,” Lois said between chattering teeth.

“Don’t try to move,” he warned, seeing the amount of blood covering the fabric.

“He went...” Lois tried again.

“We’re gonna get you to the hospital. Do you want me to call someone?” Henderson asked, doing his best to remain calm.

“Ye...” she responded weakly.

“Holy crap!”

He turned to see his partner, Sargent Zymack standing in the doorway. “Is the perimeter clear?”

“Nothing but an empty parking lot out there.” Zymack looked at Henderson. “You call it in?”

“They’re on the way,” Henderson responded. He turned back to Lois. “Lois, who do you want me to call?”

“Probably her fiancé, right?” Zymack offered. “Lex Luthor.”

Before he could ask Lois shouted between uneven breaths, “No! No!”

Henderson saw something on her face he’d never seen before. Fear. His eyes narrowed, “Lois, who did this to you?”

“Le...x.”

\*\*\*

The last hour had been filled with question after question. Lois Lane stared at the white walls of Metropolis General as the nurse wheeled her back to her room. Thankfully there had been no serious injuries. A few stitches and a concussion was all she had suffered. It could have been much worse. It could have been so much worse. Her stomach tightened as she recalled the threats Lex had thrown at her. Flashes from her fight with Lex continued to plague her mind.

*<< “You think I wouldn’t have a contingency plan, hmm? Your precious Superman? Gone. Your partner? Gone. Your career? You won’t be able to show your face anywhere without me knowing. I’ll make sure you never so much as edit a note on a post-it. You never should have crossed me.” >>*

*<< “I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this city without me knowing about it.” >>*

Clark was right.

He had been right all along and she hadn’t listened to him.

Jimmy had tried to warn her.

Jack had tried to warn her.  
 Perry had tried to warn her.  
 <<“Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I’ve had you?”>>  
 <<“Goodbye, Lois.”>>  
 <<“If that’s what you want Lois then fine get in bed with the devil!”>>

The tears ran down her cheeks as the realization of how close she’d come to things being so much worse. The nurse stopped a few feet away from her room. She looked up at her in surprise and the woman gave her a knowing look. “You seemed like you needed a moment.”

<<“You think the boss is behind this, don’t you?”  
 “What do you think? Clark’s missing. The evidence we gathered against the boss is gone.”>>  
 <<“Clark was looking into a possible lead on who he thought the boss was.”>>

<<“Sometimes, out of jealousy or frustration, I’ve overreacted. I’ve been ruthless toward my enemies.”>>  
 <<“That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I’m unstoppable.”>>  
 <<“How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?”>>  
 <<“Well, it’s no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.”>>

Flashes from her confrontation with Lex crossed her mind and she closed her eyes, squinting away the tears that threatened to overtake her. Clark was gone. Superman was gone. Everything was gone.

“I’m fine,” Lois said, straightening up in the chair. “I just need to get out of here.”

\*\*\*

*Three Months Later...*

Lois glanced over her shoulder as she closed the door to her car. She tucked the 45 caliber pistol in her bag, checking once more to make sure she wasn’t being followed. She reached up to readjust her shades and combed a hand through her hair.

She hadn’t been here since the day she left town a few months ago. A chirp came from her purse and she reached in to pull out the burner phone she’d picked up a few hours ago. Jimmy was supposed to be calling with the location of Mrs. Cox. She took a deep breath, and pressed the green button to answer it. “Did you find her?”

“Over by the harbor,” the voice on the other end responded. “You sure you’re up for this?”

“Just stay where you are,” she responded, clicking the phone closed as she reached the first step leading up to the condemned building in front of her.

“Abandoned buildings aren’t really my thing.” A voice came from behind her and she jumped in surprise, readying herself to confront any potential attacker with full force. “You should be nicer to Olsen.” She spun and sighed in relief when she recognized Agent Davenport in front of her.

“I can’t afford to waste time on niceties, Davenport,” she retorted, shaking her head. “Did you bring it?” She glanced toward the envelope in his hands.

“Everything you need to stay under the radar until the trial,” he explained, handing her the envelope.

She ripped the seal and began flipping through the paperwork to make sure everything was in order.

“Henderson’s idea. We figured it’d be a good idea to have you both next of kin to one another.” Davenport shrugged. “It was the best we could come up with.” He grew quiet before asking, “What makes you so sure he’s out there?”

“I just know,” Lois said simply, tucking the paperwork back inside the envelope. “Anything new on the case?”

“Everyone’s running scared of Luthor.” His gaze took on a

worried expression as he looked at her. “Putting the entire case on your testimony is a big gamble.”

“I’ll be fine,” Lois insisted, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Coming back to Metropolis was a dangerous call,” Davenport warned. “If he knew you were here...”

“I have to find Clark,” Lois insisted. “I never should have left without...”

“The Coroner reported him deceased,” Davenport reminded her. “What makes you so sure this is a setup from Luthor? That blast...”

“I was there,” Lois argued. “Clark wasn’t in that building. He’s alive and I’m going to find him.”

“Not if Luthor finds you first,” Davenport warned. “Be careful.”

“Please.” Lois shrugged, giving a false sense of bravado. “Remember who you’re talking to.”

\*\*\*

*Three Months Ago...*

Martha Kent finished cleaning her paint brushes, tapping the water off the bristles when the phone rang. She sighed, mentally preparing herself for the phone call she knew would be coming. Lois’ wedding was just twelve hours away.

She picked up the phone, prepared to hear her son on the other end of the line.

It wasn’t.

“Mrs. Kent?”

Martha did her best not to react when she heard the hoarse voice on the other end of the line. “Lois?”

“I... I need help.”

Martha felt a lump in her throat and the hair on the back of her neck stand up when she heard the plea from the young woman. The Lois Lane she’d met and heard her son talk about didn’t waver. She knew if she was asking for help it was because she had nowhere else to turn. Despite everything she knew Clark still cared deeply for Lois. She also knew that despite Lois’ rejection there was a part of her that cared about him too...even if she didn’t want to admit it to herself just yet.

“Where are you?”

“Kansas City.” Lois’ voice cracked again and she heard the young woman’s voice crack again. “I...”

“I’m on my way,” Martha assured her. “Do you have an address?”

\*\*\*

### Chapter 3

*Three Months Later...*

Clark stared at the blank walls surrounding him, uncertain if it was safe to move yet. He’d heard them talking. The doctors continued to disbelieve him while he fought to have his story heard. How he’d gone from not wanting anyone to know to having his story told countless times to these prison guards in white jackets and discounted. Time and time again he said the scariest words he’d known.

*‘I’m Superman.’*

Each time it was met with laughter.

Each time it was met with disbelief.

He was trapped in a prison of his own making. His own arrogance had brought him here. He knew Luthor was up to something. He knew Kryptonite was in Metropolis. Now here he was trapped in a mental ward of all places –doomed to be forgotten while his enemy continued to tighten his grasp on Metropolis.

<<“You lost control, Lex! Since when do you get your hands dirty?”>>

<<“Lois Lane won’t be a problem. She’s sure to have bled out by now anyway.”>>

<<“You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I’d say that’s personal.”>>

He felt a bile rise in his throat as the memory of Luthor boasting about his attack on Lois rang in his ears. He could still feel the pain from each blow as his enemy had taunted him with the details. His stomach churned in knots as Luthor painted the picture of Lois helpless, unable to escape as she screamed for help and no one came. All he could do was pray it was another trick. He had used all of his strength to deliver a swift kick to Luthor's gut.

That was when he saw it.

The scratch marks and the blood on his hands.

It wasn't a trick.

He'd heard a loud crack as Luthor responded with an attack of his own. He could feel himself drifting in and out of consciousness as he became flooded with memories he wasn't even sure were real.

Then it had all been over. He'd woken up in this hell hole and faced with a man he'd never met and a room he didn't recognize. No matter what he did it was always the same.

The blood curdling pain of Kryptonite filling the room and his screams of agony that continued to be ignored. He pleaded with everyone to make it stop. He could show them if it would just stop.

It didn't.

It would never stop.

\*\*\*

*Three Months Ago...*

Clark looked around the stone covered wine cellar, uncertain what Lex Luthor could possibly want from Superman. Surely Luthor wasn't foolish enough to try and attack Clark on the eve of his and Lois' wedding but he never could be too sure. After his run-in with Jason Trask in Smallville he'd discovered how humbling being human truly was. Given the recent encounter outside Metropolis Savings and Loan he was sure the missing sample of Kryptonite from the lab had made its way to Metropolis.

Lex Luthor's secretary wore a smug expression as she closed the door behind him. A sense of dread filled him as he stared down the man he knew could very well destroy everyone and everything he loved. The fall of the Daily Planet and Jack's framing reeked of Luthor. He just had to prove it... and he would.

"What do you want, Luthor?" Clark finally responded, tightening his arms across his chest as he glared at Luthor, giving him an unimpressed look.

"A favor," the man responded with a smooth smile.

"A favor?" Clark choked back a laugh. "From me? You must be joking."

"Hear me out," Luthor insisted, turning toward him with an innocent expression that Clark knew was just a cover. He was up to something. Clark stared at him, refusing to respond and Luthor continued, "My fiancée, Lois Lane, *should* be deliriously happy at the prospect of our forthcoming wedding." Clark rolled his eyes, fighting the urge to throw out a sarcastic retort. Luthor shook his head, continuing on with his plea, "Unfortunately, she is not. She misses her friends from the Planet. Namely Clark Kent."

Clark stared at Luthor, uncertain how this affected him and wondering briefly if he should try to reach out to Lois again. Despite everything, he knew losing the Planet and their colleagues had affected her just as much as it had him. Luthor said she wasn't happy. Could she be having doubts? Could she finally be seeing there was more to Lex Luthor than met the eye?

"So?" Clark asked warily.

"So, you and Clark are friends. He was able to bring you here." Luthor motioned to him, strolling among the row of casks and Clark despite his wariness followed him.

"I'm not following," Clark responded, looking at Luthor in disbelief.

"I was hoping you could use your influence to convince Clark to attend our wedding. You're invited, too of course," Luthor said

quickly, turning to face him. A slow smile spread across his face and Clark stared back at him in disbelief.

"You live in a fantasy world, Luthor. Neither Clark nor I will ever do anything to support your marriage to Lois," Clark bit back, still in disbelief Luthor would ask such a thing. Surely he had to know he would never do anything to support what he was doing to Lois. The obvious manipulation and controlling behavior Luthor exhibited made him sick. He just prayed he would be able to get Lois to see it.

"I see," Luthor sighed, turning away from him. "Then, I suppose, you're of no further use to me."

A loud cranking noise could be heard and Clark stared up in disbelief, watching unimpressed as a hidden cage fell from the ceiling. '*Surely he's not this obtuse,*' he thought to himself. Did he seriously think steel bars would hold him? He took a step forward. "Bars won't hold me..." He felt a sick feeling wash over him as a familiar green light fill the walls around him. "...Luthor."

'*Don't react,*' he told himself, hoping to keep the bravado up and prevent Luthor from discovering his weakness.

"Oh? I think they will." Luthor called out to him as Clark fell to the ground, feeling the burning sensation from the Kryptonite pulse through his body. "I live in a fantasy world? Perhaps, but my fantasy's about to come true."

\*\*\*

The rich walls were covered in wood paneling and souvenirs from important people in history Franklin Stern had met. It wasn't every day that he took a meeting late at night. This was typically the time he spent prepping for the next day and handling any emergencies before retiring home to Loretta and the kids.

Normally he'd have let the request go to one of his Junior Partners but when he saw the name he decided to take the meeting. It wasn't everyday Perry White himself called you.

Franklin Stern felt a smile cross his face when he saw the elderly gentleman, worn down from life, it appeared, standing in his doorway. "Come in, Mr. White. Please, sit down." He gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

"Thank you for seeing me at this late hour," Perry White said, taking a seat in the lavish chair across from him.

"I work a fourteen-hour day, always have. If I show my face at home before eleven p.m. my wife calls the cops." He shared a good natured smile with the man and Perry let out a hearty laugh.

"I know what that's like all too well, Mr. Stern." Perry commented with a chuckle before his face grew more serious and he jumped into why he was there. "Knew."

Franklin Stern nodded in agreement, setting his pen down and folding his hands across his desk. "I miss reading the Daily Planet. It has imitators but no true successor. Metropolis has lost an asset."

"Those of us who worked there were proud to call it home," Perry remarked, his voice full of emotion as he continued, "That's why I've come."

Franklin Stern raised an eyebrow and nodded. "I didn't think you were looking for a fourth for Bridge."

Perry cracked a smile and continued, "Mr. Stern, you own television and radio stations. You have interests in book publishing, but have you ever considered owning a newspaper?"

Franklin Stern sighed, looking at the man across from him in sympathy. It wasn't an easy task he knew—looking for a buyer—especially for a paper that was out of business. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Mr. White, but there is *no* newspaper."

"The Daily Planet was more than concrete and girders. It was people with ideas and principles. Those still exist," Perry pleaded his case and Franklin Stern felt his chest flood with sympathy. It was apparent Perry White was one of those people that cared for the paper and held those ideals he talked about. "There is a newspaper. There is just no place to print it."

"Even if that were true, why would I want to own the Daily

Planet?” Stern asked.

“I can’t imagine anyone wanting anything else,” Perry said softly.

Franklin Stern mulled it over before shaking his head. “I’m sorry, but my answer is no.” Perry White looked down, standing to his feet. Stern stood as well. “I wish you luck, though, in finding some way to rebuild. If you do, you have my subscription.” He held his hand out for Perry to shake.

Perry nodded and turned toward the door. “I just hate to see Lex Luthor win.”

Franklin Stern looked up sharply. “What’s that?”

He could swear he just saw a smirk cross Perry’s face as he turned back to him. “Lex Luthor. We’ve gathered evidence that suggests he behind the Planet’s fall. Just like to see the expression on his face when...” Perry stopped and turned back to Stern. “Well, thanks again for seeing me.”

\*\*\*

“Why would I want to own the Daily Planet?”

The bold question caught Perry off guard for a moment before he was able to form his response. “I can’t imagine anyone wanting anything else,” Perry remarked solemnly, hoping against hope he could sway the older man to take a chance on the Daily Planet and everything the paper had stood for and meant to him and his fellow colleagues for so long.

Franklin Stern seemed to mull it over a moment longer before shaking his head and giving Perry the painful response, simultaneously crushing both his and the Daily Planet’s dreams of a second chance all at once. “I’m sorry, but my answer is no.” Perry looked down, mentally preparing himself for the questions he knew that would follow from Jimmy and Jack. This was their last chance. He stood to his feet and Franklin Stern stood along with him, extending his hand to shake. “I wish you luck, though, in finding some way to rebuild. If you do, you have my subscription.”

Perry nodded and turned toward the door. “I just hate to see Lex Luthor win.”

Franklin Stern looked up sharply and Perry wondered what was behind the pensive look he saw on the man’s face. “What’s that?”

Perry suppressed a smile as he turned back to him. “Lex Luthor. We’ve gathered evidence that suggests he behind the Planet’s fall. Just like to see the expression on his face when...” Perry stopped and turned back to Franklin Stern, uncertain how much information he should really be sharing given the circumstances. He cleared his throat and nodded. “Well, thanks again for seeing me.”

Franklin Stern nodded seeming to contemplate something and Perry turned to leave. His phone rang and he turned to answer. Before he could respond with a greeting Bill Henderson’s voice crackled on the other end. “Perry White?”

“Henderson?” Perry immediately recognized the inspector’s voice.

“I don’t have a lot of time. I need you to meet me at the Lexor in an hour.”

“Lexor?” his brow furrowed.

“Come alone,” Henderson instructed before hanging up.

\*\*\*

There was eerie calm in the dimly lit office as Nigel darkened the hallway inside the Luthor penthouse. His mind continued to race as he went over and over the possibilities to explain what he’d found in Lois Lane’s apartment. Each possible solution resulted in nothing good for his employer.

Nigel cleared his throat as he entered the study. At the desk he spotted the beautiful but deadly Mrs. Cox. “We have a problem.”

“You said you would take care of it,” Mrs. Cox responded, standing to her feet. He felt a chill run down his spine as he met her deadly gaze, eyes filled with fury as she approached him and

hissed angrily, “You didn’t take care of it?”

“When I arrived there was no one there.” Nigel replied coolly, trying to reflect a calm he didn’t feel at the moment. He felt goosebumps rise on the back of his neck as he stared back at the fiery brunette who looked unimpressed with the information. “The landlord was repairing a broken door.”

“What about the blood?” Mrs. Cox asked in a harsh whisper. Her face tensed as she stared back at him in disbelief, panic written all over her face.

“Clean as a whistle. No sign of any struggle and no sign or Ms. Lane,” Nigel remarked with a cold expression. “Would you like me to keep looking?”

She shook her head, allowing a slow smile to cross her face. “No, Nigel, I’ll take care of it.”

Nigel felt the skin on the back of his neck shudder when he heard the deadly mutter from behind him. “Take care of what Mrs. Cox?”

\*\*\*

Clark doubled over in pain from the poisonous meteorite that surrounded him. All he could focus on was the blood curdling pain that resonated through his body. His skin felt like it would melt off. His bones ached from the painful radiation emitting from the cage around him. What he wouldn’t give for just a second of relief.

A sound from above could be heard. He lifted his head a few inches off the cold cement ground, preparing himself to face whatever and who ever might appear. He caught a glimpse of the keyhole in the cage. Why would Luthor build a cage with a door?

\*\*\*

“Take care of what Mrs. Cox?”

The question loomed in the air as Lex watched both Nigel and Mrs. Cox look to the other. Lex tightened his fist that was still stained in blood. His dress shirt and jacket were still torn. He hadn’t even made it upstairs to change before he’d overheard the exchange between his top two lieutenants.

“Well?” He stepped inside the room, staring coldly at Mrs. Cox and Nigel. The loud crack of thunder could be heard outside as the drops from his soaked hair dripped down the back of his neck. He could feel his anger and distrust boiling over as he stared back at the two people he’d come to trust the most in his business dealings. Something told him he wouldn’t like the answer when Mrs. Cox responded.

“Lex, you haven’t changed,” Mrs. Cox remarked, looking at him in surprise. She did her best not to meet his gaze as she looked everywhere but to him. He followed her gaze to the puddle at his feet.

“I’m fine,” he snapped angrily, glaring back at her. “I have everything under control.”

“Control isn’t what I’d call what happened tonight, Lex,” Mrs. Cox remarked boldly.

“Airing our opinions now, are we, dear?” Lex frowned, his tone turned to ice as he caught his personal assistant’s steely gaze. “Now, you know me well enough to know I don’t take criticism well.”

“Be that as it may, sir, there is a need for concern,” Nigel spoke up, clearing his throat.

“Nigel, shouldn’t you be at the docks handling business?” Lex inquired, narrowing his gaze at the older man. Nigel’s response was a stare to Mrs. Cox and a silent frown as Mrs. Cox jumped in to rescue the older man from Lex’s wrath.

“I called him,” Mrs. Cox cut him off. At Lex’s confused expression she shook her head. “What did you expect me to do? You lost control, Lex! Since when do you get your hands dirty?”

“Or bloody for that matter,” Nigel interjected with an unamused expression as he stared at the bloodied sleeve of Lex’s suit.

Lex glanced down at the bloodstain on his shirt and smiled to

himself. “You’re only as strong as your biggest weakness, isn’t that right, Nigel?” His gaze darkened. “I have none.” His tone remained detached as he remarked calmly. “Lois Lane won’t be a problem. She’s sure to have bled out by now anyway.”

“Oh, has she?” Nigel asked, closing the distance between them. “That wasn’t the scene I came across when I was called to her apartment.” Nigel shook his head in disgust. “Since when am I cleaning up your messes, sir? Since when do you take matters into your own hands?”

“No one is cleaning up my messes, Nigel,” Lex barked back menacingly as his brow furrowed.

“What would you call it then?” Nigel asked, shrugging his shoulders. “You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I’d say that’s personal.”

“It was a delicate matter that required my attention,” Lex corrected, straightening his jacket as he turned to face Nigel. “Now, can I assume your presence here means the matter is handled? I don’t need any surprises.”

Nigel exchanged a look with Mrs. Cox before opening his mouth to respond. He could tell from the expression on Nigel’s face he wouldn’t like the response. “The matter has been taken care of,” Mrs. Cox interjected.

A loud crash came from below and Lex looked to Mrs. Cox who nodded. Lex raced out the door and headed toward the corridor leading to the wine cellar below the study. He frowned when he noticed the door that led to the cellar was ajar. His palm tightened on the doorknob as he jerked the door open and raced down the stone staircase.

\*\*\*

Clark heard the door slam upstairs and listened as footsteps moved about in a frantic pace. He tensed, preparing himself for the worst when he heard the door above leading to the hell hole of a cellar he was in creak. Another confrontation with Luthor. Could he really stomach another conversation with Luthor’s smug, arrogant, narcissistic face?

A board cracked and he heard a creak then footsteps walking away. He let out a sigh of relief as he heard the retreating steps. His energy was diminishing by the second and he could feel the piercing pain pulse through his veins. His vision was blurry as he tried to focus on the lock to the cage he was in.

He felt a piercing pain as he did his best to muster any ounce of heat vision. He let out a low growl as the burning emitted from his eyes. He shouted in pain as the fire burned from his eyes and hit the keyed lock.

His head hit against the cement below him, letting out a low moan. His blurred vision came in and out as he tried to focus. He looked up and saw the melted keyhole and breathed a sigh of relief.

He was close.

*“You lost control, Lex! Since when do you get your hands dirty?”*

*“You’re only as strong as your biggest weakness, isn’t that right, Nigel? I have none. Lois Lane won’t be a problem. She’s sure to have bled out by now anyway.”*

*“You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I’d say that’s personal.”*

A rage like he’d never felt ran through him as Clark let out a loud scream of agony, propelling himself up into the poisonous door. He crashed into the ground, staring in awe as the poisonous doors that had trapped and weakened him flung across the room and crashed into the stone wall. Adrenaline pumped through his veins as he stumbled to the ground, gasping for air as he felt a mild sense of relief wash over him. The mind numbing pain began to dissipate as he drug himself across the floor. He let out a wheezy breath.

<<“Lois Lane won’t be a problem.”>>

<<“You stabbed her.”>>

<<“You’re only as strong as your biggest weakness, isn’t that right, Nigel? I have none.”>>

Another flood of rage pulsed through him and he let out a short gasp as he found solace behind one of the barrels a few feet away. The piercing pain that had enveloped him left and he tightened his fist, letting out a silent vow as he mulled over what he’d just heard.

A loud thumping above echoed and he let out a low growl. The creak of the floorboards moving up and down as panic rose inside him. He couldn’t survive another confrontation. He couldn’t survive another... A hard blow came across the back of his head and he fell to the ground in agony.

“Oh, still a little green around the gills I see.” The mocking laugh from Lex Luthor echoed in his mind as he willed the spinning and double vision to stop. Another blow came and then something hard and cold pressed against his back as he took in a heavy breath. “Tsk, tsk, tsk, someone has been getting into trouble, hasn’t he? How very un-Superman of you to leave before the party’s even... begun.” A maniacal laugh came out of him as he hissed in his ear. “I’ve often wondered, what does it take for you to bleed...”

Clark gritted his teeth, struggling to push the massive weight off of him as the sharp edge of an already bloodied blade grazed against him. Panic rose inside him as he stared at the blood.

<<“Lois Lane won’t be a problem.”>>

<<“You stabbed her.”>>

He could feel the piercing pain as the blade pressed against him. Luthor’s tone grew almost thoughtful as he taunted him with the edge of the blade, pressing it into his now vulnerable skin but not far enough to make the necessary cut for Clark to bleed. “A blade is so underused and underappreciated these days, don’t you agree?”

The starkness of Luthor’s tone sent a chill through Clark’s veins as he struggled to breathe from beneath his enemy throughout Luthor’s monologue. “This one was nabbed from a dealer that had a less than scrupulous reputation but a knack for finding one of a kind artifacts.” His tone darkened as the solid object pressed into Clark’s back further. “Much like the rarities and one of a kind pieces you so graciously donated to Metropolis’ Museum of Art...”

Clark wheezed out a painful gasp, pushing his shoulder blade up, giving himself the room to take in the massive breath he so desperately needed. Luthor’s admission sent a cold chill through him as realization began to dawn on him. Luthor had been behind Jack’s kidnapping. He had his globe. He knew everything Jor-El had spoken of in the messages from the globe.

The sharp edge of the blade pressed into him and Clark could feel the piercing of his tender skin as Luthor growled in his ear. “The original Bowie Knife used to carve out my enemy’s heart with the simple slice. Almost feels poetic, hmm?” His tone grew dark as he let out a maniacal whisper that sent a rush of ice through Clark’s veins as the words from Luthor reached his ears. “The man of steel brought to his knees by a simple rock and unable to hear the screams for help from Lois Lane herself.”

‘No,’ his mind screamed, unwilling to venture down the path Luthor continued to taunt him with.

“Oh, you should have seen her face when she realized her hero was indeed not coming to her rescue. It’s only fitting she should die from the same blade as her hero.” The eerie calm that washed over Luthor caused the hair to raise on the back of Clark’s neck.

*‘She’s not dead. He’s just trying to get in your head. Even Luthor wouldn’t do something that diabolical.’* Clark did his best to calm the rising panic inside him.

“Every delicious yell for help met with silence. What do you think her last thoughts were, hmm? Knowing her hero had let her down with the ultimate betrayal... as she had me.” The eerie calm with which Luthor spoke of Lois sent a panic through Clark. Then

he saw it. The blood on his sleeve and the bloodied skin with tears and scratches to his hands.

*'He did it,'* It was the only thought that crossed his mind before Clark found the strength to deliver a hard blow, throwing Luthor off of him and lunging at him in a full-on attack. Then he felt the searing pain flow through his veins weakening his already weakened body just as Luthor delivered a hard blow, throwing him across the room with little to no effort. He heard a hard crack inside his head and heard Luthor move toward him.

"Lu-th-or!" he roared in his delirious state, anger pulsing through his veins as he struggled to focus on the dark shadow standing over him.

"How strange," Clark heard Luthor hiss in his ear, reaching over to grab him by the front of his bloodied suit. "Strange to hear you say my name and know it's probably for the last time." His tone grew almost thoughtful as he asked himself, "But am I making a mistake? Will the pain of losing the challenge you represent be worse than the discomfort of constantly losing to you?"

"Go to...hell!" Clark spat out between uneven breaths.

"You first!" Luthor held up the long blade he'd revealed earlier. Clark stared at the blood stains still fresh on it and his mind began to race, wondering if his admission of what he'd done to Lois was true. Had he really...?

The shout from above pulled Luthor's attention away and the man stood up. "Until next time," he remarked, setting the blade on the barrel above him. "Have a nice death, Superman."

\*\*\*

Bill Henderson stared at the stern features on Perry White's face waiting for a response—any response to what he'd just told him. It wasn't every day you found out one of your friends—someone you'd come to think of as another child—had been left for dead. It certainly wasn't every day when you had to seriously think about making that person disappear for her safety. He glanced around the rundown diner Perry had insisted on going to for coffee and grimaced.

"Perry, say something," he pleaded with the man, praying for some sign that what he'd said had reached Perry.

"Where is she now?" Perry asked, not looking up from his folded hands at the booth they sat in. His coffee mug sat on the table in front of him, forgotten.

"Safe," was the only response Henderson could muster up. "I couldn't risk taking her to a hospital." Perry glared at him, his look told Henderson he better tell him everything or else. "There's a doctor that works with us and runs a top of the line clinic. It's got everything...He was able to stitch her up. She's going to be fine."

Perry threw him a disgusted look. "Yes, she'll be fine. She just has to change her identity because of this animal that you are too scared to prosecute."

"I told you before, this is not something to be taken lightly," Bill Henderson growled in a harsh whisper. "Do you think you and Kent are the first people to begin digging in Luthor's backyard? The man is the third richest man in the world. How much money do you think he'd throw around to make sure he doesn't go to prison?"

"Since when does money have anything to do with it?" Perry asked in a heated growl.

"Since the amount of zeros at the end of some people's checks began to decrease. Law and order is fine when you can afford it, but I know plenty of guys that would easily look the other way if enough money was offered. I can't take that risk and neither should you."

"So, what's the plan then?" Perry asked with a disgusted grunt. "He gets away with attacking Lois? He gets away with destroying the Planet? He gets away with everything?"

"We need a smoking gun and right now we don't have one,"

Henderson warned. "We can build a case and yes the attack on Lois will help keep him in jail but I can't guarantee her safety if she stays in Metropolis. Hell, I can't guarantee her safety as long as Luthor thinks she's alive."

"What are you saying?" Perry narrowed his eyes at him.

"I'm saying Luthor thought he killed her." Henderson's eyes narrowed. "We need to make sure it stays that way."

\*\*\*

Lex wadded the suit jacket he wore into one of the barrels and turned to Mrs. Cox. "Have this destroyed." He looked to his arms and saw her eyes widened as she stared at the wounds on him. "It's no matter. A few days and they'll be gone."

She shook her head and whispered just loud enough for him to hear, "Lex, the police are here."

"Stall them," he ordered, ridding himself of the last of his bloodied and torn clothing.

The echo from the police in the other room came, "Lex Luthor, we need to ask you some questions."

Lex did his best to squash the panic he felt rising in the pit of his stomach. "Say nothing." He reached behind her and grabbed a long sleeved jacket and a pair of golfing gloves to cover up the wounds he'd received from his attacks on both Lois and Superman.

"Lex Luthor!" the pounding came from the door again and Mrs. Cox looked to him.

"What do you want me to do?"

\*\*\*

Christina Wallace's cold features remained unmoved on the car ride to Lex Luthor's home. She didn't say a word when they parked in front of the massive gate and were escorted in by security. Her features remained stoic as she exited the squad car and climbed the massive steps leading up to the Luthor Mansion.

Detective Zymack glanced to the agent that had been assigned to him for such an important task. He grimaced, recalling the bloody scene at Lois Lane's apartment and the chilling orders Henderson had given him. He still didn't know what had happened after he'd been ordered out of the apartment and told to pick up an FBI agent from the station before questioning Lex Luthor. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

He lifted his fist to pound on the door when he heard muffled shouting coming from the back of the house. Wallace peered over at him and silently moved toward the sounds. He heard a woman's voice grow louder with accusations.

*"You could have lost everything. What are you going to do when the police show up here, looking for you?"*

*"They won't find anything!"*

Wallace looked back at Zymack, tightening her jaw before responding, "Let's move."

\*\*\*

Clark felt the world around him turn on its axis as his mind raced through everything that had happened. He was dead. He knew it. If he didn't find a way out of here he would be faced with the same fate as...

<< "Clark, I'm sorry. I just don't feel that way about you...">>

<< "If that's what you want Lois then fine get in bed with the devil!">>

<< "I have been in love with you for a long time...you had to have known.">>

<< "Lois, trust me on this I am not your typical male.">>

<< "I said nine. I thought you'd be...naked...um, ready.">>

<< "I'm a friend.">>

'Don't,' he told himself, squinting back the tears that were threatening to overtake him. He couldn't think about that. He wouldn't allow himself to dwell on that. 'She's not dead,' he told himself, hoping the thought would keep himself from drowning in the sorrows of what could happen if Lex's taunts were true.

'She's not.'

<< "We? There is no 'we.' "

"How do you know I don't have the inside track on finding Superman?"

"Sure, Clark. And when you run across Jimmy Hoffa and the Easter Bunny, why don't you reel them in too?">>

<< "Now there you go using that word again Clark. There is 'you,' there is 'I,' there is no 'we.' "

"Not yet."

"Not ever."

"We'll see."

"How long can you hold your breath?">>

<< "Not exactly what you had in mind, huh?"

"Let's see, so far I've been given a glimpse of ritual crop worship, been treated as your girlfriend, and insulted your parents. No, I couldn't have planned this.">>

<< "You feel normal."

"I am...normal.">>

<< "I'll be back, Lois. We'll go flying.">>

<< "But that would have to mean that I found you... Clark, you were sprayed. How come you didn't fall for me?"

"I guess I'm just not attracted to you, Lois."

"Liar! You are so attracted to me.">>

<< "Clark, whether or not that memory of yours comes back, I just want you to know I think you're terrific."

"Likewise,"

"I mean, I love you...like a brother." >>

<< "Goodbye? We're partners!"

"You don't **need** a partner, Lois. You never did."

"Maybe not, but I was starting to like having one.">>

<< "Goodbye, Lois.">>

The walls around him began to close in as he lost consciousness, drifting into the solace of his mind where even Lex Luthor couldn't reach him.

\*\*\*

Jimmy stared at the screen, unable to move as the image flashed across the screen again. Perry had left him and Jack at the hotel and rushed off without a word. If he hadn't been afraid of the police catching Jack he'd have followed him. The bored duo had been flipping through channels when he saw it.

The image of Clark Kent on the screen flashed again then moved on to the next supposed victim from the arson on Clinton Street. The only thing was he knew—they all did—that Clark Kent wasn't in that building when it exploded. Someone was trying to make it seem like he was though.

The question was, who?

\*\*\*

Mrs. Cox gripped the door with all her might as she stared at the detective and FBI agent standing on the doorstep of Lex Luthor's mansion. Lex smoothed a warm smile across his face as he watched the detective enter his home, staring at the spacious entryway with awe.

"Come in, come in, detective," Lex felt the adrenaline run through his veins as he felt the sense of danger creeping up on him at the idea he could get caught. It amazed him to no end how easily people could be manipulated into seeing or believing without little effort on his part. It had become a game for him over time to see how close to the edge he could get without losing everything.

"Mr. Luthor," the detective nodded to him but his face showed no pleasure in his visit to Lex's home.

"Something I can do for you?" Lex asked, staring at the young red-head who was silently staring him down from the corner of the entryway. "Miss, I don't believe I know you."

"Agent Wallace, FBI," the woman responded, pulling out her badge.

He looked at her uncertainly before allowing his face to fall to

a frown. This was not someone on his payroll. "Well, Agent Wallace..."

"We'd like to ask you a few questions concerning your fiancée, Lois Lane," the agent cut him off, not allowing him to continue his thought.

"Ask away," he motioned to the expansive entry way, making a grand gesture, "I have nothing to hide."

Agent Wallace turned to Detective Zymack before facing Lex. "Reports from neighbors suggest there may have been an altercation between you and Ms. Lane earlier tonight."

"Lois and I had a disagreement over wedding planning earlier." Lex shrugged his shoulders. "Words were exchanged and I'm sad to say I had to make the decision to call off the wedding."

"You called off the wedding?" Zymack asked, staring at Lex with a peculiar gaze.

"Lois Lane always did have an unhealthy infatuation with men of power," Mrs. Cox cut in with a broad smile. "First Superman, then Lex." She placed a hand on Lex's shoulder in support. "I'm just glad Lex was able to see she was using him before it was too late."

"I see," Agent Wallace's tone was cool as she jotted a note down in her notepad, glancing back up at Lex. "And what time was this?"

"About five-thirty or so," Mrs. Cox responded. "Lex was very upset."

"And so the cries for help?" Agent Wallace smirked as she stared back at them, gauging their reaction.

"I'm sorry?" Lex choked out.

"We had reports that screams for help were coming from Ms. Lane's apartment," Zymack interjected. "Where were you between the hours of seven and nine tonight?"

"He was with me," Mrs. Cox lied smoothly, taking a protective step in front of him.

"The entire time?" Agent Wallace challenged.

"The entire time," Mrs. Cox boldly responded. "Someone had to step in and take care of him. Lois Lane certainly wasn't going to do it."

"Well, let's not be too hasty, Mrs. Cox," Lex argued, shaking his head. "Lois was obviously very troubled."

Agent Wallace's eyes narrowed as she delivered a mighty blow. "Was?"

"Is," Lex corrected hastily. "It's easier to think of her as gone when thinking of the painful end to our courtship. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, I'm sure," Agent Wallace responded, a slow smile crossed her face. "Well, we won't keep you. I'm sure you have a lot to do. What with the funeral to plan and everything?"

"Funeral?" Lex feigned surprise.

"Ms. Lane is dead," Zymack interjected.

\*\*\*

Perry stood in the hallway of what was supposed to be Lois Lane's room. He felt a churning in his stomach as he went over and over what had happened. The doctor said the wound hadn't been deep enough to do any permanent damage but the amount of blood she'd lost could have easily killed her.

The phone in his pocket chirped and he reached for it, "Hello?"

"Chief, it's Jimmy," he heard the young man introduce himself on the other end of the line. His tone was uneven as he whispered in the phone. "Are you alone?"

"I'm at the hospital, Jimmy," Perry responded uncertain who could be listening. "What do you need?"

"CK's been reported as one of the deceased from the fire." Jimmy explained in an icy tone.

Perry felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he turned toward the television by the nurse's station. Sure enough the image reflecting back at him as one of the victims from the fire

was Clark Kent. He didn't dare respond, recalling the paranoia with which Henderson had warned him of Luthor's reach.

"I'll call you back, Jimmy."

\*\*\*

Lex smiled to himself as he descended the steps, leading him into the prison he'd built for his arch enemy. After feigning surprise and grief over the loss of Lois Lane the police had left, offering their condolences for his loss. Mrs. Cox had been brilliant in her display of affection and protectiveness as she had destroyed Lois Lane's reputation and kept him out of the detective and agent's radar as a suspect in Lois Lane's murder.

He knew there would be the task of changing out the samples the police had collected from the crime scene for a lowly scapegoat. He'd have to evaluate those involved with Lois to determine who the lucky culprit would be. Nigel still hadn't been able to track down Clark Kent. If only it was that easy. Frame that gliblet of a menace for the murder of his former bride-to-be. It would have been the perfect revenge but sadly it wasn't meant to be.

He turned the corner and heard the incoherent mutterings coming from the former man of steel as he withered in pain in the middle of the floor of the Kryptonite cell he was housed in. He walked through the open door and smiled when he heard it.

"I never should have created him."

His interest piqued, Lex knelt down and whispered in a menacing whisper, "Created who?"

"Superman."

Recalling the information, he'd learned from the globe he'd acquired some months ago he felt giddy as he asked calmly, "If you're not Superman then who are you?"

"I'm just me," he responded in a defeated tone. "Clark Kent. That's all I've ever been."

Lex's features took on a dark tone as realization hit him. His greatest enemy was nothing more than a lowly reporter, traipsing around the city like a savior and taking everything from him. His fist tightened and he struck the panic-stricken face of Superman. A smile crossed his lips as he saw blood fall from his enemy's nostrils.

"Well, well, well, *Clark*, it seems you've been keeping a little secret, haven't you?" Lex's sinister features took on a humorous glare as he stared back at his enemy's disoriented face, "Now is that any way to treat your best enemy?"

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## Chapter 4

### *Three Months Later...*

Lois Lane tightened her grip on the paperwork in hand as she watched Davenport leave. The distant sound of police sirens and cars driving over the bridge in Hobb's Bay could be heard as she stood there, taking in the familiar sounds that had become so foreign in such a short amount of time.

Three months.

The memory of the news footage that had aired a few short hours after the police had questioned Lex rang through her mind. There had been no doubt in her mind at that point that Lex had killed him. He had been way too cocky when he'd taunted her with Superman's absence during his attack. He knew Superman was gone. He knew and had taunted her with it.

<< "*Superman is dead.*" >>

No matter how long it had been, she still couldn't think of that day without crying. She felt the sting from her tears as she recalled the torn cape covered in blood that had been recovered from Hobb's Bay. It had been a nightmare watching the scene unfold and seeing the hero Metropolis and the world had come to love be mourned all around the world.

The headlines everywhere screamed the news and people all over continued to talk about it. No matter where she went, the news of Superman's death haunted her. Just as her own 'death'

continued to weigh on her mind. Gone were the days that Lois Lane, famous investigative reporter could be fighting the good fight among her fellow reporters. Instead she lived a life on the run, constantly moving and hiding as she did everything in her power to survive until the day would come where she would have her revenge.

That was what drove her.

That was what made all the lonely nights of pain and anger worth it.

The thought of revenge for what he had done to her and everyone she loved was what drove her. She would make him pay for the hurt he'd caused and watch him rot in prison for the rest of his days.

That day was coming.

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Bill Henderson sat outside the Luthor Mansion, taking a sip of his coffee as he stared at the iron gates. His jaw tightened as he stared at the balcony where lights lit up the street. The valets stood outside, making jokes about the elite guests that had entered the Luthor Mansion. He'd heard the rumors. He would never understand how the Governor or anyone in politics could continue to trust Lex Luthor after what he'd done.

No proof.

That was what he kept coming back to. No hard evidence could be found even months later linking Lex Luthor to the confession he gave Lois Lane. The confession had been used to bring the case forward on the racketeering charges but they still needed hard evidence. They needed something other than Lois Lane's testimony to nail that manipulative bastard to the wall forever. So far there was talk and rumors and circumstantial evidence but nothing concrete. They were running out of time.

Once Luthor knew Lois Lane was alive, he knew it would all be over. More and more of the details of their case seemed to be falling apart at the seams. She was all they had left. Fingerprints, photographs, eye-witnesses... All of them continued to disappear. Luthor's influence had a long reach inside the department. He was becoming increasingly aware that Luthor's reach wasn't limited to just the Metropolis P.D.

'*Unbelievable*, he thought to himself with a shake of his head as he watched the FBI director enter the Luthor home. If Luthor was rubbing elbows with the politicians running the country what hope was there in making sure justice was served?

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### *Three Months Ago...*

Lois gripped the chair she was sitting in as if it would save her from the mental blow Bill Henderson had delivered. Everything. Everything she had worked for and sought after for years had been tied to one thing: her name. Now, thanks to Lex she was losing even that. The anger pulsed through her and she felt a painful pull on her side from where she'd been stitched up. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought a plastic surgeon's clinic could be a cover for the police and federal government.

Witness Protection.

That was what they wanted her to do.

Flee and run from everything. No more late night chats with Lucy. No more awkward brunches with her mother or even having the option to pick up the phone and call her dad. It was all gone.

"I can't do this," Lois finally spoke, staring back at them in a panic.

"Lois, this is your best shot to rebuild your life," Henderson tried to persuade her. "Luthor is the third richest man in the world. Taking care of problems and making people disappear would be easy. Look what happened to Kent. Look what happened to you."

"Clark is not dead," Lois argued adamantly, her tone turning to ice.

"He sure is going out of his way to make sure the world thinks so," Henderson shot back, placing his hands on the table in front

of them. “Lois, this is your only shot.”

“My only shot at freedom is stopping Lex,” Lois countered through gritted teeth.

“How are you going to do that with a mark on your head?” Henderson asked before his face turned solemn and his jaw tightened, determination washed over his face. “The Feds can protect you.”

“And what makes you think Lex doesn’t have a mole in the FBI?” Lois countered, her tone eerily calm. “You think I’m going to trust my safety to a bunch of under-paid suits that could easily double cross me and offer me up on a platter to Lex? No!”

“Lois!” Jimmy’s voice came from the hallway. Lois and Henderson got up from their seats, exiting the office they had been occupying to see what the commotion was. A shriek came from one of the rooms down the hall. A loud sob and scream followed by another.

Lois found Jimmy numbly standing in the corner and staring at the footage on the television. Lois barely gave the screen a glance as she turned to her friend, “Jimmy, what is it?”

“Superman,” Jimmy pointed at the screen and Lois followed the direction of his hand to the screen where the image of a torn red cape with the familiar ‘S’ emblem ripped in half.

“What in the world?” Lois stared at the screen in shock, unable to believe the scene that was unfolding. The scene continued to unfold and Lois numbly stared at the team of divers holding up the tattered red, yellow and blue uniform for the world to see. In the distance she could make out a gurney where a body bag that had been sealed stood behind one of the men.

“This shocking discovery continues to bring the world to its knees as we all pay tribute to the man of steel,” the anchor spoke as footage from the Messenger launch, Nightfall, and various amateur camera footage of Superman coming to the rescue time and time again played.

“No,” Lois instinctively placed a hand to her face, staring at the screen. In bold red letters the ticker across the screen read, ‘*Superman Found Dead in Hobb’s Bay*’

“Lois,” Jimmy placed a hand on her shoulders and she felt the floodgates open up as she felt her knees give out, pulling her to the ground as her young friend attempted to console her. “Easy,” his voice croaked in her ear.

“No, no, no, no,” Lois shook her head adamantly, sobbing uncontrollably as the flood of emotions overtook her.

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The sound of metal clanging against metal echoed down the long narrow hallway. Memory after memory flooded to the forefront of his mind as Clark sat up in a cold sweat, staring at his surroundings in confusion.

‘*Where am I?*’

He looked around the room and saw a white panel in the corner of the room with a metal doorframe surrounding it. Where the doorknob should have been, was a round lock emitting a green light from the bulb. He stood up from the bed, staring down at his chest in confusion. The Superman suit he’d been in earlier had been replaced with a plain grey scrubs. On the shirt the name ‘*Kent*’ was printed in bold black letters.

Confused, he ran his hand against the label, uncertain of where he was and how he’d gotten here. He looked up in the corner, searching for a sign of light from outside but only found the dimly lit light bulbs above. Another bulb emitted a bright green light in the corner.

He placed his hand on the panel but found nothing he could get his hands on to escape with. The realization that his powers might permanently be gone hit him and he squared his shoulders, pressing against the corners of the frame with all his might. He heard a hum and the panel opened, revealing a blonde haired woman in a white jacket.

“Mr. Kent, so glad you’ve decided to join us,” her tone was

friendly but there was something eerie about the way her piercing blue eyes stared back at him.

“Who are you? Where am I?” he asked, looking at her for answers.

“I think Miguel gave you too high of a dose last night. I’ll make a note of that,” she began to jot a note in her notepad and he grabbed her by the arm.

“Dose? What are you talking about?” he demanded, doing his best to control the rising panic in his mind.

“Clark, we’ve discussed this before.” She tried to soothe, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Do I need to prescribe another tranquilizer?”

“I want some answers!” he demanded, jerking her arm as he shouted at her vehemently.

“Let go of my arm,” she ordered, placing a tight grasp on his wrist. He felt the prick from her nails against his skin and stared back at her coldly. He felt a piercing pain run through him and he hit the floor, grabbing his head as he fought the urge to throw up.

‘*Kryptonite*,’ he immediately recognized the sickening feeling of the poison. He looked up and saw the room had filled with a green glowing aura, bringing him to his knees. Where it was coming from he still wasn’t sure.

Her voice continued to speak to him calmly as he felt the mind numbing pain run through him.

“Now, Clark, we can do this the easy way or we can do this the hard way. You and I both know these fantasies of yours aren’t real. The sooner you face the truth the sooner we can help you but attacking me isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

Clark stared back at her, feeling the pain subside as a smile crossed her lips. His eyes narrowed as he saw the green light disappear. ‘*Luthor*,’ his mind shouted as his aching body tried to recover from the lethal attack. She was working for him. He knew it. She couldn’t be trusted.

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*Three Months Later...*

The music played a mellow tone as Lex entered the ballroom. He could feel the power pulsing through him as he moved through the room. Senators and Judges and Congressmen were all here for him. This was the start of everything he’d been striving toward. It was a shame he couldn’t share this moment with anyone outside of his inner circle.

A twinge of sorrow washed over him as he briefly allowed his mind to drift into the world of ‘what-if’. If things had happened differently between him and Lois he’d be celebrating tonight with her. A double victory—taking what his enemy cherished most ten-fold—Lois Lane and soon the world.

“Lex, quite the turnout, isn’t it?” Governor Pierce asked as she greeted him with a kiss on the cheek.

“Governor, thank you for the endorsement.” He smiled broadly at the woman.

“A drop in the bucket compared to the endorsements that I’m sure are to follow, Lex.” She reached up to straighten his tie.

“Now, Governor, you know I’m a man of tradition,” Lex responded in kind. “You never forget your first.” He leaned in to kiss her, enjoying the flirtatious game he was playing with the woman.

“Lex, you’re good for my ego.” She swatted him away and then turned to leave, calling over her shoulder, “Don’t do anything to make me look bad, Lex. I don’t take a chance on just anyone.”

“Of course, Governor.” He smiled back at her. “Save me a dance.”

He watched her leave and smiled to himself. This Senate seat would be the stepping stone into the world of politics that would lead him to taking the reins of the most powerful nation in the world.

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Lois watched from a safe distance as the figure entered the

warehouse on Pier 23. She'd spent the last two months tracking this woman's every move. Two months of careful planning as she watched and waited for her moment. Lois smiled to herself when she saw the figure turn and look behind her. She was paranoid.

Lois tightened her grip on the baton in her hands, waiting for the signal from Jimmy. She kept her breaths even as she tapped the headset and spoke, "Are you getting all this?"

"Loud and clear," Jimmy's voice came through the headset. "I've just sent a signal to scramble the security system's signal but they keep trying to debug the system. You've only got a few minutes before I get kicked out."

"How long do I got?" Lois asked, keeping her breath even.

"Security system should kick back in in seven minutes,"

Jimmy responded.

"Let's do this," Lois said, taking a deep breath as she approached the double doors leading inside the warehouse. What could Mrs. Cox be doing coming to a warehouse district on a weekly basis?

*'One way to find out,'* she thought to herself.

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*Three Months Ago...*

Detective Zymack led the SWAT team through the expansive doors of the Luthor Mansion. The woman he'd met earlier stood in the corner unfazed as he and his men stormed inside Lex Luthor's home, flashing a search warrant for any evidence leading to Lois Lane's murder. His orders were clear. He would be damned if Lex Luthor got away with what he'd done to his ex-fiancée.

"What is the meaning of this?" Luthor shouted as handcuffs were placed on his wrists by Agent Wallace.

"You're being detained as a possible suspect, Mr. Luthor," Agent Wallace responded with a smug grin.

"Suspect in what?" Luthor growled. His face showed no ounce of doubt or fear as he looked to Agent Wallace for answers.

"The murder of Lois Lane," Agent Wallace responded coolly as she pulled him along with her. "We have some unanswered questions regarding your whereabouts last night, Mr. Luthor."

"Call Bender," Luthor ordered to the woman in the corner.

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<< "I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "If that's what you want Lois then fine get in bed with the devil!" >>

<< "Where are you going? Get back here!"

"Stop! Get out of my way, Lex!" >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

Lois stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her face was stained with tears from where she'd been crying earlier. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and the baseball cap she wore covered her face enough to hide the bruises.

It had been five hours since her confrontation with Lex. Five hours since her entire world had come crashing down around her because she dared to tell the most powerful man in Metropolis 'no.'

*'Bastard,'* she thought to herself, feeling the swollen redness around her skin from where she'd been struck.

<< "I have been in love with you for a long time...you had to have known." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "Goodbye? We're partners!"

"You don't need a partner, Lois. You never did."

"Maybe not, but I was starting to like having one." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "What?"

"I..I can't. I'm sorry." >>

To think she'd actually been concerned about his feelings when she had readied herself to tell Lex it was over. She couldn't

do it. She couldn't go through with it. She couldn't imagine a life with that...

*'Vermin,'* her mind supplied for her as she grabbed the last of her bags, staring in the reflection at her newly colored locks.

"You ready, miss?" the sound came from the corner where the agent in charge of her relocation was standing, holding the door open for her.

"Ready," she said, readjusting the strap to her bag on her shoulder and making her way toward him. "Just get me out of here."

"What about this?" One of the officers held up the hanger where her wedding dress hung, never worn.

Lois let out a dismal grunt and muttered, "Burn it for all I care."

<< "But that would have to mean that I found you...Clark, you were sprayed. How come you didn't fall for me?"

"I guess I'm just not attracted to you, Lois."

"Liar! You are so attracted to me." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "You think I wouldn't have a contingency plan, hmm? Your precious Superman? Gone. Your partner? Gone. Your career? You won't be able to show your face anywhere without me knowing. I'll make sure you never so much as edit a note on a post-it. You never should have crossed me." >>

<< "Clark, whether or not that memory of yours comes back, I just want you to know I think you're terrific."

"Likewise."

"I mean, I love you...like a brother." >>

<< "You're mine!"

"I don't belong to anyone, Lex!"

"I will not be made a fool of!"

"Go to hell!" >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known." >>

<< "Goodbye, Lois." >>

<< "What did you do to him? Where is Clark?" >>

<< "I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this city without me knowing about it." >>

"Everything's gone." Lois let out a shallow breath as the door closed behind her.

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Lex sat in the chair provided, glancing around the dimly lit room he was in. It wasn't his first interrogation room and he knew it certainly wouldn't be his last. He enjoyed this game of cat and mouse. The truth of the matter was the police might suspect him but they could never prove anything.

"We've got a witness that places you at Ms. Lane's apartment," the detective said coldly as he slammed his palms on the table in front of Lex. "You want to tell me what *really* happened?"

A witness. He wasn't sure who could have possibly placed him in Lois' apartment. Before moving all of Lois' belongings out a sweep had been done of the entire building. It was amazing to see how quickly the apartments of all the neighbors could be vacated at the mere mention of asbestos and black mold. He had learned early on to never leave witnesses that could misinterpret a situation.

"I'm certain your witness is mistaken," Lex remarked coolly. "I was nowhere near Ms. Lane's apartment tonight."

"Yes, yes, you told us." The detective waved him off. "You were with your assistant."

"Personal assistant," Lex corrected with a sardonic smile.

The detective glared at him but continued on with his questioning. "I'm sure you were, but I don't think you two were at home."

"Oh, no?" Lex asked, raising his eyebrows at him. "Do tell?"

“How is it that you were so comfortable with your personal assistant after supposedly having your heart crushed by Lois Lane’s betrayal, hmm?” the detective paced in front of him. “Do you think we’re idiots?”

“I don’t think anything, detective,” Lex replied smoothly. “You asked a question and I gave an answer.”

“You expect me to believe Lois Lane just up and decided to leave for no reason?”

“As I said before detective...”

“You didn’t say anything, Mr. Luthor. Your assistant did. I want to hear it from *you!*” the detective narrowed his gaze on him.

Lex smirked as he met the man’s gaze. “Why detective I do feel like you’re accusing me of something.”

“Well then let me be clear.” The detective’s brow furrowed as he growled back. “I am!”

“That’ll be enough, detective!”

They both turned to see the infamous Sheldon Bender standing in the doorway. The detective frowned as he responded, “Right on time.”

“Now, detective, you wouldn’t be trying to question my client without counsel, would you?” Sheldon Bender asked as he motioned for Lex to stand up.

“We’re in the middle of a murder investigation. Your client is a material witness.”

“Yet he’s being treated like a suspect,” Bender responded with a scoff. “Charge my client or let him go. The choice is yours.”

\*\*\*

Bill Henderson stood outside the interrogation room, watching through the two-way mirror as Zymack began questioning Luthor on his whereabouts and how his relationship with Lois Lane had ended. His friend, Jack Davenport had called in to report everything of Lois Lane’s had been successfully removed from Lex Luthor’s mansion and the personal assistant was currently in FBI custody spinning a sordid tale similar to the one she’d presented earlier.

He did his best not to react to the news of Luthor being brought in for questioning when Zymack had called it in. In order to protect Lois he had to keep everyone believing she was really dead. He felt his blood boil as he stared at the calm and collected Lex Luthor sitting at the table unshaken by the accusations against him. He was the picture of a cooperating witness as he continued to dance around the questions Zymack asked. He squashed down the guilt he felt at deceiving his friend, staring at the man he knew to be responsible for almost killing Lois Lane.

He knew Lois wouldn’t adjust to witness protection easily but it was for her own good. He was able to get a call through to Ellen Lane before she’d boarded her flight to return to Metropolis. Davenport had arranged for a secure line where they explained the danger of returning to the city. He had been unable to follow through on the lie when pressed by Mrs. Lane. All she knew was her daughter’s life was in danger and they were trying to help. All he had to do was find a way to keep Luthor behind bars and have Lois testify as a surprise witness and then this would all be over.

The phone in his pocket rang and he answered, “Henderson.”

“Your girl ran,” Davenport said evenly over the line.

“What?!” Henderson looked around, noticing the eyes on him as he lowered his voice and addressed Davenport as calmly as he could. “What do you mean?”

“Agent stopped to take a leak and she was gone with the car when he came back out. She’s gone.” Davenport repeated once more.

“What do we do?” Henderson asked, staring at the crowded room of officers.

“We can’t do anything,” Davenport responded evenly. “Look she’s smart she’ll reach out when she’s ready.”

“You sure she did this on her own?” Henderson asked.

“If she didn’t, we’ll find out one way or another, won’t we?”

Davenport reminded him solemnly before adding. “She had enough to get her anywhere she wanted to go and what funds were approved for the relocation. I’m sure she’ll turn up.”

“You better hope so,” Henderson said, looking toward the room where Sheldon Bender had just entered.

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Lois ran a hand through her newly colored hair, still uncertain how she felt about her new appearance. Bill’s friend, Agent Davenport had promised to help change her identity and create a new life for her. The problem with that scenario was it left her powerless. The only way to stop all of this was to stop Lex. She couldn’t do that if she were constantly looking over her shoulder. Superman was gone. Jack had disappeared. Clark was still missing and probably dead too. With her sister and father out of the country and her mother updated by Henderson not to return from her trip abroad, she found at least some solace in the fact that Lex couldn’t get to them.

She stared back at her reflection, feeling the tears threaten to overtake her. She agreed with Henderson on one thing: leaving Metropolis was her best bet in surviving this. She just wasn’t going to do it on his terms.

She couldn’t use her bank account or her credit cards. All her accounts were set up with LexTrust Savings and Loan. There was no way she would make tracking her that easy. She needed help.

She pulled up to the Metropolis Transit station and spotted a familiar figure standing in the corner. A smile threatened to spread across her face as she glanced toward him, wondering if this would be the last time she’d see him.

“You certainly don’t do things the easy way, do you?” Perry’s gruff drawl came out as he approached the driver’s side of the car.

“I can’t let him win, Perry,” Lois said shaking her head in disbelief. “Any sign of Jack?”

“No one’s seen him since they brought you in,” Perry explained solemnly, handing her a manila envelope. “This is everything I was able to salvage from Clark’s apartment that looked like it might be connected to Luthor.”

“Doesn’t look very thick,” Lois remarked with a frown.

“Some of the journals were torn out, and pieces are missing,” Perry explained.

Lois pulled out the two phones she’d purchased earlier and handed them to him. “Give one of these to Bill. I’ll be in touch,”

“Lois, honey, where are you going to go?” Perry asked, looking at her in concern.

“I don’t know,” she responded honestly, uncertain where she could go and feel safe.

Perry pulled out a chain of keys and handed them to her.

“Alice and I have a few rental properties out west and just on the coast. The property was owned by her brother before he passed away a few years ago. Address is on the keys.”

“Perry...” Lois began to argue, and he shook his head, holding his hand up to stop her. “Thanks,” she said meekly uncertain what else to say.

“Just take care of yourself.” With that, he stepped away and started toward his car. She glanced at the keyring he’d given her, reading the addresses. Washington. Maine. Texas. South Carolina. Kansas. She stopped, staring at the last key that held a familiar address on it. It wasn’t Smallville. Who was to say how far Kansas City was from where Clark’s parents lived? It was familiar, and right now she could use some familiarity.

‘*Kansas it is,*’ she thought to herself as she pulled out of the parking lot.

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*Three Months Later...*

Mrs. Cox looked over her shoulder as she made her way through the abandoned warehouse. Lex was beginning to suspect something. She did her best not to dwell on the veiled threats she received. Three months of quietly searching for Lois Lane’s body

had proved to be futile. How had she allowed such a gross oversight to happen on her watch?

Nigel was the best as they came but he had not been fast enough. The police were continuing to watch Lex from afar, hoping for him to slip up. Now she not only had to worry about the police but Lex too.

<<“*How does a body just disappear?*”>>

When they’d attempted to steal Lois Lane’s corpse from the morgue they found no body. It was then that she suspected something more might be going on than met the eye. The murder investigation remained open and the police continued to put pressure on Lex. In return, Lex continued to go over and over the details of what had happened that night with her.

She continued to lie.

He couldn’t find out that she’d yet to confirm Lois Lane’s death.

He couldn’t find out her suspicions.

He couldn’t find out that the witness the police continued to throw in his face was none other than Lois Lane.

She reached the end of the aisle and typed in a code to unlock the secret entrance. She turned behind her once more, feeling as if she was being watched once more. A flicker of the lights above pulled her attention away from her task at hand. She turned and gasped when she saw the familiar face staring back at her.

Lois Lane.

Before she could react she found herself pinned to the ground, with a force pressing her against the cement floor. She winced as she felt the piercing pain against the back of her throat. The sharp edge of a blade crossed the side of her neck and she readied herself for her moment. Try as she might to put on a tough face she knew Lois Lane couldn’t kill. It wasn’t in her nature.

“If you so much as breathe the wrong way I will not hesitate to pierce your carotid artery and let you bleed out all over this floor,” Lois hissed in a menacing tone.

“I…”

“Where is he?” the question came as her attacker’s grasp on her throat tightened.

“Who?” Mrs. Cox choked out, trying to hold onto the low supply of air that remained in her lungs.

“You know who,” Lois snarled in her ear. “Did you really think I wouldn’t find out he was still alive?” The blade pressed into the side of her neck and a piercing pain ran through her body.

“You ca…”

“You think I won’t do it?” Lois challenged, whispering in her ear as she pressed into her back harder. “You should have let him kill me when you had the chance. You left me to bleed out and die.”

“Ho…w?”

“Let’s just say I’ve got friends in high places.” Lois gave a low chuckle as she tightened her grasp on Mrs. Cox’s neck.

“Where is he?” The pressure on her back became intense as she struggled to breathe. “How long do you think you can hold off before your body starts shutting down. The brain can only survive so long without oxygen. I’m not too worried about your heart.”

“I…”

“Lex said he got rid of Superman. The man they fished out of the bay was not Superman. Yes, I know all about your medical examiner and the payoff. Where is he?” Lois snarled in her ear, pressing the knife into her.

“Se-Sev-en,” Mrs. Cox choked out knowing the betrayal would come with a hefty price.

“I’m sorry I didn’t catch that,” Lois said, loosening her grasp on Mrs. Cox’s throat.

“Sev-en. Pier Seven,” she rasped out in-between heavy breaths.

“Anything else?” Lois pointed the blade to Mrs. Cox’s throat.

“You need a code,” she managed to squeak out.

“What’s the code?”

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Jimmy watched the screen as he worked to override the security system. On one screen the image of what was actually being picked up by security cameras was displayed. On the other screen was the footage he’d replaced all outputs of the cameras with. Anyone monitoring the security footage would see nothing but a few birds flying across the screen.

He swallowed hard as he continued to dig through the file marked ‘Pier Seven’ with previous footage to give Lois the advantage she needed to hopefully get Superman out of there. She kept insisting that Superman was alive and was the key to finding Clark. Over the last few months he’d almost given up hope.

‘Here we go,’ he thought to himself as he entered the last of the code. “You’re flying solo from here on out,” Jimmy said into his headset. “Virus has been installed and the system will shut down and reboot in ten. Be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” Lois responded over the frequency.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Jimmy grinned.

\*\*\*

*Three Months Ago...*

Lois reached Kansas City just before dawn. Her body felt the effects from the drive and her attack the night before as she exited the pickup truck and headed into the diner. She could smell the aromas of bacon and eggs in the air as she opened the door and found her way to a small booth in the corner.

“You look like you could use this,” a voice came from behind her as a cup of coffee was placed in front of her.

Lois took it gratefully and smiled at the waitress. “Thank you.” She tugged on the baseball cap, trying to avoid eye contact. The bruises on her face were more and more evident as time had passed. The purple and black colors mixed with her ivory skin told a story she knew would lead to too many questions.

“Breakfast?”

“Eggs scrambled. Wheat toast,” Lois answered quickly, not looking up.

“You got it sunshine.”

Lois watched as the waitress moved to the doors leading to the kitchen. She breathed a sigh of relief and looked around the diner. Very few people were out this early...or was it late? She still hadn’t slept yet. Five more miles until she got to the cabin. Then she could rest and change and hopefully begin to dig into whatever Clark had found on Lex.

A payphone outside caught her attention. Did she dare involve Clark’s parents in this? From her interactions with them over the past year she could tell they were good people—trustworthy. What could they possibly do?

A memory flashed through her mind from when the Nightfall asteroid had been headed toward Earth. The look in Clark’s eyes as he had tried to painfully grasp what the dynamic of their relationship was hit a chord with her. She had suspected he might have had feelings for her and the question he’d asked so innocently continued to keep her up at night for weeks after the fallout from Nightfall.

<<“*Are we more than friends?*”>>

That had been the turning point in their friendship. She’d pulled away from him emotionally, doing her best to protect him from heartache...or at least that’s what she’d told herself. Looking back, she knew the real reason. When faced with the possibility of losing everything, she’d come to realize just how important her partner was to her.

Now, Clark was missing...reportedly dead if you listened to LNN’s news report. Being informed of that by the local news wasn’t something she wanted for Jonathan or Martha. She glanced down at the red stain that had begun to seep through her sweatshirt. She grimaced, placing a hand over it to hide the injury as she made her way to the bathroom.

<< “Be careful with Lex.” >>

Once she was sure no one else was around she pulled her shirt up to inspect the wound. The bandage was soaked in blood as she peeled it off her side. She pulled the bottle of hydrogen peroxide from her bag and poured it over the wound, watching the white bubbles fizz up.

It looked like one of the stitches had come loose. She'd have to do something about that soon. She took some gauze and applied that to the wound along with the bandage. She took another layer of gauze and taped it on the outside of the bandage to provide an extra barrier between her clothes and the wound. She looked to the door, making sure she was still alone and turned her attention to her bruised face.

<< “You don't know him like I do.” >>

She swallowed hard, pushing down the lump that had formed in her throat. Clark had tried to warn her. Perry and Jimmy had tried to warn her. It wasn't until she saw the side of Lex that Clark had apparently seen from the beginning that she took any of the warnings to heart. Now everything she'd worked for was gone. Her career. Her family. Her friends.

‘Clark,’ her mind nudged her, recalling the threats Lex had made. Though the news report had said he had been found dead in the Clinton Street fire she knew it wasn't possible. He wasn't there. He had been missing. A strangled sob escaped her throat and she stared at the image of her bruised face staring back at her.

<< “I have been in love with you for a long time.” >>

<< “Are we more than friends?” >>

<< “You don't need a partner, Lois.” >>

Her hand was shaking as she pulled out a tube of concealer from her bag and dabbed at the black and blue marks on her face. There wasn't enough makeup in the world to cover up what Lex had done to her but if she could at least dull the impact of the dark colors around her face and neck hopefully she could continue to drift below the radar until the bruises faded. Still, there was no way to erase the pain in her heart as memory after memory flashed through her mind.

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A flash of light filled the room and Clark let out a snarled growl as he felt the bolt of electricity run through him. He felt like his skin would melt off from the surge that ran through him, numbing his nerves as he struggled to remain standing against the metal table he was strapped to in an upright position. The leather straps, holding him down kept him from falling as he smelt the burning of flesh against the metal discs pressed against him.

“I don't want to do this, Clark, but you leave me no choice,” the doctor's voice rung in his ear. “These delusions of yours have no place here.”

“I'm ....not...crazy!”

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Lois stared at the dimly lit street, watching as the sun began to rise. The warm reflection of greens and reds caught her eye as she crossed the street to where the payphone was. The honking of a car horn could be heard in the distance as he picked up the handset and began to dial the number to the Kents.

Three rings and she heard the familiar voice of Martha Kent on the other line. A tear ran down her cheek as she readied herself to tell her what had happened. She heard a crack in her voice as she gripped the handset to the phone.

“Mrs. Kent?”

“Lois?”

“I...I need help.” Lois heard another crack in her voice as she made the plea, uncertain how to even begin to explain what had happened.

“Where are you?”

“Kansas City,” Lois said, looking at the street sign across the street, “I...”

“I'm on my way,” Martha assured her. “Do you have an

address?”

Lois looked around. “Corner of Campbell Street and Missouri Avenue.”

“I'm on my way,” Martha assured her. A moment later the phone line went dead and Lois sighed, turning to hang the handset back on the receiver.

“Nothing left to do but wait,” Lois said, turning back to where the car was parked.

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The sterile room was empty as Mrs. Cox walked down the narrow aisle. She looked up to see a tall slender man standing in the doorway, looking over his shoulder. “You're late.”

“You said you had information?” she prompted holding up a manila envelope.

He smiled, taking the envelope from her and motioned for her to follow him. “County records for case 50936. Five foot eight. Twenty six year old female. Deceased name: Lois Joanne Lane.” He pointed to the numbers on the door for the cold storage container that read the numbers he'd just read out. With the jerk of his hand he pulled the door open and wheeled out the corpse of a man that looked to be in his late seventies.

He looked up at Mrs. Cox and smirked, “Now does this look like a twenty-six year old female to you?”

A stony expression crossed her face as she stared at the body on the slab. How could Lex be accused of Lois Lane's murder when there was no body? How could she cover up a murder when there was no body to hide and no evidence of a crime to be found?

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## Chapter 5

### Three Months Later...

Lois smiled to herself as she heard Mrs. Cox gasp for air against her heel. “It's painful, isn't it?” She heard a muttered grunt as Lois continued unfazed. “You're probably wondering ‘how could I have been overpowered by her?’ I know if I'd trained for over ten years in combative training I'd be asking the same thing.”

“I...”

“It's amazing what pure unadulterated hate can give you the power to do.” She ground her heel into the woman's back as she hissed, “Three months of doing nothing but imagining the day I would watch you and Lex suffer for what you did to me.”

“I didn't...”

“You didn't do anything?” Lois almost laughed at the notion as she gripped the woman's throat and snarled out, “You stood by and did nothing while I was left to die. You did that monster's bidding while innocent lives were destroyed. As far as I'm concerned you are just as bad if not worse.”

“He'll fi...nd you,” Mrs. Cox warned.

“Then I'll get my revenge on him too,” Lois jeered in her ear. “I imagine it'll come as quite a shock for him to discover me being alive after you assured him I was *dead*. I obviously didn't know Lex as well as I thought but one thing that came across loud and clear was Lex's .... distaste for people that disappointed him.” She tugged the plastic through the hole of the zip-tie, tightening it to the woman's wrists to ensure she wouldn't escape and looked back at the ankles she'd tied up earlier to ensure the binds were still secure.

Lois stood up, releasing her foot from Mrs. Cox's back and she knelt down in front of her, watching with amusement as the woman struggled to move but found the effort futile. “I wouldn't do that if I were you. The more you struggle the tighter the binds get. You should know that.” Lois smiled as she straightened up. “I'd love to stay and chat but time's running out. I'm sure someone will be along in a few hours to help you. Have fun explaining this one to Lex,”

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Dr. Gretchen Kelly scowled, staring at her patient as the orderlies subdued him from yet another escape attempt. She'd lost

count of the escape attempts. It was always the same. No progress in her attempts to retrain him. Every time she thought she was making progress he tried something like this.

Lex would not be pleased.

She tightened her jaw, approaching as the two men hoisted her patient up on his already unsteady legs. “We seem to be having a repeat of your past behavior again.” She clucked her tongue on the inside of her cheek in a condescending tone before adding. “It would be a shame to lose all that progress...”

“Go to hell,” the retort came with a bloody wad of saliva being aimed at her face.

Without warning the blows were thrown, subduing her patient once more in a vice like grip. Dr. Kelly wiped her face with a tissue and frowned sternly. “That was a mistake.”

\*\*\*

She was late.

Mrs. Cox was never late.

Nigel looked around the abandoned warehouse district, scanning the horizon for any sign of his missing partner in crime. The message he’d received from her had been cryptic at best. He felt the fatigue from the day wearing down on him.

His phone rang and he fished it out of his pocket, glancing at the number that appeared on the screen. “This better be good...” He answered the phone only to hear a familiar voice on the other end that wasn’t Mrs. Cox.

*“I imagine it’ll come as quite a shock for him to discover me being alive after you assured him I was dead. I obviously didn’t know Lex as well as I thought but one thing that came across loud and clear was Lex’s .... distaste for people that disappointed him.”*

The sound of the woman’s voice on the other end of the phone made Nigel’s blood boil as he felt the vein on his forehead pulse. Three months. He’d been searching for three months for any sign of Lois Lane and come up empty. Now here she was, on the other end of this phone line and he had no way of knowing where she was. It was like a dangling carrot taunting him to chase her and find her.

The months of hiding and wondering yet never finding even a morsel that could lead him to an answer that made sense. Lex continued to press for details of his cleanup the closer the trial date became. The mysterious witness the Feds taunted him with had details that made his boss question just who the witness was. Nigel couldn’t help but wonder himself if Lois Lane might actually be stupid enough to try and testify against the man that had left her for dead. He knew without a doubt that if she did it would be his head on a platter.

He felt his brow furrow as he jabbed the phone’s end button. Wherever Mrs. Cox was, Lois Lane was with her. His gaze darkened as he turned the corner toward the water district leading out to Hobb’s Bay.

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The blue lights flickered down and Gretchen Kelly watched in satisfaction as her patient’s limbs gave out, slumping him down so that the only thing holding him up was the binds that kept him locked and bound to the metal surface of the table that was tilted upright. She’d never seen anything like this before. Her patient was convinced of his Superman persona, and his mind was unmovable to any notion that she tried to introduce and convince him otherwise. His mind was strong but she was stronger.

Taking pity on her patient for a moment she gave the order to the orderlies, “Take him to his room.” She set her notepad down on the desk and jotted a few notes.

Her eyes glanced at the time and she grimaced. She was going to be late. Lex hated it when she was late.

\*\*\*

Lois Lane stood in front of the pier, uncertain where to begin. Three large warehouses stood side by side together next to the dock. There was an eerie calm in the air that sent goosebumps

down her spine and made her involuntarily shudder. Is this where Lex had him? Is this where he’d been hidden away for the last several months?

She could feel her eyes sting from the tears threatening to overtake her as memory after memory came rushing back. Three months of wondering what had happened. Three months of living on the run, looking over her shoulder and desperately trying to find anything to help her find him. Now, here she stood wondering if all that work would finally give her what she’d been searching for for so long.

*<< “Clark was looking into a possible lead on who he thought the boss was.” >>*

*<< “Clark, can’t you give up on this ridiculous idea that Lex Luthor is the root of all evil in Metropolis?”*

*“Why should I give it up, Lois, it’s true.” >>*

*<< “Sometimes, out of jealousy or frustration, I’ve over-reacted. I’ve been ruthless toward my enemies.” >>*

*<< “That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I’m unstoppable.” >>*

*<< “Lois, what if I find evidence?”*

*“Clark, you’re talking about a man I trust and admire...who’s always been completely truthful with me.” >>*

*<< “How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?” >>*

*<< “The truth is that Lex Luthor may be hiding from you what really happened to the Planet.” >>*

*<< “Well, it’s no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.” >>*

A smile crossed Lois’ face as she recalled the way she’d left Mrs. Cox to be found. Mrs. Cox had been instrumental in Lex taking everything from her, and she would face the consequences just as much as Lex would. She steadied herself and approached the door to the first warehouse, jerking it open with a hard tug. Surprisingly the door was unlocked.

She stepped inside and found the space completely vacant. She frowned, looking around the empty warehouse for a sign of anything other than dust and cobwebs. Anger pulsed through her as she began to suspect Mrs. Cox had sent her on a wild goose chase. She turned to leave and then she saw it.

A single white and blue light blinking on the side of the wall. She placed her hand on it and felt the smooth surface. ‘A hidden elevator,’ she thought to herself, realizing how close she was. She examined the black box next to the hidden door, searching for a way to open it. Maybe Jimmy could trigger it?

“No,” she knew the answer before she could ask. She couldn’t risk Jimmy getting any further involved. He could easily do it. She knew he could, but given what she knew already it would put Clark at risk. She couldn’t do that to him. There had to be another way.

A light pinged blue above the wall panel, and a low hum filled the room. She backed away, flattening herself behind one of the columns at the entrance, preparing to take on whoever would come out of the elevator. She held her breath, preparing for the confrontation as she pulled out her weapon, aiming it at the door.

The soft ping filled the air, and she peered over her shoulder to the hidden panel that opened, revealing a young blonde woman in a white doctor’s jacket, stepping out of the elevator. Lois took three deep breaths, calming her nerves before turning her attention to the woman that hurriedly looked around. She was unarmed.

Lois didn’t waste any time, stopping the woman before she could exit the elevator and held the barrel of the gun to the woman’s temple before a sound could escape her lips.

“Where is he?”

\*\*\*

*Three Months Ago...*

“Charge my client or let him go. The choice is yours.” Sheldon Bender ordered.

Detective Zymack looked across the table at Lex and motioned for him to stand up. “With pleasure.” He scrunched his face and stared back at Lex with a menacing expression. “On your feet.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lex looked at the detective with disdain, refusing to move from the chair he was seated in.

“Lex...” Bender looked at him with a concerned expression.

“Oh, please, Bender, don’t be naïve. It’s a game they’re playing. They have nothing!” Lex looked to the detective and scoffed. “If they had one shred of evidence they would have arrested me already. This is nothing more than a fishing expedition.”

The door behind the detective opened and the woman from earlier entered the room, placing a large plastic bag on the table for him to see its contents. His jaw tightened when he saw the familiar blade still stained with the blood of Lois Lane. Agent Wallace laid a stack of 4x6 photos on the table next to it, not losing her gaze on him for a second as she spread the photos out for him to see.

The cage stood in the middle of his cellar in full color with areas of the photos circled in red. The close up photos revealed a small puddle of blood in the corner of the cage from where he’d almost ended the war with Superman.

Agent Wallace folded her arms across her chest and stared down at him. Lex shifted uncomfortably under her gaze as she growled in a low whisper. “Stand up.”

Realizing neither the agent nor the detective were backing down he stood up, keeping his gaze on Agent Wallace as he did so. “Very well.”

Detective Zymack happily took hold of his wrists, pulling them behind Lex’s back and handcuffing him as he gleefully announced, “Alexander Luthor you are under arrest for the murder of Lois Joanne Lane.” He continued on with his Miranda Rights.

\*\*\*

Martha pulled into the parking spot on the corner of Missouri Avenue. The street looked almost deserted as she climbed out of the old pickup truck, looking around for a sign of where to even begin. Lois said she needed help. No explanation — Not that she needed one. She frowned, looking down the unfamiliar street. There was a diner across the street with a payphone outside. Next door was a small drug store. She glanced at the locksmith shop to the left of where she had parked. She spotted a few passersby walking along the street and offered a friendly wave which was returned in turn. No one seemed out of place. She frowned, uncertain where to begin.

She decided the best place to start was with the payphone across the street. She glanced across the empty street for any sign of traffic before crossing. She reached the sidewalk and stepped up walking to where the faded blue phone booth stood abandoned. She looked around the pavement and frowned when she spotted a dark reddish-brown pigment on the ground. She rubbed her foot over the spot but found whatever it was seemed to be stained into the concrete. The round drop appeared to have a mate, leading out to the parking lot in front of the diner. She frowned when she noticed the spots multiply in size and in density. They stopped when she reached the grass.

She looked up and saw an older gray pickup parked in the corner next to a red suburban. The license plate didn’t read New Troy, but it did have a Washington plate which was odd for Kansas City. From what she knew of her past visits to Kansas City she knew it wasn’t a place that attracted many tourists. Those that did come through never came this far into the city. Even fewer came through with government plates. She felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up as she approached the vehicle, not seeing anyone in the driver’s seat. She took a few more steps and spotted the same stained red and brown trail outside the driver’s side.

She reached the driver’s side door and swallowed hard when

she saw the bloodied handprint on the door. Recalling the plea for help on the phone she pushed past the what-ifs and tried to open the door. To her relief, the hinges creaked open, and she let out a breath, jerking the door open even further, revealing a dark auburn-haired woman curled up on the bench seat of the truck. If it was Lois, she still wasn’t sure, but there was no mistaking the large bloodied stain that covered the young woman’s abdomen.

Martha brought a hand to her mouth. “Oh, my God!”

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*Present Day...*

Clark fell to his knees, shouting in pain as he felt the piercing pain from the radiation from the Kryptonite that filled the room. It had started just when he fought back. Then it had changed to once a day and now it had become every waking moment. He’d begun to time the attacks. Five minutes. Just like clockwork it came.

It would never stop.

Luthor would never stop.

No matter how many times he tried he could never escape.

Dr. Kelly seemed to know what he was doing and where he was going at every turn. Seventy three. He’d counted each attempt at escape over the past few months. He’d tried everything but nothing could get past her. No matter what he tried it wasn’t enough and yet it seemed for some sick reason Luthor wouldn’t let him die. He could have killed him in the cage but he didn’t. He could have killed him countless times but he didn’t. For some reason Luthor wanted him to continue to live...and suffer.

Tick Tock

Tick Tock.

The wave of nausea subsided once more as the greenish hue that ran through the room faded away. Another hour and it would be the same thing. It was always the same thing.

The nauseating pain.

The cold sweats.

It was all the same.

It was always the same.

He fell back in relief as the pain subsided.

Why did he insist on prolonging the inevitable?

Why did he insist on bringing him so close to the end and yank him back again? Over and over he came close to the edge and then found himself jerked back again. The pain was excruciating as Dr. Kelly insisted on convincing him everything that had happened this past year had been a delusion.

Superman was not real.

Lois was not real.

He had never worked at the Daily Planet.

He had never flown with the wind in his face and the clouds behind him.

He had never felt what it was like to save a life.

He had never felt what it was like to love...really love.

He knew better.

No matter what they did to him they would never strip him of his memories...his life. He knew without a doubt that everything he’d experienced both as Clark and as Superman was as real as the here and now was.

He felt a pang in his chest as he thought of how many times he could have avoided all of this if he’d just been honest. If he’d just told her the truth would she have believed him? Would it have saved her?

Did it even matter?

He’d long given up hope of his powers returning.

Lois was gone.

Superman was as good as dead.

Luthor had taken everything and everyone that had ever mattered to him.

The hum of the door panel rung in his ears and he looked up, praying for the strength to survive the oncoming attack he knew was about to come. He did a double take, unsure if his eyes were

playing tricks on him. He fell back against the wall staring at the familiar face in shock. “What is this?”

Her hand went to her short brownish red locks, tucking the curled strand behind her ear as she crossed her arms over her chest and looked behind her. The door was still open. Why was the door open?

“We don’t have a lot of time, Clark.” She took a step toward him and he backed away from her, uncertain how this could be possible. Lois Lane was...dead. How was she standing here in front of him? Luthor had *killed* her. He’d seen the blood.

“Clark?” she said his name again and stared back at him with a concerned expression on her face. His mind raced as he struggled to make sense out of what was happening. Was he hallucinating? His face scrunched up, staring at the familiar face. Could it really be her?

‘Clark.’ She used his name. Not Superman. A dark cloud washed over him as he stared back at her. If this was really Lois Lane then why was she calling him Clark? A voice echoed in his head and he let out a muffled groan, trying to focus.

“Are you having another episode?”

The voice came and went but he wasn’t sure if it was coming from somewhere in the room or if it was the echo from the recent attack. It was getting harder and harder to tell the difference. His last bout of shock therapy had left him on the ground for hours and his mind a puddle of confusion as he sought to find something to help ground him. The anxiety attacks were becoming more frequent as the reality of just how hopeless his situation was began to set in.

What did she say?

His head jerked back, staring at the brunette with an icy tone, “I’m not crazy.”

“Clark,” she repeated his name in a soothing tone.

His vision began to clear and the face came into focus. Her lips pursed as she stared back at him. The way she held herself, looking behind her and nervously pacing was all Lois Lane. It suddenly clicked as he looked back at her, feeling a rush of emotions he’d kept buried since discovering what Luthor had done to her.

He had a thousand questions but found himself unable to ask any of them. A familiar smirk crossed his face. “You cut your hair.”

“Yeah, well, a lot of things have changed,” she said with a shrug.

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” he replied bitterly, recalling his last conversation with her. Why was she here? Was this another game? A test from Dr. Kelly? Did Luthor send her?

“So?” She looked at him expectantly.

“So what?” He asked, looking at her in disbelief.

“When were you going to tell me?”

“Tell you wh...at?” Clark asked, feeling a painful wave of nausea hit him once more. Talk about bad timing. Why did that deadly meteorite have to choose now of all times to attack him? Had it already been five minutes? Was Luthor watching?

Panic raced through his mind as he looked up at the blinking light above the door panel. A group of orderlies was approaching from behind as Lois paced around the room while he withered on the floor in pain. He opened his mouth to warn her but found himself unable to speak.

“How did you end up here?” she snapped angrily, continuing to pace as he stared at the orderlies approaching. She stopped, turning her attention to him as she knelt over him, placing a hand on his chest. It was a gesture she’d done a thousand times to him as Superman. Did she know?

“Clark?”

“What’s going on here? This patient hasn’t been authorized to have visitors.” The orderly looked back at him, shaking his head. “Still causing trouble, eh, Superman?”

“Hey, get your hands off of me!” she yelled as the orderly forced her out of the room.

He stood up to try and stop the orderly from manhandling her but found himself too weak to do anything. Every fiber of his being was shouting for him to do something. This was his only shot. His only chance. “Lois, wait!”

A hard blow came from behind him and darkness overtook him.

\*\*\*

*Three Months Ago...*

“Lois?”

Lois heard the voice from behind her. She could feel herself fading in and out of consciousness as she held her side, the pain from before growing unbearable. She could feel herself drifting in and out as she tried to focus. The voice was familiar. Her eyes snapped open, recalling her phone call earlier.

Clark’s mom.

“I...”

“Oh, thank God!” she heard the voice say. “An ambulance is on the way. We’re going to get the person responsible for this and...”

“No!” Lois gasped sharply. “No hospital.” That was the last thing she said before losing consciousness.

\*\*\*

Bill Henderson clanked his mug with his fellow colleagues and looked around the squad room uneasily. This was a small hurdle. The weapon had been found. The arrest had been made. He did his best to squash the guilt he felt. It wasn’t murder. It was attempted murder, but he couldn’t tell Zymack that or anyone else in this squad room. He felt the gaping hole of isolation envelop him as he looked around the crowded room.

Davenport said he and Wallace would be bringing a case against Luthor with Lois’ testimony implicating him as the boss of Metropolis and charging him with RICO. He had to just bide his time.

A slap across the shoulder came from Zymack. “Why you so glum, Bill? You just nabbed the biggest case of the year. The golden boy has been brought to his knees by law and order. Scum bags that beat women don’t deserve the air they breathe.”

“Yeah,” Bill nodded in a noncommittal agreement. “He’s dirt and he’s going to pay for all the lives he’s ruined.”

“Yeah, he is,” Zymack cheered.

The phone on Bill’s desk rang and he lunged toward it, grabbing the handset eagerly. “Henderson.”

“Bill, this is Michael,” came the voice of the District Attorney. “We have a problem.”

\*\*\*

Martha swallowed hard as she watched the store clerk talking with the ambulance she’d called. Everything in her was shouting at her to go over there and have the EMTs look at Lois. She didn’t. She’d heard the fear in the young woman’s voice at the mention of help. Something had happened to make her feel like she couldn’t ask for help from them. Lois had called her. She had reached out to her. It was up to her to make sure that trust wasn’t misplaced.

She watched the ambulance pull away, praying she’d made the right decision as she examined the wound on Lois’ abdomen. To her surprise she saw clean stitches along Lois’ side. Whomever had treated Lois last had at least had medical training. She frowned when she saw the loose stitch at the top. She needed to close the wound but without any equipment she wasn’t sure how to do that.

“No...” she heard Lois mumble incoherently still out of consciousness.

Martha reached in her purse, digging for the first aid kit she kept on her. Hoping she had enough gauze to bide some time until she could help mend the wound properly. She pulled out a large square of gauze and some medical tape, laying it flat on the

surface of the wound. Lois let out a involuntary scream in agony.

Martha squinted her eyes closed, taping the bandage to her abdomen and placing a tentative hand over it, smoothing the edges out. She whispered, hoping Lois could hear her, "I'm going to get something to close up that wound. I'll be right back."

"Clark..." Lois let out a moan of her son's name with a cryptic, "He...lp."

Martha stared at the young woman uncertain of what to think after hearing the plea. She did her best not to think too hard about it as she wiped her hands with a napkin from her purse to remove the blood and headed to the pharmacy next door.

\*\*\*

The white painted brick walls wore a bleak stain as one by one inmates came in and out of the large holding cell. Still, Lex wasn't bothered by the catcalls or derogatory comments thrown his way. He knew it was only a matter of time before he would be rid of this place.

It had been twelve hours since his arrest. He'd made sure Bender sent the message along to take care of the situation by any means necessary. This was as close as he'd ever come to being caught. This was as close as he'd ever come to losing everything. He wouldn't make that mistake again. He had gotten too close. He had allowed himself to lose perspective and for that he had paid dearly.

A slow smile spread across his face as realization washed over him. He was the only one that knew of Clark Kent's existence. It was a thrilling feeling to know he wielded such power. That was a power he would hold onto by any means necessary. He had Superman exactly where he wanted him and now he was free to do as he pleased without the threat of the super-powered god meddling in his business.

It was time he shook things up around Metropolis anyway. Ensure the city knew who was in charge.

The jangling of the keys from the officer outside reached his ears. He heard a hard click and smiled smugly when he saw the distraught Bill Henderson standing in the doorway.

"What did you do?"

\*\*\*

Lois felt a warmth across her cheek and began to stir. Her throat was dry, and her lips were chapped. She reached down to her side and touched a tight bandage. She looked down, lifting the unrecognizable shirt and saw her midsection had been wrapped tightly with a white bandage. The bleeding from earlier appeared to be gone entirely. She fingered the bandage, looking around the room that seemed so familiar to her but she couldn't place it.

"You'll have to leave that dry for a few weeks so it can heal but after that, you should be good to go," a familiar voice said from the corner of the room.

Lois looked over at her in surprise and croaked out the name, "Mrs. Kent."

"Martha," she corrected her, standing up and approaching her with a cup of water. "Here, you sound parched."

Lois looked around the room, immediately recognizing it as the same room she'd stayed in when she and Clark had come to Smallville for the investigation into Jason Trask. A lump formed in the back of her throat as she recalled how close she had come to losing him back then. Guilt washed over her, and she found herself unable to meet Martha's gaze.

"Thanks," Lois took the glass and began to slowly sip on it. She felt the cold liquid against her throat and gulped it down.

"Easy," Martha cautioned her, placing a hand on her shoulder. It was strange sitting here in Clark's room with his mom and him not being there. Come to think of it everything that had happened over the past twenty-four hours had been bizarre...a nightmare she couldn't escape from.

"You gave me quite a scare there," Martha said finally breaking the silence between them.

"What happened?" Lois asked, looking around the room uneasily.

"I was hoping you could tell me." Martha took a seat on the edge of the bed next to her. "You were bleeding to death when I found you...Then you wouldn't let me take you to a hospital."

"It's too dangerous," Lois said hurriedly, setting the glass down on the nightstand.

"You can talk to me," Martha gave her a smile. "I'm a pretty good listener."

Lois felt a sting in her eyes as she looked back at the woman. She desperately wanted to tell her everything but the fear of what could happen if someone discovered she had helped her outweighed that need. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"Lois, you're in trouble. I can see that." Martha pointed to her wounded midsection. "Please, just tell me what's going on so I can help you."

Briefly Lois pondered the notion of telling Martha everything. The fight with Clark. The arson of his apartment. Lex's nefarious deeds and her being forced to fake her own death. She'd never felt so alone in all her life. She wanted to tell her, but putting a target on Clark's mother's back wasn't what she wanted. She knew Clark wouldn't want her involved. She needed to just reassure her that Clark didn't die in that fire. That was what she'd called her for. That was all she needed to say.

She looked down at her lap, staring at the faded blue sheets across her lap and wondering what her next move would be. How had she gotten here? Did anyone see her? Where was the truck? So many thoughts raced through her mind mixed with the jagged memories from the day before.

Lex tried to kill her.

Lex alluded to the fact that he had done the same to Clark and Superman.

The painful truth behind that statement continued to weigh on her heart heavily. What would Metropolis be without Superman? Her throat tightened as her mind lingered on Clark. What would life be like without him? She felt like a shell of the woman she'd been just a few days ago...or even a year ago. The old Lois Lane never would have allowed herself to be caught off guard the way she had. The old Lois Lane never would have missed the clues or ignored Clark's warnings the way she had.

What was it that made her so sure that Lex was worthy of her trust? What was it that made her think for a moment that Clark would lie to her or go out of his way to deceive her? She couldn't answer either of those questions. She turned to look back at Martha who was watching her intently.

"It's too dangerous." Lois shook her head adamantly. "I can't drag you into this."

"Then why did you call?" Martha asked her.

Lois felt the sting from her tears in her eyes as she stared back at the woman that desperately wanted to help her. "I wanted you to know the truth, but not like this..." she looked around the room. "I shouldn't be here. I've already put you in danger just by being here."

"Lois, the only one in danger right now is you." Martha argued, pointing at her midsection. "You are not going anywhere in your condition. Clark would never forgive me if I let anything happen to you..."

Clark.

She felt a lump form in her throat as the reality of how deep in denial she had been weighed on her. How many people saw what she hadn't for the past year? How many people saw the way Clark acted toward her, treated her and figured out what she couldn't...or didn't want to.

<<"I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.">>

Lois let out a bitter laugh. "Clark would never forgive you?" she echoed, looking at the older woman through her tears.

Martha sighed, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I know my son better than anyone. He can be stubborn at times and narrow minded with things, but when he cares about someone it’s never halfway. He’s never been good at hiding his feelings.”

Lois let out a muffled sob, hearing the words from Martha as she painted the picture as if there was some magical wand that could be waved to undo what had already transpired. After everything Lex had done there was no going back. A sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach told her the threats against Clark were probably just as real as his threats against her.

“Please, just let me help you.” Martha gave her a genuine smile and Lois felt a pang of guilt as she stared back in the older woman’s eyes. She could see where Clark’s genuineness and helpful nature came from.

“I...can’t,” Lois whispered hoarsely. “I don’t deserve your help. I’ve already done enough damage...”

Martha stared at her for a moment before squeezing her hand, a knowing look on her face. “Okay, if you don’t want to tell me that’s fine. I can already take a pretty good guess at what’s going on based on what I already know.”

“What do you already know?” Lois shifted uncomfortably.

“I know you were involved with a dangerous criminal.”

Martha laid out the statement looking at her for confirmation. Lois didn’t have it in her to confirm the statement and allowed Martha to continue. “Lex Luthor was responsible for at least half a dozen criminal activities that Clark uncovered in the past year. None of which he could find any evidence to prove but all of which made him more determined to bring him down.”

“You’re not stating anything that we both don’t already know,” Lois acknowledged carefully.

“I know Clark was out of sorts when he heard you might actually marry Lex and I’m guessing by the fact that you’re no longer wearing an engagement ring that you realized that was a mistake.” Martha looked down at her hands.

Lois stared blankly at the woman, unsure how to even explain what had transpired when she had attempted to call off the wedding. “You could say that.”

“Taking into consideration the lengths Lex Luthor went to do things in order to further his own personal gain, it doesn’t take an expert to see that you’re scared. It also doesn’t take an expert to realize that your heartrate picks up every time Lex Luthor’s name is mentioned. So I’d venture to guess he’s the one you’re running from and he’s the one that did this to you. What I don’t understand is why you haven’t gone to the police and why you wouldn’t go to a hospital when you desperately needed the help.”

Realizing there was no way getting around it Lois bit her lower lip and explained, “Because he thinks I’m dead...everyone does.”

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He was a rat. A no-good lousy, backstabbing, didn’t deserve to wear the uniform rat. Detective Zymack did his best to remain calm as he stared back at the officer holding the keys to the kingdom so to speak and taunting him with the fact that every piece of evidence they’d resurrected from the Luthor Mansion had gone missing. Not just a single bag but the entire box was missing.

Zymack shook his head, looking at the officer in front of him in disgust. “Look again!”

The young officer jutted his chin out in defiance, shoving the register back at him. “It’s not here.”

“How is it that an entire evidence locker goes missing in a matter of minutes of being logged in?” Zymack sneered at him.

“You got something to say just say it,” the officer growled, a look of defiance in his face as he dared Zymack to say the words.

He was all too happy to oblige as he leveled the accusation against him with satisfaction. “Who’s paying you, huh? Luthor? His patsies? You know it’s only a matter of time before we bring him down and everyone working for him.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he sneered back at him with an arrogant snort.

“What the hell did you do?” Zymack shouted, reaching over to grab him by the collar.

“Careful, detective, one might think you’re assaulting a fellow officer.”

“Let it go, Dave.”

Zymack released him, turning to see Henderson standing behind him with a solemn expression on his face. “You know this isn’t right, Bill.”

Bill Henderson’s jaw tightened and he responded coolly, “We can’t charge him with murder but there’s a lot more we can do.”

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The summer breeze blew through Lois Lane’s hair as she rocked back and forth on the back porch of the Kent’s farmhouse. Her mind continued to mull over her conversation with Martha earlier and the countless conversations she’d had with Clark over the past year.

<< “I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.” >>

<< “You think the boss is behind this, don’t you?”

“What do you think? Clark’s missing. The evidence we gathered against the boss is gone.” >>

<< “Clark was looking into a possible lead on who he thought the boss was.” >>

<< “Goodbye, Lois.” >>

How had she missed something so big? How had she allowed herself to become caught up with the likes of Lex Luthor without knowing who he really was? She mentally berated herself over her ill informed decisions.

<< “Sometimes, out of jealousy or frustration, I’ve over-reacted. I’ve been ruthless toward my enemies.” >>

<< “I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.” >>

<< “That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I’m unstoppable.” >>

<< “How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?” >>

<< “Goodbye, Lois.” >>

A single tear ran down her cheek as she realized how many times she’d ignored the evidence in front of her. All the times Clark had pushed her to press further than what line he had given them on any story he was involved in. Messenger. Amy Valdez. The Heat Wave. There were so many instances where she was sure if she looked hard enough she might have seen Lex for what he really was. Maybe if she had, Clark would still be around.

She swallowed hard, realizing the hard truth she’d been in denial over for the last twenty-four hours. He was gone. He was really gone. There was no rewind button or take backs. That thought sent a pain through her chest and the tears flowed freely as the reality of her world shattering around her began to hit her.

<< “Well, it’s no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.” >>

<< “I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.” >>

<< “You think I wouldn’t have a contingency plan, hmm? Your precious Superman? Gone. Your partner? Gone. Your career? You won’t be able to show your face anywhere without me knowing. I’ll make sure you never so much as edit a note on a post-it. You never should have crossed me.” >>

<< “Goodbye, Lois.” >>

Clark Kent was gone.

Never again would she see him give her that goofy grin when he was humoring her or tease her about not checking the water level on an investigation. No more late-night movies or bantering back and forth over a difference of opinion. He was one of the few reporters she’d gone toe to toe with and received more than a

dismissive tone or brush off.

He challenged her in a way no one ever had and gave her the respect she had sought after throughout her career as a journalist. It hadn't been easy climbing the ranks and earning her place as an award-winning investigative journalist. Even after her accolades she still struggled to earn the respect from her peers. But Clark had given it to her freely and treated her as his equal.

<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>

She felt a bitter bile rise in her throat, recalling her last conversation with him and the confession he'd made in the park. At first she'd been too shocked to process what he was saying. The moment the words were out there all she could think of was Claude and every failed relationship she'd had. She'd sworn off inter-office dating. She wouldn't allow herself to get pulled into that trap again.

The heartbreak on his face had stung but it didn't keep her from asking him to find Superman for her. It didn't stop her from seriously considering Lex's proposal. It didn't stop her. Why, she still didn't know. Why was it okay to dismiss Clark's declaration of love like that? Why was it okay to push him away and yet allow herself to become enchanted by the likes of a sociopath like Lex Luthor?

She knew the answer.

It was the same thing that kept her closed off from everyone for so long.

Fear.

She'd been afraid and now it was too late.

<<“I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this city without me knowing about it.”>>

<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>

<<“Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I've had you?”>>

<<“Goodbye, Lois.”>>

<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>

She had been fooling herself thinking she could deny what was happening. She'd felt it over the past year, the immovable force that gravitated her toward him time and time again. Every time they got close she pulled away. She wouldn't allow herself to fall into that trap even though she knew she already had.

Perry, Jimmy, Jack, Martha... Everyone saw it, but she hadn't. What she actually felt...really felt she still wasn't sure. It wasn't just friendship. It wasn't just partnership. There was something there that made her want to reach out and cling to it...whatever it was and never let go.

<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>

Rather than face her fears and deal with her demons she ran to something...someone far more dangerous than she could have imagined. She thought denying her feelings and burying them would protect her from getting hurt again. She couldn't help but scoff at the reasoning her past self had made in thinking that a platonic relationship with Lex was safer than anything with Clark. How she'd ever associated the word 'safe' with Lex she would never know.

<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>

She had spent a year in denial only to be faced with the reality of her decision in the most cruel twist of fate. Finally, when she was ready to admit there was something. Finally, when she was having doubts... Finally, when she realized the gravity of her mistake, only to have everything snatched out from under her.

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The pale blue skin and white hair of the older man's corpse stared back ominously from the photo on the table. Mrs. Cox

tapped her fingers against the red table top, a scowl crossed her face as she looked up at Nigel sitting across from her.

“What do we do?”

“That depends,” Nigel reached over to pour sugar on his spoon and stir it in his tea. She stared at him in silence, awaiting his response as she listened to him tap the spoon on the rim of his cup before setting it down on the napkin next to his cup. “Are we saying Lois Lane is still alive or are we saying she's dead and we don't know where the body is?”

Mrs. Cox frowned, staring back at him. “I don't know.” She grew thoughtful for a moment before adding. “The police seem to think they have a strong case against Lex for her murder. One has to wonder why when the county morgue can't seem to find a record of her corpse.”

“A problem indeed,” Nigel mused. “How can one have a murder without a body?”

“Precisely,” Mrs. Cox looked over the rim of her coffee mug and allowed a slow smile to smooth its way across her face.

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Martha stared out the window from the kitchen, watching Lois Lane stare off into the horizon. The young woman's emotionally vulnerable state made her ache for Lois. She wanted nothing more than to reassure her that Lex Luthor wouldn't be able to find her here. Unfortunately, she couldn't give her that reassurance. There was no way to guarantee what that man was or wasn't capable of and giving her false hope wasn't something she imagined would be helpful for either of them.

She'd seen the news coverage. She didn't believe any of it. She knew there was something more to the story and she knew that Lois held the answers. She refused to believe that her son was dead. She knew her son and she knew he hadn't died in that fire. What she didn't know was where he was or what had happened. Lois was the key. She just had to bide her time until Lois was ready to talk.

Jonathan had helped her bring the truck to the farm and hidden it in the barn. The blood had been too much to clean up so a reupholster job would have to happen in order to repair it. She glanced down at the pitcher of lemonade in front of her.

“Clark still hasn't called?”

Martha turned to see Jonathan standing behind her with a concerned expression on his face. “No, the, uh, phone keeps going to voicemail.”

“Have you asked her if she knows anything?” Jonathan asked, looking toward the window where Lois was leaned over in the rocking chair, wiping tears from her eyes.

Martha felt her heart ache for the young woman and turned to her husband. “She's been through a lot. I didn't want to push her.”

“Last time Clark called he said he thought someone had Kryptonite,” Jonathan reminded her. “If Lex Luthor is after Lois he could just as easily have gone after Clark and...”

“And what?” Martha challenged, raising her eyebrow at him. “He isn't calling back because he can't. I'm sure he'll reach out when he can. If something were wrong we'd know it.”

“Martha, something is *wrong*,” Jonathan reminded her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Don't you think I know that? I was the one that found her like that. I was the one that...” She stopped herself, unwilling to revisit the memory of having to stitch the young woman's side back in the seat of the old pickup truck. She forced a smile and said, “Just give her some time.” Martha poured two glasses of lemonade and headed outside to check on Lois.

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“Lois?”

Lois turned to see Martha standing a few feet away with two glasses of lemonade in her hand. “I thought you could use this.”

“Thanks.” Lois took the glass from her with a grateful smile. She looked around the porch and commented, “It's peaceful here.”

"It's home," Martha said, taking a seat next to her. There was a silent lull between them before Martha turned to her and said, "Jonathan has been trying to reach Clark since last night. The phone keeps going to voicemail."

Lois glanced down at her feet, uncertain how to respond. How did she even begin to explain what had happened? There was so much she didn't know for sure.

"You're not going to get through," Lois finally spoke up, looking over at the older woman with a pained expression. "Lex hired someone to burn his place down."

"*What?!*" Martha's eyes widened and Lois shook her head, doing her best to remain level-headed as she explained what she could of the misdeeds Lex had leveled against Clark. It was the least she could do. After everything they'd done she owed them the truth.

"Clark was looking into the boss of Metropolis...at least that's what he told Perry," Lois let the words roll off her tongue with ease, swallowing back tears as she did her best to convey what information she could without getting caught up in the pain that came with the words. "I went there to...talk to him after we had an argument and he wasn't there. It was stupid." She shook her head, looking over at Martha. "I was such an idiot."

"You are not an idiot," Martha corrected, shaking her head. "Don't let yourself believe anything otherwise. You're a very smart and intelligent woman. You'd have to be to crack some of the cases you and Clark have over the past year."

"Thank you," Lois gave her a pained smile and continued, "Perry made us all go cool off at the place across the street. We hadn't even ordered yet and the entire block of Clinton Street was in flames. The apartment building, the dry cleaners and the entrance to the subway tunnel." She grew thoughtful for a moment. "I thought it was odd Superman didn't show up. He always showed up when there was a disaster. He was always there to help..."

"I'm sure he was needed somewhere else," Martha's gaze looked away and Lois continued.

"Clark wasn't in the building when it exploded. But later a report came out that he had been and that he..." Lois swallowed hard, unsure how to continue.

"He what?" Martha pressed.

Lois shook her head bitterly. "He taunted me about it. Acted like it was some sick game...everything and everyone being taken away. First the Planet then my career and ...friends." She felt her eyes sting as the tears flowed freely. "I never wanted this. I never wanted anything like this. He said he had taken care of Clark...I don't know what he got himself into but I don't know what to do...I want to find him but I don't even know where to look."

Martha seemed unaffected by the news that her son had been reported missing. She placed a hand on her shoulder. "Clark is a strong young man. I'm sure he's just being careful before reaching out."

"You don't know Lex." Lois shook her head in disgust. "He made me scream for help while he was attacking me...then laughed when Superman didn't show up. I think he's done something to them both, Martha. Superman wouldn't just not show up. Clark wouldn't just disappear."

"Unless there was Kryptonite," Martha said with a numb expression on her face.

"What?" Lois looked at her in confusion. "What did you just say?"

"Nothing," Martha forced a smile. "Don't worry about it."

"You said *Kryptonite*," Lois challenged, staring back at her with a distraught expression. "The imaginary rock that Jason Trask thought could kill Superman?" Martha was silent and Lois pressed her, "What aren't you telling me?"

"It's nothing," Martha shrugged her off, standing to her feet. "I should get these washed."

"It's not *nothing*. If you know something that could help me find Clark you need to tell me!" Lois shouted angrily, standing to her feet. "Don't you understand how serious this is? He could be lying in a ditch dying somewhere."

"He's not!" Martha shook her head adamantly.

"How do you know?" Lois challenged, seeing something in the older woman's eyes. She was hiding something and she was going to find out what it was. Right now, she had nothing to go on but her last conversation with Clark and that wasn't much. If Martha knew something that could help her track him down...

"How do you know? Lex could be torturing him or he could already be dead!" Lois shot back angrily. She pointed to her midsection. "Did you forget what Lex did to me? What do you think he'd do to Clark?"

"It's not *possible*," Martha turned away the moment the words were out of her mouth.

"What are you talking about?" Lois pressed.

"I..."

A voice came from the corner of the porch and she turned to see Jonathan Kent. "Martha, just tell her."

"Jonathan..."

"Clark trusts her. We need to too." He said simply, still not giving her what she needed to understand what they were talking about.

"Tell me what?" Lois asked, looking between the two of them for answers she so desperately needed.

"You might want to sit down for this one, Lois," Jonathan said with a sigh.

"I'll stand," Lois replied adamantly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Suit yourself," he shook his head.

"What's going on?" Lois repeated.

"Lois, it's impossible for Clark to be dead," Martha explained with a pained expression. "because it's impossible for him to be hurt."

"Unless there's Kryptonite around," Jonathan interjected.

"What are you talking about?" Lois shook her head, not following what they were trying to say.

"Honey, Clark *is* Superman," Martha explained, allowing the news to sink in.

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## Chapter 6

*Present Day...*

Shock.

Lois knew that was what she was experiencing. There was no other way to explain the range of emotions that ran through her as she took in the sight of her former partner in hospital scrubs and covered in wounds around his face and neck. She noticed the round red marks around his temple and briefly wondered just what Lex had been doing to him.

Gone was the clean-shaven Clark Kent she'd come to know over the past year. In his place was a man with a callous expression on his face, staring back at her as he seemed to struggle to remain in the present.

*'I'm not crazy.'*

Those were the words he'd used when she'd called out his name, again and again, trying to get a reaction. Then he'd smirked at her, and she felt relief wash over her when he seemed to recognize her and note the change in haircut. She never should have pushed him. He'd retreated back as soon as she delivered the questions that had been haunting her for so long.

Gone was her friend.

Gone was the man she'd known for the past year.

Gone was her hero.

In his place was someone she didn't recognize, but before she could get the answers she needed, she found herself trapped by two oversized orderlies that looked like anything but hospital

workers. The piercing stares and overpowering weight they tried to use in order to drag her from the room were the work of Lex. She struggled against the massive weight behind her as one of the two orderlies that had stormed into Clark's room tried to forcibly remove her.

She couldn't leave him.

She couldn't lose him again.

She knew in her heart that if she left she would never be able to track him down again.

"Lois, wait!" she heard Clark yelled just before falling to the ground.

"Clark!" she shouted, looking on in horror as she saw the man hover over him like a vulture circling his prey. He was bleeding. She lifted her leg and extended it, delivering a hard blow behind her, forcing the orderly's grasp on her to be released. She quickly moved to where the other one was hovering over Clark and delivered another blow to the back of the orderly's head.

"Clark?" she turned him over, tapping his cheek with her palm in an effort to wake him up. She choked back a sob as she saw the blood dripping down the side of his cheek from where he'd been struck earlier. "Please wake up," she whispered, suppressing her tears as she stared at him for what felt like an eternity.

The emotional roller coaster she'd gone through over the past few months ran through her mind as she ran her hand against his cheek, feeling the flesh beneath her fingertips. A range of emotions ran through her as she placed her hands around him, feeling the solid frame against her as she attempted to help him to his feet in what appeared to be a half-conscious state.

He was alive.

He let out a soft groan, and she turned behind her to see the orderlies still on the ground. She didn't have a lot of time. She had to get Clark out of here before that doctor escaped the supply closet she'd locked her in. Jimmy had done a purge of the security system and introduced a virus in order to keep her from being discovered, but in doing so, that meant he didn't have eyes on her either.

"Just stay with me," she whispered, wrapping her arms around his waist as she looked for the best way out. She dragged her foot across the floor, pulling Clark with her as she attempted to make him walk with her, a task that proved to be difficult while holding up the weight of someone double her size.

"Lo...is," she heard Clark mumble incoherently as they exited the room.

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Lex stood in the corner of his balcony watching as his guests continued to float toward the liquor being served freely. He glanced over at the clock and scowled. She was late. He moved to his office study, closing the door behind him and ensuring there were no unwanted guests nearby to overhear his phone conversation.

He moved to his desk and picked up the phone, dialing the familiar number he knew by heart. Four rings and he hung up, feeling the tension begin to build within him as he reached down to dial again.

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Silence.

The water swished against the wooden posts on the pier, giving a silent lull in the background as Nigel lit a cigarette and looked around the dock for any sign of his missing colleague. It was quiet. Too quiet. He reached the corner, turning to see the warehouse with a faded '7' on the side.

His phone in his pocket rang, and he reached in to grab it. There was only one person that would be calling at this time of night.

"Yes, sir?"

"Oh, so there is someone that still works for me alive," the voice of Lex Luthor echoed from the other end of the phone line.

Before Nigel could respond, Lex cut him off. "Gretchen and Mrs. Cox seem to have taken an early leave. Meet me at the penthouse. I have news."

"Yes, sir," Nigel responded, ending the call and turning back from where he came.

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*Three Months Ago...*

John Baker took a puff from his cigarette, enjoying the last taste of nicotine he would have before his flight to Washington later. It had been a long and stressful day already. The entire airport of New Troy International had been shut down by a Federal Aviation Administration agent coming in, flashing a badge and pulling everyone into that tiny room in the back to question them about a missing doctor.

No one had been provided any information other than the names and a copy of the drivers license photos of the doctor and his family. He wasn't sure what the big deal was, but it seemed whoever this Dr. Sam Lane was he was in trouble with someone. He himself hadn't recognized the doctor, but he had recognized the youngest daughter. She had caught his attention on the flight to Belize a few weeks ago and made him take the extra initiative to check on that section of the plane. He hadn't seen her come back through, but he hoped he would be on the flight when she did.

It was strange for an FAA agent to conduct an investigation like this, but he'd seen stranger things in New Troy. After all, this was where a man had defied the force of gravity and flown the Messenger into space. Anything's possible, right?

He threw the butt of his cigarette on the ground and scrunched it into the pavement with the tip of his shoe before returning inside. Stranger things had happened.

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*Lois and I were able to find the missing kids from the Beckworth State School. Who knew that all those years of hiding in isolation would come in handy someday? Dr. Hamilton may have been the one to administer the Metamide 5 to those kids, but Lex Luthor was the one calling the shots.*

*It took everything in me not to fly him to a deserted island and leave him there. The world would probably be much better off if I had but robbing him of justice and due process for his crimes isn't what Superman does. Testing on children? Is there no level too low for Lex Luthor to stoop? I want to tell Lois, but all I have are his veiled pleas in front of Superman and a child that's been paid off with anything a ten-year-old could ever dream of. She wouldn't believe me anyway.*

Journal after journal laid on the old wooden floorboards of Clark's childhood treehouse. Lois set the red leather journal she'd been reading down, running her hands up and down her face, trying to push away the tension around her eyes from reading for so long. She leaned back against the wooden wall behind her and heard a creak as she moved. Her mind continued to race through everything again.

Clark was Superman.

Lex was a murderer.

Those were the two truths that continued to press against the forefront of her mind as she continued to reel from the information she'd read. Clark had been meticulous about keeping documentation of every encounter with Lex as his alter-ego. Journal after journal went through everything that Clark theorized and couldn't prove. Veiled threats and the like were documented there in Clark's handwriting in black and white, but they could never see the inside of a courtroom. Doing so would only bring to light the secret Clark had harbored for who knows how long.

She felt tears sting in the corners of her eyes as she reflected on the last year through a fresh set of eyes. Lex had been manipulating her from the start. She saw that now. Poisoning children for his own gain, setting off bombs for his amusement in order to test Clark... It was hard to imagine how she'd been fooled

for so long. She could see it all so clear now.

The controlling tendencies.  
The manipulative behavior.  
The narcissistic arrogance.  
<<“*He’s a monster!*”>>

How many times had she dismissed Clark’s accusations against Lex? She’d lost count. Time and again Clark had made digs at Lex, and she had ignored every one of them. Not once had he come to her as Superman and told her what he knew. Not once had he given her more than empty accusations without anything to base them on. Nothing.

*‘She wouldn’t believe me anyway.’*

“You never gave me a chance,” she muttered through the tears she was trying to hold back.

Clark was Superman. The truth stung. The man she’d idolized for the good part of a year was the same man she’d confided her schoolgirl crush to. She should be angry. She should be furious at him, but after everything, she found herself unwilling to devote the energy it took to continue with her anger. He’d lied to her. He’d kept things from her. But at the end of the day, it didn’t change anything.

He was still missing.

Martha and Jonathan had said the only thing that could weaken Clark was Kryptonite. The same meteorite Jason Trask had insisted could kill Superman. It was real. Another lie. Clark had let her believe that Jason Trask was a lunatic—though by all rights the man was certifiable—and allowed her to print a story stating the mysterious Kryptonite was nothing more than a myth in Trask’s mind. What she had published had been a lie. She felt sick, realizing the predicament he’d put her in. She was no better than the reporters that wrote stories about Elvis sightings.

She couldn’t blame him really. It was a life-threatening piece of news that could have put him in danger. But if she’d known, she never would have even mentioned it in the article. That thought probably never even crossed his mind.

Jonathan said Clark trusted her. That was his reasoning for having Martha tell her what Clark had been lying to her about for the last year. Though she was sure part of it was to force her to give up whatever information she might have to help find their son. She knew the Kents had to be just as torn up about everything as she was—if not more.

It had been three days.

She was no closer to finding a connection now than she was a few days ago when she’d had that bombshell dropped on her. Nothing made sense anymore. He claimed to trust her yet he kept the biggest part of himself from her. He claimed to love her yet pushed her away instead of telling her what she needed to know to stop her from making the biggest mistake of her life. Had it been revenge? Callous mistreatment for not returning his feelings? Though now she didn’t even know what those feelings were anymore.

Whatever it was, it hurt more than the betrayal Lex had laid on her. It hurt more than the pain she’d felt when she thought her life was over. She knew she wasn’t perfect, but she never pretended to be. She never lied to her friends or attempted to manipulate their emotions for personal gain. She’d laid it all out on the line and instead of giving her something to help her understand why he didn’t trust Lex he left her with more questions—isolated and alone.

She let out a disgusted grunt and stretched her arms up over her head, curving her back against the wooden wall behind her and allowing the tension to release from her tired muscles. Her mind drifted back to that night in her apartment. It seemed so long ago. How had it only been a few short weeks?

She knew the comment about loving him as an ordinary man had to hurt but so did the remark about her robe and the cold way he just left her like that. Not even giving her a chance to respond.

He just left. She didn’t claim to be perfect, and she knew she had her faults, but given the situation, she couldn’t help but continue to come back to that day at the park.

If he had all this information on Lex why didn’t he tell her? Was he trying to test her? Make her earn the right to be told the truth? It didn’t make sense. After all this time why did he choose then to make a declaration like that? Why now? What she needed more than anything at that moment was her friend. Not more conflicting emotions to make her more confused about what to do.

A thousand questions and no way to answer a single one. She doubted she’d ever get the answers from anyone other than the source himself. No matter what the answer was, she was still stuck in a lose-lose situation. She didn’t know where Clark was. She had no way of finding him without returning to Metropolis. She couldn’t do that until she’d healed from her wounds. Martha had been watching her like a hawk to make sure she didn’t try to leave until then.

Clark was Superman.

He had lied to her and manipulated her to protect his secret and continue to toy with her emotions even now. She should be angry, but all she felt was numb. She should just walk away but she couldn’t. She had to know what was the real Clark Kent and what was a façade. She had to know...

The hard truth had been weighing on her for a long time. She didn’t want to even admit it to herself let alone anyone else... especially after discovering his deception. She let out a strangled sob, burying her face in her hands and allowing the tears to fall freely. She had to know if any of it had been real.

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*Present Day...*

Lois swiped the card on the door panel, watching with a satisfied smile as the door sealed closed, enclosing the orderlies inside. She tapped her hand on the card she’d swiped from the doctor earlier. Clark seemed to physically relax against her when they exited the room. She looked down the narrow hallway from where she’d come in and pulled him against her. “Clark, please,” she pleaded with him, hoping to get him to wake up.

The weight of his body on her was slowly wearing her down. They had to get out of here before she was discovered. Mrs. Cox wouldn’t stay tied up forever and lugging the enormous weight of her former partner wasn’t helping matters. Lex had obviously gone out of his way to turn this underground fallout shelter into a makeshift hospital. A cold chill ran through her as various scenarios for why Lex would invest so much money and time into a place that would only ever house one patient.

Was his hatred for Clark that deep?

She felt some relief on her shoulders as they reached the end of the corridor. She turned back to see he had straightened up and was now supporting his weight on both legs. He still seemed out of it, but at least he was able to provide her some relief.

Muffled shouts and curses could be heard from a few feet away. She looked to the corner where she’d locked the doctor inside one of the closets. The door still remained closed, and she could see the door handle shake from the rattling inside.

“What is...?” she heard Clark mumble in her ear.

“Don’t worry about that,” Lois assured him, smoothing her hand against his chest. It seemed to have the desired calming effect over him as his face relaxed. She looked at him, staring at the scars and bruises on his face.

What had they done to him?

She forced a smile at him, hoping to see some sign from him of cognitive thinking. He continued to stare blankly at her, and she wondered for a moment if he’d been drugged then quickly squashed that thought, recalling what she’d learned over the past few months. She tightened her arm around him, silencing her tears at the familiarity of him that she’d missed.

‘*Stop it,*’ her mind screamed, forcing her to focus on the task at

hand. She couldn't allow herself to get swept up in her emotions right now. She had to get them out of here.

She felt a chill run down her spine as she stared at the cold metal panel doors of the small elevator she'd entered the floor on. The only reason she'd been able to get as far as she had was because she'd had that doctor with her. Would she be able to make it out of here with Clark without raising any red flags?

She glanced toward the silver camera by the elevator and swallowed hard, recalling Jimmy's warning of the blinking red light. It was still blinking blue. She had time. She felt her stomach tighten as she knelt down to grab the pistol from the holster wrapped around her ankle. She felt a calm wash over her as her hand tightened around the frame of the gun. A loud click echoed in the vast space as she released the lock. She surveyed the room, preparing to defend herself and Clark from any potential intruders.

Silence.

She smiled to herself, tugging on Clark's waist and pulling him toward her as she crossed the aisle to where the elevator was. She pulled the badge she'd retrieved from the doctor and waved it in front of a scanner that had been hooked up to the computer outside the elevator. A beep echoed from the corridor, and she looked up to see the elevator doors open. She pulled Clark with her inside the elevator, praying she wasn't walking into an ambush.

She glanced up and saw the blue light on the camera inside the elevator. Hopefully, Jimmy would be able to keep the signal scrambled long enough for her to get Clark to the truck. That's all she needed to do, and then they were home free.

How long would whoever was monitoring the security footage be fooled?

How long before they discovered the orderlies and that doctor?

She glanced at Clark, seeing the blood that had fallen across his face appeared to have stopped. She reached over to brush the wayward curl of black hair from his face. The short beard that had begun to grow covered up much of his face. It was strange to see him like this. He seemed lost and incoherent as they had made their way out of the tiny prison he'd been trapped in for who knew how long.

Her grip tightened on the trigger, preparing herself for what could be waiting for them when the doors opened. The soft lull of the elevator moving could be heard through the deafening silence that filled the elevator car.

She glanced at Clark. There was so much she wanted to say but now was not the time. "No matter what happens just stay with me. You got it?"

She looked at him for any sign of recognition, but all she was awarded was a mute nod.

Did he understand?

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Mrs. Cox could taste the blood in her mouth as she crawled her way to the front door. Her chin, neck, and knees were torn from dragging her body across the cement floor. The sharp edge of the box cutter was just a few feet away....

Freedom would be hers, and Lois Lane would pay dearly.

\*\*\*

*Three Months Ago...*

<<"I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this city without me knowing about it.">>

<<"Well, it's no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.">>

<<"You think I wouldn't have a contingency plan, hmm? Your precious Superman? Gone. Your partner? Gone. Your career? You won't be able to show your face anywhere without me knowing. I'll make sure you never so much as edit a note on a post-it. You never should have crossed me.">>

<<"That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always

*twelve steps ahead of him. I'm unstoppable.">>*

<<"How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?">>

<<"Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I've had you?">>

"No! Lex, no!"

Lois shot up from the bed, sweat dripping from her face and heart hammering in her chest. She looked around the room, trying to catch her breath. She swiped her hand across her cheek, wiping the tears away.

It had been two weeks since the attack. Two weeks of sleepless nights and looking over her shoulder every two seconds, thinking any second he'd find her. Any second she'd be staring into those beady eyes and smelling the stink of bourbon on his breath as he tortured her with the details of what he'd done to those she cared about most.

It never stopped.

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Nigel pulled up the old dirt road, looking for a sign that would lead him to the house he was looking for. After some debate of what the consequences would be, both he and Mrs. Cox had agreed no good would come of telling Mr. Luthor of Lois Lane's survival. It was a mistake he planned on correcting after all. No sense in causing his employer to worry unnecessarily. And no reason to give Mr. Luthor an excuse to take his anger out on either him or Mrs. Cox unjustly.

From the time Ms. Lane had entered Mr. Luthor's life he had had a bad feeling. He knew she was trouble and had done his best to warn him. The thrill of the chase and enchantment of something Mr. Luthor referred to being sweet revenge on his enemy was what kept him entranced. It was also what nearly destroyed him.

He wasn't sure how but he knew someone was helping Lois Lane. He just had to determine who. As of right now, he'd eliminated the option of family given the current location of each family member was out of the country. Then there was the question of friendships, and fortunately for him, the few she kept were easily accessible. One of which had crossed paths with Lex Luthor already and met his own demise.

Still, the connection to Clark Kent seemed strong according to neighbors and those that knew her well. It wouldn't be a far leap to think that those closest to Clark Kent might also be willing to help Lois Lane.

He let out a sigh as he ran his hand against his forehead, wiping the sweat from his brow. The search for Lois Lane continued.

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Jonathan Kent looked up from his paper, eying Lois Lane out of the corner of his eye as she limped into the living room. Martha sat on the couch next to him, keeping a keen eye on her over the book she was reading. Two weeks. It had been two weeks since Martha had found Lois bleeding to death in the cab of that pickup truck in Kansas City.

The blood curdling screams of terror continued to come. Every night he prayed for peace. He prayed for something to take away the nightmares that haunted the woman he knew had captured his son's heart so completely. The nightmares continued, and despite everything they tried, nothing took away the sheer terror that washed over Lois when they came.

He knew whatever hell Lex Luthor had put her through his son was suffering the same ten-fold. That was what kept him up at night. That was what made him watch the news day in and day out and continue to help dig out each and every meticulous note Clark had taken on his interactions with Lex Luthor. Something in there had to help bring this monster to justice.

He'd never believed in the death penalty until now but for what Lex Luthor had done to Lois alone, it was enough to make him wish a slow painful death on that sociopath. How he'd been

raised and how he'd raised his son was to always treat others with respect. To think anyone would treat anyone the way Lois had been treated made his blood boil on a dangerous level that would make his doctor blow a gasket. Martha said the scars were beginning to heal, but the wounds were deep. He hadn't seen them since that night he helped bring Lois to the farm. He didn't want to see what that monster had done to her. He'd seen enough in watching Lois continue to process everything.

Something had broken deep inside her. The vibrant young woman he'd met a few short months ago was gone. The woman that kept his son on his toes and gave him a reason to want to settle down had disappeared. In her place was a shell of that person, focused on one purpose: finding Clark. It was hard to hear her refer to Clark in the past tense. Despite the admission that Clark was Superman she still had doubts as to whether he was still alive. She did try to put on a show for him and Martha, but he could tell in her tone she thought he was lost to her.

He saw Lois approaching, taking a seat in the rocking chair on the other side of Martha. Her face was downward cast with something he hadn't seen since she'd been here. Determination. She had a notepad in her lap as she toyed with the spiral binding.

"I think I have an idea."

He set his paper down and looked over at her. Martha placed the book she had been reading across her lap and followed suit. They both looked at Lois, waiting for her to continue.

"I'm not sure how well it will work, but we need to try something, right? There are names of people Clark said may have been paid off. Hundreds really," she began to ramble nervously. "There's got to be a trail for that, right? I mean, start by showing a connection to Lex for all of them and then press them for the truth."

"It's a start, but Lois how would you even do that? Most of what Clark had in those journals were of the stories you and he worked on in Metropolis." Martha frowned, looking confused as she continued. "Lex Luthor thought he killed you. Do you really want to give him a chance to correct his mistake?"

"I know," Lois replied instinctively placing a hand to her midsection. "The first step is finding the connection, and that can be done from anywhere."

"And the next step?" Martha spoke up, the concern evident in her voice.

"My next step would be to reach out to some of the people that helped me and have them look into it." She finished lamely, "It's not a lot to go on right now, but it is a start."

Jonathan nodded his agreement. He frowned when he heard a car door slamming outside. Martha looked at him and asked, "Are we expecting anyone?"

"No," Jonathan shook his head, standing up and reaching for the rifle he kept over the fireplace.

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The squad room was quiet. They'd just taken the last group of inmates from the holding cell and moved them into general population at the correction center. He had been working later and later nights for the past two weeks. Marie was getting worried about him. Heck, even his Sargent was getting concerned about all the overtime he'd been putting in. There was no official case. There was no case period as far as City Hall was concerned but he refused to let it go.

Davenport had assured him there would be a case based on Lois' statement to them, but he had to confirm she was even reachable. Perry White still refused to give any information on her whereabouts.

He didn't trust the police.

Henderson couldn't blame him there. Trusting his colleagues was something hard to come by these days. No one could find where that evidence locker had disappeared to. No one could prove it had even been checked into evidence, so there had been

nothing to go after the crooked officer with.

He'd been told to drop the case. His Sargent knew better though. He knew dropping the case after everything that had happened wasn't possible.

Henderson stood up, heading toward the break room for another refill of his coffee. He caught wind of a conversation at the front desk and couldn't help but listen in.

"I'm telling you this guy's been missing for almost two weeks!"

"Sir, I don't know. If you could just fill out the form and in the morning..."

"In the morning?" the man scoffed. "You tellin' me I got to wait till morning to find out if my guy is in your system or not?" He pulled out a photo and laid it on the desk. "That's Barry. My top seller and I'm tellin' you it ain't like him to just not show up for a gig...let alone ten or twelve."

Curious, Henderson approached the man at the desk and cut in, "I'm sorry I couldn't help but overhear..." He motioned to the quiet waiting area. "Who did you say you were?"

The man grumbled an incoherent introduction, "Sammy. I run Sammy's Look-Alike Agency off Broad Street." He shoved the photo in Henderson's face. "You seen this guy?"

Henderson frowned, staring at the 8x10 glossy photo. The man in the photo was wearing a black t-shirt with the Superman emblem on it and a pair of jean shorts. The face was hard to mistake. He looked exactly like...

"Superman?" Henderson looked at the image in surprise.

"Not Superman," Sammy corrected. "Barry. My lookalike. He's been missing for over two weeks. No show to every gig. I been getting the runaround for the last week and a half and I want some answers!"

Doris, the dispatch manning the front desk gave him a pleading look and Henderson nodded. "Why don't you come to my office, and we'll see what we can find out."

'Thank you' Doris mouthed to him as he escorted Sammy through the doors that led to the squad room.

\*\*\*

#### *Present Day...*

Lois felt the strain on her back muscles as the elevator doors opened. She held her breath, looking around the empty room. Clark's breath hit her cheek as his neck slumped down and she felt the weight on her double.

"No, no, no, no," she tapped his face, trying to wake him back up as she attempted to pull him back up. "Clark?"

He fell to his knees and pulled her with him, letting out a groan. She let out a muffled cry, trying to push him off of her. She pushed his shoulder, shaking him as she pleaded with him.

"Please, Clark, you've got to help me here..."

She heard him let out a deep breath, coughing as the weight on her lessened. He took another deep breath, and she looked up and saw his eyes flutter open. She placed a hand on his cheek, and he looked back at her before squinting his eyes shut, lowering his head as he flattened his hands on the concrete below them. "I... can't...move."

"Okay," Lois took a deep breath, running a hand against his neck. He was really here. Staring at her with those eyes she never thought she'd see again. She felt her throat tighten, feeling the sting behind her eyes from the tears she was holding back. "It's okay."

"I'm..." he let out a low moan, straining to lift himself off of her and she tapped her hand against his shoulder to help roll him over on his back.

She let out a sigh, feeling the relief on her diaphragm as she let out a heavy breath. She looked behind her, making sure the warehouse was still as empty as it had been when they had come out of the elevator.

A labored cough came strangled out of Clark's throat.

“Clark?” She turned, placing a hand on his chest. She felt a hard lump beneath his skin. She swallowed hard, running her fingertips over the hard object again. There was definitely something there. She moved her hand to his cheek, and he turned to her with a dazed expression. He still seemed out of it. “What did they do to you?”

His arm hung around her. His hand was shaking as it brushed against her back. They had to get out of here. “It’s okay,” she said, placing a hand over his. Determination crossed her face, and she placed an arm around his waist. “We’re going to get out of here.” She tightened her grip on him, steadying herself as she stood up, helping him to his feet. She let out a short gasp as the weight of him on her shoulders hit her knees.

“Lois...” She heard him whisper as they straightened up. She could feel the strain on her back, reaching for the pistol that had fallen to the ground.

“Clark, it’s okay,” she whispered, smiling as she felt the metal barrel against her hand. “I’ve got you.” She tightened her hand on the barrel, bringing the pistol to her, letting out a low groan as she brought her arm back to her. The tension from stretching her arm out released itself, and she could feel her shoulder tingle under the weight of Clark’s body pressed against hers. It wasn’t as heavy as before. He seemed to be supporting himself at least halfway on his left side. That was better than before. “Just walk with me,” she whispered tugging him with her to the exit. She tucked the gun in her back pocket then moved her other hand to Clark’s chest. “I’ve got you.”

\*\*\*

*Two Months Ago...*

Lois flattened herself against the wooden boards of the hayloft, listening intently to the conversation happening outside the barn. The straw bristles scratched her face as she breathed heavily beneath the bales of hay. She could feel her breath against her face as the sound of Jonathan Kent’s voice reached her ears.

“You get off my property now!”

“You don’t want to do that,” Nigel St. John’s voice had a sinister tone as he threatened Jonathan. “How many loans have you taken out on this farm? Quite a bit of luck you’ve encountered with the extensions you’ve been granted for repayment.”

“What’s your point?” Jonathan barked angrily.

“Cross the wrong person and your luck could change, Mr. Kent,” Nigel hissed back at him. “What happens when those purse strings close, hmm? Lose the farm, your home, everything...”

“Go to hell!”

“If she hasn’t reached out to you she will,” Nigel threatened. “See that you make the right decision.”

“You can tell your boss that I know exactly what he is and what he’s done and I won’t rest until justice is served. You low-life piece of garbage are nothing more than an errand boy and the day will come when you have to answer for all the pain and suffering you’ve caused. You want to threaten me? Go ahead! There’s nothing you can do that’s any worse than what your boss has already done to me and my family,” Jonathan growled back in defiance. “Get off my property!”

A shot fired and she heard a muffled scream that sounded like Martha. Lois jumped, clamping her mouth with her palm to keep herself from screaming out. She silently sobbed, letting out a shaky breath beneath her palm. *‘Don’t panic.’*

The sound of a car door slamming in the distance and the gravel moving beneath the retreating tires reached her ears. She counted to ten, waiting for a sign that she could move. She had to get out of there. She had to...

“Lois?”

\*\*\*

Seagulls honked in the distance as the waves crashed on the shore. Perry took a deep breath, taking in the sea salt air and turned to the porch swing where Jimmy Olsen sat vigil on his

laptop tapping away at the keys. After ensuring Lois had made it out of Metropolis safely, he’d gathered up Jimmy and what he could carry and brought him back to the beach house. Alice thankfully had been more than understanding given the circumstances. She didn’t even mind him helping pitch in on some of the research they were pulling together on their case against Lex Luthor.

He pulled up a chair, setting his coffee mug on the wooden railing and turned to Jimmy. “You been at it all night, son.”

Jimmy pointed to the mobile phone Lois had gifted him with and then glanced back at the screen. “Lois had a few leads. I’m checking them out.”

“What kind of lead?” Perry asked, standing up and taking a look over Jimmy’s shoulder.

“Phillip Manning,” Jimmy said, tapping away at his keyboard.

“Isn’t that one of the Smart Kids?” Perry scrunched his face, glancing at the report Jimmy had pulled up on the screen. “How’d he end up in Westminster Academy?”

“Every kid that was tested on ended up with a scholarship under Lex Luthor’s name to different private boarding schools around the world,” Jimmy explained, pulling up the reports on each kid from the Smart Kid case. Jimmy clicked on the window with Phillip Manning and pointed to the screen when the scholarship information displayed a number that made both of them raise their eyebrows. Jimmy glanced back at Perry and smirked. “Phillip Manning was the only one to receive an extra hundred thousand grant from his scholarship that can be liquidated once he turns eighteen.”

“Pay off?” Perry guessed.

“Yeah, the question is for what?”

The screen door creaked, and they both turned to see Alice with a mug in her hand. “Still hard at work I see.”

Perry gave her a weak smile. “Not our first all-nighter and probably won’t be the last.”

“I think I found something that might help,” she said, opening the door and revealing the rugged face of the young man that had gone missing after the fire on Clinton Street.

“Jack!” Jimmy shot up from the porch swing and crossed the distance, wrapping a strong arm around him. “Where have you been?”

Jack motioned to the man standing behind him. “I needed to lay low. I had some help.”

“Davenport?” Perry stood up, recognizing the agent standing behind Perry.

\*\*\*

The motor roared and the rubber tires burned against the asphalt. Lois ran a hand through her hair, brushing the loose strands from her face, glancing in the rearview mirror. The exhaust filled the air as the wind blew in her hair as she drove past the state line of South Carolina. She saw the Rest Area sign and let out a sigh of relief. She had been driving for hours, and she could feel the fatigue from driving for so long on her body. She’d barely stopped to rest in the last few hours.

Jonathan had been shot. He’d been hurt, trying to protect her. After ensuring he was indeed alright and there wasn’t anything she could do for Martha, she left after the sun had set, moving in the midnight hour across the states. She had brought all the journals with her and left a message with Jimmy on the burner phone detailing the names she’d found.

\*\*\*

*‘I’m Superman.’*

The confession escaped Clark Kent’s lips again and again only to be met with maniacal laughter as the doors closed behind the orderlies. He looked up at the blank walls, snorting in disgust. How far had he fallen to be pleading with these prison guards masquerading as doctors to believe him?

“Clark!”

His head shot up, looking around the room in a panic. It couldn't be...

<<“Lois Lane won't be a problem. She's sure to have bled out by now anyway.”>>

<<“You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I'd say that's personal.”>>

“Help Superman! Help!”

“Lois!” He looked around the room in a panic, hearing her voice and knowing how impossible the sound of her voice could be. A bitter bile simmered in his throat as he looked around the empty room whose walls continued to close in around him. He clamped his hands around his head, mentally pushing away the pain that came with hearing the pleas for help.

“Clark! Help!”

<<“Lois Lane won't be a problem. She's sure to have bled out by now anyway.”>>

<<“You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I'd say that's personal.”>>

“It's not real,” he told himself, pushing the painful lump he felt in his throat down as he rocked back and forth.

<<“Lois Lane won't be a problem. She's sure to have bled out by now anyway.”>>

<<“You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I'd say that's personal.”>>

“It's not real. Not real...” he continued to tell himself over and over, falling to the floor.

Lois was gone and was never coming back.

It was just another trick.

Lois was gone.

Luthor had made sure of that.

\*\*\*

*Present Day...*

The rain of gunfire filled the air as Lois flattened herself against the car door. She glanced behind her, looking at Clark lying on the ground next to her. She peered across the street to where the gunfire was coming from. She tightened her grip on the handle, squeezing the trigger to return fire.

She reached down to her thigh, looking at the dark red stain on her jeans from where she'd been shot. She heard another shot and heard the sound of return fire in the distance. This time the gunfire stopped.

She reached over to where Clark was hunched over and shook his shoulder. “Clark?”

“Lo...” He looked to her with a delirious expression.

“Everything's fine. We're going to get you out of here,” Lois assured him, placing a hand on his cheek.

“We?” he mumbled incoherently.

She looked behind the car, hearing footsteps approaching. The loose gravel crackled beneath the footsteps. The familiar face motioned it was all clear, and she breathed a sigh of relief, reaching for the door handle a few inches away and pulled the latch. The door creaked as the hinge widened and she reached inside for the small black bag on the floorboard. She ducked down, so she was eye level with Clark.

“Clark, just know I wouldn't do this if I didn't have to,” she began, hearing the shakiness in her voice as she unzipped the duffel bag next to her.

“Wouldn't do wha...” He let out an agonizing scream, and she quickly silenced him, sealing her mouth over his as she felt the vibration from his shouts against her face. Her grip tightened on the metal scalpel in her hand, and she pulled away from him, looking down at the bloodied stain on his shirt. The cut just below his collarbone revealed what she'd suspected. There beneath the blood was a small silver object. She pulled it out and revealed a glowing green tip, and he let out another cry of agony.

“I'm sorry,” she threw the bloodied device to the ground and placed a hand over the area she'd cut, applying pressure to the

wound as she reached in the bag with her other hand. She pulled out three butterfly strips, fiddling with the backing as she applied it to the area around the small half inch incision she'd made. She hadn't cut deep enough to hit an artery thank God. She reached back in the bag and pulled out a thick square of gauze to apply over the wound. He let out a muffled moan, and she continued to apologize, “I know. I know. I'm so sorry, Clark.”

“Why?” he choked out in pain.

“I'll explain later,” she said, running a hand across his cheek. “Just trust me,”

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*Two Months Ago...*

After stopping to rest and filling up the gas tank once more, Lois finally made her way to the cabin of Perry's a little after dawn. The drive had been painful, to say the least. Her body needed sleep. She knew that but stopping for even a moment wasn't an option.

It was just a flesh wound. The doctors said that as if it made anything better. Jonathan had been shot trying to protect her. She knew staying with the Kents was a mistake. She should have left earlier, but she hadn't. She had stayed. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

She turned the truck up the incline of the mountain, angling up the steep hill and passing house after house. She was getting closer. '220. 222. 224. 226.' She stopped when she reached the last house, pulling into the steep driveway for the house with a '228' marker on the mailbox.

The flattop in front of the house had a carport to pull into. She looked up at the stone front of the cabin, mildly impressed with how Perry could afford a place like this on just an editor's salary as she stepped out of the vehicle. The shrubbery and trees created a barrier around the front of the house and kept most of the windows that were without curtains hidden. She walked around the back, checking for any signs that the cabin wasn't safe before fishing the key out of her pocket. The sound of a stream trickling nearby could be heard beneath the haven the trees provided above.

Any other time she would have found the silence and solitude alarming and intimidating. Gone were the sounds of the city she'd known almost her entire adult life. No local food carts to venture to and find food at. She was safe, but she was alone. It was a new feeling to grow accustomed to. Even in her early days at the Planet, she'd had someone to talk to. Though her trust of her colleagues had been limited even then, she had at least had someone. Now she felt the isolation envelop her, strangling her with the silence that surrounded her.

How long would it be like this? How long would she continue to look over her shoulder and wonder when Nigel or Mrs. Cox or some lackey of Lex's would find her and get rid of her?

She approached the back door and fit the key into the lock, turning it with a sharp click. She glanced down at the door, only seeing one lock and pondered how safe that really was before opening the door. She stepped inside, sniffing the air as she inspected the back room. It had a musty smell in it, and the open room had a small T.V. set in it and a long couch against the wall with a lamp next to it. The walls had plain wood panels on them and looked like they hadn't been touched since the place was built.

She turned the corner and found two doors across from one another in the narrow hallway and on the other side was the kitchen that appeared to lead up to the main living area. She turned to where the doors were, opening the first door that revealed the master bedroom. The bed took up most of the room, and the walls mirrored the same wood paneling that had been in the room and hallway she'd just come from. There was a decent sized closet next to the bathroom which led into another bedroom. That room was a decent size as well and had a window looking over the bed, letting sunlight into the dimly lit room. She opened the door on the other side of the room and found herself out in the hallway again.

She made her way into the kitchen that had a large double-paned window overlooking the sink. There was a refrigerator and freezer, a dishwasher, oven and gas stovetop and a microwave. She sighed to herself, looking around the room that she had barely gotten any use out of in her apartment. She didn't see herself cooking any elaborate meals here, but maybe she could figure out how to make something edible. She'd have to make a run to the store later.

Jimmy said he'd be in touch when he found something out about those names. It had been nearly twelve hours since she'd spoken with him. Calling again might draw attention to herself. She knew all too well the lengths to which Lex would stoop to in order to get what he wanted. Putting a target on Jimmy and Perry by calling the beach house again wasn't a good idea. She knew it, but the signal from the phone he had was awful.

She saw a narrow sliding door in the corner of the kitchen and opened it up, looking for any sign of an intruder. All she found was a shelf of cleaning supplies that didn't look like it had been touched in at least the last five years. She sighed, closing the door back and turning to where the main living area was. She heard a noise from outside and stepped back, hiding behind the white rectangular column that kept her out of sight to whoever was at the door.

'Blinds' she thought to herself, hearing the footsteps outside the door as she stared at the open windows. Why were all the blinds open? 'Go away,' she mentally pleaded, hoping whoever was at the door would just leave.

To her surprise, a key inserted itself into the lock, and she held her breath, listening to the loud click as the door unlocked. Should she run? Should she stay and try to find out who it was that had a key to Perry's cabin? Were any of the places she'd been given safe?

Her chances of leaving disappeared as the door cracked open and a familiar face stared right at her. "Still think you can do this on your own?"

She scowled, staring at Jack Davenport as she stepped out from behind the column, "What are you doing here, Jack?"

\*\*\*

## Chapter 7

### Present Day...

The monotone beeping of the alarm played in the background. Red and white lights continued to blink on the screen as Lex Luthor stared at the monitor in front of him. He watched the screen change from Clark Kent rocking himself back and forth in the corner of the room to footage of his two body guards beating on the door, trying to make their escape. He felt the vein on his forehead pulse as he rewound the footage and replayed it for the tenth time.

In front of him was his security director who nervously waited for him to respond. Millions of dollars spent on developing the top of the line security and this maggot had dropped the ball, letting his enemy slip between his fingers in the middle of the night.

"Explain this!" Lex growled out, jabbing his finger at the monitor repeatedly.

"I... I'm not sure, Mr. Luthor," the director stammered back.

"You're not sure?" Lex hissed. His face twisted as he reached for the man's collar, pulling him close so he was inches away from his face. "Correct me if I'm wrong but you graduated at the top of your class? Isn't that right? Best of the best?"

"Y..yes..."

"No one can hack you without your knowing about it. Wasn't that what you sat in my office and bragged about four years ago?" Luthor spat out angrily, jerking the man toward him by the collar.

"Y-yes, sir, but..."

"No, buts." Lex threw him to the ground and growled, "You're fired!"

\*\*\*

The muffled sounds of Clark's screams echoed in the room. Lois kept a tight hold onto Clark's hand as she watched the doctor examine him. Would he notice anything different? Lois bit her lower lip, watching as the doctor continued his exam that resulted in Clark's body convulsing off the bed and him crying out in agony.

Agent Wallace stood behind her. "You need to keep him quiet."

"I'm treating him the best way I know how," the doctor responded through gritted teeth. "What this man needs is a hospital..."

"No!" Lois practically shouted, reaching for Clark's hand protectively. "No hospitals."

"It's too dangerous," Agent Wallace remarked, covering for Lois' reaction. "Just treat what you can and prescribe something for the pain." She turned to Lois. "If he keeps screaming like that someone is going to call the police..."

She eyed the black and blue marks on him warily as the doctor applied medicine to the wound on Clark's chest. It had taken three hours to get them to Perry's cabin. A choice the FBI was anything but happy about. She'd had five missed calls from Davenport since they arrived at the cabin.

They wanted to question him, interrogate him about what had happened to him. Clark continued to moan in agony as the doctor continued the exam. She swallowed hard, eying the burn marks on his left bicep. The doctor picked at the burn with a set of tweezers and Clark lurched off the bed, screaming in agony.

"Stop it!" Lois cried, gripping Clark's arm with all her might as she looked at the doctor in dismay. "You're hurting him!"

The doctor turned back, looking at Lois and sighed, "He'll be hurting a lot more if I don't do this."

"Lois," Agent Wallace warned her from behind.

Another blood curdling scream came out of Clark's throat and Lois clamped her hand over his mouth, resting her forehead against his. "It's okay," she lied, trying to calm him down. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, stroking the side of his face with her other hand. His eyes flashed with anger and confusion as she made out the tears glistening in the corners of his eyes. She felt her chest tighten, staring back at him with tears in her eyes. She pressed her lips to his forehead and whispered, "It'll be over soon."

\*\*\*

The bullet casings scattered on the pavement crunched from beneath Lex Luthor's feet as he surveyed the scene. He counted the blood spatter outside the entrance to Pier 7. Nigel had already neatly wrapped up the bodies for him and was waiting for direction on how to proceed.

It wasn't as simple as making them all disappear. Each of them had been on his payroll. Paid to look the other way and plant evidence where needed in order to keep his operation running. How all of them had ended up in Hobb's Bay in what appeared to be a standoff he wasn't sure but he was determined to find out.

Nigel cleared his throat, "We were able to find this, sir."

Lex turned and looked at the object in Nigel's hand. The green light blinked at the end of the tracker, sending a surge of rage through him. His last line of defense had been the tracker he'd inserted into Superman's chest. Without it he would have no way of finding him.

"How long has it been?" he asked, locking his jaw as stared back at Nigel for a response.

"Roughly three hours according to a few of the shelter deprived residents," Nigel said in a subdued tone.

Lex looked to the cleanup crew that stood by, waiting for him to give the go ahead. "Get started," he ordered them. "Not a single fiber should show any sign of life here. Fail and it'll be the end of your career and possibly your life."

With that he stormed through the doors of the warehouse, intent on seeing the extent of the damage that had been done to his

facility. Nigel stood behind him, waiting patiently for him to lead the way. "Where's Gretchen?" Lex asked.

\*\*\*

Lois held her breath, enjoying the quiet solace that came once Clark's screams of agony had subsided. She silently mulled over the information the doctor had told her as he wrote up a report *'just in case'* Clark decided to testify against Lex. She had told them he was in no condition to help with the case yet the issue kept getting pushed. She glanced over to the other side of the bed where Clark was lying. He had passed out from the pain halfway through the doctor's exam.

The doctor said Clark probably wouldn't remember any of tonight. The burn marks were consistent with injuries sustained by patients treated with electroshock. Many of those treatments resulted in short term memory loss. She reached over, stroking the side of Clark's face, feeling the roughness of his beard and mustache against her palm. He looked almost unrecognizable beneath the dark hair that covered his face.

"I know that wasn't easy," Agent Wallace's voice intruded on her thoughts and Lois turned to face the woman staring back at her.

Lois scowled at her angrily. "Get the hell away from me!"

"The doctor said he should recover in a few days. The wounds should heal up but if not we can call him back," Agent Wallace continued, crossing her arms over her chest. "You can be mad at me all you want but it needed to be done and you know it."

"Right," Lois shot back angrily, dabbing at her eyes with her hand and sitting up on the bed. "It's not enough that he's obviously been tortured and put through hell..." She stood up to her feet, wagging her hand in the air. "You didn't have to make me do that."

"He trusts you," Agent Wallace reminded her gently.

"He was scared and screaming for it to stop..." Lois shook her head, running her hands up and down her arms. "There had to be another way."

"He'll be fine," a voice from the corner remarked.

Lois looked up and saw Jack Davenport standing in the doorway. She let out a muttered curse, "What are you doing here?"

Agent Wallace turned to Jack. "You won't be able to talk to him. The doctor gave him a sedative for the pain..."

"You're not going to talk to him period!" Lois argued venomously. "Do you seriously think I'm going to let you anywhere near him after what happened to John Black?"

"He's a potential witness," Jack Davenport retorted, pointing to Clark's unconscious state. "He's obviously been tortured and probably can give some damning testimony against Luthor. Perry White said he'd been the one leading the initial investigation into Lex Luthor."

"Read my lips," Lois spat out angrily. "You stay the hell away from Clark or I will make it my mission to make your life a living hell!"

"You seem very protective of your partner, Lois," Davenport caught her gaze. "I thought you two were just *work* partners."

"Jack!" Agent Wallace snapped at him.

"Get out!" Lois pointed to the door angrily.

"We'll be in touch," Davenport remarked. "Call us when he wakes up."

\*\*\*

Gretchen Kelly felt a panic rise in her throat as she heard the sound of footsteps. She had failed him. Lex had given her the task of breaking Superman and she had failed miserably. She had recognized the woman the moment the gun had been pointed at her.

Lois Lane.

She was alive.

She held onto hope that this information would be enough to save her from Lex's wrath. The door creaked and the rustling of

keys jangling caused Gretchen Kelly's heartrate to pick up. "Lex?" she called out.

The door opened and Nigel St. John stood in the doorway, aiming the barrel of the pistol at her. "Mr. Luthor is very disappointed, Gretchen."

"No, you don't understand, Nigel," she began to stammer. "It wasn't my fault. It was..." She looked at him with pleading eyes. "Please, I have to tell him."

"I know who it was, Gretchen," Nigel remarked coldly. "But I'm afraid you won't be telling Mr. Luthor anything."

\*\*\*

*Two Months Ago...*

"Are you sure?" Lois asked, staring at the missing person report in front of her. The bluish hue from the corpse staring back at her sent chills down her spine and made her stomach churn.

Jack Davenport laid the glossy 8x10 photo of 'Barry' out of costume with a large group and his arm around two women that looked to be charging by the hour, staring back into the camera with a big grin. He looked just like...

"Barry Hayes. Born and raised in San Francisco. Came to Metropolis to have his big break. After Superman's appearance this past year he found it, playing Superman. The owner of the lookalike agency said he hadn't shown up to any of his gigs in a few weeks. We ran the dentals and checked the body and found a tattoo on the left shoulder."

"Kinda hard to get ink done when you're invulnerable," Lois muttered, looking away from the images.

"There was some waxy residue applied to the body that was maybe intended to cover up the tattoo, but after the body was embalmed, it came off. The coroner didn't think anything of it until we were asked to look again. Dental records were a match for Barry."

"So now instead of a dead superhero, we have a dead lookalike." Lois shook her head in disgust. "Great."

"This doesn't change anything," Davenport said, pointing to the image on the table. "If Lex Luthor killed this man to fake the superhero's death..."

"If?" Lois scoffed, shaking her head. "Please, let's not pretend this isn't another cover-up."

"Superman's out there. The question is, where is he?" Jack asked.

Lois shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. "I don't know."

"Perry said this partner of yours was pretty close with him," Jack prompted.

"Clark was... is a friendly guy. He makes friends with everyone. Makes you feel at ease, and you end up sharing more than you intended. That's just the way he is." She felt a hitch in her throat as she added quickly, "Everyone loves him."

"I'm sorry," Davenport said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't be sorry." Lois shook her head. "Help me find him."

"Find him?" Jack glanced at her in confusion. "Lois, you were the one that said Luthor said he..."

"I know what he said, but I also know Clark. I'm telling you he's out there somewhere. We just have to find him."

"You're sure?" Jack Davenport asked.

"Yeah," she nodded. "Positive." Her gaze shifted to the table where the picture was sitting. "He's probably your best bet to find Superman and nail Lex Luthor to the wall. He was looking into him."

"That must have made the partnership awkward," Jack Davenport observed.

"Just help me find him," she said, her expression turning to stone as she looked back at Jack.

\*\*\*

Christina Wallace sat outside the doors to the mayor's office, watching as Lex Luthor exited the doors with Mayor Berkowitz in tow. She kept her expression cool and collected as she continued

to stare, meeting Lex Luthor's gaze. She gave him a slow smile, watching as he turned his attention back to the mayor and changed directions.

The phone in her pocket buzzed as she continued to watch him. "Wallace," she answered the phone.

"How's the surveillance going?" she heard her partner ask.

"Swimmingly." She grinned happily, watching Lex peer over his shoulder at her. "The charges may not have stuck, but he knows we're watching him."

\*\*\*

Lex caught the gaze of the young blonde from across the room. His eyes narrowed with recognition. It wasn't enough that all allegations against him had been dropped. That agent from the FBI kept showing up everywhere.

"Mr. Luthor, let me show you the new facilities..." Mayor Berkowitz said, pointing to the hallway leading to the courtroom. "We're calling it the Luthor Wing," he winked back at Lex as he led the way.

"Actually," he noticed the young blonde staring him down from across the hall. "I have an appointment, Mayor. Perhaps, a raincheck?"

"Of course!" he cheered happily. "I'll walk you out. I can't tell you how much we appreciate your generous donation."

"I'm always willing to support our city's law enforcement," Lex remarked coolly.

Mayor Berkowitz shared a solemn expression as they continued toward the exit. "We really appreciate it, Mr. Luthor. With the news of Superman's death hitting the city the way it has... To be honest, we're having a hard time keeping good men and women on the front line."

"Happy to help." Lex beamed, catching the gaze of the young blonde once more before pushing his way through the exit.

\*\*\*

Lois took a deep breath, looking around the empty cabin. She set her bags down by the door, checking to make sure the locks were secured. She fumbled with the locks, ensuring each one was as tight as possible before moving into the living room.

She leaned back against the door, staring at the open space in front of her. She grabbed her bags and carried them into the bedroom, pulling the mobile phone out of her bag. She flipped through the envelope, finding the stack of phone cards she'd purchased. She needed to call in and check on how things were going with Jimmy on the names she'd given him.

A knock at the door caused her to jump. She quickly shoved her phone and the envelope full of cards back into the side pocket of her bag. Another knock came and she reached beneath her jacket, feeling the handle to her pistol that was holstered. She made her way to the backdoor where the knocking was coming from. She looked through the window on the side and saw a woman with bleach blonde hair and a white box in her hands. Curious, she unlocked the door and opened it.

"Yes?"

"Oh, see, I knew Tim had someone new move in here. Dolores told me I was crazy, but well this will show her. I may be getting old but I knew I saw a new car pull in." The woman began to ramble at fifty miles an hour, not even stopping to take a breath.

"I'm sorry," she did her best to keep up with the woman's rambling. "Who are you?"

"Oh, where are my manners." The woman pushed past her, stepping inside with the white box in her hand. "I'm Melinda Hemingway." She puffed out her chest as if that should mean anything. "I own the property right on the corner..."

"Uh-huh," Lois did her best to force a smile, uncertain why that should mean anything.

"So, I take it you're Tim's new tenant?" Melinda asked, pursing her lips as she turned toward the mirror on the wall behind them, checking her teeth in her reflection.

"Tim?" Lois racked her brain for the name that had been on the paperwork Perry had given her. She had mentioned Tim. Alice's uncle had been the property owner before he had died and passed it on to Alice. Maybe that was who she meant.

The woman's mouth pursed into a thin line and she raised her eyebrow at Lois. "Yes, Timothy Westman? The owner of this property?"

Lois did her best to not react to the woman's intrusive behavior. Creating a lasting impression wasn't how she wanted to start things. She was supposed to be laying low. "Yes, I think I remember Alice mentioning him."

"Alice?" Melinda frowned. "Tim's niece?"

"Yes, she was the one that rented the cabin to me." Lois forced a smile.

"Oh, yes, Tim does have a soft spot for her," Melinda acknowledged.

"Right." Lois felt like her teeth would fall out from how hard she was keeping the pretense of smiling for this woman.

"So, you are...?" the woman prompted.

"Um, Leila," Lois introduced herself with the new identity she'd been furnished. "Leila Kane."

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Leila." The woman eyed her carefully, handing her the white box in her hands. "We do take pride on appearances around here. Just be sure to treat the place like your own it and we shouldn't have any issues." She opened the box for her. "Double chocolate chip. I made them myself."

"Well, thank you," Lois stammered, uncertain how much longer she could carry on this conversation that was making her teeth hurt.

"Welcome to the neighborhood, Leila Kane," the woman called over her shoulder as she made her way to the exit. It was clear she'd only come over to get the dirt on who Lois was. Lois let out a sigh of relief when the door closed behind Melinda and set the box down. She checked to make sure the locks were tight and then turned back to the bedroom to call Jimmy.

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#### *Present Day...*

Lois peeked through the cracked bathroom door, leading to the bedroom where Clark was sleeping. There was still no change. The longer he slept the more worried she became. He had passed out on the car ride to the safe house. Even when the doctor had been cleaning his wounds it hadn't jarred him from his unconscious state.

Four days. It had been four days since the rescue. Agent Wallace had been waiting at the cabin with the doctor. The same doctor that had stitched her up after Lex's attack. She glanced down at her reddened thigh as she turned to face the bathtub. She'd run out of antibiotics yesterday and the area around her wound was becoming more and more red. She suspected it was infected. She'd have to reach out to Wallace and see if she could get a refill.

She reached over to turn the faucet to the shower on, feeling the water that came out until it was the right temperature. She slipped her robe off, hanging it on the hook and pulled back the shower curtain. The water continued to run out of the faucet at her feet and she leaned down to pull the lever, rerouting the water to the showerhead. There was a creak in the pipes and then the water burst out of the showerhead, raining over her.

She reached for the bottle of shampoo and began lathering it in her hair, staring at the tile walls. How long had Lex kept Clark in that prison? A month? Two? Three? She placed her hand on the tile, allowing the water to beat on her back as her mind flashed back to the rescue she'd performed four days ago.

*'I'm not crazy.'*

Those had been the words he'd growled out at her when she'd tried to rescue him. It was clear there was no limit to the lengths Lex would go to in order to torture his enemy. There had been

bruises, cuts and burns all over Clark's body. She let out a shuddered breath, recalling the ligature marks on his back when the doctor had shed him of the uniform Lex had him in. Agent Wallace had taken a picture of the uniform and then burnt it.

She let out a muffled sob, recalling Clark's frantic state when they'd been surrounded by gunfire. He had been scared. Lex had obviously gotten his hands on Kryptonite and been using it and God knows what else to torture Clark. She knew the physical scars would heal eventually but the obvious mental ones he'd been burdened with she wasn't so sure of.

She reached down to release the lever to the shower and turned the faucet off. The steam from the shower quickly evaporated and she felt the goosebumps raise on her skin, reminding her of the moist droplets that covered her body. She reached for the towel, hanging on the shower rod above her head, pulling it down and wrapped it around her body. She took the other towel hanging on the rack and used it to dry the remainder of her body, catching a glimpse of her tear stained cheeks in the mirror.

She looked back at the half-open door once more. Still nothing.

Four days.

It had been four days since the rescue.

Surely there was a limit to how much rest a body...even a super body needed to recover. She didn't have the answers and she knew there was only so long he could go. Still, she couldn't help but wonder if his retreat into slumber was a way of hiding from the perils he'd endured at Lex Luthor's hands.

She sighed, making her way back into the bedroom. She looked down at the redness around the wound on her thigh. She grabbed the cell phone from the dresser and returned to the bathroom with the first aid kit. Hopefully it wasn't too early.

She turned, looking over her shoulder when she felt a brush of air against the back of her neck. Nothing. The door remained open as she applied the antiseptic to her leg and listened to the long ring echoing through the earpiece of her phone.

"Hello?"

"Martha, it's me." Lois peered over her shoulder, looking back at Clark's sleeping form. Four days and no change.

"Perry told me what happened," Martha said carefully. "Are you...?"

"I'm fine," Lois said quicker than she needed to. Truth be told she was anything but fine at the moment but she didn't want to waste time discussing herself. She needed to ask about Clark.

"You were shot," Martha corrected her. "I don't think that qualifies as fine."

Lois sighed, realizing she wouldn't get around the subject. "It's healing I guess."

"Are you keeping the dressing clean?" Martha asked. "You've got to change them like clockwork otherwise it'll get infected..."

"Yeah, I've been changing it every day, but it's still pretty red." Lois sighed, readjusting the phone against her face. "I'm going to call in for some more antibiotics." There was a silence between them and Lois bit her lip, trying to find the right words to ask the question she'd been dreading. What if he doesn't wake up? What if there's something wrong? What if...

"Any change?" Martha asked, seeming to read her thoughts.

"No," she choked back a sob. "No, there's been no change. I'm starting to get worried. It's been four days now..."

"I'm sure he'll come around soon. Are you keeping enough sunlight on him?" Martha asked.

Before Lois could respond she felt a hand on her shoulder. Flashes from the fight with Lex raced through her mind and she instinctively went on the defense, not giving the potential attacker a chance to throw the first punch. She grabbed the hand by the wrist and delivered a kick before throwing her assailant over her shoulder. She turned, adrenaline pulsing through her veins and

stopped when she saw Clark lying on his back in the middle of the floor.

The phone laid on the ground forgotten and she moved to Clark's side, hovering over him as he let out a painful groan. "Clark! Oh, my God are you, all right? I'm so sorry I..."

"Am I dead?" he croaked out.

She felt a lump in her throat, uncertain how to respond. Was he dead? How was that the first thing he said to her after all these months? She tightened her jaw, swallowing the tears that were threatening to take over and whispered, "No." she ran her hand against his cheek. "You're not dead."

He stared back at her for a long moment. His lips were dry and chapped as he opened his mouth to ask, "How...?"

'*Water*;' the thought popped in her mind as she brushed away a few stray tears that had escaped out of the corners of her eyes. '*He needs water*;' She removed her hand from his cheek and saw his face fall as she pulled away. "It's a long story."

She found herself unable to move, staring back at him. She needed to get up. It had been four days since she found him and God only knows how long since he'd had any food or water. She needed to get up but that task seemed impossible in that moment.

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Clark began to stir, hearing the sound of water running in the distance. He squinted his eyes, feeling the sunlight on his face. Sunlight. He hadn't felt direct or indirect sunlight in so long he'd forgotten what it felt like. He tried to open his mouth but felt a sting in his throat. His lips were chapped, and he parted them carefully, feeling the sticky skin pull apart. '*Water*;' he thought to himself. He needed water. The last attack must have taken more out of him than he'd thought.

He reached for the side of his steel hospital bed, only to find a soft comforter hanging over the side. He squeezed the material, curious how he'd been awarded such privileges by the likes of Dr. Kelly.

His eyes fluttered open, and he stared up at the unfamiliar setting he was in. The plain white walls were gone. He shifted his neck and felt a cramp, reaching his hand back to grab it and felt the sting from his left shoulder. He looked down and saw a white square of gauze taped just below the collarbone. He ran a hand across his bare chest and sat up, staring down at the skin uncertainly. He lifted the comforter and noticed an unfamiliar looking pair of cotton shorts was all he had on.

He frowned, looking around the unfamiliar room. Was this a trick? He peered up in the corners of the wood-paneled walls and saw no sign of cameras. No sign of him being watched but he knew that didn't necessarily mean anything. Luthor was always watching...waiting.

He looked to the side table and frowned, seeing a familiar pair of glasses sitting on top of a familiar pair of shorts and shirt. He reached out to touch it. The fabric was soft and worn, just as his had been. He lifted the folded shirt, opening it up and gasped at the worn number and lettering on it. It was his old t-shirt from college with his jersey number printed on it. The glasses looked just like the pair he'd kept in Smallville.

He lifted them up, staring at the spectacles with a wary expression. How simple his life had been back then. No evil villains to fight. No stress of having the weight of the world on his shoulders. The small problems that weighed on him back then seemed minuscule compared to the mountain load of pain he carried with him now.

'*Water*;' his mind reminded him. He looked around the room and saw a door partially open and leading to the bathroom. The light was on, and he could still hear water running in the distance. He swung his legs around, placing his feet on the ground and feeling the soreness in his back and leg muscles with full effect. He placed his palms on both sides of him, putting all his weight into the effort of lifting himself up. He could feel a sharp pain in

his shoulder, and his leg muscles had definitely seen better days. He was up though.

He glanced back at the bed he'd sat up from and saw a blood stain on the navy blue sheets he'd been laying on. He frowned, uncertain where it had come from. The water stopped. He turned toward the bathroom, hearing a familiar voice.

"Yeah, I've been changing it every day, but it's still pretty red," the female voice came from inside the bathroom.

*'It couldn't be,'* his mind screamed, recognizing the voice immediately. He walked toward the open door and saw a woman with a towel wrapped around her and her back facing him as she spoke on the cordless phone to someone. The silhouette was unmistakable. Her hair looked different, but her body language was all her. He knew it was probably a trick. It always was. The holograms and recordings had been funneled through his prison every day, and he knew the evidence had already been presented of her death. It couldn't possibly be her. Still, he couldn't help but be drawn in as he stood in the doorway, unable to move, frozen and continuing to stare.

"No, there's been no change. I'm starting to get worried. It's been four days now..."

He couldn't help himself. He knew engaging in the fantasy would only cause his mind further torment. He had to prove to himself this wasn't real. It was a dream. She wasn't...

The second he felt the damp flesh against his hand he recoiled, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he croaked out her name, "Lois?"

It only took a second before he found himself flat on his back after she delivered a hard blow to the gut and threw him back across the floor. He let out a painful groan, and then a minute later she reappeared, hovering over him. "Clark! Oh, my God are you, all right? I'm so sorry I..."

"Am I dead?" he croaked out.

A look flashed in her eyes, and she gave him a tight-lipped frown as a sob escaped her throat, "No," her hand brushed against his cheek, and she croaked out, "you're not dead." Image after image of her helping drag him from an elevator flashed through his mind. Another of her pleading with him to trust her and stabbing him with a scalpel flashed through his mind.

<<"I'll explain later, just trust me.">>

"How...?" he did his best to ask the question as she stared back at him, tears in her eyes. A million thoughts raced through his mind as he stared back at her. He had so many questions but found himself unable to voice a single one. She was alive. Lois was alive. How this was possible, he wasn't sure, but for the first time, he felt something he hadn't in a long time. Hope.

"It's a long story," Lois pulled away from him, standing to her feet. He caught sight of the bandage on her leg and the swollen red skin around it. She'd been injured. That much was evident.

He stared at her for a long moment, waiting for her to say more but she didn't. Should he ask? Would she answer? There were so many questions he had but knowing when the right time was to ask for the answers seemed a skill he couldn't or wouldn't use as he found himself unable to form the words to ask what he so desperately needed to know. Lois turned, leaving the room without another word and closing the bathroom door behind her.

He carefully sat up from where he'd so graciously been thrown and slowly image after image came back of her literally dragging him from the prison cell he'd been in and rescuing him.

<<"Clark, just know I wouldn't do this if I didn't have to.">>

<<"Clark, what did they do to you?">>

<<"I know. I know. I'm so sorry, Clark.">>

<<"Clark, it's okay, I've got you.">>

*'Clark,'* the name sounded so good to his ears, but still, it felt strange to hear her call his name. There was something about the way she said it that felt different. He moved his hand to his face, feeling the rough hair against his skin from not being able to shave

in...How long had it been?

The door creaked open, and he looked up to see Lois dressed in a t-shirt and shorts with a bottle of water in her hands. "I thought you might be thirsty. It's been a few days since you last ate."

He took the bottle from her, twisting the cap and gulping the water down as fast as he could. He could feel the cool liquid soak into his body like a sponge, thirsting for more. How long had he taken for granted the precious gift of water? The cool liquid flowed through his insides, quenching the thirst he thought would never end. He closed his eyes, saying a silent prayer of thanks before opening them once more and looked down at the empty bottle in his hand. He dared not look up for fear that he'd be forced to stare into her eyes once more. He was still reeling from the news that she was alive.

Lois Lane was alive.

She pointed to the bathroom behind her. "The bathroom's all yours. There are fresh towels on the towel rack. Why don't you get cleaned up and if you need anything..." She pointed to the door behind him.

He didn't respond. He couldn't. Listening to her voice made his heart ache as the image of the bloody knife flashed through his mind again and again. The threats and ugly picture Luthor painted for him time and time again.

She stopped mid-sentence and knelt down in front of him, forcing him to look at her. "Clark?"

There it was again. His name.

"I know this is a lot to take in," she began slowly, placing a hand on his shoulder. He flinched slightly, unable to welcome her touch just yet. "Okay," she backed away, and he heard a crack in her voice. "I'm just gonna give you some space." With that she got up and left, leaving him alone in the unrecognizable room to ponder everything he'd just learned.

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"Clark?" Lois stared at him, watching fear and recognition cross through Clark Kent's eyes as he stared back at her. He was almost unrecognizable with the unkempt beard and mustache that had grown out over the last few months.

He was scared. She couldn't blame him. Knowing what she'd been put through by Lex, she knew it was probably nothing compared to what he'd been put through. She stared back at him, hoping to see some resemblance of the man she'd known for the past year.

"I know this is a lot to take in," she began carefully, placing a hand on his shoulder as she stared back at him. He physically recoiled beneath her touch, and she felt a lump form in her throat as she pondered what to do. Did she keep pushing him and risk more damage or did she give him his space and hope for the best? She swallowed hard and chose the latter.

"I'm just gonna give you some space."

She stood up and left, hiding the tears that were threatening to overtake her as she slammed the door closed behind her. A muffled cry escaped her throat, and she lowered herself to the ground, leaning back against the door and rocking herself in-between strangled cries.

\*\*\*

*Two Months Ago...*

Franklin Stern pointed to the large portfolio in front of each of his shareholders. "Gentlemen, this city has been delivered a disservice. For the longest time Metropolis prided itself on being the home of the great Daily Planet. Now it lies in ruins, forgotten."

He tossed a copy of the Metropolis STAR on the boardroom table. "Are we really going to let Lex Luthor control the narrative of this city?"

"Franklin," one of his advisors spoke up, "I miss the Planet as much as anyone, but LexCorp owns the entire media outlet of Metropolis. We have influence with some of the television markets

but Metropolis is not our turf and with the rumors surrounding Luthor's last hostile takeover, I'm not sure this is a fight I'm willing to embark on."

"Agreed," Stern's CFO nodded. "We know your heart is in the right place, but Lex Luthor is too much of a threat." He sighed, meeting Stern's gaze. "I'm sorry."

"So, we just lie back and let Luthor takeover? No one is willing to stand up to him?" Stern asked, shaking his head.

"That's not what we're saying..."

"Isn't it?" Stern challenged. "Luthor gets a stronghold on Metropolis and it's only a matter of time before he starts branching out. With his recent legal trouble we need to strike while the iron is hot and take control."

"But..."

"Have I ever steered this board wrong before?" Stern asked.

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Lex Luthor sat behind his desk, tapping at the smooth surface of his wood grain desk. He looked up at his visitor, the FBI's Director of Major Crimes, Victor Talley. "I have half a mind to file a lawsuit against your department for harassment, Mr. Talley."

"I have half a mind to give Agent Wallace the freedom to open an official investigation into the backroom deals that she's uncovered," Talley responded with just as much gusto. "I'm not one of your patsies, Mr. Luthor. You have a problem with the FBI doing its job, file an official complaint and I'll make sure to give it the attention it needs... Thanks to these budget cuts we're running out of toilet paper."

"I'm so glad to see my tax dollars are hard at work paying your salary... funding your department and the luxuries that help keep the FBI running. All so you can turn around and threaten me. Perhaps the FBI's Chief of Staff would be interested in hearing from me. I do owe her a dinner..."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure she would love to hear all about how scared you are of a little town car following you to public functions. Didn't you fire your head of security? Think of it as government funded protection," Talley responded with a dark tone.

"Lest you forget your position is appointed by the people," Lex warned.

"Threatening a public official is a federal crime, Mr. Luthor," Talley reminded him. "As I stated before, if you have a complaint then file it with my office. If not, then I suggest you go about your day and drop it. If there isn't anything to find then you have nothing to worry about, right?"

"You're playing a dangerous game, Mr. Talley," Lex threatened.

"I'll take that under advisement," Talley responded in turn. "Threaten me again and I'll have you sitting in a federal prison before you can call that fancy lawyer of yours. You wouldn't do well in federal prison, Mr. Luthor. Tiny room. Four walls. No windows. From what I hear you're a bit of a claustrophobic." His tone turned dark as he added, "Don't sit at the table with the big boys if you're not prepared to lose." With that Victor Talley stood to his feet, smiling as he left the room, leaving an angry Lex Luthor behind.

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Simon Truesdale sat in his limo glancing at the passenger across from him nervously. He'd always had a weak spot for beautiful women. She popped the wrist of her latex gloves and smiled at him with a devilish smile. "Just in case."

"Are we going to be making a mess?" he asked nervously.

"I won't," she whispered, leaning over, "but you will."

He heard a popping sound before falling over, grabbing his neck to stop it from bleeding. The woman whispered in his ear, "Simon, you should have seen this coming. No one talks about closed boardroom deals and lives to tell the tale." His eyes widened as he realized what was happening. "Think of it this way. At least you can save your kids the heartache of going through a

painful divorce..."

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Jimmy let out a defeated sigh, setting the papers on the coffee table in front of him. Another dead end. He'd tried everything he could but he just couldn't come up with a way into Westminster in order to talk to Phillip Manning. He'd been able to hack into the school's mainframe and access the student's files but trying to find a way to approach the almost 11-year-old or his state assigned guardian was proving impossible.

"You coming up empty too?" Jack asked, looking up from the desktop computer he was huddled behind in the corner.

"I'm stuck," Jimmy said with a grunt. "Trying to reopen these cases and dig up the evidence we had but was destroyed..."

"Well, you can't say Luthor doesn't clean up after himself," Jack let out a low whistle. He got up from the desk and walked over to Jimmy. "The agent at Lexel Investments isn't returning my calls."

Jimmy let out a groan, shaking his head and pointing to the stack of papers on the table. "Your board member was murdered."

"What?" Jack leaned over and grabbed the stack of papers, looking at the picture on the article he'd printed.

"He's going to get away with it," Jimmy muttered angrily. "He always gets away with it."

"You know, if that's how you really feel then why are you bothering?" a voice came from behind him and Jimmy turned to see Alice White standing behind him with a mug of coffee in her hand.

"Mrs. White, sorry, we didn't mean to wake you," Jimmy said hurriedly, sitting up on the couch.

"Oh, Alice, please," she corrected him again, taking a seat next to him. There was a silence between them. She nudged Jimmy. "You seem to have given up."

"He keeps killing everyone," Jimmy said, shaking his head in dismay. "We get a witness or a little headway and then poof Luthor takes them out." He grew solemn before adding, "Just like CK."

"You don't know that for sure," Alice reminded him. "He could be injured or..."

"Dead?" Jack cut in with a solemn tone.

"He would have reached out by now if he was all right." Jimmy shook his head, staring at the monitor on his laptop. "Something happened. He wouldn't just drop off like that."

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#### *Present Day...*

Clark stared at his reflection in the mirror, trying to recognize himself through the mangled hair that covered his face. He could feel the tension rising on the back of his neck, and he looked down at the counter where his hand was shaking against the countertop. 'Stop it,' he told himself, gripping the side of the counter with a growl. He looked up and stared into the mirror, seeing the reflection of the stranger staring back at him once more.

He was unrecognizable.

He turned away in disgust, looking at the towel and razor that had been set out on the counter for him. 'Subtle,' he thought to himself, looking around the bathroom. Unlike the other room he was in this one was covered in floral wallpaper that seemed to be something out of the late seventies. He looked to the bathtub that appeared to have been replaced recently. Unlike the tile around it, the hue was brighter and more of a sterling white than the off-white eggshell that encompassed the room.

How long had it been since he'd showered... or shaved for that matter? He briefly wondered if he could even remember how to use the razor in front of him. He'd relied on his heat vision for most of his adolescence. By the time puberty had hit he was already invulnerable, making shaving a difficult task as he learned how to maneuver his heat vision with hair that needed daily trimming.

“You stink.” He told himself, reaching over to turn the water faucet on. A piercing pain ran through his shoulder as he extended his arm and he pulled it back, hearing the loud ringing from the faucet as the water came on. “Other arm,” he told himself. He extended his other arm out to turn the faucet where he needed it to be and pulled the lever to turn the shower on.

The cold water made him jump back, and he could feel his unsteady legs fighting to keep standing as he stared at the stream of water coming from the shower head. He wore a determined expression on his face as he allowed the sleeping shorts to fall to the ground and stepped out of them. He reached behind him to grab the razor from earlier.

Inside he saw a sample bottle of shampoo and a bar of soap on the side of the tub. It was the same brand he’d used countless times before. He felt the tension immediately leave his body as the warm water hit his skin. He stared down at his feet, watching the brownish water flow toward the drain and bit back a roar of triumph as he reached for the shampoo to wash the stink, blood, sweat, and tears out of his hair. The scent of fresh soap filled the shower, and he felt tears burning the corners of his eyes as he reveled in such a simple task. It was something so common, and yet it had become something he craved for however long he had been trapped in that hell hole.

He reached for the bar of soap, intent on continuing the treatment he’d given his hair when his leg began to shake. He reached out to grab the curtain only to fall back, landing on his back. The pain from the fall made him cry out, and the door flung open.

He looked down, thanking the lucky stars for some semblance of modesty that had been granted to him by allowing the shower curtain to keep him covered for the most part as he struggled to sit up. His body wasn’t nearly as strong as it used to be. That much he was aware of, but the unsteadiness in his legs remained a mystery. Could it be the prolonged exposure to the Kryptonite? The electroshock he’d been subjected to? The beatings? Anything was possible, but at that moment he would have given anything to be able to stand up and continue with the independent act he’d been reveling in. The simple act of bathing himself.

Another thing Luthor had robbed him of.

He didn’t dare look up when Lois entered the bathroom. How could he? He couldn’t even bathe himself. He’d lifted an entire space station into orbit, knocked an asteroid the size of Metropolis out of its trajectory toward Earth and yet he couldn’t even stand on his own two feet and finish the mundane task of bathing himself.

To his surprise, she didn’t say anything. She lifted the lever and released the water from the showerhead, so the water rerouted itself to the faucet. Not a single word escaped her lips as she handed him the soap bar that had fallen to the floor. He looked up at her in surprise, uncertain of what to make of this side of Lois Lane he’d never seen before. She adjusted the curtain and pulled it back so that only his face could be seen from behind it.

She reached down and picked up the razor and the bottle of shampoo that had fallen to the ground during his fall. He glanced over at her, uncertain how to respond as she placed the items on the side of the tub. He reached over to grab the side of the tub and let out a muttered grunt when he felt his hand shaking against the porcelain.

Lois’ hand reached over to cover his, stilling the movements and he gritted his teeth, holding in the frustration he felt at his body’s failure to do the simple things that used to come so easy. “It’s okay,” she whispered, turning to him. He didn’t respond, uncertain how to even look at her. There was a silent lull between them and then she broke the silence. “You’re bleeding.” She reached over pointing to his forehead with the wet washcloth in her hand.

He reached up to stop her, grabbing her wrist, letting out a muffled growl, “No.”

She flinched, grabbing his hand to release his grip on her wrist. “You need help,” she whispered hoarsely. “Please, just let me help you.”

He stared back at her, contemplating her plea for a moment and then released his grip on her wrist. He looked down at the porcelain of the tub he was sitting in, staring at the faucet that continued to run. He could see the red trickle of blood on the side as it ran down the drain.

He was bleeding.

She applied the washcloth to the side of his head and whispered, “I think maybe sitting might be a better option.” She pulled back, standing to her feet and pointing to the showerhead. “I’m just going to turn this on.”

“Okay,” he nodded, keeping a tight grip on the side of the tub when he felt the rain of the showerhead pour down on top of him. Just as quickly as the shower curtain had parted it closed back again and she took a seat on the floor with her back to him. He looked down in defeat, realizing she was trying to give him at least the semblance of the last of his dignity.

The worry on her face was evident, and he wanted to explain. He tried to tell her, but he found himself at a loss for words. The skill of formulating a response and using words to express himself as he had for so many years was foreign to him now. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to say the words. The half thought that he hoped she would understand the meaning behind.

“I fell.”

“I know,” she said, not turning to look at him. “I know this is hard and I know you’ve got a lot of questions, but right now I think it’s best you focus on...healing.”

He stared for a long moment at her back uncertain what to say in response. The water continued to rain over him, trickling warmth as he watched the soapy residue flow toward the drain. He closed the curtain, leaning forward into the stream to silently continuing to wash the remainder of the soap from his body.

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*Two Months Ago...*

Perry could feel his blood pressure spiking the minute Jimmy, Jack and Alice began pitching their brilliant plan to him. Alice had her hands on her hips and her chin jutted out in defiance as she continued to plead her case. All he could see was the reminder of how close he’d come to losing someone he’d cared about.

“Absolutely not!” Perry White shook his head adamantly, staring at the two traitors sitting across the table, uncharacteristically silent as Alice glared at him. He looked pleadingly at his wife. “It’s too dangerous!”

“It is a *one day* trip, Perry.” Alice White shrugged, running a hand through her hair. “One conversation.”

“That’s how it always starts!” he shot back, running a weary hand through his thinning grey hair. “It’s just one day. Whoops, here comes a lead and next thing you know you’re holed up in the corner of an alley with a guy named Moe and the barrel of a 45 pointed at you and then guess who has to come to the rescue...”

“I think that old memory is a bit tainted.” Alice sniffed, shaking her head. “As I remember it, you were the one that didn’t want to check in with Old Man Krebs because you were so sure Moe could be trusted.” She crossed her arms over her chest, tapping her foot impatiently at him. “I was the one that put a tail on you and saved your ignorant behind from becoming target practice for McCarthy’s gang.”

“Fine!” Perry waved her off, not wanting to get into a debate over who saved who at the moment. Though he knew it was himself that had called the cops, not her. “You saved me. Whatever, but that was almost two decades ago! This isn’t a run of the mill mobster. This is a dangerous felon who gets paid to make explosives and ruin lives!” Perry barked, shaking his head.

“Oh, since when has that ever stopped you? It’s not like I’m jumping out of a helicopter waving ‘Come get me!’ Unlike some

people, I actually know how to be discreet.” Alice huffed.

“I *am* discreet,” Perry shot back.

“As a bull in a china shop,” Alice rolled her eyes at him. “I remember a certain newspaper hound that got himself tied to a nuclear warhead and ...”

“And almost got myself killed if it weren’t for you following me.” Perry finished for her, sharing a smile with her. He was losing this argument and he knew it.

She took a step closer to him, placing a hand on his chest, “We made a great team back then.”

“We still do,” Perry sighed, placing his hand over hers. “But we’re too old to be dangling off of helicopters and chasing down terrorists.”

“You might be too old but I am not,” Alice argued with a grin.

“Alice...”

“Chief, she’s got a point,” Jimmy cut in, setting his glass of water down.

“She most certainly does not!” Perry argued half-heartedly. “It’s too dangerous!”

Jack nudged Jimmy and whispered loud enough for Perry to hear, “You think Perry realizes he sounds like Clark when he’s trying to talk Lois out of something?”

“I heard that!” Perry turned to the two young men sitting at the table.

“Oh, come on, Perry, don’t you miss it? The adrenaline pumping through your veins when you’re on the tail of a hot lead,” Alice pleaded with him.

“You could get killed,” Perry remarked solemnly.

“I remember saying the same thing to you when you went undercover to expose the corruption in the McCarthy trials,” she shot back, wagging her finger at him. “You asked me to trust your instincts and I did. You almost got yourself killed in the process but I trusted you, Perry.”

“Alice, these aren’t dirty politicians we’re dealing with here,” Perry reminded her.

“Which is why you should let me help,” Alice said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Face it, you need help. The only way to get close to these guys without tipping off Lex Luthor is for someone to talk to them that they don’t know. I’m an anonymous face.”

“You got to admit, it’s pretty genius, Chief,” Jimmy piped in. “We’ve got to get something to help bring down Lex Luthor. The FBI said Lois is the only evidence they have in their case against him. Alice would be perfect...”

“It’s one day,” Alice reminded him.

“Just one day?” Perry pondered aloud, realizing he’d already lost the argument.

“I’ll go with her,” Jimmy offered.

Perry wagged his finger at Jimmy. “If anything ... and I mean anything looks suspicious you get her out of there and don’t look back. You hear?”

“Aye, aye,” Alice gave a playful salute and turned to leave.

Perry sighed, shaking his head. He knew it was a good idea the minute Alice mentioned it but he couldn’t help but wonder if this might be one case where she was getting in over her head.

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*Present Day...*

Nigel stood outside the medical office of Dr. B.D. Kahn. The building looked just like any other, but his source had insisted she’d seen a woman fitting Lois Lane’s description brought here a little over a month ago. The question was, why on Earth would Lois Lane have been brought to a plastic surgeon’s office when the hospital was only a few blocks away?

He reached for the front door and frowned when he realized it was locked. *‘Interesting,’* he thought to himself. Perhaps it was time that he got to know who this B.D. Kahn was and the nature of his connection to Lois Lane.

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“Just a few more feet,” Lois whispered, keeping a strong grip on Clark as she helped him walk to the bathroom counter.

*‘Easy for you to say,’* he thought to himself, dragging his leg across the floor, making his way to the counter and gripping the ceramic surface as if his life depended on it. He looked down, staring at the wet front of her t-shirt from where she’d helped him out of the shower. He felt exposed.

He had to hand it to her. She remained eye level with him. Still, he found himself unable to be grateful for the small saving grace in the humiliating situation he was in. He was naked... exposed for all the world to see. Of all the fantasies he’d had over the past year of being naked in the shower with Lois Lane this was not how he’d pictured it. He could feel panic rising in the pit of his stomach as her knee brushed against his upper thigh and he felt his body instinctively respond. *‘No, no, no, no... This is not happening’* he looked down to his feet, the back of his neck burning with embarrassment and tears burning in the corner of his eyes. He gritted his teeth, feeling the heat from his embarrassment wash over him as he imagined for a moment if being back in that hell hole would have been better than this.

“It’s okay,” she reassured him, tilting his chin and forcing him to look at her. “Here,” she handed him a large bath towel, keeping her eyes on him as he took it from her.

Immediately he felt relief when the large terry cloth material unfolded from his hand. He held the counter with one hand and shook it open with the other. Gone were the days of super-speeding through his morning routine and drying off with a spin change. How could he have taken such liberties for granted? He let out a groan of frustration as he struggled to hold the towel in place long enough to tie the two ends around his waist into a knot.

“Oh!” Lois seemed to register what he was attempting to do and quietly helped him with the task. He met her gaze with a pained expression, uncertain what to make of the look in her eyes. She placed a hand on his cheek, fingering the hair that had grown along his cheekbone. “I think you might need to use a trimmer. This is too long for just a razor.” She looked behind her and held up a cordless trimmer.

His eyes widened in a panic as he saw the silver and black trimmer come near him. The last time he’d had to shave with anything other than his heat vision was when he’d broken the blade of the razor he’d been gifted by Pete Ross. He swallowed hard, staring at the blades that could potentially reveal too much. He reached his hand out and stopped her, grabbing her wrist to prevent her arm from coming any closer.

She stopped, staring back at him in surprise. He held her gaze for a long moment before releasing his grasp on her. She pulled her wrist back and set the trimmer down. He looked down, keeping his hand on the countertop for support and looking toward the open door.

He needed to get out of here.

He needed space.

He needed to take what little of his dignity was left and get away from Lois before he embarrassed himself any further. He felt more vulnerable under her gaze than he had in all the months he’d been under the camera surveillance of Luthor and Dr. Kelly. The sooner he could get out of this bathroom and away from Lois the better he’d be.

“Clark?” she placed her hand on his cheek and he shuddered beneath her touch. She stared at him for what felt like an eternity. He looked down, uncertain what to say to explain what was going through his mind in that moment. “Clark, it’s fine,” she whispered, cupping his cheek with her palm. She moved her arm to his back, “I’m just going to help you to the bed and then you can take it from there, okay?”

He nodded silently, unwilling to give a vocal response for fear his humiliation and embarrassment of the current situation would betray him. His legs continued to tremor with each step. He

reached the doorway, leading to the bedroom he'd woken up in. He reached his arm out to hold onto the door frame for support.

"Easy," Lois whispered, tightening her grasp on his shoulder as they stepped out onto the wooden floors. He could feel his arm begin to tremor and she stopped, waiting for it to pass before taking the next few steps toward the bed. "I've got you," she whispered.

He took another staggered step toward the bed, cursing under his breath at the current predicament he was in. How many times had he prayed and wished for an opportunity to be close like this with Lois? How many times had he dreamt of having her hold him and never let go? Now all he wanted was to get as far away from her as possible.

*'Not exactly how you imagined it, is it?'* he thought bitterly as he felt the damp fabric from the front of her shirt press into him. They only had a few more steps before this torture would end.

"Almost there," Lois cheered, offering him a tense smile. He could tell from the perspiration on her forehead she was looking forward to the end of this task as much as he was. He knew Lois kept herself in shape but he never imagined she was strong enough to literally drag him out of the shower and into the bedroom.

*'Twenty-five steps.'*

He took another step and before he could react, he felt his legs give out from beneath him, pushing both him and Lois back onto the bed. He closed his eyes, uncertain what storm would come his way from Lois. To his surprise he heard laughter of all things coming from her as she hovered over him, attempting to untangle herself from where they'd fallen in the collision.

"Well, that's one way of doing it I suppose." Lois placed a hand on his chest, staring back at him for a long moment. He found himself getting lost once again in her gaze, uncertain how to react. Instinctively, he moved his hand to cover hers. The top half of her torso was soaked and he could make out the outline of the top half of her bra from beneath her dark green top. His gaze shifted back up to her face, meeting her eyes with his. It would be so tempting to act on impulse. How many nights had he dreamt of being this close to her again and here she was in the flesh, close enough to touch.

He reached his hand up, running his hand across the side of her face, outlining her jawline with his thumb. She felt so good. He knew if he kissed her there was a very real chance he wouldn't be able to stop. After the months of torture and living in isolation, cut off from everything thinking she had died he knew he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

She was *too* close.

Unbearably close.

But in that moment, he didn't care.

She moved closer and her eyelashes fluttered against her cheek. Then without warning she pulled away, clearing her throat and sitting back, "I'll let you finish getting dressed," she pointed to the door, standing to her feet in an almost sprint out of the bedroom.

She mumbled a quick, "Call if you need anything," and closed the door behind her.

He let out a long sigh, sinking his head back against the comforter, uncertain how to respond to her departure.

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## Chapter 8

*Two Months Ago...*

Perry White's warning rang through Jimmy Olsen's mind as he watched from across the street as Alice White made her way through the crowd. After the fire, finding the original witnesses that had come forward before had been near impossible. When he'd attempted to reach out to the agent at Lexel Investments he'd reached a dead end when confronted with a new manager at the branch that claimed never to have heard of Lyle Thompson before.

John Black had disappeared from his old apartment building,

but luckily his love of a specific brand of coffee had not changed. He'd been able to track his activity and find him on the east end of Metropolis Bridge working as a manager at LexTel Communications. If he had to bet, he'd say the new job was a bribe to silence John Black on his brother's criminal activities.

Jimmy looked up at the familiar office building, surveying the rundown street he was on. His contact said John Black left every morning around this time to get his morning coffee. He looked over at the coffee cart where Alice White was standing in line next to the man he recognized as John Black.

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Jack looked around the grounds nervously. The collar was too tight, and the jacket felt like it belonged on someone out of a Wimbledon ad. He was not the suit and tie type. He never had been. Yet somehow Olsen had talked him into this idiotic scheme to have Perry White enroll him in Westminster Academy.

*'It's better than sleeping on a park bench,'* he thought to himself, climbing the steps to go to his first class. The school was massive, and he had no idea how he could arrange to accidentally run into Phillip Manning here, but he'd figure it out. After everything Clark had done for him the least he could do was help bring down the psycho behind his death.

He was a realist. He knew if Luthor said he'd killed him the chances were pretty high that he had. Lex Luthor wasn't one to mince words. He knew Lois didn't believe it—or didn't want to believe it. He'd seen his own share of heartache in his young life but he knew prolonging the pain and holding onto false hope would only make it harder. It was better to accept what had happened. Lex Luthor had murdered Superman. It was up to them to prove it.

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John Black backed away, looking around the crowded street he was on. How had they found him? He'd been so careful. He swallowed hard, staring at the older woman with bright blue eyes, waiting for a response from him. He nervously glanced over his shoulder, making sure that the woman from before wasn't around. She said she'd be watching. If he slipped up, it would cost Pete his life. He couldn't afford to even appear to be cooperating...

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said hurriedly, pulling the change out of his pocket to pay for his coffee. "Keep the change, Marta."

The woman wasn't to be deterred, following him down the steps that led to his office parking garage. "Really? You have no idea what I'm talking about? Then why do you keep looking over your shoulder, John?"

He instinctively looked over his shoulder once more to be sure he wasn't being followed. "Stay away from me."

"You've been threatened, haven't you? That's why you just looked again," she said calmly, staring him down.

"Leave me the hell alone," he snapped, glancing at the elevator a few feet away. "You have no idea what kind of trouble you're stirring up by being here."

The woman remained calm, calling him out as he made his way to the elevators. "You're scared, John, I get that, but if you would just..."

"I talk, I die. Leave well enough alone, lady," John barked, turning to face her. His face fell as he hissed out in a sharp whisper. "You think I want this? I am dead. My brother is dead. Everyone I care about... if I go anywhere near the police. Do yourself a favor and forget about the Planet bombing."

"Staying silent isn't going to do anything but continue to eat your conscience away, John. I know you're scared, but we can help you. The longer you let them get away with intimidating you and those you love, the more powerful you make them. How many people have to die before someone says enough is enough?" she asked.

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*Present Day...*

The drumming of raindrops against the wooden roof echoed throughout the bedroom. Clark could hear each pang of droplets beat above him. It was another day he was forced to remain inside. How much rain could flood from the sky in a week? It had been three days of nothing but clouded skies and thunderstorms, preventing him from taking in the sun's rays he so desperately needed.

He stared up at the ceiling. It was strange, looking around at his surroundings and knowing he was no longer restricted to his room he still found himself unable to venture out of his room without prodding. Lois typically came to him, offering another meal that consisted of some form of peanut butter. If he weren't still reeling from the last time he'd spoken with her, he'd beg for something different to eat.

That would require talking to her.

After his humiliation in the shower last week he couldn't bring himself to say anything to her. He could barely look at her. It wasn't just the bruised ego or having her see him in a state he never wanted anyone to see him in. It was everything.

His last conversation with her had been a fight over her marriage to Lex Luthor. The last time he'd seen her she had been ready to walk down the aisle to that monster and yet here she was. What had happened? He wasn't sure how much he could trust her or open himself up to her.

He still wasn't sure exactly where he was or how he'd gotten out of Dr. Kelly's clutches. He was grateful for his newfound freedom—even if it came at the price of having lost his powers and the normal use of his muscular and possibly even his nervous system. The extent of the damage done wasn't something he wanted to ponder too deeply.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, doing his best to test the limits of his hearing once more. He could make out footsteps coming from the kitchen and cabinets opening and closing but nothing near the range he'd once been gifted. He felt his hand begin to shake and reached to stop it by holding his wrist with his other hand.

It was getting better. He could tell that at least. The intensity of the tremors wasn't nearly as bad as they had been. The time between each episode seemed to be subsiding as well. He was doing his best to get as much sunlight as he could, but the current weather conditions weren't helping.

He'd counted eight days since he'd woken up in the cabin with Lois. She remained distant. He couldn't say he blamed her. After what had happened that first day he wouldn't blame her if she never talked to him again. He couldn't find it in himself to speak or respond to any attempt at the conversation she presented him with. It was too humiliating.

He never wanted Lois to see him like this. Broken and beaten down both emotionally and physically. He couldn't even find the strength to walk across the room without nearly collapsing on top of himself. There were still so many questions he had for her, but he couldn't bring himself to ask.

Why did she rescue him?

Where were they?

Was she still engaged to Luthor?

The last questions weighed more heavily on his mind than the others. After everything that Luthor had put him through, he couldn't afford to let his guard down around anyone—even Lois.

A light knock came from the door, and he looked up, seeing Lois standing there in a faded sweatshirt and jeans. "Hey." He looked up at her, unwilling to respond as he waited for her to just say whatever it was she had to say. She looked down for a moment, muttering something he couldn't hear under her breath before looking up and saying, "So, I made some sandwiches. Peanut butter and honey." She stopped for a moment, looking over at him with a concerned expression. "You like that, right?"

He just stared blankly at the ceiling, ignoring the question and hoping she would just leave. The longer she stayed there at the door, the longer he was reminded of that first day and the many fights they'd had leading up to his kidnapping and eventual torture. It was something he wished he could turn off but right now he couldn't. Every time he looked at her all he could see was the oblivious woman that had broken his heart so completely.

<< "Clark, just know I wouldn't do this if I didn't have to." >>

<< "Goodbye? We're partners!" >>

"You don't need a partner, Lois. You never did."

"Maybe not, but I was starting to like having one." >>

<< "Clark, what did they do to you?" >>

<< "I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known." >>

<< "I know. I know. I'm so sorry, Clark." >>

<< "If that's what you want Lois then fine get in bed with the devil!" >>

<< "Clark, it's okay, I've got you." >>

"Right," she muttered under her breath. "So if you're hungry lunch is on the table." With that she turned and left, leaving him there to dwell on his own thoughts.

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The memory of the gunshot echoed in her eardrums as Mrs. Cox made her way through the warehouse, looking around at the crowd of barrels that had now taken up space in the once vacant warehouse. She stared at the wall that had once led to the elevator and only entrance into LexCorp's Applied Science Division. It was covered in brick and had recently been painted.

She stared at the once empty space, uncertain what to make of it. Nigel had disappeared. Dr. Gretchen Kelly's body had been fished out of Hobb's Bay, and she had yet to find the strength to tell Lex how it was her that had cost him his revenge on Superman.

It had been nearly a week and a half of lying low and hoping to hear from Nigel. Nothing. She had no way of knowing if she was safe to return to the Luthor penthouse or not. The longer she stayed away, the more certain she knew what her fate was.

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Lois stared across the table, watching Clark silently eat the sandwich she'd made. It was strange how the silence inside the cabin felt more isolating with him here than it had when it had just been her living here. She pushed her plate away, glancing across the table at him, hoping to catch his eye. Why wouldn't he just look at her?

Was it really so hard?

"Um, I've got a call into Dr. Kahn to take a look at your hand. Make sure there isn't anything more serious going on," she said, hoping to jog some sort of reaction from him.

Silence.

"He's supposed to be an excellent doctor. Bill Henderson said he's helped hundreds of thousands of people the FBI had to keep in hiding," she finished softly. That got a reaction. He stared at her for a long moment before turning away.

"Do you remember Bill?" she prompted, reaching her hand across the table to touch his hand only for him to jerk it away. She bit her lower lip, uncertain what to do. She could fly into a fit of anger and take it personally, or she could continue to wait. Her mind went back to that first night at the cabin when she'd been holding him down as Dr. Kahn plucked out each and every sample of dead tissue from his burns. As painful as the ordeal had been for her she knew it had to be even more painful for him.

He needed time. He had been through hell and back, and he needed time to adjust. She just needed to be patient with him. She swallowed the lump in her throat and grabbed a pen and pad from the drawer behind her. "Um, I'm going to try and go to the store later." She pushed the list she'd made earlier toward him with the pen. "Do you want me to pick anything up?"

She stared at him, watching him read the list and then push it back toward her. She forced a smile, taking it from him. “Great,” she pointed outside. “Well, the rain’s letting up, so I guess I’ll go ahead and go.” She felt a pang in her chest as she rose from the chair, feeling his eyes on her as she left.

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*Two Months Ago...*

Lois Lane took a sip of the red wine in her glass, spinning it in her glass as she stared lazily off into space. Her hand instinctively went to her side, recalling the pain she’d endured at having almost died at the hands of Lex Luthor. He tried to kill her. He really tried to kill her. She was used to having criminals she was investigating or dirty politicians come after her, but it was a completely different experience to have someone she thought she knew betray her so completely. She felt numb inside, thinking of how many times she could have just once dug a little deeper and possibly saved herself the heartache and pain she’d been put through. Would it have saved her? Would it have saved Clark from whatever hell he was currently in?

Clark. That was an entirely different problem she didn’t know how to address. He wasn’t dead. She’d never been so relieved to get a visit from Jack Davenport. Clark wasn’t dead. Superman wasn’t dead. Which meant she now had to figure out how to find him and what to do when she did.

Truth be told, she still wasn’t sure how she felt about the revelation. She knew she cared about both Clark and Superman in a way that made her question how she’d found herself saying ‘yes’ to Lex’s proposal in the first place. Was it fear? Was it Superman’s rejection? The isolation and hopelessness that had filled her days leading up to her eventual acceptance of Lex’s proposal weren’t something she liked to revisit but coming to terms with what had happened and what she’d allowed to happen was the only way she could move forward.

Lex had been playing her this entire time. Clark had seen it. He had tried to warn her, and she didn’t listen. Though most of his warnings were never followed up with anything substantial for her to look into. When pressed, he never gave her any actual proof of Lex’s wrongdoings. He couldn’t provide a single example for her so she’d brushed it off as Clark being jealous or insecure. Why she’d allowed herself to continue to ignore the warnings without at least looking further or pressing Clark, she didn’t know.

Throughout the entire time, she’d known Clark he had a knack for getting her to open up in a way she’d never done before. He knew things about her even Perry wasn’t privy to. She recalled her slip in the EPRAD warehouse where she thought she was going to die and found herself confessing her painful past with Claude to him. Lois hadn’t told anyone—even Lucy—what that rat had done, but she’d told Clark. She’d spent weeks on edge, waiting to hear the gossip but it never did. Little by little she found herself trusting him more and more. All the while, finding herself drawn further and further in. Little did she know the same man she’d confessed her crush on Superman to was the same man flying around in a cape and saving her on a regular basis.

On one hand, she was grateful he was there for her and had saved her life. On the other hand, she felt humiliated and betrayed. The closer they’d gotten in their partnership and friendship, the days of her not being honest about a lead or giving him misinformation were gone. They were friends. Or at least she had thought they were. She trusted him with some of her deepest secrets, and it hurt that he couldn’t return the same trust.

How many times had he lied to her in order to cover up his secret? How many times had she called him out on his odd behavior or a lead that had just happened to land in his lap and have him blatantly deceive her? After everything she’d been through with Claude and Paul, it felt like another punch to the gut. But this hurt far worse because Clark’s betrayal hadn’t been something she could see coming. He was supposed to be her

friend. He was supposed to be someone she could trust. He was supposed to be ... Clark.

She should be angry.

She should be furious.

She should just walk away.

The problem was that required telling her heart to stop feeling what she was feeling. The reality was Clark had wormed his way into her heart and hurt her in a way no one ever had. He broke down her barriers and made her open up to him. Now, here she was numb from the pain of realizing she was in love with her best friend who had been lying to her about everything from the beginning. Where did that leave her?

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Lex Luthor sat back against the leather seat of his office chair, tapping against the leather with his fingertips. “It’s been a month, and they’re still holding onto this case like they expect it to resurrect itself,” he seethed angrily. “Mr. Talley is unwilling to close ranks with his people.”

“Do you want me to take care of the situation?” Nigel inquired from the speakerphone.

“No, I don’t think this one will bow down to our normal intimidation tactics, and it’s not like I can make the director of the FBI’s Special Crimes unit disappear. They would never let that go,” Lex muttered angrily, looking around the room impatiently. “Where is it you’ve gone off to anyway? It’s been two weeks since you took off. Don’t forget who signs your checks!”

“I’m handling a situation, Mr. Luthor,” Nigel assured. “Nothing to be alarmed about.”

“I need you back here,” Lex hissed. “I want to make sure there is no mistaking who is in charge here. Some of our lieutenants need reassurance you are still loyal to the organization.” He tensed, adding a sinister, “You are still loyal to me, aren’t you, Nigel?”

“Of course, sir,” Nigel responded. “I should return to Metropolis by the end of the week.”

“See that this time your flight information doesn’t get lost,” Lex growled angrily.

“I’ll be sure to confirm everything before I leave,” Nigel remarked before hanging up.

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Nigel sat in the empty hotel room, looking through the information he’d uncovered. Mr. Luthor wanted him back in Metropolis, and he was still no closer to finding Lois Lane than he was before. He was faced with a dilemma. Tell Lex Luthor of his mishap and risk the wrath that could end him or continue the charade and secretly keep his investigation into her whereabouts going.

He knew which choice was safer yet the idea of leaving Kansas without any further information felt wrong. He looked at the map in front of him, uncertain where his next move would even be. He’d been staking out the Kent farm for two weeks, and no one out of the ordinary residents had come or left the farm. The neighbor Irig was making daily trips. The sheriff and the doctor. No one seemed nervous or out of place. What was he missing?

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*Present Day...*

The phone on her dashboard continued to ring, vibrating against the plastic surface. The humming of the engine drowned out the sound as the car jerked onto the highway, heading west of the river and farther and farther away from the reach of Alexander Luthor.

Mrs. Cox reached her hand up to brush the hair out of her eyes, staring at the road in front of her with determination. She couldn’t turn to Nigel. She couldn’t turn to Lex. She couldn’t turn to anyone. For the first time in a long time, she was alone.

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Clark sat on the back porch, staring up at the sun. A privilege

he'd been robbed of for who knows how long. It had been twenty-three days since he'd woken up in this cabin and found himself face to face with a very alive Lois Lane. Slowly but surely the tremors were subsiding. He still had moments where his legs would give out from under him, and he'd catch himself, but for the most part, he felt stronger than he had before.

Lois Lane was alive.

How that was possible, he still wasn't sure. He found himself, going over and over that night in his mind. He had seen the blood. There was no mistaking the certainty in Lex Luthor's voice as he had taunted him with the gruesome details of her death over and over.

Nothing made sense and he still wasn't sure how much he could trust her or how much she knew. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose as he recalled her attempt to help him shave. Though his unshaven appearance must have seemed frightening to her, he found solace in hiding behind the beard and mustache that had begun to form. After having his secret exposed to his mortal enemy, he felt the need to hide away as much of the old Clark Kent as he could from peering eyes.

He hated who he had become.

Scared of his own shadow and unable to trust his own senses. He still wasn't sure how much he could trust Lois.

She was ...*different*. Though she wore the same face and said the right things, he could tell there was something about her that had changed. She kept watching him and staring for long moments. The Lois Lane he knew could barely go a minute without talking, but this version of her was aloof and reserved. She was going out of her way to help him with simple tasks that he knew his Lois wouldn't dream of doing. She never would have gone to the lengths that this Lois had. He still found himself unable to rationalize what had changed.

The Lois Lane he knew didn't like guns. This one had a routine of having target practice by the creek. The Lois Lane he knew didn't look at him like that. This Lois seemed to lose herself, staring at him as if he'd break. The Lois Lane he knew didn't ...

He could feel a lump form in his throat as he clamped his eyes shut, not wanting to think about that first day. Being unable to bathe himself due to captivity had been one thing, but the humiliation of having to have Lois help him with the task had been worse. She'd done it though. What he couldn't figure out was why?

Never had she looked at Clark that way. Not once had she shown this side of herself where he would have thought her capable of being anything but indifferent to him. Especially not after the words that were shared in their last fight about Luthor. Something had changed, and he couldn't figure out what.

After all the mind games and tricks Luthor had stooped to to try and break him he knew it was dangerous to let his guard down. Still, he found himself enchanted by this new version of Lois that went out of her way to help him. That first day had been unbearable. He'd gone from being the strongest man in the world to being unable to control his body long enough to take a five-minute shower.

The saving grace in that moment was Lois giving him back some sense of dignity and keeping her back to him throughout the process. He'd come close to kissing her. When she'd fallen, trying to help him to the bed. That look she gave him sent a storm of emotion through him each and every time. He had seen that look before, but it had only been reserved for Superman. Now having her look at Clark that way was unnerving.

The old Lois Lane would have demanded he talk to her three weeks ago. She probably would have jumped into some tirade about how it made her look bad to have her partner impersonating a mute. He wasn't sure how to react to this new aloof version of Lois Lane.

He could feel the sting from the sun's rays on him and sighed,

reaching for the t-shirt laying on the back of the chair he was sitting on. If he stayed out here any longer, he was going to get burnt. A few of the cuts and bruises had healed somewhat, but many of the scars remained. He wondered if his powers would ever return. If he would ever return to who he used to be.

He already knew the answer to the last question. There was no going back. Lex Luthor knew who he was and if Superman ever dared show his face again, he would be taken down with a single statement. His gaze drifted to the glass doors where Lois was sitting at the table, staring at him the way she always did.

He let out a muttered curse, grasping the side of the chair when he saw his hand tremor. 'Calm down,' he told himself.

A shadow washed over him, and he looked up to see a man in a black suit and tie standing over him with a crew cut haircut and piercing blue eyes. He flashed a badge at him with an 'FBI' identification card and a silver badge that read, 'Federal Bureau of Investigation.' Clark frowned, unsure who this unwelcome visitor was or what the FBI would be doing here.

"Jack Davenport," he held his hand out for him to shake and Clark stared at it uncertainly. "I'm leading the FBI's case against Lex Luthor." His eyes narrowed as he took a seat across from Clark. "I hear you might be able to help."

Clark stared back at him, uncertain how this Jack Davenport had found him or what the FBI was doing looking into Lex Luthor. He glanced back to the glass doors Lois had been sitting in front of a few moments ago. He frowned when he realized she was no longer there and turned his attention back to Jack Davenport.

"I still don't understand why Lois won't accept our help. She keeps insisting that she's safer out of witness protection." Davenport shrugged nonchalantly, prompting some sort of recognition from him. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you that your chances of surviving this trial go up when witnesses actually cooperate."

Clark stared blankly at the man, uncertain how to respond. He turned to stare at him, silently sizing him up as Davenport continued the one-sided conversation. "I, uh, tried to give Lois the space she asked for, but we're running out of time. Thanks to some dirty cops, the case against Lex Luthor relies solely on her testimony. Is there anything you could tell us that could help..."

Clark narrowed his eyes at him. "Testimony?"

"She didn't tell you?" Davenport asked, his brow furrowing as he stared back at him in surprise. His voice lowered an octave, and he asked, "So what exactly is going on between you two anyway?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Lois' voice came from behind, and they both turned to see her standing with her arms crossed over her chest.

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Lois stared out the window where Clark was sitting on the back porch. He hadn't said any more than a few words since that day he fell in the shower. It had been nearly three weeks, and she still hadn't heard anything from Davenport on the officers that had ambushed her and Clark. They were so close to building this case against Lex and finally putting him behind bars.

The longer he was outside and absorbing the sun's rays the better he seemed to be doing. Still, she tried to remain nearby in case he had another accident. It was unnerving to see him like this. She'd seen his hand tremor the first day and had seen the fear on his face. Whatever it was that he'd been put through it was enough to scare him. She couldn't really blame him. It frightened her too.

The doctor said it looked like Clark had been put through her electroshock and had signs of torture. His arms and ankles had ligature marks, and there were burn marks on his back and temple. Bluish markings around his wrists showed signs of a recent treatment that the doctor was sure he would recover from soon if the treatment were administered according to regulations.

She wasn't so sure.

She was doubtful that the treatment Clark had been put through was anywhere near the standard regulations for patients. He seemed to know who she was and he appeared to know who he was, but for whatever reason, he refused to talk to her. He wouldn't respond to any attempt at conversation, and even her vain attempts at getting him to crack a smile by joking about her lack of cooking skills were lost on him. She took a sip of her glass of water, uncertain how to break through the deafening silence that had fallen between them.

She got up, taking her glass to the sink to rinse it out. She took a deep breath, setting the glass down. A noise outside caught her attention, and she peered out the window to see Jack Davenport standing outside, talking to Clark. Anger flashed through her mind, recalling her plea for the FBI to leave her be. She didn't want anyone pushing for information the way she knew the feds would.

She stepped outside and heard the tail end of the conversation between Davenport before jumping all over him. "Is there anything you could tell us that could help..."

"Testimony?" she heard Clark ask with a hoarse voice.

She felt a lump in her throat, angry that he would talk to Agent Davenport but not her. It had been almost three weeks, and she had yet to have him talk to her or even respond to her with more than a silent nod or shake of the head.

"She didn't tell you?" Davenport asked, rubbing the salt into the wound that remained open before adding, "So what exactly is going on between you two anyway?"

Her painfully unsteady relationship with Clark wasn't something she wanted to be discussed with anyone—especially not the FBI. Anger flashed in her eyes as she growled out angrily, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Davenport flashed a weak smile on his face. "I was just updating Kent on the case..."

"Are you deaf?" she snapped irritably, throwing her arms in the air as she approached. "You can't understand the meaning of the word, 'no'?"

"This isn't up to you, Lois," Davenport cut her off, letting out a sigh. "We have a problem."

"What kind of a problem?" Lois asked, seeing the uneasiness in Agent Davenport's demeanor.

"Our guys lost Nigel St. John last night. We don't know where he is," Davenport responded solemnly.

"Nigel?" Clark spoke up, looking to Davenport in concern. "Lex Luthor's manservant?"

Lois felt a pang in her chest, hearing him respond once more to Jack Davenport. Three weeks of nothing but nonverbal communication from him and yet one visit from the cocky, egotistical Agent Davenport and Clark had already spoken more to him than he had in the entire time he'd been with her.

"Among other things," Davenport shrugged. "Professional assassin has been more his recent role in Luthor's organization." He narrowed his eyes at Lois. "You're going to have to be prepared to move if we get wind of him heading in this direction."

"Move where?" Clark asked.

"The other safe house," Lois responded, not looking back at him.

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Nigel smiled to himself as he watched the two men that had been following him through the hospital stairwell, scamper around the roof, unable to track his whereabouts. The helicopter flew through the air, leaving the bewildered agents clueless as to where the helicopter had come from or where it was headed.

Finally, after months of searching, he'd finally gotten himself a tangible lead. He'd wasted his resources trying to look into the Kents. He was so sure Lois Lane would show up there, but he'd been unable to find even one lead as to where they might be hiding her.

"We've got enough fuel to make it out of New Troy and land you by the landing strip of Mr. Luthor's private plane." The pilot said, looking back at him to where Nigel was hidden behind the seat. "Paul can take you where you need to go from there."

"Yes, I don't think I'll be traveling by plane for this trip," Nigel responded. "I need to stay off the radar of the federal government."

The pilot thought for a moment and then responded, "We can get you in a rental, but that's as far as I'm able to go without getting Mr. Luthor's authorization."

"Mr. Luthor has enough to worry about," Nigel responded shaking his head.

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Lois sat in the corner of the sofa in the living room, uncertain how to process what had just happened. Clark had gone from not saying a single word to not being able to shut up as he pressed Jack Davenport for details on the case against Lex Luthor. How had he gone three weeks without saying more than a single syllable to her and yet when Jack freaking Davenport showed up he couldn't find the mute button to save his life.

"Luthor's not dumb enough to get his hands dirty," Clark said, shaking his head. "If Nigel is doing anything on his orders it won't come back to Luthor."

Lois felt a pang in her chest, hearing Clark's voice echo around the living room once more. She could feel tears threatening to overtake her as she went between being angry that he was talking to Davenport to being grateful to hear his voice.

"We have ways of breaking people," Davenport remarked smugly. That remark resulted in a dark expression from Clark and Davenport quickly covered, "Nothing like what you were put through, Clark. We do have our limits."

"These people are monsters, Agent Davenport," Clark's voice cracked as he made an emotional plea, shaking his head. "You have no idea what these people are capable of."

"You sound like you do," Davenport remarked, folding his hands in front of him. "Offer is still good. Just one statement about what happened could help solidify the case..."

"No," Lois cut in, hearing the wavering in her voice as she fought back the tears. "That's enough."

Davenport shot her a look. "Lois, I get you're a little overprotective after what happened to John Black, but we know what we're doing."

"Do you?" Lois scoffed, feeling the flood of tears threaten to overtake her. "Because I don't think you have any idea how to keep your witnesses safe."

"We had a leak. It was contained. End of discussion," Davenport responded evenly. "But I think your partner here can speak for himself. Given he's the one that was kidnapped and might have insight into what Luthor is up to."

"Well, that would be news to me!" Lois shot back angrily, folding her arms over her chest, leaning back against the cushion of the couch. She could feel both men's eyes on her but didn't dare look up.

"Something going on here I should know about?" Davenport asked.

"No, everything's just peachy! Perfect little picture of your perfect little case that will more than likely blow up in your face along with everything else, but by all means please... you want him to talk. Go for it!" She gestured to Clark's stern face as she continued on her verbal attack, unable to hold back.

"I mean, you're already getting more out of him than I have in the past month. Which is really insane given that I spent the last four months... Yes, four months trying to figure out where in the hell he had been taken. But sure why not bond with the FBI agent that you've known all of five minutes," Lois fumed angrily, glaring at Clark as she jabbed her index finger into his shoulder.

"I mean, it's not like I-your supposed friend might actually

want to know anything or need some reassurance that you aren't brain damaged or worse. I mean, I'm only the person that dragged him out of that hell hole, got shot at and fought off fifteen different people trying to gun us down in the process. But yeah, I guess it's too much to ask for, right?"

Her face tightened into a scowl as she continued her tirade. "Hey, how are you? Are you okay, Clark?" Nope!" She narrowed her eyes at Clark after mocking the conversation for him and then adding, "See? How hard was that?" With that she stood up and stormed out of the room, leaving the two alone to sort through the rest of what Agent Davenport had to say.

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*Two Months Ago...*

Phillip Manning wasn't the paranoid type, but he could tell when someone was following him and the new kid was definitely following him. He looked over his shoulder as he turned the corner and sure enough there he was. What he was doing on this wing of the school he wasn't sure.

He glanced at the time, seeing it was almost time for dinner he turned down the hall leading to the stairwell. Maybe he could lose him in the crowd. He jerked the door handle to the stairwell and found the door immovable. He growled, banging his fist on the wood-paneled door to get it to open. He looked over his shoulder and groaned when he saw the problem.

"Phillip Manning. You're a hard kid to track down,"

Phillip turned to face the stranger that had been following him. "What do you want?"

A newspaper clipping of his reign on Metropolis during his time under the influence of Metamide 5 hung in front of him. "I think you know more than what was printed in this article."

"What's it to you?" Phillip asked.

"A friend of mine died. I want to right a wrong, and I think you can help." The stranger remarked solemnly.

"I'm still not hearing why I should care," Phillip remarked.

"My friend—I think you know him. Superman." The stranger said.

Phillip immediately tensed, recalling how Superman had helped all of him and his friends from making a grave mistake. Even after he had fixed the formula, it had been discovered that the Metamide 5 turned into poison. Thankfully he'd stopped when he did. He stared at the young man looking back at him in surprise. "I know him," Phillip said carefully, "but I can't help you."

"He helped you. Gave you a fresh start," the man reminded him.

"There's no one left to look out for the little guy," Phillip shot back with a snort. "Death of Superman seems unreal, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does," the man said. "Which is what brings me here."

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"No." Lex shook his head adamantly, staring across the boardroom of traitors that dared defy his decision. "This will not stand."

The director turned toward Lex and shook his head. "Mr. Luthor, with all due respect the Daily Planet is a liability. We can look to make a profit here and cut our losses. What good does it do to keep hold of something we look to make no money from?"

"I still own this company, don't I?" Lex growled out in anger. "You are *my* board! Not Stern's."

"And our job is to ensure LexCorp continues to grow and expand and make us all a lot of money," Another board member spoke up, standing to his feet.

"Which we're not doing. We haven't been able to pass the price changes through City Hall," his public relations officer added in.

"I told you I'd take care of City Hall," Lex growled back angrily. "Just keep pushing the numbers."

"Stern Media isn't a threat, Lex," another board member

spoke up. "We sell the Daily Planet, and we look to make a huge profit. The insurance money paid off all the debt and then some. The longer we hold on, the more of a liability it becomes."

"And the more opportunity for Stern to rebuild," Lex shook his head. "No, the Daily Planet will remain where it is, a distant memory for Metropolis. Franklin Stern can take his offer and go buy up another television network."

There was a look across the table between his CFO and Media director. Lex narrowed his eyes at them and snarled, "Spit it out!" They looked back at him in surprise when he pointed at them. "You two! What aren't you telling me?"

"We have an offer from Stern Media to buy out the LNN network,"

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*Present Day...*

Clark glanced toward the doorway that Lois had just stormed out of, uncertain what had precipitated her outburst. He looked back and caught Agent Davenport's concerned expression. The FBI Agent shook his head. "You've done quite a number on that one."

Clark shook his head. "I'm not talking about it."

Davenport shrugged. "I didn't say anything."

"I mean, what does she expect me to do just go back to the way things were?" Clark continued, trying to justify his actions to the FBI agent. "She's acting like..."

"You two obviously have a...complicated history," Davenport managed, looking up at him uneasily. "But to your point, things can't go back to how they were. Too much has happened...to both of you."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Clark asked, looking up.

Davenport's jaw tightened, and he looked down. "I think instead of sitting here talking to me, you need to talk to her."

"It's not that easy," Clark muttered.

"It never is." Davenport shrugged. "But someone has to take the first step." There was a silence between them, and he continued, "So, we heard Lois' opinion about you testifying against Luthor. How about you?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," Clark said warily.

"Okay." Davenport leaned back in the chair he was sitting in. "I don't suppose you want to tell me why?" Clark looked up at the man, silently shaking his head 'no' and Davenport nodded, "Fair enough." He leaned forward. "I had to ask."

Clark looked toward the doorway where Lois had stormed out earlier. "She's really testifying against Luthor?"

Davenport shrugged. "Cornerstone of the FBI's case against him. Professional hitman hunting down all my witnesses and she's the only one still standing."

"You really think Nigel's headed this way?" Clark asked, looking back at Davenport.

"We can't be sure of anything just yet," Davenport said.

"We've got men in the area, but if he is spotted, both of you need to make a break for it." Davenport laid out some paperwork on the table, and his face took on a stern expression, and he continued, "Both of your new identities came with a checking account with enough cash to keep you moving. Just don't do anything to draw attention to yourselves."

"New identities?" Clark asked.

"I guess she never told you?" Davenport looked at him in surprise.

"Tell me what?" Clark asked, picking up the paperwork Davenport pushed his way.

Clark silently took the file from him, flipping through the paperwork. Leila and Colin Kane. He shifted uneasily staring at the marriage license in his hand. Married? He and Lois were supposed to pretend to be married. How exactly was that supposed to work when they were hardly talking to one another?

Clark pulled out the supporting birth certificate and marriage

license from the folder. “This is a joke, right?”

“No joke.” Davenport smirked. “I’m told you two already argue like the Hatfields and McCoys so it won’t be that much of an adjustment.” At Clark’s dark look he quickly cleared his throat. “Sorry. Bad joke. Bill Henderson’s idea. He figured it’d be better to have you both next of kin in case of an emergency. This was the easiest way to do it.”

“Makes sense I guess,” Clark looked down at the paperwork in his hands.

Davenport’s phone chirped, and he quickly turned to answer it, stepping away from them and walking toward the kitchen.

“Davenport.”

Clark watched him leave, looking at the paperwork in his hand. Davenport was right. Someone needed to take the first step and given that Lois had been the one taking all of the initiative lately he supposed it was his turn. Putting aside his humiliation and bruised ego he sighed, setting the paperwork down on the table. He tightened his grip on the edge of the couch, waiting for the tremor in his hand to subside. *‘Easy.’*

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Lois jerked the cabinets open, searching for anything to help squash down the anger festering in her veins. She swallowed back the tears that threatened to overtake her. Clark was fine. He wasn’t injured. He wasn’t traumatized. He was just refusing to talk to her for three and a half weeks. He had had every opportunity to open his mouth and respond...say anything to her. Yet he remained mute.

“Need a hand?” a voice came from behind her.

Her jaw tightened, letting out a strangled breath as she croaked out, “He speaks.” Lois spun around to face Clark, crossing her arms over her chest as she stared him down. “You have a lot of nerve!”

“I just thought you might want some help,” he said carefully, taking a step back and leaning against the counter behind him.

“Why? So you can squash your guilt over ignoring me for almost a month? No thanks,” she growled at him, seething in her anger for a moment before throwing another verbal attack. “Who the hell do you think you are?” She jabbed him in the chest with an index finger. “Do you have any idea what kind of hell you put me through?”

“Put you through?” he growled indignantly, straightening up. “I’m sorry, I must have missed the part where you had a cell right next to mine.”

“You can’t hold onto the victim card to justify you being a royal jerk!” she scowled angrily. Realizing how that sounded she relented immediately and backtracked. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry. I know you’ve been through a lot.”

“You *know*?” he scoffed in mocking laughter. “You have no idea!”

“No, I don’t.” She straightened up, putting her hands on her hips. “Because unlike Jack Davenport, I am apparently not important enough for you to talk to. God forbid you actually acknowledge my existence. No, that would be asking for too much. It’s much more logical for you to freeze me out and leave me guessing what the hell you’re thinking!”

“Jack Davenport isn’t someone I have to question his motives,” Clark remarked darkly. “Jack Davenport didn’t sit there and...”

“And what?” Lois challenged, taking a step closer. “I’d really love to hear how you’ve justified to yourself why you can’t bring yourself to utter a single word to me all this time.”

“I don’t know,” he finished lamely, unable to complete his thought.

“You don’t know?” Lois felt the tears trickling down her face. “That’s just...great.”

“I’m still taking a lot of this in I guess.” He looked down, avoiding eye contact with her and she wiped the tears from her

cheeks, feeling her anger continue to fester.

He was lying. She could tell from the look on his face. It was the same look he gave her when he was about to give her a lame excuse to leave. Every time she knew he was lying yet she never called him out on it.

“Liar,” Lois fumed irritably.

“Excuse me?” he scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I said, *liar!*” she growled at him. “You think I don’t know when you’re lying to me? You think I’m just going to sit back and let you fool me with another lame excuse so you can avoid talking about whatever the hell it is you’re trying to hide? I am done with people lying to me. I am done with being deceived. If you’ve got something to say, then say it!”

“You’re right,” he acknowledged solemnly. “I’m sorry.” He looked up at her, seeming to try and find the words to ask what it was he was holding back. “It’s just...the last time we talked didn’t go very well.”

Lois looked down for a split second then met his gaze. “Well, a lot has changed since then.”

“It has?” he asked, peering at her uncertainly.

“Of course it has.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m not testifying against Lex Luthor for kicks you know,” Lois said uneasily, staring back at him. “I hate him just as much as you do and I want to see him pay for his crimes.”

She watched the revelation seem to take form in his mind, softening his steely features. His breathing evened out, and he stared back at her for a long moment. If she didn’t know better, she would have thought he was trying to look through her. Given the injuries he’d suffered and the bruises he was still nursing she knew that wasn’t possible.

Even with the messy goatee that had begun to grow on his face it still made her take a second look and take an extra moment to remind herself that he was really here. It had been hell scouring every part of LexCorp, trying to find where Clark might have been taken to. Now finally he was standing here and talking to her. She felt a lump build in the back of her throat, and she managed to squeak out. “Jimmy, Jack, Perry, we’ve all been through hell and back.” She fiddled with a loose string on her shirt, looking down.

“What?” he asked, taking a step toward her.

She bit her lip, hoping to fight back the tears. “I’ve just really missed you,” she said, looking up at him.

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## Chapter 9

### *Two Months Ago...*

Lois let out a sigh of frustration, counting the change out for the one bag of groceries at the register. She was running out of money fast. She knew the longer she went without having an income the worse things would get. She couldn’t keep the nosy Melinda Hemingway from visiting throughout the day, wondering how she could afford to keep the place up and pressing for more details on her past. She needed to do something so she wasn’t staring at the same four walls driving herself crazy with every what-if scenario.

The red headed cashier gave her a weak smile, taking the pile of change she’d pushed toward him. She bit her lower lip, watching as he counted out the total of the exact change for the groceries. This was getting pathetic. She had to do something. The cashier handed her the receipt and she made her way toward the exit with the single bag in her hands.

She needed to find a job, but doing so would take her attention away from what she was working with Jimmy on. What if she had to leave? What if there was a break in the case? She couldn’t just drop everything if she had a job here, could she?

Then again, she couldn’t justify not being gainfully employed either. She hated living on half a sandwich and water everyday. She knew she couldn’t keep this up. She had to do something. The longer she went without work the more susceptible she was

making herself to the unknown.

An orange flyer pinned to the corkboard in the entryway of the grocery store caught her attention. She stopped, taking a look at the flyer. 'Help Wanted.' She grabbed the flyer, reading it carefully. It wasn't much but it might be enough to keep her afloat.

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Lex took a puff of his cigar, reading through the morning edition of the Metropolis STAR. The editorial on Metropolis Power's recent hike in prices being a long overdue change for the city stood next to the article on an inside source divulging Franklin Stern's torrid affair with his secretary. A smile crossed his face as he read through the orchestrated story he'd spun for the gullible new editor of the Star, James Stark.

The bold power play that Carpenter had made for the STAR had planted a seed for Lex. Though he wouldn't go so far as to assassinate an international leader in order to sell papers, Lex knew Carpenter had the right idea. Control what people read and you control what they think. He stared at the doctored image with a smile, enjoying the upper hand he'd allowed himself in negotiations with Stern Media for the Daily Planet. As long as he owned the Planet he kept the people of Metropolis under his control. No one would take that from him.

"Sir, you can't go in there!" the voice of Asabi could be heard from the hall.

Lex set the paper down, preparing for his confrontation with the hostile Franklin Stern that had just stormed into his office. "You've got a lot of nerve, Luthor!"

"Mr. Stern," Lex smiled, leaning back in his chair. "To what do I owe this surprise visit?"

"You know good and well what you've done, you little maggot!" Stern retorted, his vein popping from his throat as he threw a copy of the Metropolis STAR at him.

Lex frowned, looking down at the paper in mock sympathy. "Such a shame, Franklin." Lex clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "I know you had high hopes for this deal to go through too, but I'm afraid in light of this new information the board and I feel you can't be trusted."

"You yellow bellied, scum sucking piece of garbage. Do you think I'm an idiot?" Stern snarled at him angrily.

"Watch that temper," Lex warned, narrowing his eyes at the older man. "You're upset. As you should be, but don't forget who you're talking to."

"I know exactly who I'm addressing," Stern growled back angrily. "You won't get away with this."

Lex pointed to the television behind him, showing Stern Media's stock prices plummeting. "How sure are you, really?"

"This isn't over!" Stern growled, pounding his fist on Lex's desk and leaving Lex to wonder momentarily if he'd poked the wrong bear.

\*\*\*

It seemed like the perfect opportunity. Something quiet and out of the way where she wouldn't be expected to interact with a lot of people. The hours weren't full-time, but she didn't need a full-time job. Just something to keep her mind occupied and give her enough money to pay for groceries and gas for the week. Perry and Alice were covering all the utilities for the place and the FBI was paying a stipend for letting Lois use the place as a safehouse.

Lois straightened up in her chair, watching the face of the man sitting across from her change as he read through her resume. She offered a smile as she waited for a decision, gripping the envelope in her hand nervously. She had to start working somewhere.

Sitting alone in that cabin was only making her go crazy and she had to have some income. She couldn't afford to burn through the money Davenport and Henderson had given her to keep her out of Lex's clutches.

"When can you start?" the man across from her finally looked up from the resume in his hand, setting it down on the desk.

Lois was taken aback by the question. It usually took at least two interviews to land a position. She wasn't normally asked when she could start until the end of the second interview. She swallowed hard and shrugged. "Now?" Lois offered a broad smile, silently trying to quiet the nervousness in her abdomen.

It was quiet here. That was good. There were plenty of computers and books to keep her mind busy. Taking a job as a librarian wasn't something she had on her bucket list but it wasn't the worst profession either.

He offered his hand to shake. "Welcome to the Clover City Library, Ms. Kane."

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*Present Day...*

Lois glanced out the window, seeing the car lights fade. False alarm. That was what Davenport had called it, but the look on his face had told her otherwise. She glanced back at Clark who was sitting at the table across from her. Picking up on their conversation from earlier wasn't something she felt like diving into.

The source reported seeing Nigel heading south on I-95, leading away from them. As long as the agents on his tail didn't lose him again they could sleep somewhat better tonight. Though a good night's sleep wasn't something she imagined coming easy for her or Clark anytime soon. She had her own inner demons she was battling and he continued to fight the mental battle, sometimes screaming so loud it left her trembling as she listened to his cries for help.

If she wasn't afraid he'd lash out or close himself off even more than he already had she would try to help him somehow, but considering he'd completely shut her out for the last three weeks it wasn't a move she was comfortable acting on. She took a sip from her water, debating on whether she should say anything. Clark seemed lost in thought as he stared at the top of the table.

"I guess that's good news about Nigel," she finally said.

Clark looked up, meeting her gaze. "Yeah, just as long as he isn't on his way to hurt anyone else."

Lois nodded, letting out a deep breath. "I'm sure they'll catch up to him. They've got a whole team working to track him down."

"He got out of Metropolis, didn't he?" Clark reasoned aloud, looking around at their current surroundings. "And wherever this is."

"Clover," Lois supplied, setting her glass on the table.

"Clover?" Clark echoed, his face scrunching up as he looked at her for confirmation. "South Carolina?"

"Well, on the outskirts of it." Lois nodded and tilted her head with a halfway shrug. "Clover is just below us."

"And where is this?" he asked, gesturing to the mountain terrain behind them.

"One of Perry and Alice's rental properties," Lois explained. "I didn't trust the FBI to keep me safe so I took relocation into my own hands." She let out a sigh, leaning back in her chair.

"Isn't that a bit dangerous?" Clark asked, looking up at her. "I mean, they're the experts at this kind of thing, right? And knowing Luthor, it's only a matter of time before they connect the place to you. Luthor knows how close you were to Perry."

Lois glanced down, forming her answer as carefully as she could. "The cabin is still in Alice's late uncle's name so there's no way to connect it back to either of them."

"And what happens if Nigel or one of Luthor's cronies shows up here?" Clark asked.

"Then we move onto the next location," Lois said with a shaky breath.

"How many times have you had to do that?" Clark asked.

"Twice," she said, shaking her head. "I actually didn't make it to the first one. I, uh, called for help from a friend and they helped me out for a few weeks until I could get my bearings."

He seemed to sense something in her tone and peered up at her

curiously. “A friend?”

“I left as soon as I could. I didn’t want to put them in danger.” Lois looked down. “But not soon enough.” The remorse was evident on her face but she couldn’t bring herself to tell him what had happened in Smallville just yet.

“Nigel?” Clark guessed.

“Yeah.” Lois bit her lower lip. “I, uh, hid and as soon as the coast was clear got the hell out of dodge.” Her tone was quiet. “Not my finest moment.”

“I’m sure you did what you had to do,” he reasoned aloud. The hopeful outlook almost sounded genuine. She forced a smile and nodded, unwilling to meet his gaze. He placed a hand on hers from across the table. “For what it’s worth I am thankful for you getting me out of there.”

Lois looked back at him shyly. “Well, I couldn’t just leave you there.” A half-smile crossed her face, and she added playfully, “We’re partners, right?”

A half-smile cracked across his face and he nodded. “Yeah, but there’s not much of a partnership when your place of employment is blown to pieces.”

“Semantics.” She shrugged. “We have a lot of ground to cover in order to get you caught up on the story that’s going to rack up all the Kerths next year. Possibly even a Pulitzer.”

That earned her a grin. “I’m guessing Perry caught you up on the investigation.”

“More or less,” she said carefully, taking a sip of her water.

“More or less?” He looked at her with a frown.

Lois looked back at him, uncertain how much she wanted to divulge at that moment about how wrong his investigation into Lex had gone. She knew it would come out eventually, but she wasn’t ready to delve too deep into what had happened nearly four months ago. Talking about the investigation that had blown up in their faces would only bring back the memories of that night.

“How long has it been?” Clark asked, pulling her back to the present.

“Um, almost four months,” Lois said, tapping her hand on the table. “I’m guessing you were in that place the whole three months you were missing...?”

“Three months?” Clark shook his head. There was a silence between them.

Lois watched as Clark seemed to process the information. The memory of being alone in her apartment covered in her own blood flashed through Lois’ mind. Clark cleared his throat and looked up at her. “Last time I saw you, you were still ignoring all my warnings about Luthor. Now, you’re leading the charge in the investigation against him. What changed?”

“Does it matter?” She looked up at Clark’s expectant eyes, still waiting for her to continue the conversation but she found herself unable to. She cleared her throat, standing to her feet. “Um, I was going to make a sandwich. You want one?” She pointed to the kitchen behind her.

“Does it have to be *peanut butter*?” Clark groaned after her.

“What is wrong with peanut butter?” Lois asked in mock indignation.

“Nothing unless you’re eating it *every single day*,” Clark rolled his eyes.

“I’m domestically challenged. Burning the cabin down isn’t exactly the best way to lay low,” Lois remarked with a grin.

“I’ll risk it,” he said, pointing to the kitchen. “Come on, there’s got to be something we can make in there that doesn’t require two slices of bread.”

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The room flickered from the fluorescent light, buzzing with a light hum above the bruised and bloodied man that sat hunkered on the exam table. Christina Wallace swallowed hard as she surveyed the scene, seeing the team of federal agents bagging and tagging evidence in the room while the doctor continued to treat

the injured Dr. Kahn.

“What happened?” Agent Wallace asked, turning to the investigator on the scene.

“Hospital staff found him in the stairwell,” the investigator pointed toward the open door where agents were picking up the evidence that had been left there.

Agent Wallace walked through the room, approaching Dr. Kahn. His face was covered in round burn marks and small cuts around the chin and neck. “He’s...” Kahn coughed, holding his chest before taking a deep breath, “...after...Lane.”

“What?” Wallace squinted, uncertain she’d heard him right.

“Lois...Lane,” Kahn gasped out heavily.

Wallace turned to the investigator, “Call Davenport.”

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Clark stole a glance at Lois as they made their way through the local grocery store in town. He’d been nervous at the suggestion to venture out of the cabin. In his search through the cabinets and refrigerator he’d found himself face to face with a flashback of the contents in Lois’ kitchen back in Metropolis. Scarcely anything in the kitchen but staple items like bread, the all too familiar peanut butter, jelly, and honey and of course her cream soda. As fearful as he was about venturing out, the idea of eating another peanut butter sandwich was enough motivation to make him take the scary leap of riding shotgun with Lois down the mountainside and into town to the store.

So far he’d been able to make his way through the bakery section without any tremors. He was actually starting feel confident that maybe just maybe he’d be able to make it through the short grocery trip without one. He glanced over at Lois who was pushing the cart toward the produce section, eyeing the bread in the cart as he guided her to the fruit and vegetables.

“Apples,” he pointed to the cart, smiling to himself as he felt the cherry red skin of the apple against his palm.

\*\*\*

Lois’ eyes widened as one by one another bushel of vegetables or fruit was added to the grocery cart. She looked over her shoulder nervously, feeling exposed the longer she was out in public. Normally she did her shopping at times when she knew there were less people to run into at the store.

“That’s a lot,” Lois eyed the cart uneasily.

“I’ll make it last,” Clark promised, reaching over to examine the squash, holding the yellow and green vegetables up to his face to look at them more closely.

“You do remember the part about me not cooking, right?” Lois reminded him.

“Uh-huh,” he grumbled, handing the squash to her. She sighed, grabbing the plastic bag off the roll and shaking it open. He grinned at her, watching as she put the squash inside the plastic bag. “See? You’re learning already.”

“I don’t like squash,” she scrunched her face up at him.

“You haven’t had good squash though,” Clark responded, pointing behind her.

“There is nothing wrong with sandwiches,” she retorted with a sigh.

“Vegetables are important. So is protein,” Clark reminded her. “There’s the meat section right there.”

Lois sighed, “There goes the budget for the week...”

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Garlic, onion and the slight hint of bell pepper simmering in the skillet. Lois glanced up from the cutting board, seeing Clark shake the handle of the skillet, expertly flipping the vegetables around with the flick of his wrist. He seemed confident, finding himself at ease in the kitchen. A place she’d never been comfortable.

“Smells good,” Lois said, looking down at the cubes of raw chicken she’d helped cut.

“Thanks.” Clark flashed her a half-smile, turning his attention

back to the dish he was preparing. The tight grip he kept on the handle of the skillet began to loosen and his hand began to shake. She reached over to grab his wrist, calming the tremor flowing through him from the involuntary movement.

He looked down, staring at the skillet and she tightened her hand around his, helping him through the pain. She stared at him for a moment and then cleared her throat. "Um, so, what's the next step?" She gestured toward the pan in his grasp.

"Add the chicken," he said, looking back at the chicken that laid on the cutting board. His voice was strained as he spoke.

Lois nodded and reached over to grab the cutting board, brushing the chicken cubes into the pan. She watched as the skillet began to sizzle with the white meat simmering with the vegetables in the pan. He reached his hand over to grab a spoon of butter, tapping its contents inside the pan. She caught sight of his hand trembling again and placed her other hand over his.

"It's okay." She nodded to him. "I've got it." She smiled back at him nervously. "Just, uh, what's next?"

He met her gaze, his resolve slowly disappearing as her hand rested over his. He cleared his throat, looking away. "Um, add the broth." Lois felt him pull his hand away and she turned her attention to the cup of broth sitting next to the stove. Slowly she continued to put the dish together that Clark had started, following his direction and praying she didn't screw it up.

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Clark stared up at the ceiling, sighing in relief. His stomach was full from dinner. A real dinner. A meal that didn't mirror that of something he tried to live off of in college. He closed his eyes, flashing back to the kitchen where Lois had been helping prepare the dinner. It was strange seeing this side of her. She seemed less hostile, less guarded now.

She had helped him.

She hadn't said anything when his hand began to tremor. She silently helped calm his nerves and took over, preventing his well-intentioned dinner from burning. He swallowed hard, recalling the fear that had flooded through him when the tremor had taken over him. He'd tried to put on a good show. He'd been desperate for the change of scenery and the opportunity to put something in his stomach that didn't come between two slices of bread.

The seldom meals he'd been afforded over the past few months weren't what he'd consider fine dining. Dry scraps of slop and stale water. He had learned a long time ago he could survive a long time without water and food, but the last few months had definitely tested his limits. He'd spent the first few days in the cabin drinking bottle after bottle of water, quenching the thirst he couldn't seem to be able to satisfy.

Lois had been determined to try her best at preparing the dinner tonight. Given it was her first time cooking something that didn't come out of a box with directions and a seasoning packet she'd done pretty well. The chicken had come out a little overdone but overall it had been satisfying. The small luxuries he'd been accustomed to, cooking for himself and being able to enjoy some of the cuisines he'd discovered throughout his travels were now something that remained out of his grasp. He chopped it up as another thing that Luthor had taken from him.

His mind drifted to the day and Davenport's conversation with him as well as the conversation he'd had with Lois. She wasn't the same. That much was obvious. She seemed... more guarded than before yet softer with him at the same time. It left him wondering how to react to such a drastic change in someone he thought he knew inside and out. His last thoughts before drifting into a fitful slumber were of the small smile on Lois' face as she struggled her way through dinner. Things were changing between them. He just wasn't sure if it was for the better or not.

\*\*\*

*One Month Ago...*

Lois tapped her hand on the folder in her hand, reading over

the information Jimmy had sent over. The facial recognition software he'd run Mrs. Cox through had found a match. She wasn't sure if she should be more worried knowing the woman responsible for taking care of Clark was a trained assassin or the fact that she had been trained under Ra's Al Ghul.

Mercy Graves. That was her name. Parents were murdered by the Al Ghul society. She was adopted by Ra's Al Ghul at the age of eight as many of the children that are trained up by Ra's Al Ghul were. She was rumored to be linked to at least twenty-five assassinations during her training.

Jimmy's handwriting at the bottom of the page had '*League of Assassins*' with a question mark next to Mercy Graves. Lois felt the skin on her arms fill with goosebumps and the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She'd heard about the League of Assassins. Cut throat killers trained in the art of taking out their enemy in some of the most gruesome ways. There were rumors that Lionel and Lillian Luthor's deaths were a mark by the league but no one could prove the connection.

Lois turned the page and read through some of the rumored marks Mercy Graves was responsible for. Prominent businessmen that had been tortured for information before she put them out of their misery. The last sighting of Mercy Graves had been in 1983 during Ra's Al Ghul's attempt to take over Gotham City years ago. At the same time of her disappearance from Gotham, Beverly Cox appeared in Metropolis. Three months after the deaths of Lionel and Lillian Luthor. Six months later she was in Lex Luthor's inner circle.

That couldn't be a coincidence.

She set the file down, turning her attention to the nearly vacant library she was sitting in. One of the benefits of working here over the last few weeks had been the flexibility for her to connect with Jimmy and not worry about leaving a trail to her location. The library was a good fifteen miles out of town and out of the way. The salary wasn't much but it was enough to keep adding more to savings and take care of her needs throughout the week.

She moved toward the cart of returned books and began to scan them into the system, listening to the short beep as she tried to occupy her mind with something and help distract herself from the possibly hell Clark was in at the hands of Mercy Graves. Lex had said she had taken care of Clark. Knowing what she knew, it wasn't hard to imagine Lex might have gotten his hands on Kryptonite. He had a knack for wanting to collect rare objects. What she didn't know whether Kryptonite could kill him. Martha said it made Clark weak and vulnerable. Would prolonged exposure kill him?

That thought sent a shiver down her spine.

'*He's not dead.*' Her mind forced the thought of Clark being gone away. '*He's not dead.*'

A loud thump caught her attention and she jumped, startled, dropping the book in her hand. She looked up and saw a young woman with her three-year-old staring at her curiously. "Are you all right? I didn't mean to startle you."

"Fine, sorry," Lois lied. "I was just... someplace else." She reached for the cardboard books on the desk and closed out of the screen she was in to load the Check Out menu. She typed in her login and clicked the button for check out.

The little girl smiled at her. "I gah book."

"I see." Lois smiled back at her and glanced at the cover of the book. It was one of the books the Superman foundation had put out this past year. '*Learn Your ABCs with Superman.*' She felt a lump in her throat, staring at the cartoon image on the cover, uncertain if she would ever get a chance to find the real Superman before Lex took him from her forever.

Silently, she picked up the scanner and heard a beep, loading the book's information on the screen. She typed in her login once more to confirm the checkout and printed the checkout label, tucking it inside the book and handing it back to the little girl.

"I hope you enjoy your book." Lois smiled at her.

"Tank yooou." the little girl waved at her and walked with her mother out of the exit. Lois watched them leave, staring at the door for a long moment. She still couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that had fallen over her.

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Phillip took a sip of his drink, looking across the table at Jack, the man that had approached him earlier. Lex Luthor. He was after information about Lex Luthor. Of course he was. He knew someone would come looking eventually. He just didn't anticipate it'd be this soon.

"What do you want to know?" Phillip asked, meeting Jack's gaze.

"The extra money in the scholarship?" Jack prodded, tapping his hand on the table. "It was hush money, wasn't it?"

"An investment in my future." Phillip rolled his eyes in disgust, quoting the words Lex Luthor had used in his statement to the press. "It's got a nice ring to it when you're eating it up at the press conference, doesn't it?"

"I'm not buying it though," Jack responded, tightening his jaw as he stared back at Phillip.

"Why not?" Phillip shrugged. "I'm just a troubled kid that nobody wanted anything to do with until Lex Luthor, right?"

"Or a kid that got dealt a bad deal who did what he had to do to survive," Jack countered, leaning forward. "I know what it's like to have the world turn against you, Phillip, and I know you know what Luthor did was wrong."

"It's a lot of money," Phillip said uneasily.

"And that must mean whatever dirty secret you're hiding for Luthor is a doozie," Jack said, lifting up his cup to drink.

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*I went through something I never thought I would. The world almost came to an end...literally. With all my strength and knowing what I can do I couldn't help but wonder if this is what I was sent here for. This moment was the first time I saw not only Metropolis, but the world support Superman. I still don't understand how Lois can have so much blind faith in this façade I've created in Superman yet continue to hold so much distrust to Clark.*

*I think I scared her. I scared myself. Not knowing who you are can be pretty terrifying. I still don't understand how it happened. I've never been able to be hurt. I've never had injuries. So why would reentering the Earth's atmosphere cause me to have amnesia? Even in my disoriented state I still found a way to stop Nightfall. I guess I have Lois to thank for that. I wonder if there will ever be a day when I can tell her the only reason I got there in time was because she found me in the alley behind my apartment.*

Lois set the journal down, uncertain if she should continue. She felt a sense of dread wash over her as she read through the anguish in Clark's words from the time of Nightfall. He had been scared.

It was strange, reading through these journals with fresh eyes and seeing the past few months through Clark's eyes. He hadn't lost his memory from a car crash. He'd lost it trying to stop Nightfall.

<<"Clark, please. Superman put it all on the line, not just once, but twice. You, you fell into some garbage cans in the dark. No offense, but I don't think you can put yourself in the same league with him.">>

It seemed insane that she had dismissed him so easily back then. How blind had she been not to see what had been going on?

<<"Are we more than friends?">>

A lump formed in her throat as she contemplated what her answer would be if he asked her that now. She glanced at the time. It was getting late.

\*\*\*

Bill Henderson sat in the driver's side of the unmarked car,

looking around the underground parking garage suspiciously. After months of chasing their tails around they finally had a solid lead on something tangible to help build their case against Luthor on the RICO charges Victor Talley was chomping at the bit to bring against Luthor. Henderson reached for the hat he was wearing, readjusting it and pulling the rim of the hat over his eyes when he spotted John Black exit the elevator around the corner.

Henderson grabbed the handle to the door, rising out of the driver's seat to greet Black. John Black looked around, gripping his briefcase as he met Henderson's gaze but didn't say anything, "Mr. John Black?" Henderson asked, confirming his identity.

"You must be my ride?" John Black eyed the car behind Henderson.

"To the airport?" Henderson nodded, opening the car door for him. He waited for John Black to slide inside and then closed the door behind him. He climbed inside the driver's side and closed the door behind him, looking up in the rearview mirror to see John Black looking back at him. "You ready?"

"Let's just get this over with before I change my mind," Black responded.

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<<"That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I'm unstoppable.">>

<<"You think the boss is behind this, don't you?"

"What do you think? Clark's missing. The evidence we gathered against the boss is gone.">>

<<"Clark was looking into a possible lead on who he thought the boss was">>

<<"Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I've had you?">>

<<"How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?">>

<<"Well, it's no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.">>

Lois shot up in bed, screaming from the invisible threat that continued to attack her in her dreams. Gone were the peaceful nights of sleep and the comfort of safety and stability. In its place were the nightmares of what could happen the moment she stopped running. The moment she stopped it was over.

<<"Well, it's no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.">>

She glanced at the clock, running a hand through her tangled hair. Her heart still pounded against her chest as she instinctively reached for the rough skin on her side where the wounds were beginning to heal. Determination crossed over her face and she reached for the burner phone on the nightstand, pressing the speed dial for Jimmy Olsen's phone.

After a few rings a groggy, "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"I need a secure line," Lois said, reaching for her laptop that was tucked safely in its bag on the floor by her bed.

"It's three in the morning," Jimmy began to argue.

"Please," Lois said, choking back tears. "I know it's early and I'm sorry, but I just...need this."

Jimmy sighed from the other end of the phone line and responded, "Fine, I'm getting up."

"Thanks."

\*\*\*

Jack sighed, setting his uniform on his lap as he rode back to the beach house with Perry. He had what he needed from Phillip. Lex Luthor had admitted to being the one testing on the smart kids and had attempted to encourage Phillip to continue Metamide 5 in front of Superman. No wonder Clark hated the guy's guts. If he would willingly expose kids to poison like that there was no limit to what he could do.

Phillip said he would testify to corroborate other witnesses but he wouldn't be the only witness taking the stand. The only thing

they had to do now was find those other witnesses. Hopefully Alice and Jimmy were having better luck than him.

\*\*\*

Lois sat at the desk, looking up every time the bell on the door rang. She could feel the tension in her neck building as she jumped at every sound. She was sure her new boss thought there was something wrong with her given how skittish she was behaving with every patron that entered the library. She could recall countless afternoons of reading for hours on end in the Metropolis Library and not once did she feel as anxious as she did here.

A stack of books landed in front of her and she forced a smile, trying to hide her reaction from the young teenager staring at her with an impatient look. She reached over to scan the first book, "Hemingway," she commented, reading the title.

He let out an annoyed look, "Yeah, it's for school." He looked to the door with an impatient expression. "Can we hurry this along?"

Lois nodded silently, taking the next book and scanning it in the computer. She did her best not to meet the skittish teenager's gaze. He looked nervous. Really nervous. The reporter in her would push for answers to why he was so anxious but that would draw unwanted attention to herself. That wasn't something she could afford to do. She had to sit here and do nothing, keeping her head down.

She finished scanning the books and handed them to him. "Return date is next Thursday."

\*\*\*

Victor Talley stood outside the interrogation room, watching as Agent Danny Malone, one of the newest agents on the Major Crimes Unit took John Black's statement. The young John Black couldn't be older than twenty but the years hadn't been kind to him. Black's face was covered in scars and worry lines as he spoke into the microphone in front of him.

"Pete Black was hired to plant a bomb inside the Daily Planet on May 2<sup>nd</sup> of 1994. He didn't ask questions. He just did the job." John looked down. "Pete never had what you would call a moral compass."

"Did you ever see or hear who hired Pete to complete this assignment?" Malone asked carefully.

"The boss," John Black responded. "The woman that hired him said it was the boss of Metropolis. She called herself Mrs. Cox."

Pictures were laid out in front of him and Malone asked, "Do you recognized the woman in these photos?"

"That's her in all of them," John responded.

"You're sure?" Malone prompted.

"Positive," John responded. "That's the woman that hired Pete."

"Was there another assignment your brother was hired to complete for this woman?" Malone asked.

"Yes," John looked down, unwilling to meet Malone's gaze. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to look up, "Pete was given a quarter of a million dollars to plant explosives in someone's apartment, framing them for the bombing of the Planet."

Malone jotted down something and pressed, "Any other jobs?"

"Yes," John continued, "He was hired to go to the jail this Jack kid was in and make it look like the kid offed himself out of guilt." Tears ran down John Black's face and he said, "Pete had a hard time doing it. He's not a murderer. He's not a killer. He told her that."

"He planted the bomb, didn't he?" Malone asked.

"He didn't build it," John responded. "The agreement was John would let Cox know when Jack was alone and someone else would do the job. He's just a kid."

"So was Jack," Malone responded coldly.

"I know."

\*\*\*

Lois gathered her things, checking behind her as she made her way toward the exit. The tall trees leading up to the entryway outside caused a long shadow to cast over the steps. She saw a figure waiting outside the front door. Her grip tightened over the strap of her purse, mentally preparing herself for any potential confrontation.

It seemed odd to have someone waiting outside the door like that. She couldn't make out the face. She glanced back at the dim night lights behind her. The manager was sitting in his office, going over the books, unaware of the possible intruder. What would someone want with a library?

She glanced toward the side door, wondering momentarily if it was still unlocked. The alarm over the door blinked red, indicating the security system was on and the door was locked. She turned her attention back to the front door and saw the figure move, stepping into the light of the doorway. She let out a shaky breath when she recognized the face.

"Get a grip, Lois," she told herself, jogging toward the exit and tugging the door open to confront her surprise guest. "What are you doing here?"

Christina Wallace smiled back at her. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Lois cleared her throat, closing the door behind her and making her way down the steps, unwilling to look the woman in the eye. "You didn't scare me."

"You could have fooled me." Wallace followed her down the steps and to the truck parked on the side of the building. "You're pale as a ghost."

Lois tightened her jaw, ignoring the comment. "I'm fine," she lied, walking toward her truck. The sooner she got inside the sooner she would feel in control. Three weeks since she'd started working here and she couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that continued to haunt her. Everything and everyone was a possible threat. Her mind was constantly racing, trying to stay ahead and her nights were filled with nightmares of either herself or Clark being tortured by Lex. She couldn't escape it.

"We need to talk," Wallace said following her to the driver's side of the truck. "There's been a development."

"Great," Lois said, not really sure how a development would affect her. She muttered under her breath a profanity as the nightmare from the previous night flashed through her mind. "Stop it."

"You're not okay," Wallace observed, placing a hand on her shoulder. "What's going on?"

Lois spun on her heel to confront Wallace. "What the hell do you want from me? Fine, yes, you scared me. *Everything* scares me. I can't even go down the freaking street without being scared that someone or something is going to come out."

"Are you done?" Wallace asked, looking back at her in concern.

"Not even close," Lois growled out angrily.

"Get in the car," Wallace ordered, pointing to the car in front of them.

"Go to hell!" Lois hissed out.

Wallace pursed her lips and pulled out a pistol, removing the clip and emptying the chamber in front of her before tossing it to her. "Take it."

Lois reached out to grab it. "I don't do guns."

"Well, that's too bad," Wallace responded. "Because in order to survive this you're going to need to know how to defend yourself in a gunfight." Her gaze grew dark as she stared Lois down. "Your martial arts skills won't help you when you have bullets coming at you."

"Don't you think I know that?" Lois growled out angrily. "I almost died! Now everywhere I go and everything I do is colored by that. Maybe my car won't start right and will be rigged to blow up. Maybe my drive will become too predictable and I'll be taken

out by a sharpshooter? I can't breathe! I can't think!"

"So, take your life back," Wallace said, tossing her the clip. "Get in the car."

\*\*\*

*Present Day...*

Lois stepped out of the bedroom and followed the fragrant smell of coffee brewing and the hint of pancakes and eggs from the kitchen. Cautiously she turned the corner, surprised to find Clark behind the stove, hard at work. He was flipping the last set of pancakes onto the awaiting plate when he looked up and met her surprised expression.

"Um, when did you find time to...?" she looked around the kitchen in amazement, seeing the mess from dinner last night had already been cleaned up. "You didn't have to do this by yourself."

"I wanted to," he said, handing her a plate.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she pressed, recalling his tremor from last night. The last thing either of them needed was a trip to the hospital or a call to Dr. Kahn because he pushed himself too hard. She still wasn't sure how obvious Clark's differences were from humans and pushing their luck wasn't something she envisioned going over well for him. She recalled some of the journal entries around the time the clone had been destroyed. The inner battle he had with himself regarding the nightmare of possibly becoming the subject of a scientist's latest experiment had been terrifying. Here he was the strongest man in the world and the idea of being locked away and experimented on was his greatest fear.

'*A fear that came true,*' she reminded herself, staring back at Clark for a long moment. His eyes met hers briefly before looking down again.

She felt a flutter in her abdomen as he placed a hand on her shoulder and responded, "I'm fine." He gestured to the table. "Let's eat."

\*\*\*

Clark glanced across the table at Lois, watching her from over the top of his juice glass. He had so many questions that he wanted to ask but he was afraid of scaring Lois with the overwhelming volume of concerns that had plagued him throughout the night. He hadn't slept. He had tossed and turned most of the night, thinking of what he'd learned over and over again.

He recalled going days without sleep when he needed to but this was different. He felt drained but couldn't bring himself to give into the fatigue. Instead he'd busied himself with mundane tasks around the cabin. He'd cleaned the floors, dusted, scrubbed the kitchen and then as soon as it was late enough he'd started breakfast.

Lois seemed to have appreciated the gesture. He knew he still had a long way to go to make up for shutting her out the way he had in the beginning. He hoped the act of goodwill was seen as that. There wasn't much he could do to repair what had already been done and said between them but he could try and take the first step.

He'd had time to do nothing but think last night as his body refused to give into sleep. He found himself replaying the last month with Lois and unable to rationalize his behavior. Was he really so messed up that he'd think Lois would do anything to hurt him? He hated the angry person he'd become. His hatred and resentment at his torturers had spilled over onto Lois—the person that rescued him.

That was still hard to wrap his mind around.

Lois had faced off against Luthor's thugs and physically dragged him out of that poisonous room. She had put everything on the line and risked her life to save him. For someone who claimed to only see him as a friend he couldn't understand why she would go to such lengths.

Whatever the reason he was determined to make a change. The silence had to stop. No matter how much guilt he carried

around for what happened with Luthor he couldn't let Lois carry that burden any longer. He couldn't continue to be this person that lashed out at everyone trying to help him.

It had taken a few sloppy attempts but he'd finally gotten the hang of flipping the pancakes with the spatula. Cooking without his heat vision for assistance had taken some getting used to but once he got the hang of it he found it was easy to find his rhythm.

"So," Lois twiddled with her fork, staring down at the syrup covered plate. Her eyes lifted up, meeting his gaze momentarily before hiding behind her fluttering eyelashes again.

"Do you want some more coffee?" he offered, pointing to the pot on the low bar. She shook her head and he smiled back at her nervously. "Is this weird?"

"A little," she admitted with a shrug. "I guess I'm still getting used to you talking to me."

"I know." He nodded. "I didn't handle any of this very well." He glanced her way, meeting her eyes as they darted his way uncertainly. "I think there's a lot we need to talk about."

"Like what?" Lois asked, combing her fingers through her hair as she looked him in eyes expectantly.

"Three months is a long time," he began carefully. "I know Davenport mentioned you were testifying against Luthor."

Lois' face went from hopeful to mildly annoyed before she responded with a sigh. "Whenever they have enough to formally charge him, yes." Lois tapped her hand on the table. "There's supposed to be an evidentiary hearing in a few months. We had a lot more than we have right now. I'm working with them to help rebuild the case. Leaving my testimony as the backbone of the case isn't exactly what I call a winning strategy."

Clark watched her, wondering briefly what had caused her to pull back so quickly then turned his attention to her remarks about the case against Luthor. "What about everything Perry and Jack were able to get on Luthor?"

"Gone," Lois shrugged with a pained expression. "All of it." "No one got hurt?" he pressed carefully.

"It was the middle of the afternoon," Lois said carefully. "Thankfully most everyone was on their way home. Perry, Jack, and Jimmy were across the street with me when it happened. There were a few casualties of course, but it could have been a lot worse than it was."

"How bad?" he asked, his voice croaked in concern as he imagined the fate his neighbors and friends had been faced with all those months ago.

\*\*\*

Lois closed her eyes, trying not to react when she heard Clark dive into his questions about the damage to his apartment and the injuries his neighbors and friends had sustained. Of course he'd want to know. Why wouldn't he?

She mentally berated herself over the false sense of hope that had washed over her. For a split-second she thought he was actually going to open up and tell her what he'd been hiding from her all this time. As dumb as it sounded she actually thought he might try and open up about Superman to her. As soon as the thought crossed her mind it was quickly squashed by his question about the bombing.

"How bad?" Clark's voice cracked as he stared back at her.

She silently counted to ten, pushing the memories from that day away as she got up from the table to retrieve the large file jacket from the shelf behind them. Her hands tightened around the tattered sides as she made her way back to the table.

"Fair warning," she began carefully, handing him the file, "the first time you see it it might be too much." She took a deep breath, preparing herself mentally before opening up the painful images. Clark nodded his understanding and reached for the string that held the jacket closed. She stopped him, placing a hand over his. "Are you sure you're ready for this?" Lois asked, giving him one last chance to back out.

“Just show me,” he said, looking up at her.

Lois nodded, releasing her hand from his. She did her best not to react as the photos of his apartment building in flames were laid out on the table. A hand flew across his mouth as he caught sight of one of the bodies being carried out by the fire fighters.

“Clark,” she reached across the table to stop him from pulling any more crime scene photos from the file.

He met her gaze with a pained expression and shook his head. “I have to,” he said simply, pulling out the next stack of photos.

\*\*\*

Nigel held the hard drive he had retrieved from Dr. Kahn’s computer in his hand, setting it down on the desk of the computer expert, Dr. Emmet Vale. The man was a tech wizard and had been leading LexCorp’s charge in breakthrough technology advancements for military weaponry. But like all men he had a weakness. The last six months had been filled with long stints of drinking binges and gambling. That combined with his recent divorce had left the doctor hungry for something Nigel could easily acquire: money.

“I’ll need this to stay off Mr. Luthor’s radar,” Nigel said carefully, setting a large stack of hundred dollar bills next to the hard drive.

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*One Month Ago...*

Lois stared at the red and white targets flying through the air as she let off the round of shots, aiming with precision in the center of the target. A smile spread across her face as she saw the rounds enter the center ring. She was getting closer to the target. She let her arms down, setting the pistol down on the table in front of her, removing the ear muffs and protective gear as the target moved toward her for her to look over.

“You’re getting better.”

Lois turned around and saw Agent Wallace standing in the corner behind her. “Better? I’d say that’s dead on.”

“When no one’s firing back, yes,” Wallace reminded her, handing the earmuffs back to her. She held up a bullet proof vest. “Now that you’re comfortable with firing shots let’s work on your aim under fire.”

“Under fire?” Lois asked, looking around the empty firing range.

Wallace hit a button under the table and the target raced backward. The center ring opened and revealed a long barrel “Put it on.”

“What the hell?” Lois looked back at her in disbelief, throwing the vest on and reaching for the weapon on the table and aiming at the target that was now firing back at her.

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Victor Talley paced around the room, glaring at Jack Davenport and Daniel Malone. This was big. This was bigger than anything. If he was able to prove everything John Black said then this would be the biggest case the FBI cracked since the systematic taking down of mobsters like Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, and Machine Gun Kelly. This case was career making and he wasn’t going to let anyone or anything screw this up.

“Malone, I want you on John Black like white on rice. He doesn’t even take a piss without you knowing it. Are we clear?” Talley ordered with a grunt.

“Got it, Director Talley,” Danny Malone responded with a broad grin. “No one will get to him. I swear.”

“They better not,” Talley retorted before turning his attention to Davenport. “Jack, I need you and your team to dig up what you can to corroborate John Black’s statement. Let’s see if we can pull Pete Black from county and get him under federal protection. If we can get him to turn on Luthor that’ll go a long way in proving our case.”

Davenport nodded. “We still haven’t had Luthor arrested yet.”

“I’m not throwing him in that box until I’ve got him cornered like the rat he is,” Talley growled. “No mercy.”

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## Chapter 10

*Present Day...*

Lois sat silently on the edge of the loveseat, watching as Clark scribbled notes on a legal pad, flipping through the police reports and crime scene photos from the Clinton Street bombing. Her gaze drifted toward the desk where the file jackets on the subsequent incidents that they knew Lex was behind. She felt a lump form in the back of her throat as she watched Clark hang his head, setting the last stack of photos on the table.

Four hours later and Clark had finally finished taking meticulous notes on the case. She hadn’t said anything. What was there to say? The painful, memory of what Lex had done in an attempt to fake Clark’s death and possibly even add an attempt on her friends’ lives wasn’t something she allowed her mind to dwell on for long. She couldn’t. Given the time, she was always reminded of what happened shortly after and she couldn’t—*wouldn’t* relive that. Not now.

There was a lot more Clark had yet to see. The John Black murder, the attempted murder on her and the fake death certificate that had been issued, and of course Jonathan’s shooting at the Kent farm. She knew eventually she needed to tell him...and she would. Just not now.

Seeing the emotional state Clark was in, pouring over the damage that had been done in his absence was enough to prevent her from giving him any more information. His features remained stern and his eyes filled with remorse. Even though he hadn’t been the one to set off the bomb that had injured and killed those people, he still carried the weight of their loss and injuries with him. Was that what it was like for him when a rescue went wrong for Superman?

She’d never even thought about how Superman managed after a disaster occurred where he hadn’t been fast enough or able to be in two places at once. A conversation from early in their partnership flashed through her mind.

<< “A fifteen-year-old boy is in critical condition, his mother is in shock, and his little sister can’t stop crying. There were witnesses, but they’re not talking. The officer I talked to says they’ve had half a dozen like this in the last week alone.”

“Sounds like a job for Superman.”

“Yeah. That would have made it a truly great story, wouldn’t it?”

“Forget the story, Clark. Metropolis needs Superman.”

“You think he would have been able to stop this? ... Or that?”

“No. Even Superman can’t be everywhere at once.”

“Then what good is he?”

“It’s the idea of Superman. Someone to believe in. Someone to build a few hopes around. Whatever he can do; that’s enough.”>>

Superman had been missing for days and Metropolis seemed to be experiencing an extra dose of destruction from the criminal element. At the time, she had been resentful of Clark’s ability to track down the missing hero, but knowing what she knew now, she wondered if there might have been something more to the story. Superman had shown up and been actively coming to the rescue for almost two months before up and disappearing from sight. No one knew where he went. Clark wasn’t the type to back down from a fight. She knew that first hand given the wild goose chase he’d sent her on for ‘super Godzilla’ and many of the verbal sparring sessions the two of them had ended up in over the past year.

Something had happened.

She had a sinking feeling whatever it was, Lex Luthor’s name was written all over it. What she didn’t know was how to gain enough trust from Clark in order to get him to open up about whatever that was.

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose, setting the file in his hand down on the coffee table. He had gone through every photo and taken detailed notes of the sequence in which the bombing had occurred. He had a list of names on another sheet of paper. She wasn't sure what they were, but hopefully, it was something that might help Henderson and Davenport solidify the case against Lex. As of right now if they went before a judge with just her testimony, it would look like nothing but bad blood given the broken relationship between herself and Lex. Losing John Black, and his testimony had delivered a mighty blow to the FBI's case.

"This was a professional hit," Clark finally said, pushing the notepad he had set on the table toward her.

"What's this?" Lois asked, wrinkling her nose as she picked up the legal pad.

"Aliases," he said with a scowl.

"Aliases?" she inquired, not following.

"If you were a professional hitman would you use your real name?" Clark asked. She stared at the names, and he moved to claim the seat next to her. "When we were investigating the Metros these were some of the professionals that came up in some of the follow-ups. Or the aliases rather."

"And you think one of them might have been hired by..." she glanced over at Clark uncertain how to refer to the name of the man that had kidnapped and tortured him.

"Luthor?" Clark's mouth thinned out into a straight line, and he nodded. "Yeah, I think he was the one pulling the strings on the entire Toasters operation."

Lois held her breath, waiting a moment before responding. Any other time they'd talked about his suspicions it always resulted in a fight. She wanted to ask what made him suspect Lex but she didn't want to risk him pulling away either. "The evidence linked back to Toni Taylor," she stated the fact as simply as she could, watching him uneasily.

"I know." His head dropped, and he stole a glance toward her as she stared back at him expectantly. "Don't get me wrong, she was just a culpable, but she didn't act alone." He was silent for a long moment.

Lois bit her lower lip, approaching the question cautiously. "What makes you think she didn't act alone?" He looked up at her with a look of disbelief, and she added, "I mean, Toni Taylor was running the Metros. She did admit to giving those weapons to the Toasters..."

Clark nodded, letting out a long sigh. "The money and technology needed to create those weapons and suits the Toasters had was way out of the Metros reach. Someone had to design it, create it, and then find a group of money hungry thugs that enjoy seeing Metropolis go up in flames."

Lois pursed her lips, processing the information he'd laid before her. Many of the names were ones she hadn't heard before, but one stood out to her. 'The Handyman' was on the FBI's Most Wanted list and at the top of every hitman's arsonist list. She wasn't sure how to react to the information he'd just shared. On one hand she was resentful for him not including her in what he suspected months ago, but on the other hand, she was relieved to have him open up to her now.

"So, we're looking for a possible project contracted at LexLabs or STAR Labs around the same time the Toasters appeared," Lois reasoned aloud.

"Luthor's not dumb enough to take it somewhere that he couldn't erase the record," Clark shook his head.

"Can't hurt to at least look," Lois reasoned.

"No," Clark sighed. "I guess not." His gaze shifted toward her and she felt her heart rate speed up, shifting beneath his watchful eyes. A smile cracked at the corners of his mouth.

"What?" she found her voice, staring back at him curiously.

"Nothing." He shook his head, and she stared back at him expectantly. "It's just nice being able to talk about this without you

biting my head off."

Her mouth twisted and she shrugged, uncertain how to respond. "Well, things are different now, right?"

"Right." He nodded his agreement.

\*\*\*

"The evidence linked back to Toni Taylor."

Clark did his best not to react defensively to the statement. He stole a glance at Lois, noting how careful she was being as their conversation came dangerously close to the main argument they had had for months with one another for the last year. Despite his knowledge that she was helping testify against Luthor he still felt uncertain of himself around her. How much could he really share? It was idiotic. He knew that. He also knew how many times he'd tried to tell her about Luthor's murderous ways and been ignored.

Part of it he supposed was being gun-shy, but another part of him was afraid of losing everything he'd gained in the last twenty-four hours. He hadn't realized how much he actually missed talking to her and spending time with her.

He looked back at Lois, uncertain how to explain everything he knew without causing a rift between them. Most of what he knew was from his interactions with Luthor as Superman. Not that there was any danger of Superman showing up anytime soon. But explaining that part to Lois wasn't something he envisioned would help gain her understanding. Quite the opposite would probably happen.

"I know," he finally spoke, meeting her gaze as she stared back at him expectantly. Momentarily, he wondered how much he should divulge about what he'd discovered when following up on the investigation into the Metros. Deciding the only way to determine where he and Lois stood with one another was to just bite the bullet and trust her with what he knew. He swallowed the lump in his throat and sighed. "Don't get me wrong, she was just a culpable, but she didn't act alone."

He waited for her to react, gauging her face and body language. Lois looked away, and at first, he wasn't sure if she might still think he was paranoid. Then came her question, "What makes you think she didn't act alone?" He stared at her for a moment, uncertain how to respond to her question and she continued her thought. "I mean, Toni Taylor was running the Metros. She did admit to giving those weapons to the Toasters..."

To his surprise, Lois seemed to actually be rationalizing his statement instead of arguing against him. He sighed, nodding as he explained calmly, "The money and technology needed to create those weapons and suits the Toasters had was way out of the Metros reach. Someone had to design it, create it, and then find a group of money hungry thugs that enjoy seeing Metropolis go up in flames."

"So, we're looking for a possible project contracted at LexLabs or STAR Labs around the same time the Toasters appeared," Lois reasoned aloud.

"Luthor's not dumb enough to take it somewhere that he couldn't erase the record," Clark shook his head, feeling any chance of proving a connection to Luthor had gone up in smoke months ago.

"Can't hurt to at least look," Lois reasoned.

"No," Clark sighed. "I guess not." His gaze shifted toward her, and he felt a lump in his throat as he tried to process how different things were between them. He wasn't sure how to react. This was so different from their past conversations about his suspicions of Luthor. The corners of his mouth twitched into a half-smile.

"What?"

"Nothing," he shook his head, and he caught her gaze. "It's just nice being able to talk about this without you biting my head off," he admitted sheepishly.

"Well, things are different now, right?" she shrugged, looking down at her lap.

"Right," he nodded his agreement.

Lois was quiet for a moment, and he watched her, trying to figure out what she was thinking. She cleared her throat. “Um, I’m going to give Jimmy a call and see if he’s got any ideas.”

“Jimmy?” Clark asked, watching as she reached for a mobile phone from the corner table next to her. He felt a pang in his chest as dread washed over him. Calling Jimmy and involving him in this would only give Luthor an opportunity to strike out. The gruesome mark that had been left on his heart from the images he’d seen earlier made it hard for him to rationalize involving anyone any further than he had to. His friend had survived Luthor’s wrath once, but he wasn’t sure he would a second time.

“No,” Clark shook his head, catching Lois’ curious expression as he elaborated. “I don’t want to drag anyone else into this.” He scowled, looking at her with a snort. “I really don’t even want *you* involved in this, but it’s too late for that.”

Lois scowled back at him. For a moment he thought she was going to tear into him with a lecture about being able to take care of herself, but something seemed to stop her. “This isn’t just about you, Clark.”

“It’s *me* Luthor’s after,” Clark responded in a dark tone, praying she didn’t push him for more.

“We’re already involved.” Lois sighed, placing a hand on his arm. “Me, Perry, Jimmy, Jack, Alice. Even Bill Henderson.” She was quiet before turning toward him, “You can’t seriously think you’d try to do any of this on your own.”

“You don’t know what he’s capable of,” Clark warned, uncertain how much he was willing to share at that moment.

She was quiet for a moment, pulling back and staring at him before responding carefully, “You might be surprised. He’s done some pretty awful things to all of us.” Lois let out a shaky breath and reassured him, “Jimmy knows what he’s doing as does Jack and Perry.”

Clark sighed. “Does he?”

Lois held up the phone in her hand. “Pay-as-you-go phone. None of them were purchased at the same store or at the same time. Everyone has their own, and they’re O’Neill Cable phones, so there’s no way for LexCorp to put a trace on them.”

“Smart,” Clark observed mildly impressed.

“Jimmy’s idea,” Lois pointed out, handing the phone to him. “Don’t just take my word for it. You can talk to him yourself. His speed dial is three.”

Clark stared at the phone, uncertain what to do. Did he want to reach out to his friend and know how he was? Yes, but something stopped him from taking the phone from her. He shook his head and pulled away from her.

Her face fell, and she pulled the phone back to dial. He sat next to her listening as she greeted their young friend, “Jimmy, hey, it’s me. I think I have something for you...”

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Lex watched from the safety of his limo as the last brick from the warehouse on Pier 7 came down. After assessing the damage that had been done upon Superman’s escape, he had determined the best course of action was to destroy all evidence of the secret Applied Science Division and anything that would link him to the misdeeds of Dr. Gretchen Kelly.

Nigel had taken care of the orderlies and the lovely doctor. Over the past few weeks, he’d quietly moved people around and set plans in motion to begin the destruction of one of the most expensive prisons LexCorp had ever built. He still couldn’t understand how Superman had escaped from the cell or who had helped him hack into the security system.

Someone had helped him.

Who that was remained to be seen.

He pressed the call button on his phone, waiting for the response he knew was to come. The voice on the other end responded, “Yes, Mr. Luthor?”

“Asabi, there’s still no sign of Mrs. Cox?” he asked, staring at

the destruction through the tinted glass of his window.

“No, Mr. Luthor,” Asabi responded.

“Check our contacts in Gotham to see if she’s returned home.” He instructed, “If she doesn’t turn up by the end of the day I want a contract put out.”

“Yes, Mr. Luthor,” Asabi sighed against the phone and static echoed in Lex’s ear.

“And Asabi?” he called out.

“Yes?” Asabi inquired.

“Get the most recent address for Perry White. I have some unfinished business with him,” Lex added darkly.

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*One Month Ago...*

The drive had to be the longest drive John Black had ever been on. He glanced over at the driver’s side, seeing the light brown hair of the agent driving him to what they called the safehouse. His grip tightened on the envelope in his hand. A new identity was what he’d been promised if he testified for the feds. He knew given a chance to explain his brother would forgive him.

“You’re a little lost in thought there, Johnny boy,” the agent remarked with a wry smile. “We got a long drive. You going to waste it staring at me like a stalker we’re going to have problems.” He waved the gold band on his hand in John’s face. “No offense but you’re not my type.”

John snorted and let out a chuckle. “You couldn’t afford me anyway.”

“Well, I don’t know,” he awarded John a half-smile. “Mrs. Davenport has pretty expensive taste...”

John let out a laugh. “The good ones usually do.” He grew thoughtful for a moment, staring at the long road in front of them. They’d been driving for hours already and were no closer to their destination it seemed than before. He looked in the backseat where the agent that had taken his statement at the bureau was slumped over snoring away. He wished he could find enough mental peace to get even a short nap, but that was something that he doubted would ever come.

\*\*\*

The boardroom for Stern Media was dimly lit as Franklin Stern’s team of attorneys sat on one side of the table with the team of attorneys for the New Troy Department of Energy. Everyone wore exhaustion on their faces of the weight of the stress from the negotiations each team had embarked on for the last month. Everyone that is except for Franklin Stern who sat at the head of the table like a cat that just ate the canary.

“We’ll announce tomorrow morning,” Franklin cheered, lifting his glass in a toast. “Chin up gentlemen. This is the start of a new era for Metropolis.”

“I’ll get this filed with Hamilton tonight, but I sure hope you know what you’re doing, Franklin,” his head attorney warned, placing a copy of the contract in his briefcase. “Getting into a pissing war with Luthor isn’t really what we would call smart business.”

Stern leaned back in his chair confidently. “I don’t envision anyone enjoys having LexCorp push their way into the market sectors we built up first.” His gaze grew dark. “I’m sick and tired of bowing down because you all are too afraid to take a stand. We all know who started the twenty-four-seven news circuit in Metropolis and we know who shut them down.”

“LexCorp isn’t going to take this lying down,” his attorney retorted.

“He doesn’t have a choice,” Stern responded with a grin. “I own all the transmitting towers in New Troy, and now Luthor has to come begging to me to keep LNN as the top news network in Metropolis.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then the competition just disappeared, didn’t it?” Stern laughed.

\*\*\*

The room was dark and dimly lit as Jimmy Olsen sat in the visitor's room. He stared at the steel door he was told Toni Taylor would enter from by the guard. It had been fifteen minutes and still no sign of anything. He momentarily wondered if she decided not to come.

It had been sheer luck that he'd come across her name in the list of inmate transfers. Florida State Penitentiary had become the home of quite a few inmates from Metropolis. All of which seemed to be in connection to the Metros. The Metros had almost been pushed out of Metropolis by the Toasters. At least that was the story they'd all been told. Lois had asked him to look into all the old stories she and Clark had worked where Lex Luthor's name came up. So here he was.

He heard a creak from the door and looked up. There, standing in the doorway was a shackled Toni Taylor. The door closed behind her, and a loud clank filled the room. Jimmy gazed at Toni for a moment. Her hair was pinned up in a bun as she stared at him in disbelief. "You the reporter?"

Jimmy stood to his feet. "James Olsen."

"Like I told you on the phone, there's not much to tell." Toni looked around the dark room as she took her seat across from him.

"Then why the request to transfer?" Jimmy pressed, looking back at her expectantly. "You sent fifteen requests in your first month of being in Metropolis Penitentiary."

"It's prison," Toni scoffed. "That's what you do. Besides, I like the scenery here better. Much less dreary when you've got the ocean waves to help drift you off to sleep in this hell hole."

Jimmy stared at her for a long moment and then leaned back in his chair. This wasn't the woman Clark had described to him. She wasn't vulnerable or scared but rather dismissive. Could it be an act? He cleared his throat, going for the jugular. "I don't believe you."

"Pardon?" Toni scoffed.

"I don't believe you," Jimmy repeated. "I think you're hiding something. Maybe covering for someone and that's why you wanted out of Metropolis Penitentiary."

"And what makes you such an expert?" Toni scoffed.

"Because my friend said he saw a side of you that was worth saving." Jimmy narrowed his eyes at her. "I believe you know him as Charlie."

"Yes, I know Charlie," Toni said as she gave Jimmy a glare. "I've spent the last few months trying to figure out how Clark Kent pulled the wool over my eyes like that." Her tone grew soft. "Still it was a shock to hear what happened to him."

Jimmy glanced down, uncertain how to respond. "CK is one of the good ones."

Toni looked away for a moment before responding, "So, what is this about?"

"Lex Luthor," Jimmy said, folding his hands in front of him on the table.

"What about him?" Toni shifted uncomfortably.

"He came to the Metro Club to see you, the head of the Metro Gang," Jimmy looked at her with a prompting look. "Why?"

"Why don't you ask your friend, Lois Lane?" Toni gave him a disgusted look. "She had her opinion made up before the ink was dry on the warrant."

"I'm asking you," Jimmy said, ignoring the remark.

"You don't understand..." Toni shook her head. "You don't know what he's capable of..."

"Not if you don't tell me," Jimmy said, tapping his hand on the table. "You met with Lex Luthor at your club, and the next day the Toasters were shut down, and you were left holding the bag."

"You have no idea," Toni muttered looking away.

"What if I told you that night Lex Luthor went to Lois Lane and pointed the finger at you being responsible for the fires?" Jimmy asked.

A flicker of something crossed her face. "I can't testify." There was a silence between them and then she added, "But I can point you in the right direction."

\*\*\*

*Present Day...*

Lois stood in front of the bathroom mirror, applying the lipstick as she prepared for her afternoon shift. She ran her hand through her hair, checking everything was in place. Since their conversation a week ago about the arson and his suspicions Clark had closed himself off again. He still talked to her, but he was holding back something. What it was she wasn't sure.

She had called Martha a few days ago to update her. It felt so strange being closer, it seemed, with Clark's parents than with him. Still, she felt she owed them whatever information she could provide. Martha had risked everything bringing her back to Smallville, and that had almost cost Jonathan his life. A shudder ran through her, and she pushed the memory of that day out of her mind.

Martha, of course, was thankful for keeping her informed about her son. Even if he didn't want to pick up the phone and call her himself. She still didn't understand that. She had given Clark the numbers and the phone to call everyone that she thought would matter to him and he just stared at the phone like it was a foreign object. What she couldn't understand was given his close relationship with his parents why he wouldn't want to at least call them and let them know he was okay. Despite her own fragmented relationship with her parents, she would give anything to be able to reach out to them through all of this. But she couldn't. She couldn't talk to them or see them or give any form of communication that might give Lex and his thugs reason to believe she was indeed alive.

The differences she and her mother had had over the years seemed so small in the grand scheme of things now. She missed her mom. She missed her sister. She even missed her dad. She had spent months on the run, hiding and staying one step ahead to survive. Seeing Clark shrug off an opportunity to talk to his family sent a range of anger and jealousy through her. She knew it probably wasn't as simple as it seemed but she couldn't help but resent him for squandering any opportunity he had to talk to his family.

She stepped out of the bathroom, checking the bedroom for her purse and keys before heading out. When she stepped into the living room, she found Clark asleep on the couch with one of the files across his chest from where he'd apparently been reading it. Her gaze shifted to the coffee table where a plate of half-eaten pasta was, and three empty glasses sat next to it. She shook her head, grabbing the plate and glasses and taking it to the kitchen. Her foot slammed on the lever to the trashcan, lifting the lid up for her to dump the half-eaten dish into the trash. She then slammed the plate and glasses down on the counter before spotting the bowl and spoon sitting in the sink.

She let out a muttered curse. "You've got to be kidding me."

She could leave them there and hope they get cleaned but that would assume Clark was doing anything but sitting on the couch going over that file. That's all he'd done for the last week, and her patience was wearing thin. If there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was a messy kitchen. She couldn't stand dirty dishes sitting around while someone went about their business. How hard was it to pick up a dirty dish, clean it and put it in the dishwasher?

She set her things down on the table then turned to the kitchen sink, yanking the dishwasher open. Sure enough, everything inside was dirty. She checked and found a spot for the lonely dishes that were sitting in the sink. Her hand tightened on the handle for the water, jerking it on with a loud clank as she rinsed the dishes off and loudly pulled the top rack of the dishwasher open, tossing it into the rack with another loud clank.

"I would have gotten those."

She looked up and glared at Clark's disheveled appearance and shrugged her shoulders. "It's *fine*."

It wasn't fine. Nothing about the current situation was fine, but she wasn't going to argue right now. She had to leave, or she was going to be late. She patted her hands dry with the dish towel and then tossed it on the counter. "Just turn the dishwasher on." She glared at his disheveled appearance with a snort. "You know, if you're not too busy what with all your time being consumed with nothing."

She grabbed her purse and then headed toward the door, hoping a few hours of sorting books would help calm the anger that was festering inside her. She jerked the door open and was met with a downpour and rumbling thunder.

"Great." She ran out the door, keys in her hand, slamming the door behind her as she raced for the car.

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Jack Davenport pulled onto the interstate. After a short stint in the hotel and a greasy meal, he was finally back on the road. He knew the visit to the cabin may have been a mistake, but he had to at least try to get Kent on his side. That had only gotten him the wrath of Lois Lane. Despite the obvious tension between the duo one thing that couldn't be mistaken was Lois Lane's fierce protectiveness over her former partner.

He knew if he could get Kent to take the stand against Luthor that would solidify the case against him and keep that piece of scum behind bars for the rest of his miserable life. He'd come across some pretty twisted figures in his career, but Lex Luthor was in a class all his own. There was no limit to how far he pushed the boundaries of the law or which laws he chose to disregard. What he couldn't understand was how he continued to stay so many steps ahead of them.

The phone rang, and Jack grimaced, reaching over to hit the speaker button to answer the phone. "This is Davenport."

"Jack?" Christina Wallace's voice crackled through the speakers.

"Hey Chris, talk to me," Jack grinned, speeding down the highway.

"We just got a break," she said with a sigh of relief, "A real honest to God break."

"Bigger than the John Black break?" Jack asked.

"We got an ID on Nigel St. John and a witness connecting him to the boss," Christina said with satisfaction.

"Witness?" Jack pressed.

"Didn't Rollins call you?" she asked.

"No, I've been sleeping the last forty off," he groaned.

"What'd I miss?"

"Dr. Kahn was attacked last night, Jack," Christina explained. "Nigel was looking for Lois."

"Did he get anything?" Jack asked, holding his breath as he waited for an answer.

"You know Kahn," Christina said wryly. "He wouldn't give anything to anyone." She was quiet a moment before adding, "Talley's issuing the warrant now. If we can get Nigel..."

"We got Luthor and his entire empire locked and loaded," Davenport finished for her. "Keep me updated."

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Clark watched as the backlights left the driveway and turned to see the water splattered all over the counter from where Lois had angrily flung water around as she'd finished up the dishes. He let out a sigh of defeat, reaching for the hand towel to dry the counters with. It was clear everything was not *fine*.

Truth be told, he couldn't really blame her for going into a tangent. He hadn't exactly been helpful with anything since he'd gotten here. He supposed he probably would have done the same thing if the roles were reversed. He looked down at himself with a grimace. It had been two days since he'd last showered. He was becoming something he didn't even recognize.

He stared at the empty cabin.

It was a mess. He knew he was to blame for a lot of it too. He looked back at the living room where the clutter of papers and food crumbs surrounded the couch. He looked to the kitchen and sighed, staring at the food stains on the stove and the bottles and spices that had been left out. The old Clark Kent never would have tolerated anything being out of place or even a stain on the counter. He had been meticulous with his cleaning habits and had always kept a clean house. It was a habit he'd learned early on as a child.

In his depressed state, he'd lost that. His hand went to his matted hair, and he sighed, realizing how far he'd come from who he was all those months ago. The fool that thought he was invincible and could take on Luthor without any consequences wasn't someone he wanted to think about. He relived his mistakes every day for months, knowing that if he hadn't been so arrogant, he wouldn't be in the situation he was in now. Luthor wouldn't know the one thing that could destroy him. Lois wouldn't be living on the run. His friends wouldn't be holed up in Perry's beach house afraid to step into Metropolis again. Everything would have been different if he had just ignored that call from Lex Luthor's secretary.

<< "If ifs and buts were candies and nuts we'd all have a Merry Christmas." >>

His father's favorite saying popped in his head and Clark shook his head in disgust. He had to do something. He couldn't continue like this. He had become something he didn't even recognize and certainly didn't like. Here he was sitting in his own filth, afraid to sleep and letting Lois do everything. He needed to make a change.

The thunder outside clapped, and he looked around the kitchen. He opened the door to the cabinet beneath the sink and began pulling out the cleaning supplies. It was time for a change.

\*\*\*

Nigel straightened his tie as he prepared himself for another meeting with Lex Luthor. His latest assignment left him dreading the final confrontation. He was supposed to be looking for Mrs. Cox. She had gone missing after the escape and Lex had found the last signal from her phone had been a block away from Pier 7. He suspected betrayal within his organization, and the contract for her return was issued without a second thought.

Nigel knew better though. He had a sinking feeling that the person responsible for the raid wasn't someone in the Luthor organization at all. He had a sinking feeling the person responsible was none other than Lois Lane herself. Of course, admitting that to Lex Luthor would mean exposing his own failure in taking care of the problem as he'd promised. That was something he couldn't do.

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Several hours later Clark stepped out of the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. He stared back at the unshaven face staring back at him. He still couldn't bring himself to shave it off. He wasn't sure what he expected to happen once the hair was gone, but he just couldn't bring himself to shave it off. Still, the messy look of the beard and mustache that was covering his face wasn't something he wanted to see either.

The trimmer Lois had tried to help him with over a month ago sat on the charger in the corner. If the blades broke, he'd at least be alone when it happened. There was no explaining how or trying to lie himself out of it. He hit the switch on the trimmer, and a loud hum came from the blades as it turned on. He stared at the rotating blades wondering one last time how good of an idea this was.

He lifted the trimmers, taking a deep breath as he brought the blades to the side of his face. One by one the hairs fell into the sink, and he let out a sigh filled with remorse and relief as he saw the skin revealed on both sides of his face. Gone were the trimmer breaking days for him he supposed.

He winced, pulling the blade back when he felt a sharp pain.

He grabbed a small piece of toilet paper and blotted the red bubbles of blood that began to rise to the surface. *'First time for everything,*' he told himself, waiting for the blood to dry up enough for him to continue. He examined the blade and cleaned off the trimmers.

He reached up to carefully remove the tissue from where the cut on his face had been. Thankfully it wasn't that noticeable. He was fairly certain the cut would heal up within the next few days. He ran a hand against the coarse hairs on the other side of his face and sighed. He still had to clean up the other side. He clicked the button on the trimmer, and it hummed to life once more. This time he didn't apply as much pressure, holding the trimmer steady as he watched the hair disappear from the side of his face. All that was left was a neatly trimmed goatee around his chin and mouth.

Should he keep going?

He looked at the reflection staring back at him, running his hand against his now smooth face. He ran his hand against the freshly trimmed goatee, feeling the soft hair against his fingertips. He still didn't recognize himself, but that was the point, wasn't it? He had a new identity, and he supposed a new life here. The name Collin seemed so foreign to him, but that was who he was supposed to be.

A stranger he shared the same initials with.

He picked up the pair of glasses from the counter and put them on, feeling at ease as he stared back at himself. He looked around the bathroom and turned the water on to rinse the hair down the sink. He'd spent most of the afternoon cleaning the cabin. He'd found the cleaning supplies and scrubbed the tile floor, swept, mopped, and done some deep cleaning in the bathroom before giving himself a good hose down in the shower. It was long overdue. He'd become complacent in his own filth and muddled mind. Depression and laziness had taken over as he fell further and further away from anything or anyone he recognized.

Part of why he couldn't bring himself to pick up the phone and call his own parents was out of sheer self-loathing. He had let them down. He was not the man they'd raised him to be. His fears of what Luthor could or would do to them if given the chance continued to keep him up at night. Reaching out to them would mean having to admit his own failures, and he wasn't ready to do that.

After wiping down the counter with a damp towel, he padded his way into the bedroom to get dressed. He rummaged through the closet, finding a pair of jeans and a green t-shirt. He tossed the towel in the hamper and barely finished pulling his jeans up when he heard a distinct knock coming from the back patio.

He glanced toward the bedroom door, spotting an aluminum bat by the door and grabbing it. His hand tightened around the base of the handle, and he opened the bedroom door, glancing out into the hallway where the patio door was at the end of the hallway. He could make out the silhouette of a female figure from the blinds covering the glass door. He looked at the clock on the wall. Lois wasn't due back for another two hours.

Another knock came from the unwelcome visitor on the doorstep. He held the bat in his hand, cautiously making his way to the door. What he would do with it he wasn't sure. He'd gotten into plenty of fights as Superman with criminals trying to take a swing, but he'd never had to worry about being hurt before. Hitting a woman wasn't something he was sure he could do if it came down to it but still having the bat in his hand gave him the reassurance he needed to open the door.

The warm, humid air hit his bare chest as he peered through the cracked door. The woman on the doorstep was short and wore her red hair in a tight bun as she looked him up and down over her red framed glasses. "Can I help you?" he asked, not opening the door open more than a quarter of the way.

The woman's eyes moved up and down him once more, giving him the compulsive need to return to the shower and shed himself

of the sinful gaze he was under. She pushed her glasses down the bridge of her nose, biting her lip as she remarked, "Well, hello there, I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

He stared at the hand she extended toward him, refusing to take it as his grip tightened on the bat. He didn't know this woman. He didn't know who she was or what she was doing here. He certainly didn't feel comfortable letting his guard down enough to offer a greeting to her. If he'd learned anything during his capture, it was to never trust anyone.

She seemed to sense his distrust and cleared her throat. "I'm Melinda." She pointed to the driveway to the left that wound out toward the corner, and she purred, "I live...right over there. Are you a friend of Leila's?"

He could feel the tightness in his chest as she stepped closer and he blew out his nostrils as he replied evenly, "You could say that."

Her lips pursed. "She certainly does like to keep to herself, doesn't she? I've invited her to bridge at least a dozen times." Her eyes slid across his chest once more, and she added, "But she never mentioned a, uh..."

Clark sighed, realizing he wasn't going to get rid of this woman unless he gave her something. Recalling his new identity and now current connection to *'Leila'* he ground out with an annoyed expression. "Husband." The woman's eyes looked like they were about to pop out of her sockets as she choked back the title. He couldn't help but wear a satisfied grin as he extended his hand to introduce himself, "Colin Kane."

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The grandfather clock ticked the seconds away as Lex read through the paper in front of him. He could hear the heavy breathing of his attorney, Sheldon Bender as he nervously twitched in the corner like the greasy rodent he was.

"How long?" Lex barked out, turning to the corner where his sorry excuse for legal counsel cowered, waiting for him to continue. "Are you deaf?"

"I...I believe we're looking at a few weeks," Bender finally stammered out nervously.

"A few weeks," Lex mused, controlling his anger as he stood to his feet. He walked toward Bender, keeping the false sense of calm before grabbing the front of Bender's shirt and jerking him toward him by the collar. "A few *weeks!* Tell me something, Bender, how exactly did the top attorney in the state let my top lieutenant have a warrant issued on him and somehow remain clueless on the matter for what was that again?"

"A few...weeks," Bender stammered back, his eyes squinted closed as Lex threw him to the ground.

Lex stared at the soiled stain on the front of Bender's pants and snorted. "Good God, Bender, clean yourself up. You're an embarrassment."

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The humid air was sweltering as Clark made his way up the narrow hill leading back to the cabin. He couldn't just call for a ride like any other normal person. He could have called a cab or asked for a ride, but out of sheer stubbornness or the sake of proving to himself that he could make the trek he chose not to. That choice continued to tease him as he moved up the steep hill.

After getting rid of the rude neighbor and promising to have Leila keep an eye out for Melinda's missing dog, he had finished getting dressed and then started work on prepping dinner. He wanted to make sure there was nothing for Lois to do when she got home. She'd been doing everything...and he'd let her for over a month now. In the beginning, it was necessary. He could barely move. Now, however, it was sheer mental strength that kept him from helping her.

That had to change.

It was a two-mile walk to the butcher shop. Two miles hadn't felt like anything when he was going downhill, but now that he

was feeling the pain of the incline he could feel the tension and strain in his back and leg muscles. The rain had come and left, leaving the ground slick from the recent downpour. The sun's sweltering rays were making the trek up the last hill far more difficult than it needed to be.

How long had he cursed the gifts he'd been given, wishing to be normal? How long had he wondered what it would be like to be normal? It seemed like the thoughts of another person. What he wouldn't give for the gift of flight or super-speed. After cleaning the cabin from top to bottom, he had a new appreciation for just how much he had taken for granted.

He glanced at his hands, seeing the slight tremor beginning to show and cursed, "Not now," he told himself. He just had to make it back. He'd already made the sauce and had the dough prepped. He really didn't want to have to deal with another tremor. The pain that always came with them always left him weak. He looked up at the golden sun, staring into the white heat boring down on him. 'Please no,' he pleaded silently.

Whether it was luck, the sunlight or mind over matter he wasn't sure, but just as quickly as the tremor came, it went, leaving him relieved and confused. He turned the corner catching sight of a man covered in mud and pine attempting to grab the back tire of his pickup truck. Curious he approached, setting the bag in his hand down, "Looks like it's stalled."

"You could say that," the man said, pointing behind him to the large truck. "Been stuck for half an hour and no reception." He pointed to the mobile phone sitting on the bed of the truck's open tailgate.

Clark looked to the large chunks of mud behind the tires from where they'd been spinning and the man's disheveled appearance. It was clear the mud had flown all over him when he'd attempted to reverse out of the muddy ditch he was in. Clark spotted the pile of pine the man had been pushing toward the stalled vehicle.

Clark pointed to the pine. "Maybe I can help."

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Jack Davenport pulled up to the steel gate, fishing his ID badge out of the cup holder for the security guard to inspect as he wheeled up to the booth. He recognized the guard on shift and grinned. "Man, they'll let just about anyone in there, won't they?"

"Well, they let your ugly mug on staff," the older guard retorted with a laugh. "Christina's been expecting you." He scanned the badge and keyed something into his computer. "For the record, you're late."

"I'm never late." Jack grinned smugly.

"Take that one up with your partner, Jack." He pressed a button, and the steel gates unfolded, opening up to the New Troy Federal Building.

Jack Davenport chuckled when he saw Christina Wallace standing on the corner behind where the gates had opened up. He drove up and shook his head, "You know you keep waiting for me outside like this and people are going to talk," he joked.

"If you actually showed up on time I wouldn't have to babysit you," Christina retorted, jerking the passenger door open.

Realizing she was more upset than he realized he dropped his joking demeanor and turned to her. "Where's Kahn at?"

"Dr. Rosenthal is looking him over in the triage wing," Christina said, shaking her head.

"That old bat?" Jack grimaced. "Poor Kahn."

"You need to prepare yourself, Jack," Christina said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"For what?" he asked.

"Just prepare yourself," she repeated, looking straight ahead as he pulled into the parking garage.

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"Thanks for the ride," Clark said, climbing out of the pickup truck with the brown bag he'd picked up from the butcher shop. "I really didn't want to climb that hill."

The man nodded his thanks to him. "I really didn't want to push this baby out of the mud," he joked. "Thanks again for your help."

"Have a good night." Clark nodded, closing the door behind him and then turned back to the cabin, hearing the engine roar behind him as the stranger drove away. He looked down at the mud covered shoes he was wearing and spotted the garden hose hooked up to the faucet near the patio. He picked up the hose and aimed it at his muddied feet and ankles, feeling the cold water blast the chunks of mud off of him. Once he was sure it was all off, he wrung the water out of the ends of his jeans and kicked his shoes and socks off, setting his shoes on the top step of the patio to dry.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside, stripping his pants off and making his way to the bedroom to get changed. He glanced at the clock. He still had another forty-five minutes before Lois got home. He was barely going to make it in time, but hopefully, dinner would make up for it.

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Lois grabbed her things, slamming the car door shut behind her. She held the large manila envelope she had picked up from the post office earlier and readjusted her purse on her shoulder. The ground was still damp from the recent downpour, and she could smell the wet ground as she walked around the back of the cabin, fishing out her keys to unlock the back door.

She noticed the cushions that had been hanging on the side of the patio were folded neatly inside the plastic bin by the door. Curious she put her key in the door to unlock it and found it was already open. A frustrated groan escaped her lips. Had she forgotten to lock it in her haste this afternoon when she left?

She stepped inside, and her senses were assaulted by the drastic change that had taken place. Gone were the putrid smells of old food and decay and in their place were the warm scents of lemon and a hint of cheese and pepperoni. She looked to the kitchen where Clark was pulling out a pan from the oven.

She looked back toward the living room and saw it had been vacuumed and dusted. Everything had been organized, and the couch even appeared to have been vacuumed. She bit her lip, looking back at the kitchen where Clark was cutting the pizza on the pan. She could feel her mouth salivating at the prospect of once again having a slice of pepperoni pizza. It had been nearly four months since she'd last tasted her favorite greasy slice of pepperoni from Mario's.

A small smile threatened to overtake her face as she stood in the entryway of the kitchen. She felt a lump form in her throat and tears threatening to flood out of her dark brown eyes as she watched him pull the messy triangles he'd cut out of the misshaped pizza from the pan.

"You made pizza," she said finally, letting her presence known.

He stopped, looking back at her with a half-smile. "Tried." He gave her an apologetic look. "I know how much you love your pepperoni. I thought it'd be a nice change."

She nodded, looking around the kitchen that he'd obviously just cleaned. "Thank you," she said, placing a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry for earlier. I just..."

He shook his head, stopping her mid-sentence. "You were right," he said. "I needed to get yelled at." He handed her a plate, and she stared down at the round red slices of pepperoni glistening from the light in the kitchen.

A smile spread across her face. "You made me pepperoni pizza."

"Tried." he shrugged, pointing to the misshapen pizza on the pan. "I think I underestimated the dough."

Lois let out a tearful laugh, and he looked at her in concern. She shook her head. "I'm fine. It's just...no one's ever made me pizza before." She let out a light laugh.

He grinned back at her. “I also did some cleaning.”

“I saw.” She cleared her throat. “Thank you.”

“I guess I got a little too lost in my own head,” he frowned looking back at her.

She nodded sadly, recalling how Martha had helped pull her out of her depression the first week after she had found her bleeding to death. It wasn’t easy to come back from, and she knew all too well how easy it was to get lost in what could have happened and the paranoia of what could happen. It was enough to drive anyone crazy. Given the hell Clark had been through she couldn’t say she was surprised that he had suffered through something similar. She would have been more surprised if he didn’t have any lingering effects from being held captive by Lex.

“Well, they don’t exactly make a ‘*how to bounce back from an abduction*’ guide for stuff like this,” Lois said cautiously.

“No, they don’t.” He shook his head, placing his hand on her shoulder. “But I think it’s time to stop wallowing and start *doing* something.”

“Like what?” she asked, looking back at him expectantly.

“Like taking some of this off of your shoulders for one.” He gestured to the cabin. “I think you’ve been pulling more than your fair share longer than necessary.”

“It’s fine,” she shrugged, avoiding his gaze.

“No, it’s not.” Clark moved his hand to cup her cheek. “You saved my life, Lois, and I have done a horrible job of showing you how grateful I am for that.” His tone dropped a few octaves, and he added. “I’m sorry, and I’m going to try and help more where I can.”

“Thank you. I know this isn’t easy and I am sorry for snapping earlier. Patience isn’t exactly something I have a lot of practice in,” she said slowly.

He grinned back at her. “I’m well aware.”

She felt a flutter in her abdomen as she stared back at him. She’d felt awful all day for snapping at him. She knew how hard it was for her after Lex had attacked her and she’d had to stay hidden from the world. The depression that overtook her had been whole consuming. If it hadn’t been for Martha helping her to see what was happening she was sure she never would have made it as far as she did.

A small smile crossed her lips as she looked at his newly shaven appearance. He still wore a neatly trimmed goatee, but he had shaved. She wondered momentarily why he had chosen not to shave completely. She reached her hand up, stroking his cheek. “You shaved.”

He nodded. “I figured it was time.” He ran a hand over his face.

“Going for a new look?” she teased.

“Well, looking too much like Clark Kent wasn’t something I thought I was supposed to do.” He teased the hair on his chin with his fingers. “This is the new normal, right?”

“For now,” Lois nodded, staring back at him.

“So, there may not be a Planet or a story to chase, but we can still learn to work together as a team to bring down Luthor.” Clark smiled back at her.

A half-smile crossed her lips, “Lane and Kent.”

He nodded, “I guess now it’s Kane and Kane?”

“Hottest Team in Town,” she recalled the marketing campaign her and Clark had been pulled into early in their partnership.

“Who better to bring down the man that thinks he’s Metropolis’ Golden boy?” his lips curled into a smile.

“I guess we have a lot of work to do,” Lois agreed.

“Yes, but first you need to eat.” He guided her to the table.

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## Chapter 11

Alice White poured over the paperwork scattered on the coffee table, taking a sip of her tea. Jimmy and Jack both huddled over the other side of the couch, jotting down notes and Perry sat at his

desk, tapping away at the computer. She smiled, noting the way his reading glasses kept slipping off of Perry’s face. She felt like everyone they had interviewed after John Black’s death had been a dead end. All attempts to meet with Pete Black had been stonewalled by his attorney. All they had left was the option to comb through the research they’d been through again and try and find the needle in the haystack that would hopefully close the gap in the FBI’s case against Lex Luthor.

A wry expression crossed her face as she recalled the recent years where she’d been resentful of Perry’s job at the Planet. Now here she was helping to rebuild it with Perry’s second family as he referred to the boys and Lois. Truth be told a part of her missed it. Her days of investigating and chasing down leads had been cut short due to the surprise arrival of their first son, Steven. Then shortly after Jerry followed.

She wouldn’t trade her days with her boys for anything in the world, but there was a part of her that wondered what might have happened if she and Perry hadn’t started their family so young. She never did get a chance to make a real name for herself or get recognized by any of the more prestigious awards for journalists, but she loved every minute of it. After all, working side by side, chasing down leads was where she and Perry had met and fallen in love with one another. A smile crossed her face as she glanced over at Perry running his hand across his tired face. Though the circumstances weren’t ideal, it felt good to be in the game again.

“Okay, so, what have we got so far?” Jimmy asked, letting out a muffled yawn.

“You sound exhausted,” Alice commented.

“I’m not tired,” Jimmy shook his head. “I’m just stressed.” He pointed to the papers in her hand. “Anything?”

“Dr. Baines’ file was clean. The helicopter that went up in flames had mechanical failure that caused the explosion.” Alice frowned.

Jack nodded and then added, “Mechanic that did the inspection is no longer in the land of the living, so there’s no way to verify that.”

“Sound like a cover up if I ever heard one,” Perry commented with a sigh, walking up behind the sofa Alice was sitting at and placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Of course the story we get from the place he worked at is ‘he’s a great guy’ and ‘he would never do anything wrong’ so there’s not really much to go on there.” Jack rolled his eyes. “Guy obviously helped cover up a crime.”

“Any money trail?” Jimmy asked.

“Nope.” Jack shook his head.

“Luthor paid him somehow, we just got to figure out how.” Jimmy let out another yawn.

“Okay, that’s the third one,” Perry let out a yawn. “Why don’t we call it a night?”

The group nodded their agreement and Alice laid her notes down on the table. She looked to Jimmy who remained in his seat, looking through the paperwork on the table.

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The credits scrolled across the screen and Clark looked next to him where Lois’ sleeping figure had slumped over, leaning against him. Halfway through the movie, she’d fallen asleep, and he hadn’t had the heart to move her just yet. Though the day hadn’t started out very well, it had ended on a happy note. After dinner, they’d found a movie to watch on one of the old cable networks. For a few hours at least, he was able to pretend things were normal.

Truth be told he wanted to savor the moment a little longer. His arm moved up, allowing her head to rest against his chest as he placed a tentative arm around her shoulders. For a moment he allowed himself to wonder if this was a glimpse into what life would be like if he ever got the courage to act on his feelings for her and tell her what was weighing on his heart.

He loved her.

There was no doubt in his mind that he was in love with Lois Lane. The past month had only intensified his feelings, solidifying the fact that he was cursed with being in love with someone that was destined to only love half of him. Given the fact that his powers were long gone he knew the chances of ever winning Lois Lane's heart were slim to none. She was in love with Superman.

Superman had died in that Kryptonite cell.

Even if his powers ever did return he could never take the risk that came with putting the red cape and 'S' on again. His parents, Lois, his friends... Everyone was in danger. That knowledge continued to keep him up at night, robbing him of precious sleep he knew his body needed to heal from the damage Luthor and his thugs had done to him.

Lex Luthor knew he was Superman.

Lex Luthor knew the one thing that could destroy him.

As long as he stayed hidden everyone was safe but what would happen when all of this was over? What would happen when they finally caught him, and Luthor made his final move of exposing Clark to the world as a liar?

He dreaded what would happen on that day.

He prayed by then he would have a plan for how to protect those he loved from the wrath he was sure would ensue once the news was out. He'd have to find a way to tell everyone, warn them.

He looked to Lois as she nestled her head against his chest in her sleep and he felt a lump in his throat. This was one of the things he'd sought since as long as he could remember. Finding someone, he could love and possibly start a family with. Just being normal as he had put it to his dad when he'd first moved to Metropolis.

That dream was gone.

He knew it.

Luthor would make sure any chance of him and anyone he cared about having any semblance of a normal life was destroyed. It was the double-edged sword that he was sure would swing in both directions. He wanted Luthor to pay for his crimes and stop him once and for all, but at the same time, he feared what would happen the day he finally had the handcuffs slapped on his wrists.

The idea of facing him in the courtroom as Clark or Superman unnerved him to no end. He knew if given the opportunity Luthor would take advantage of the situation and expose his secret to the world. He would never be able to have a normal life again... at least not the one he wanted.

Deciding he'd tortured himself long enough, he sighed, turning himself toward her in order to lift her up off the couch. Her long legs hung from his arm as he adjusted her in his arms, allowing her head to rest against his shoulder as he carried her back toward the bedroom.

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Jack Davenport took a sip of his coffee, staring at the late hour on his watch as he turned to Dr. Kahn who was starting to stir from the hospital bed he was sleeping in. He'd spent hours talking with the doctor that had been treating him, then had waited for Kahn to wake up. Christina said they had an ID on Kahn's attacker.

A smile crossed his lips as he realized how close he was to cracking the Luthor case wide open. He wouldn't make the same mistake again. Victor Talley had already issued a federal warrant for Nigel St. John. All he had to do was get Dr. B.D. Kahn on the record with his testimony and give Sheldon Bender the opportunity to cross-examine him. Bender was smart and would try not to cross, but he knew one thing Bender prided himself on was his reputation. That was exactly how he would get him.

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Clark ran a weary hand over his face, staring at the clock in front of him. Sleep was not coming tonight. It was a quarter till

midnight, and he couldn't seem to get his mind to shut off. The fears he harbored of what would happen when they finally caught Luthor continued to haunt him. The crippling anxiety was draining.

He stared at the phone on the table, recalling Lois' request for him to call Jimmy. His young friend was probably still up. He recalled many nights where he'd been woken in the late hours with a lead on a story they had him researching. His hand felt shaky as he reached for the phone, holding it in his hand.

What would he say?

Deciding that he'd put the conversation off long enough, he stretched his thumb over the number three and pressed it. He then pushed the green phone button, initiating the call. He let out a shallow breath, putting the phone to his ear.

"A bit late to be calling for a background check, isn't it?" he heard Jimmy's voice echo from the other end of the line. Clark was silent for a moment, feeling a wave of emotion wash over him as he struggled to find his voice. Jimmy seemed to sense the hesitancy and called out, "Lois? Everything okay?"

Clark took a breath and finally spoke, "It's me, Jimmy."

The pause was deafening as he waited for his friend to respond, "CK?" Jimmy choked out with a strain.

"Yeah," Clark responded, allowing another pause on the line as he added, "It's been awhile."

"Man, you have...no idea how good it is to hear your voice." Jimmy's voice crackled through the earpiece and Clark could feel the sting of tears in his own eyes as the emotions he'd kept bottled up threatened to become too much for him.

"Yours sounds pretty good too," Clark responded, uncertain what to say to the emotional response from his friend he was so sure he would never hear from again during his torture.

"So...how are you?" Jimmy asked cautiously.

"Better," he said uncertainly. "I think?" Clark wasn't sure how convincing he was or if he should elaborate on that point.

"I guess you heard about the fire?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah, I've been through the file," Clark said.

"She never gave up you know," Jimmy said sadly. "After the fire and...the story leak Jack and I thought it might be true." There was a pause, and Clark distinctly heard a sniff from Jimmy as he added, "Lois wouldn't give up though."

"Famous Lane stubbornness at its best," Clark responded lamely, cracking a smile.

"Well, you know Lois," Jimmy retorted with a sigh, "Once she's made her mind up about something there's no talking her out of it. I'm just glad she was right."

"You and me both," Clark said with a sigh.

There was another pause, and Jimmy began cautiously, "You know this hasn't been easy on her."

Clark was caught off guard by Jimmy's admission but didn't say anything, letting his friend continue. "I mean, Lois puts up a good front. She always has, but what Luthor did to her... what he did to you. It nearly broke her."

Imagining anything that would break Lois was hard for Clark to envision. Jimmy had mentioned something Luthor had done to her. Curiosity fueled his next question, "What do you mean? What did Luthor do to her?"

"Nuh-uh," Jimmy responded. "If she hasn't told you yet...Just let her tell you herself."

"Should I be concerned?" Clark asked.

"Let's just say after the fire and what he did to Lois, your rage at Luthor became something all of us share enthusiastically," Jimmy responded with venom.

"He certainly brings it out in people," Clark responded lamely, uncertain how to respond to Jimmy's admission.

"Yeah, he does," Jimmy said cautiously. "Hopefully when this is all over we'll have him locked away in a nice padded cell along with all his cronies." A flash of memories ran through Clark's

mind, and he was silent for a moment, recalling his time under Dr. Kelly's care in his own padded cell. "CK? You okay?"

"Fine," Clark lied, pulling himself from the avalanche of painful memories that were threatening to pull him in. "Listen, Jimmy, could you do me a favor?"

"Name it," Jimmy responded.

"Can you see what you can find out about a Dr. Gretchen Kelly for me?" Clark asked, recalling the doctor's name. He doubted anything would come up, but it would help put him at ease knowing what had happened to the doctor that had tortured him.

"Gretchen Kelly," Jimmy noted the name aloud before letting out a stifled yawn. "I'll get on it first thing in the morning. I should have something back from my contact at STAR Labs pretty soon too."

"Lois will be glad to hear that," Clark said then added, "You sound exhausted. You need to get some rest. We'll talk later."

"Promise?" Jimmy asked.

"Promise," Clark responded before adding, "Night Jimmy."  
"Night CK."

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Asabi straightened the rearview mirror as he looked back at his passenger, "Are you sure making a trip of this magnitude is something you want to do, Mr. Luthor?"

Lex looked back up at Asabi and nodded. "This is something I need to handle myself Asabi. Given Nigel's current predicament it's not something I can trust him to carry out."

"Yes, Mr. Luthor," Asabi nodded, pulling out of the driveway and heading east. "We should reach our destination by tomorrow evening."

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Jimmy set the phone down and leaned back on the couch, recalling his conversation with his friend. Clark seemed so different now. Lois hadn't told him much about the rescue. She hinted at some trauma, but Jimmy didn't press for details at the time. He'd just been grateful to know his friend was safe.

Now weeks later, the questions continued to plague his mind as he began taking more of a lead in the investigation into 'the boss' with Alice and Jack than he'd ever done before. Perry, of course, continued to help train him on how to read body language and interrogate a possible source to get the information and coax them into coming forward. That was the key that he seemed to struggle with. Plenty of people would tell you what you wanted to hear, but not many would agree to testify or put a mark on their head the way Lois and John Black had.

He had a long list of people to investigate, but Clark had asked him to look into Gretchen Kelly so that's what he would do. Maybe it would help lead them to someone or something to help solidify the case against Luthor? Jimmy sighed, letting out a yawn. He would have to wait till morning to start his research. Right now, he needed sleep.

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Dry. Lois felt her lips, and she could feel the dryness in her throat, mouth, and lips. She grimaced, placing a hand on her face as she began to stir. She looked around the familiar surroundings recalling how she had fallen asleep next to Clark earlier. She looked down at the wrinkled shirt she was wearing and felt a warmth across her cheeks.

Clark must have carried her to bed.

She swung her legs off the bed, getting up to fetch a glass of water from the kitchen when she heard a sound coming from the hallway. She felt her heart tighten in her chest as she flattened herself against the door, peering out the cracked door to see where the sound was coming from. A light flickered from the hallway, and she frowned, realizing it was coming from the television in the den.

She poked her head further out in the hallway, reassuring

herself there was indeed nothing out there. The sound from the television was set at a low volume, making it so you could barely make out what was even playing. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair then headed for the kitchen to quench her thirst. She grabbed a glass from the cabinet and poured herself water from the sink. After a few moments, she made her way back through the hallway and stopped outside the doorway of the den.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was well past two am. What was he doing still up? She tightened her arms around herself making her way into the den where she found Clark sitting on the loveseat with his back to her. "Clark? It's two am," she yawned sleepily.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he apologized looking back at her.

"You didn't wake me," she said, holding up the glass in her hand as she moved closer. He looked up, and she saw the defeated expression on his face through the reflection of the blue and white light coming from the television. The lines of worry were written all over his face, and she could make out the dark lines under his eyes. "Couldn't sleep?" She took a seat next to him.

He shrugged and dipped his head into his hands as he stared down at the floor. She twisted her mouth and saw the strain on his features as he attempted to avoid eye contact with her. She knew all too well how sleep could remain elusive when the nightmares became too much. Given what he'd been through it wasn't a huge stretch to think he might be suffering from something similar.

She reached out her hand and placed it on his left shoulder. "They do go away eventually."

He didn't respond.

She was quiet for a moment allowing the muffled sound of the television playing in the background to fill the silence. She took a breath, setting her glass down on the side table and glanced at the television. It was an old Perry Mason episode. A smile curled on her lips, and she sighed. "My mom used to love this show."

He looked up and nodded. "So did my dad."

Lois recalled the many afternoons and evenings of watching Perry Mason with her mom as well as some of the fights that the show was meant to cover up. More times than she could remember her mom would put them in the back room of the house with the volume higher than necessary. Lucy was too young to realize the fight that was going on behind the closed door. All she seemed to care about at the time was whether Perry Mason would get his guy.

"Lucy and I used to watch Perry Mason reruns with mom all the time when we were younger. Most of the time it was just to keep her company after Daddy left."

The memory of her mother's tired and depressed face after her father had walked out flashed in her mind and Lois looked over and saw the same weary lines around Clark's eyes. She recalled the many times she'd caught him sleeping during the day and how tired he seemed. If he were up all night avoiding night terrors, then that would explain why he was sleeping all the time. She felt a pang of guilt for not putting two and two together sooner.

"So, how long have you been having them?" she asked, placing a hand on his knee.

"Huh?" he looked at her with a surprised expression. For a split second he looked like he would pull away, but instead, he shook his head. "A few weeks I guess."

Lois nodded and allowed the information to sink in. The past few weeks now seemed different as she realized what Clark had been trying to hide from her. She had a sinking suspicion he was still holding back on what was truly keeping him up at night but decided not to push it. He still didn't know she knew he was Superman. A part of her wondered if she should just tell him but given how fragile everything seemed she opted not to. He had to work through whatever it was on his own. She knew that. It was just hard to watch and not have the ability to help or do anything.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, uncertain if she could handle what nightmare could bring the strongest man in the world to his knees.

He shook his head and pointed to the television, “You know not many actors can pull off playing dual roles in an episode like this. Raymond Burr really makes this Grimes character a believable separate character.”

Lois bit her lip as she realized simultaneously that Clark probably knew more than anyone how hard it was to carry on two identities and that he was trying to change the subject. She pulled her hand back from where she’d placed it on his knee and turned toward the television, seeing the familiar episode of ‘The Case of the Dead Ringer’ playing. She stole a glance at Clark as she watched Raymond Burr’s character of Grimes be transformed into a Perry Mason lookalike.

How long did it take him to change between identities?

Clark kept his hair loose and neatly groomed whereas Superman always had it slicked back. The voice he used was different. The way he held himself was definitely different. In a way, he was playing two different characters. She had so many questions that nagged at her, but she knew she couldn’t ask them. She couldn’t tell him what she knew.

She let out a sigh. “Must get confusing going back and forth.”

“I’m sure it can be.” Clark nodded, letting out a yawn as he leaned back against the cushions of the sofa.

“I remember when I was working undercover on my first sting operation I had to train myself to respond to my undercover name. I had Perry start using it so I wouldn’t get confused.” She let out a laugh. “Steve Lombard was very disappointed to discover the new girl he’d heard about turned out to be just me.”

Clark let out a light chuckle. “That guy’s a piece of work.”

“Lombard’s a walking harassment suit,” Lois rolled her eyes. “But he still keeps it ambiguous which is why Perry could never do anything. That and he has a knack for getting all the big players on the record which gives him job security.”

“Had,” Clark supplied with a yawn.

“Right, I forget,” Lois said sadly. “Maybe one day the Planet will be back though.”

“Mmm hmm.” Clark nodded incoherently.

Lois looked over and noticed his eyes were drooping as he leaned back against the cushions, his head nodding to the left as he slowly drifted off. “Clark?”

“Hmm?”

“You should go to bed,” she whispered, patting his shoulder.

“No, I’m fine,” he said, not bothering to open his eyes in response. “I’m listening.”

“You’re exhausted.” She moved her hand to his chest.

“Been exhausted for months, but I’m still listening,” he murmured. “Just keep talking.”

She sighed, leaning back against the cushion on the sofa and continued, “Did I ever tell you about my first undercover assignment?”

“No, but something tells me you’re about to,” Clark mumbled.

“Hey, I won a Kerth for it.” Lois grinned back proudly.

“Big surprise,” he shot back with a sleepy grin.

“Hey, I wasn’t always at the top of my game,” she shrugged.

“Somehow I have a hard time imagining you fetching coffee or working in the mailroom.” He yawned.

“I interned in research.” She scrunched her nose up. “Perry gave me my first shot at a reporting job, but I didn’t get my first real break into investigative reporting for a few years.”

“Uh-huh,” was Clark’s tired response.

He grunted his, and she sighed. “Anyway, I got a job as a waitress over there at Hell’s Kitchen, the club that used to be there before the Metro Club was built. I got a tip there was supposed to be a big meeting with some of the guys running a car theft ring. The thieves were drugging their victims so that there was no

recollection of the crime. All the victims were dumped around Hell’s Kitchen.

“What I wasn’t expecting was Bruno Mannheim—the guy that ran a lot of under the table deals from there? You know, illegal gambling, shark loan type stuff? Turned out he had upped his game and was trying his hand at cooking up illegal drugs.” Lois grew thoughtful recalling the bust. She’d been caught by Mannheim taking photos of the lab just before the police had raided the place. “In hindsight, it probably wasn’t the smartest move.” She let out a light laugh. “I’m sure if we’d been partnered back then you probably wouldn’t have thought so either, but it turned out okay. The dealers were caught, and they stopped the thieves. No one ever knew what happened to Mannheim though. He just kinda disappeared...”

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The sound of horns honking in the distance and the morning train rushing by were the last thing on Bill Henderson’s mind as he looked to his passenger who had his head buried in the large paper bag from Luigi’s. Henderson looked around the alley where they were parked, ensuring once more than there was no one around that could cause any trouble.

He watched as the carefully wrapped sandwiches from Luigi’s were unwrapped and scarfed down in a sloppy mess. He did his best not to make eye contact as he waited for this Bobby to finish. Lois said this guy was one of the best sources she had for knowing what was going on. He’d had to swear he wouldn’t use him for any official investigations and then spend an arm and a leg on gourmet sandwiches that appeared to disappear in the blink of an eye. Almost a hundred dollars in food gone in less than ten minutes. Whatever information this guy had better be worth it.

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#### One Month Ago

The car door closed and Beverly Cox stepped out of the town car, wearing a pair of shorts and a white t-shirt and sneakers. She felt so out of place here in the country but given this was where Lois Lane would have felt most comfortable she knew this was where she would find the missing reporter.

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*I saved Luthor tonight. I never thought I’d actually regret saving a life. Now all I can think of is how I might have just helped subject more crime and pain on Luthor’s victims. I want to tell Lois what I know. I want to warn her, but I know she won’t believe me. She never believes me. Luthor could commit murder in the street, and she’d still be defending him.*

Lois let out a long breath, setting the journal down on the table. A chill ran down her spine as she recalled how many times Clark had tried to talk to her about her relationship with Lex. There was always disdain and an undertone of insecurity when he brought the subject up. She never could understand why he held so much anger and antipathy toward Lex until now.

She had thanked him that night he stopped Lex’s bleeding. She’d been so clueless back then. Fuentes and his crew refused to take money from Lex because of how bad his reputation was on the streets. In hindsight, she should have looked into what his reputation was, but she’d been more grateful to be out of the situation than curious about Lex’s reputation among criminals.

That had been a mistake. She let out a sigh, wondering momentarily how many mistakes she would have to face by the end of this.

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Wayne set the shovel down, hearing the crunch of straw behind him. He turned to see an unfamiliar brunette standing behind him, holding a .45 caliber pistol aimed at his chest. “You must not be from around here.”

“No, and I have a feeling you might know something about strangers, Mr. Irig.” The woman took a step toward him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Wayne narrowed

his eyes at her.

“Why don’t I believe you?” she challenged, grabbing him by the collar.

\*\*\*

“Pie smells good,” Jonathan said with a smile.

“You’ve already had your slice,” Martha scolded when she saw Jonathan eying the pie she’d just pulled out of the oven.

“I should test each one though,” Jonathan argued, eying the pie Martha had cooling on the counter.

“You can leave the taste testing to the Johnson boy,” Martha shrugged her shoulders. “You’re supposed to be watching your cholesterol.”

“No pity for a man that faced death and survived.” He gave a mock sigh.

Martha smirked at him. “You can only use that card for so long you know.”

“Is it working?” he asked.

She sighed, reaching over for the pie she’d sliced earlier and placed a sliver on a saucer for him. He grinned eagerly, picking up his fork to take a bite when a rapid tapping at the door stopped him.

Martha laughed. “Saved by the door.” She walked to the door and opened it, finding a frazzled Wayne Irig on the other side. “Wayne?”

“Martha.” Wayne nodded to her. “Can I come in?”

“Sure,” she stepped aside for him to enter.

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The engine turned over, and Beverly Cox readjusted her sunglasses in the rearview mirror. Nothing. She’d been checking into all the Kents’ neighbors trying to find someone that may be helping to hide Lois Lane.

Nigel said he was sure the Kents had been helping her. Unfortunately, his last visit had ended in a situation that required her to make a visit to the rugged Midwest under the guise of checking into expansion opportunities for LexCorp. She’d gotten rid of the evidence of Nigel’s visit. Now all that was left to do was find Lois Lane.

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Present Day

Lois began to stir. Her neck muscles were stiff. Her eyes fluttered open, and she saw the edge of the coffee table. She craned her neck and looked behind her. Clark was fast asleep behind her. She bit her lip, letting out a muttered curse. She’d fallen asleep.

She lifted her head up from the couch cushion where she’d fallen in the middle of the night. Clark’s arm laid across her hip, and she could make out the light snore coming from behind her. She held her breath, trying not to make any noise as she reached down to lift his hand from her hip so she could loosen herself from his arms without waking him.

She slowly rolled out from under Clark’s arm, falling to the floor on her knees and gently lowering his arm back down on the cushion of the couch. She let out a long breath, standing to her feet as she looked back at Clark, still sleeping.

He said he’d been exhausted for months. She wondered momentarily how long he had been hiding the fact that he wasn’t sleeping. He admitted to not sleeping for a few weeks but who really knew? She pulled down a fleece blanket from behind the couch, shaking it open and letting it fall over him, and then turned back toward the bedroom to get ready.

The door behind her closed and she rushed to the bathroom, turning the shower on. She turned back and grabbed a towel from the rack and caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. Her face was littered with crease marks from where she had been laying on the couch. The imprint of the cushion’s uneven texture was pressed into her skin. She reached up a hand to finger the hot flesh before turning away from her reflection.

She shed the t-shirt and shorts she had been wearing as a nightgown and tossed them to the floor, followed soon by her undergarments. The towel hung on the corner of the shower rod as she stepped inside the shower, allowing the warm water to rain across her face, obliterating the impression left on her face from the cushions. Her eyes closed as she tilted her head up, allowing the water to rain down her body.

She could still feel his arms around her, and she hated how that made her feel. Despite every attempt to keep him at a distance and not allow herself to get drawn in, she found herself unable to pull away. It was a losing battle. She knew it was a dangerous game, to begin with. Trying to prevent herself from feeling what had been there unknowingly for over a year was like attempting to convince her left part of the brain it didn’t need the right. It was a losing battle to a war she’d been fighting for months.

She was too close.

She knew it.

If she could, she’d run away and bury herself behind work and the many things she used to hide behind before. Now it was different though. There was no story to chase. There was no escape. There was no risk of any of their former colleagues casting judgment or interrupting the conversation she knew needed to be had before she could even contemplate anything with him. That was the problem. He was too available. She had no buffer to hide behind. All she had was the reality of how complicated and painfully dangerous her current situation was, and the reality of just how deep her feelings were.

She was in no condition to be thinking of anything beyond friendship with anyone let alone Clark. Especially after what she’d been through with Lex. She knew it was too soon. She knew it was too complicated. She knew all of these things yet found herself still fighting the pull that continued to call out to her, making the day to day all that more painful.

They were both battling the mental scars Lex had cast on them.

They were both still recovering both physically and emotionally.

She had no business looking for anything beyond friendship with Clark.

Yet here she was, finding herself tempted once more to wonder what if...

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Victor Talley set the phone down on the receiver on his desk and turned toward the guest in his office. Ever since the sting operation for taking down Lex Luthor had been authorized, he had been having regular visits from the lead detective investigating Metropolis’ crime reign from the boss. His brow furrowed as he cleared his throat, “Inspector Henderson, I’m assuming you have some information for me?”

“More of a question.” Bill Henderson’s mouth thinned into a line as he looked to Talley with a grunt. “A request really.”

“Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like this?” Talley inquired, noting the concerned expression on Henderson’s face.

“Now don’t be so judgmental, Victor.” Henderson sighed. “You could like the proposition.”

“I’m not buying it.” Talley shook his head and jutted his chin out. “Spill.”

Henderson ran a hand against his chin. “Let’s say I came about information on a contract being put out on a potential witness that is also responsible for unspeakable crimes.”

Talley turned to face Henderson with a curious look on his face. “I’m sorry, is there a question in there, Bill?”

Bill nodded. “What are our options in getting this person to cooperate with the investigation?”

“Is this person willing to cooperate?” Talley asked.

“It’s only a matter of time before this person shows back up.” Henderson shrugged. “If you had Luthor stalking your every move

and knew you were being hunted by the most notorious killers in the world what would you do?"

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The faint sound of chopping came from across the hall. Clark let out a low moan as he awoke, recalling the peaceful night's sleep he'd had. A smile crossed his face as the memory of falling asleep next to Lois came back to him. He sat up, running a hand through his hair as he looked around. He caught a glimpse of the clock on the wall that read, 3:45pm. He groaned, running both hands up and down his face and he stood up. He'd slept almost the entire day away, but he knew his body had needed it.

He hadn't slept that good in a long time. He felt at peace. More content than he had in months. Rested. He'd spent months sleeping with one eye open, paranoid of what terror was waiting around the corner. Now here he was finally free and unable to find solace in his freedom. Last night had been different though. Despite the late hour, Lois had stayed up with him, talking with him until he fell asleep.

She didn't have to stay up with him.

She could have gone back to bed at any moment, but she didn't.

He was grateful for the company. Having someone there to help drown out the fears and the harsh reality of what he'd survived helped his mind relax enough to allow sleep to come. He hadn't slept that good in ages. Surprisingly he didn't feel sore or overtired from the late wakeup but rather energized.

He reached for the pair of glasses that had fallen off his face in the middle of the night. It seemed strange to not feel a sense of dread when he stared at the spectacles. Part of his hesitancy in shaving the rest of his beard off came from his fear of what would happen if Lois ever found out about Superman. Remaining hidden behind the messy hair, goatee, and glasses helped him feel safe from discovery. Though he knew the days of Superman being a problem were long gone. He doubted he would ever know the freedom that came with flying in the clouds again.

A sad expression crossed his face at that realization, and he frowned, placing the glasses on his face as he walked into the bedroom to get dressed. He missed it. He couldn't deny that. He had spent years loathing his powers only to now find the day he finally became human enough to bleed, it wasn't what he wanted at all. He missed being able to get dressed in a blink of an eye and heating his coffee with a blast of heat vision. Though at times he felt out of place and different his powers were what made him who he was. Without them, he felt lost.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror, uncertain what to make of the man staring back at him. He let out a long breath and continued getting ready for the day. 'Superman is gone,' he told himself. 'Clark Kent is gone.'

With that, he strode back into the bedroom and headed toward the kitchen to find Lois. He made his way down the narrow hallway, leading to the kitchen and spotted Lois in the corner with her back to him. There was a pot of water on the stove, waiting to boil and a large bowl in front of her with lettuce and cabbage mixed together. Diced tomatoes were on the cutting board in front of her.

"Hey," he said, walking past her to get a glass from the cabinet.

"Hey."

He caught a glimpse of a smile on her face as he turned to wash his hands and fill his glass from the sink. Her gaze stayed on him a moment longer before turning her attention back to the cutting board. He took a sip of water and then set the glass down and walked over to the stove where the pot of water was beginning to boil. He spotted the box of spaghetti noodles next to it and asked, "Have you added anything to the water yet?"

"No," Lois shook her head, dropping the chopped tomato into the salad and taking the cutting board to the sink to rinse it off.

He grabbed the salt shaker and olive oil sitting on the counter and sprinkled a little of each in the now boiling water before adding in the noodles. A bowl of chopped onions sat on the counter next to the stove. He reached down to grab a pan from the cabinet below. He turned the burner of the stove on and set the pan on top of it in order to heat it up.

"Here," Lois pushed the package of ground hamburger toward him, and he nodded, unwrapping the plastic from it and dumping it into the pan. "Spaghetti?" he guessed, sprinkling the Italian seasoning and salt onto the meat as it began to sizzle inside the pan.

"It's one of the few things I know how to make without following the directions on a box," Lois gave him a half-smile.

<< "I know how to make four things. This is the only one without chocolate." >>

He recalled the conversation she'd had with Superman during the heat wave when the superhero had supposedly been staying at his place. Lois never did end up making dinner that night. Both of them had left to handle the runaway Metro train. The gesture had been more than welcome at the time. Given how Superman had been blamed for the heatwave and the entire city had turned its back on him, Lois was the only one left cheering in his corner.

His brow furrowed for a moment, recalling the stress he'd been under during the heat wave. They had traced the cause of the heat wave back to LexCorp but found no intentional wrongdoing on Luthor's part. Who was in charge of the investigation?

"Clark?" Lois waved a hand at him. "You okay?"

"Just remembering something," he said shaking his head and turning his attention to the meat that now looked almost completely brown. He took the wooden spatula to the meat and began chopping it in the pan, adding in the onion and other seasonings as he continued to stir the ground beef around.

"Remembering what?" Lois asked.

He stared at the meat in the pan and removed it from the burner before grabbing the strainer from the counter and a few paper towels to drain out the grease. He looked up, meeting Lois' concerned expression.

"Sabotage," he said with a frown.

"Could you be more specific?" Lois prompted.

"The almost train crash during the heat wave," he elaborated and then mumbled more to himself rather than her, "The heat wave."

"I remember," she nodded letting out a disgusted snort. "That Dr. Sayer was a moron."

Clark frowned. "Do you remember who was in charge of the LuthorPower investigation?"

"That would have been the NRC," Lois recalled aloud as she helped pat the grease out of the strainer. "What's this about?"

"The train's brake lines were cut. The power lines were cut..." he mumbled aloud, wiping the grease out of the pan.

"What are you talking about?" Lois asked as she looked back at him.

"The rescues," Clark explained, recalling the clean-cut cords he'd found when inspecting the train after the almost crash. The same was true for the power lines that had trapped the underground construction crew. "They were set up by someone."

Lois shook her head adamantly. "There was no sabotage listed on the report. I should know I was the one that picked up the inspector's..."

"Well, it wasn't on the report." Clark frowned, realizing he may have just given too much information. What he knew about the sabotage had not been included in the report, but he suspected that was because Luthor had paid the inspector off. He had seen the smooth cut on the power lines and on the brakes as Superman. The original officers on the scene had even suggested sabotage.

"If it wasn't on the report then how do you know it was sabotage?" Lois asked, turning to look at him.

"I just...do," he finished lamely. Lois stared back at him with her arms crossed over her chest, and he fought the urge to provide another fake 'Superman-told-me' story to her. After everything that had happened, he couldn't stomach lying to her.

"Okay." She shrugged. "So, who do you think was behind the sabotage?"

"If I had to guess, Luthor," he said with a heavy breath, feeling the weight lift off him as he stared back at her. Thankfully she didn't press him for how he knew there was sabotage. She just took him at his word. Still, it wasn't like Lois to let something like that go.

"So, sabotage to create a disaster in order to...what?" Lois wondered aloud.

"Prove the theory he'd planted in the press," Clark finished darkly.

"What, the Superman theory?" Lois asked, scrunching up her nose. "That was Dr. Sayer."

Clark groaned. "If there's anything I've learned in the past few months, it's to never underestimate Luthor."

"So you think Sayer was put up to it?" Lois guessed. Clark was silent, watching her process the information. "I guess it couldn't hurt to check it out. Alice has a few contacts on the board. I'll see if she can check into it."

"You're not going to dust off the famous Lois Lane Rolodex?" he asked, looking at her in surprise.

"That kind of defeats the purpose of playing dead if snitches know I'm alive," Lois gave him a weak smile, reaching for the jar of sauce on the counter.

Clark frowned, watching as she poured the sauce into the pan with the meat, stirring it all together. The pained expression on her face felt like a punch in the gut. He recalled the several conversations they'd had about Jimmy or Perry getting information for them, but he never really put it together before. She couldn't do the legwork like she used to. She couldn't take charge the way she once had. Luthor had robbed her of that.

"I think the noodles are just about done," Lois said, pointing to the pot on the stove that was now boiling loudly.

"Huh?"

"The noodles," she repeated.

"Oh!" He turned the burner off and took the pot from the stove. Sure enough, the noodles were ready. He carried the pot to the sink to drain the water then returned the pot to the counter where Lois had set out a potholder. "Sorry." He gave her an apologetic smile.

"No problem," she said with a sad expression, looking down at the red sauce that was beginning to splatter.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked. He noticed the small lines around her eyes tighten as her jaw jutted out. She was upset.

"Lois?" he placed a hand on her shoulder, turning her toward him.

She looked away, refusing to look back at him. "Um, food should be ready soon." He sighed, uncertain what to do. Her body turned the rest of the way so she was facing him and she added, "I try not to think about it. The fact that no one outside of you and a few select people from the Planet know I'm alive." Her voice cracked, and she looked down. He felt his chest tighten when he saw how hard she was fighting to remain in control of her emotions. "I don't even know if my family knows."

The last statement was hard to swallow as he stared back at her. She'd practically thrown the phone at him and begged him to call his parents after they'd begun talking again. He had refused. He still couldn't bring himself to call them. He couldn't face them. All this while Lois wondered if her parents were mourning the loss of their child, unaware she was still alive and well.

"I'm sorry," he said lamely, knowing full well how empty the words must seem.

"It is what it is." She shrugged it off, looking away.

He knew better than to believe the bluster she was trying to give him. He tilted her chin up to look at him and allowed his hand to move across her face. "It's not going to be like this forever."

"I know," she replied hoarsely, stepping away. "That's the problem."

He opened his mouth to respond but found himself at a loss for words. The sound of a car door slamming came from outside, and her face went pale looking around the kitchen nervously. She quickly turned the knob to the burner, killing the heat mid-boil. "Wait here," he instructed, moving toward the living room.

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"If it wasn't on the report then how do you know it was sabotage?" Lois knew the answer to her question before she even asked it but still she had to give him at least an opportunity to try and be straight with her. 'Please don't lie to me' she thought to herself as she turned to face Clark.

"I just...do," the words were all he seemed to be able to muster as he looked away from her.

She could press him and force him to tell her how he knew this information, but given that he hadn't outright lied to her and made up a story about Superman telling him, she tried to play along. 'At least he's trying to be honest,' she thought to herself.

"Okay," she shrugged her shoulders. "So, who do you think was behind the sabotage?"

"If I had to guess, Luthor." He seemed to relax, releasing a breath he'd been holding.

"So, sabotage to create a disaster in order to...what?" Lois wondered aloud. She could only guess what Clark was hinting at as his face became tense. Whatever it was he was putting together was enough to distract him from the pan he was cooking in, nearly burning the food.

"Prove the theory he'd planted in the press," Clark finished darkly. His arms crossed over his chest, and she could make out the familiar stance he used to take when confronting criminals as Superman. It was hard to believe how blind she'd been. Though he hid so much from her, there was a lot of clues he gave that hinted at his dual identity.

She played along, following his train of thought and gave him a confused look. "What, the Superman theory?" The theory that Superman was the cause of the heat wave had been planted by one of New Troy's top scientists, Dr. Edward Sayer. He'd been disgraced after the incident and was now teaching at one of the local engineering schools in Metropolis. Lois let out a breath. "That was Dr. Sayer."

Or was it? She knew better than anyone how easily Lex could manipulate others to do his bidding. Surely it wasn't a huge stretch to think Dr. Sayer may have been paid by Lex to plant the idea in the press, but the reason for why wasn't something she could rationalize. Even now she couldn't see how framing Superman for the cause of the heat wave did Lex any good.

Clark groaned and shook his head adamantly. "If there's anything I've learned in the past few months, it's to never underestimate Luthor."

"So you think Sayer was put up to it?" Lois guessed. He didn't respond, and she took that as him wanting her to figure it out for herself. The only problem was she couldn't figure it out herself. She couldn't pull out her sources and hit the pavement digging for the truth. Everyone she knew in Metropolis thought she was dead. "I guess it couldn't hurt to check out. Alice has a few contacts on the board. I'll see if she can check into it."

"You're not going to dust off the famous Lois Lane Rolodex?" A small smile crossed Clark's face. She was sure he meant the comment as friendly teasing, but the months of isolation had taken their toll on her.

She let out a bitter laugh. "That kind of defeats the purpose of playing dead if snitches know I'm alive." She reached for the jar of sauce on the counter. She felt Clark's eyes on her as she fought

to keep her emotions in check. The bottled up emotions she continued to push down were slowly becoming too much for her over time. She knew eventually she'd have to face them, but not today.

She turned her attention to the pot that was boiling on the stove, "I think the noodles are just about done."

"Huh?" He looked at her in confusion.

"The noodles," she repeated.

"Oh!" Clark turned his attention away from her to tend to the noodles. She reached in the drawer to pull out a pot holder as he carried the pot to the sink. He returned with the pot of noodles drained of the water and set it down on the potholder. He gave her an apologetic smile and a sheepish look. "Sorry."

"No problem," she said, looking down at the red sauce that was beginning to splatter. She could feel his eyes on her as she silently continued to stir. Her mind was still wandering to their previous conversation. What she wouldn't give for an opportunity to go back to Metropolis and be of more help to the investigation to bring Lex down. She knew if she did, she was putting her life at risk, but she also knew they probably wouldn't have lost John Black if she had been involved from the beginning.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Clark asked slowly.

She remained silent, unwilling to acknowledge the question, fearful that if she did, she wouldn't be able to bury the resentment that threatened to take over. He had no idea how good he had it. At least he had a way to reach out to his parents and friends. She couldn't even pick up the phone and call her sister because it might put a target on Lucy's back.

For the longest time, Lucy had been her best friend and confidante. Even throughout some of the ups and downs with Lucy moving across the country and then going with Dad on the doctors without borders mission, she had at least had a way to call. Now she didn't even have that. She didn't realize how much she relied on that connection to help her through the daily grind until it had been taken from her.

"Lois?" Clark placed a hand on her shoulder and turned her toward him.

She looked away, refusing to look back at him. "Um, food should be ready soon." She caught a glimpse of his concerned expression and decided to just bite the bullet. He was always good at telling when something was bothering her and he never could leave her alone when he knew she was upset. Too many times she recalled him showing up with ice cream or pizza after a lead went sour or Perry had killed a story.

Clark had a way about him that made you want to tell him your deepest secrets before you even realized what was happening. He had a way of putting you at ease and scaring off any potential bad mood. She let out a sigh and turned the rest of her body toward him with a frown. "I try not to think about it. The fact that no one outside of you and a few select people from the Planet know I'm alive."

She heard her voice crack, and she looked down, feeling the weight from the words that hung in the air. Then she found herself admitting to the fear she'd kept buried inside for the past few months. "I don't even know if my family knows."

"I'm sorry," Clark said, looking down.

"It is what it is." She shrugged it off, looking away as she tried not to focus on the vulnerability she'd just exposed to him. *'Why do I keep doing this?'* He took a step closer, and she felt her insides flutter, simultaneously trying to suppress the need to be closer, and run away as the distance between them closed.

His hand moved to her chin, tilting her face toward him and she felt the warmth of his palm against her cheek. "It's not going to be like this forever."

"I know," she replied hoarsely, taking a step back in order to reclaim her bearings. He was too close. "That's the problem."

Clark's face went from confused to lost in a matter of seconds

as he stared back at her. The sound of a car door slamming came from outside and she felt her chest tighten in panic. Who could be in their driveway? She quickly turned the knob to the burner off and pushed the pan back toward the wall.

"Wait here," he instructed, moving toward the living room.

Lois stood there for a moment, searching for something to use as a potential weapon. She finally settled on the wooden cutting board and followed Clark into the living room. She turned the corner and saw a man with rugged jeans and a gray t-shirt standing in the doorway talking to Clark.

"...didn't mean to startle you," the man held up a black wallet, "You left this in the truck."

Lois breathed a sigh of relief, setting down the cutting board when she realized it wasn't an intruder but a good Samaritan returning Clark's wallet. How he'd lost it in the first place, she wasn't sure.

"Uh, thanks," Clark said, taking the wallet from him.

"Truck?" Lois asked curiously, walking up behind them and making her presence known.

"Colin here was helping me get my bull-headed self out of the mud yesterday." The man explained. "I gave him a ride back after, and I guess this fell out in the shuffle. Found it this morning."

She glanced at Clark with a questioning gaze, and he shrugged. "It was nothing."

Lois still felt uneasy that this stranger now knew where they lived and they knew absolutely nothing about him. Thankfully his identification information had been confiscated when Davenport had been here, but if it hadn't, they would have been having a completely different conversation.

"Well, thank you, Mister...?"

"Oh, you can call me Nate," the man said, extending his hand to shake hers.

She stared at it and took his hand reluctantly. "Nate."

"Well, thank you, Nate, you certainly saved my, um..." she swallowed hard uncertain if she could bring herself to summon the word up without giving herself away. She had to. She knew she did. They had to be believable and fit in or risk standing out and be forced to move again. "...husband from a trip to the DMV and every bank in the area."

"Don't I know it," Nate laughed, shaking his head. "That trip is never fun." He looked around the living room behind them. "You two must be new here. I don't remember seeing you at the SummerFest last month."

"Well, we've been, uh, settling in," Clark said lamely, placing an arm around her waist and pulling her close enough just to be believable as a couple to Nate.

"Ah, newlyweds, huh?" Nate grinned. Lois was about to ask where he got an idea like that but thought better of it as Nate continued his one-sided monologue on what he assumed to be her and Clark's story. "You have that new love air about you. Still, in the honeymoon phase and haven't had that first big fight." He chuckled more to himself than anyone and Lois suppressed her gut instincts that wanted to argue back with this Nate.

She wanted to tell him he had no idea what he was talking about. Though they were playing a part here in this small town, she still felt angry when anyone tried to assume anything about her. Playing the role of Leila Kane in this mock relationship made her fight against her instincts to correct the false assumptions and tell Nate how it was. She had to hide so much of herself she wondered if there was going to be anything left of her old self when all this was over.

Nate looked around and nodded. "You definitely picked the right place to start out. Yeah, moving can be a pain." Nate nodded good-naturedly. "Well, don't miss the end of season festival. Town always pulls out all the stops for the Harvest Festival. Lots of great food." He patted his belly for emphasis.

"We'll keep that in mind." Lois forced a smile, glancing at the

open door behind Nate. How long was he going to sit here and try to make chit-chat? What was it with these people and this innate need to talk to strangers?

“Well, once you get settled you should give the town a good tour,” Nate said with a smile. “It’s a lot of old friends and some local entertainment. Don’t be a stranger.” he patted Clark on the shoulder.

Lois felt her stomach flutter as Clark leaned closer to her. He was too close. Incredibly too close right now. “Sounds fun.”

Nate nodded, seeming to take a step to leave before he turned back to Clark and asked, “Hey, you got any background in construction?”

Clark’s eyes shifted slightly, and he shrugged. “Some carpentry and basic framing, yeah.” He then asked the question she was thinking before she could voice it. “Why?”

“I got a team I’m trying to put together to restore that old bridge by York,” he explained nonchalantly. “I could use some guys not afraid of a little hard work.” He then quickly added, “If you’re interested that is.”

Clark looked back at Lois silently asking permission. She shrugged her shoulders, unsure how good of an idea it was for him to be swinging hammers with the way his hands had been lately. He then nodded and turned back to Nate. “I might be interested.”

Nate pulled out a card and handed it to him. “Call that number on Monday. Sheila’ll get you squared away. Crew does pick up at six am sharp.” He grinned back at them and turned to leave, nodding a silent goodbye when his mobile phone began to ring, and he turned to answer it.

“What just happened?” Lois asked sighing in relief when she felt Clark’s hand leave her waist.

“I think I just got offered a job,” Clark said with a bemused expression.

“Is that a good idea?” Lois ventured cautiously.

“Well, we’re supposed to be normal, right?” he shrugged.

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## Chapter 12

Jack Davenport set the paperwork in his hand down, and let out a long sigh. Victor Talley had sent word to all the appropriate people of Nigel’s warrant. It was only a matter of time before someone led them to the hitman’s whereabouts and gave the FBI the opportunity to seal the lock on Luthor’s cage once and for all. Talley refused to arrest Luthor until he had him dead to rights. While Jack had his qualms with the plan he knew given the debacle with Malone last month it was for the best.

He read the latest note on the file once more and grinned. It was only a matter of time. He leaned back in his seat and wore a broad grin. “Beverly Cox, you will be the key to Luthor’s downfall.”

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Lois glanced over at Clark as he pushed his empty plate away from him. Her mind kept drifting to their uninvited guest that had just shown up on the doorstep. She still wasn’t sure how she felt about someone in town knowing too much about them let alone their address. She had done her best to keep her head down in the past few months and not draw attention to herself and now all of that seemed to be fading into oblivion as Clark not only seemed to be forging friendships with strangers but taking jobs from them.

He hadn’t thought twice about accepting the job or making small talk with the man that could easily give them up if Nigel or Mrs. Cox came through looking for new strangers. It felt like a disaster waiting to happen but Clark seemed to be genuinely looking forward to the opportunity. What was she supposed to do, kill the excitement with facts?

The phone on the counter rang and she placed her hands on the table, preparing to check who it was when Clark jumped up. “I got it.” She watched in shock as he grabbed the phone and

checked the caller id before answering it, “Hey Jimmy.”

Her eyes widened, trying to process the scene that had just unfolded. Since when was Clark okay with answering the phone? She bit her lower lip, listening for clues to the conversation.

“Really? No sign of forced entry?” Clark’s brow furrowed as he leaned against the counter, jotting a note down on the notepad. “Anything else?”

Lois stood up, walking toward him as Clark continued to jot notes from his conversation with Jimmy. “Any idea who the patent was filed with?” Clark asked, glancing back to Lois as he mouthed, ‘*Toasters*.’ Her eyes widened, realizing the conversation had to do with the Toasters weaponry they had Jimmy look into.

“Okay, thanks,” came his response after a few minutes.

Lois ran her hands up and down her upper arms, waiting impatiently for Clark to finish the conversation with Jimmy. What had Jimmy found out? Was it something they could possibly use in the case against Lex? She could feel her adrenaline pulse into action as she began planning her next move without even hearing the news from Jimmy. From Clark’s body language she could tell whatever it was was good news. That had to mean Jimmy had found something, right?

Clark hung up the phone and turned to her with a satisfied grin. She couldn’t hold in her excitement any longer. He barely had time to set the phone down before she pounced on him. “What did he find out? It was Lex, wasn’t it? I knew it. That low-life put all those people’s lives in danger just to turn a profit and he’s going to...”

“Lois!” Clark shouted, trying to get her attention.

She let out a sheepish laugh. “Sorry, I got a little ahead of myself there.”

“A little?” Clark snorted.

Lois sighed, changing the subject. “What did Jimmy say?”

“Plans for the weapons the Toasters were using aren’t a part of any public files. Whoever designed them hasn’t filed a patent on the plans within the last year.” Clark explained with a frown.

“Damn,” Lois groaned shaking her head.

“But Jimmy was able to find something interesting,” Clark continued with a smile on his face. “The weapons the Toasters were using came from a metal compound that was patented through LexLabs under a scientist named Emmet Vale. It’s supposed to be resistant to extreme temperatures, able to keep it’s form even at over a thousand degrees.” Clark gave a dubious look and shrugged. “Don’t ask me how.”

“What’s so special about this metal compound?” Lois asked, not following where he was going with this information.

“So glad you asked.” Clark grinned happily. “That metal compound is still pending patent review as of last week. It hasn’t even been released to the public yet.” Clark wore a smug expression as he announced the news.

“If it hadn’t been available to the public then how did a group of thugs get their hands on it?” Lois wondered aloud, following his train of thought.

“Precisely,” Clark cheered happily.

Lois plastered a smile on her face, trying her best not to get too excited. After all, this was just a lead. They’d had several before that had dried up before Davenport and his team could put together anything tangible to tie to Lex. All they needed was one shred of physical evidence and Phillip would agree to testify. His testimony combined with hers would be enough to shut Lex and his empire down for good. Then maybe she could return to her life—whatever would be left of it after this.

She felt a flutter of something she hadn’t dared think about in months. Hope. Hope that she could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel and bring Lex to justice for his crimes. Hope that she could reclaim her life and quit looking over her shoulder 24/7. Hope that one day she wouldn’t have to train herself to respond to the foreign name that had been thrust upon her. Hope that one day

she would hear her name uttered from those around her and be able to respond without fear of being targeted by the professional killers Lex had at his disposal.

“Lois?” Clark placed a hand on her shoulder and she bit the inside of her lower lip, savoring the moment of being recognized as Lois Lane instead of Leila Kane.

“Um, well, good.” Lois nodded, trying not to let where her train of thought had drifted become too apparent as Clark took another step toward her.

“You okay?” he asked, squeezing her shoulder.

“Fine,” Lois lied, avoiding eye contact with him as she looked away.

“You don’t look fine,” he observed cautiously.

“I’m just... cautious is all.” Lois shrugged him off. “Um, was there anything else?”

“Yeah.” Clark’s face fell as he handed her the notepad he’d been jotting his notes down on.

“Who’s Gretchen Kelly?” Lois asked, seeing the name written at the top in Clark’s neat handwriting.

Clark looked down to the floor, his hand fell from her shoulder and his face grew tense. She looked up at him cautiously, noting his closed off behavior. She could press him for information on who this was or she could let him tell her on his own. Though she suspected she already knew who it was.

Her eyes moved down the notepad in her hand. “She was killed in a drug bust?”

Clark scowled shaking his head. “Among a few corrupt officers and drug addicts in Southside according to the report Jimmy found.”

She could tell from his tone that Clark didn’t believe it was just a drug bust gone wrong. “You think there’s more to the story?”

“I don’t know,” Clark said with a shrug, pacing around the dining room. “It just seems a little *convenient* is all.”

“Convenient?” she asked, taking a seat at the table.

“What’s a doctor like that doing in the worst neighborhood in town? Why would decorated officers go to that part of town?” Clark listed off the holes in the story on his hand.

“Could be a setup,” Lois reasoned aloud, leaning back in her chair, allowing him to continue.

“He’s getting rid of people that can point the finger at him is what he’s doing,” Clark mumbled under his breath just loud enough for her to make out. She watched him pace around the room angrily, wondering just what this Dr. Kelly’s role had been in his kidnapping and torture, but didn’t dare ask. “Luthor never leaves any loose ends.”

“Well, he’s left a few,” Lois tried to reassure him.

“Name one,” he scowled.

“Phillip Manning,” Lois breathed the name cautiously. “Me.”

Clark’s hardened expression immediately softened. He seemed to be having trouble formulating a response as he claimed the seat across from her. He finally found his question, “What kind of loose ends?”

Lois frowned. “Dr. Alfred Carlton. The testing at Beckworth State School by LexCorp...” She looked down at the table in front of her. “And the mistake of admitting to being the boss of Metropolis.” She felt a lump in her throat at the last admission and quickly looked away.

“He *admitted* it to you?” Clark looked back at her in surprise.

“Among other things,” Lois said quickly, shrugging it off.

“Anyway, we should definitely look into this Emmet Vale. If we can prove opportunity and access then that should help with the case.”

“Lois?” he reached across the table to take her hand and she pulled away.

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” she said hastily, straightening up in her seat.

He nodded. “Okay.”

A silence fell between them and then he stood up, walking over to the kitchen counter and grabbing the keys from the hook on the wall. “You going somewhere?” she asked, watching him curiously.

“We both are,” he said firmly, striding toward her with a purposeful look on his face. There was a glimmer of something on his face she hadn’t seen for a long time. He seemed relaxed and even playful as he extended his hand forward and pulled her up from her seat at the table. “Come on.”

She gave him a skeptical look, “Where exactly are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.” He grinned back at her.

“A surprise?” she echoed back to him.

“Come on it’ll be fun, I promise.”

“I hate surprises,” she retorted uncertainly.

He let out a groan. “Sometimes you can’t know everything about everything.”

“Where are we going?” she pressed.

“I’m not telling you.” He chuckled. “Just get in the car and you’ll find out when we get there.”

“This is ridiculous.” Lois shook her head.

“You’re just mad I won’t tell you anything.” He smirked, pointing out the obvious reason for her uncertainty.

“We don’t have time to play games,” Lois retorted. “We should be looking into Emmet Vale.”

“Jimmy’s already on it,” Clark reminded her. “There’s nothing we can do until he finds something.”

“I still want to help,” she argued.

“I know you do.” He sighed. “but right now the best way to do that is to do what we can to fit in around here and not draw attention to ourselves.”

“And fitting in is a part of this surprise drive you want to go on?” she asked cautiously.

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “I do know this from living in a small town. It’s the people that don’t socialize that end up drawing more attention to themselves.”

She sighed, staring back at his hopeful eyes and relented. “Fine.”

\*\*\*

From a distance, the local Florida State Patrol watched as a sleek dark blue town car pulled into the parking lot of the rest stop just outside of Jacksonville. One of the patrolmen looked on, nudging his partner as a tall slender man stepped out of the car, stretching his arms over his head.

“That guy look familiar to you?”

His partner looked up. “Pretty expensive ride. You want to check him out?”

“Hold on,” he pointed to the man stepping out of the backseat of the car. The dark hair and stern features were unmistakable. “Is that...?”

His partner let out a low whistle. “Mr. Lex Luthor himself. What do you think he’s doing all the way out here for?”

“No clue,” he shook his head.

“Wanna check it out?”

“Not in a million years,” was his gruff response.

\*\*\*

Clark smiled to himself as he pulled into the parking lot, eyeing the familiar looking setup with a large screen on the lawn. He could feel Lois’ eyes on him and knew she was probably imagining every ulterior motive she could as he pulled into a space in the corner of the lot.

It wasn’t crowded which was a pleasant surprise given the feature for the night was a dollar night special. He’d seen the ad outside the shopping center he’d gone to the day before, advertising showings for classic movie night. Tonight’s special was *Trading Places*.

He put the car in park and turned the ignition off but keeping

the radio on. He fiddled with the radio until he found the station printed on their ticket stubs. An advertisement came in over the speakers inside the vehicle, welcoming them to the Clover Drive-In followed by an ad for the local butcher shop.

Lois sighed, leaning forward to turn the volume down. He let out a chuckle, noticing her skittish demeanor as she curled herself up against the passenger side door, glancing anywhere but at him. "You're going to get awfully uncomfortable leaned up against that door for an hour," he finally remarked, hoping to get her to loosen up. "What's wrong, haven't you been to a drive in theater before?"

She gave him a dismissive shrug, straightening up and looking out the window cautiously. "Of course I've been to a drive-in before."

"What are you looking for?" he joked, lowering his voice to mirror the sound of a demonic announcer. "The Drive-In Massacre Serial Killer?"

"That's not funny," Lois glared at him, not even awarding him a smile.

"Come on, lighten up." he laughed, pointing at the screen that had begun to flicker. "It's a movie not a horror show."

"I'm just... careful," Lois said cautiously as she eyed the semi-full parking lot.

"Of what?" He laughed. "You act like the boogie man is gonna jump out at any second."

"Unlike some people I like to be aware of my surroundings." Lois sniffed, straightening up as she reached for the bag of popcorn in the middle of the seat.

"You really don't socialize well with others do you?" he commented, noting the wary way she was eying the couple that walked past them.

"We're supposed to be laying low," she snorted.

"We are," Clark shrugged his shoulders.

"Between the nosy neighbors and the way too friendly clerks at the store..." Lois mumbled under her breath.

"You keep avoiding them and then they're just going to keep pushing," Clark said with a sigh. "Believe me I know." His gaze shifted down as he recalled the many times his parents had gone above and beyond to make everything appear normal even when it wasn't.

It worked like a charm.

No one suspected that the baby adopted by Martha and Jonathan Kent was anything other than what he appeared to be. They lived in a town where there was nothing to do but drive somewhere else, cook, shop or gossip. Little did anyone know the biggest piece of gossip was right under their noses the whole time. Strange Visitor from another planet raised just like anyone else in Smallville.

Lois placed a hand on his arm and offered him the bag. "Want some?"

"Thanks," he took a few pieces of popcorn from the bag and took a bite.

She slid closer on the bench seat, letting out a sigh. "I guess you're saying I'm being paranoid."

"Just a little bit," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You have every reason to be cautious but the more you close yourself off the more you're going to make people question what it is you have to hide. Small towns are funny like that. They want to know everything about everyone." He then pointed to the screen. "Besides I doubt Nigel or Luthor could appreciate a classic film like this."

Lois let out a groan and laughed. "Probably not." She sighed, leaning back against the seat. "Eddie Murphy's comedy is wasted on those two."

"Yeah, they'd probably interpret it as a horror film," Clark joked.

"No money and no power," Lois said with a sigh. A silence fell between them and Clark leaned back in his seat, trying not to

acknowledge the uncomfortable air that had fallen between them. He never should have brought Luthor up, but it did at least help coax Lois out of her paranoia.

Her head leaned over, just enough to rest on his shoulder and he held a breath, unable to move. He remained still, doing his best not to react at the sudden contact. He could make out the faint scent of her shampoo as she leaned in closer. He swallowed hard, wondering how long he could hold his breath like this. His chest tightened and her head settled more comfortably on his shoulder. The intoxicating scent of vanilla and lavender hit his nostrils and he bit the inside of his lip. His heart felt like it was pounding a hundred miles a minute and he teetered on the edge of wanting to die right there and yet never wanting her to move away from him.

"I'm sorry," Lois spoke up and he blinked uncertain what she was apologizing for.

He lifted his head, clearing his throat, uncertain how to respond as he lamely shrugged. "For what?"

She lifted her head, looking back toward him. "For not believing you." Her tone was solemn as her eyes cast downward. He swallowed hard, uncertain how to respond as she continued, "I have a knack for getting in over my head and this time I'm so deep in I'm not even sure if I'll ever get out." She looked back up at him and gave him an apologetic smile. "Anyway, I know you tried to warn me and like an idiot I didn't believe you. I'm sorry."

He wasn't sure how to respond to this never before seen side of Lois Lane. Humility wasn't something he'd ever seen Lois handle well. Apologizing or even admitting she was wrong about anything had been rare if it ever even came about. Now here he was faced with the rare unicorn that was an apology coming from a very humble Lois Lane. A far cry from the overbearing, non-sense woman that refused to admit she was wrong on anything, going so far as to turn her invitation to the Orchid Ball an opportunity he should have jumped at rather than a request.

He cleared his throat, uncertain if he should acknowledge her apology or not. Deciding on the former he chose to cautiously respond, "You were able to see the truth eventually. That's what matters." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Before it was too late anyway."

"Right," Lois flashed him a weak smile turning her attention back to the screen that was lighting up. "Looks like the movie's about to start."

To his surprise she took the opportunity to scoot closer to him, resting her head more fully on his shoulder and nestling her chin against him as the movie's opening credits began to play. He wasn't sure if he should acknowledge the closeness or just continue to sit there, soaking up the close contact of having her relax against him. His hand moved to her side, reveling in the feeling of having her in his arms even if it was just for the span of a movie.

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The sand crunched beneath the Louis Vuitton's as Lex Luthor took in the evening sky. The ocean waves crashed in the distance and he breathed in the ocean air. He gave a pleased smile as he noticed the small beach house on the pier. "This the place?"

"Yes, Mr. Luthor," Asabi smiled, pointing to the pier.

"Keep an eye out," Lex instructed. "No surprise visitors."

"Of course," Asabi nodded with a dark expression.

\*\*\*

*One Month Ago...*

All hairs stood on edge as Lois flattened herself on the ground, hearing gunfire echo around her. The flashes of light and smoke surrounded her and the bullet-proof vest weighed her down as she planned her next move. She could feel the panic rising but quickly squashed it as she lifted her arm up, aiming at the red and white bull's eye target. She quickly rolled to the side, taking aim at the moving target and firing her shots off.

"Bull's eye," she said confidently as the smoke began to clear

and the lights flickered on.

“You’re getting better,” Christina Wallace’s voice came from behind her. “You still need to work on your aim though.”

Lois stood to her feet, brushing herself off and examining the end results. The bullet holes all centered around the center circle of the bull’s eye. She held a satisfied grin as she turned back to Christina Wallace. “It’s within target.”

“You want to go up against a trained assassin you have to be dead on,” Christina reminded her.

\*\*\*

Jack Davenport walked through the empty corridors, checking for anything out of place in the safehouse. He nodded for John Black to follow him once he checked the last closet and the young man set his bag down on the ground, tossing his jacket on the back of the rocking chair in the corner.

“Boy, they must pay you extra for all that paranoia,” John Black commented as Jack took a seat on the sofa next to him.

“Comes in handy in my line of work,” Jack retorted with a smirk.

There was a quiet lull between them and Jack watched as Danny Malone moved toward the kitchen, checking the area and calling out, “Looks like they stocked the good stuff this time, Jack.”

Jack turned to catch the brown beer bottle Malone tossed toward him, stopping to take a look at the label. “Name brand.” He let out a low whistle. “I guess someone finally removed the stick up Talley’s behind.”

“Hey, now, don’t go talking about our frugal director like that,” Malone joked around, making his best impression of Talley, “What do you mean you went over budget? Money doesn’t grow on trees, Agent. In my day we had to make do without amenities. Do you know what it’s like to go a month without running water?”

“That is an awesome impression,” Davenport grinned, popping open the cap to the beer and handing the other to John, “Beer?”

“Too nervous to drink,” John shrugged. “So when is this hearing?”

“Tomorrow,” Davenport said taking a sip of his beer. “Director called for an emergency hearing so we’ll be leaving first thing in the morning to present the case in front of a federal judge to determine if there’s a case.”

“And if there isn’t?” John asked.

“Then we keep digging,” Jack said with a smile. “We’re not going to let him get away with this.”

“How can you be so sure?” John asked.

“I just am.”

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*Present Day...*

Jimmy flashed his identification to the attendant and made his way into the car lot, searching for the car he’d been assigned. He looked behind him and saw Jack struggling to keep up as he lugged the large bag filled with the laptop and camera he’d been working on for the last few months.

“You all right?” he asked, slowing down and readjusting the bag on his back.

“This is an idiotic idea,” Jack mumbled as they reached a dark blue sedan that matched the license plate on the paperwork they’d filled out inside. “Are you sure this Gordon guy can even tell you anything?” Jack asked with a grumble. “Everything we’ve come across has been a dead end.”

“He’s the one that reached out to me, remember?” Jimmy reminded him.

“Any idea how he got roped into all of this?” Jack asked, catching up to him.

“He said he had some information on Luthor’s secretary,” Jimmy said with a sigh as he unlocked the car. “Just get in.”

\*\*\*

A loud bang and the crash of glass came from the front of the house. Alice quickly grabbed the shot gun hanging above the bed, loading it with the shells and pumping the barrel before she made her way down the narrow hallway. The sound of Perry’s bark coming from the living reached her ears and she felt tension rise in her body as she prepared herself mentally for whatever she might find.

“You’re nothing but a coward, you scum sucking vermin!”

“Aren’t we full of colorful language,” came the comment of none other than Lex Luthor as he stood in the doorway of the beach house. “Surely a man of your stature can come up with a better monologue to use when welcoming an old friend to your home?”

Alice felt a bile rise in her throat as she flattened herself against the wall, watching from a safe distance. Right now Lex Luthor thought he was in control. She would let him think that and hopefully he would give something away that they could use. Her grip tightened on the barrel of the shotgun in her hands.

“If you seriously think I’d do anything but deck you for what you did to Lois...”

“A sad situation if any,” Lex nodded in agreement. “But that’s what happens when you live dangerously as she continued to do, chasing leads...”

“You can lie to the police and lie to your circle of A-list wannabes but we both know you’re responsible!” Perry growled out angrily.

“If anyone’s responsible for Lois Lane’s demise it’s her former partner, Clark Kent,” Lex responded smoothly. A flicker of something crossed his face and his tone turned dark. “Which brings me to why I’m here.”

“I didn’t think it was for directions,” Perry barked angrily through gritted teeth.

“So, where is he?” Lex asked.

“Who?” Perry asked.

“Don’t play games,” Lex countered.

“I know you can’t be talking about Clark,” Perry responded. “I mean, after all, he died in the fire, didn’t he?”

Alice held the barrel of the shotgun to her chest, wondering if Lex Luthor would give himself away or not.

There was a long moment of Lex Luthor staring Perry down and then a pause. “Perhaps some of your other co-habitants will be more forthcoming.” He looked behind him. “Check the rest of the house. Perhaps Mr. White needs some persuasion.”

That was all she needed. Alice gripped the shotgun in her hands and stepped out, holding it on Luthor. “Get the hell out of my house!”

\*\*\*

Lois climbed out of the truck, slamming the door behind her. The sun was beginning to set and she could make out the crescent orange sun along the horizon. The movie had been fun once she allowed herself to let her guard down and enjoy it. She wasn’t sure what had triggered her need to make amends but afterward she felt like a huge weight had been lifted off of her. The colossal mistake she’d made with Lex had been weighing on her for months.

Every conversation she and Clark had had since his rescue felt ingenuine as the guilt she carried around over not listening to him continued to eat at her. Here he was trying to be nice to her and give her a worry-free evening and all she could think about was how they never would have been in this situation in the first place if she hadn’t ignored Clark’s warnings.

Clark walked up behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She gave him a quick smile. She glanced toward the walkway where a car was driving down the massive hill the long line of cabins was built off of. In the driver’s seat was the nosy Melinda Hemingway with a young man in the passenger seat next to her.

“Just smile and wave,” Clark said, walking up behind her.

Lois sighed, recalling their conversation earlier about drawing attention to themselves. She really couldn't stand that woman. Something about her felt fake and reminded her of the women that had grouped together and gossiped with one another at the country club as her family began to crash down around her. Her mother's supposed friends were quick to point the finger and blame her father's infidelity on her mother. It had been a brutal blow and had pushed her mother to seek refuge in the bottle rather than deal with her crumbling life.

Still, she knew he was right. He had a lot more experience with hiding things from people than she did. Being friendly to someone she didn't know or didn't particularly like wasn't something that came naturally for her. But if it would help keep their cover she was all for it.

Lois lifted her arm and waved, offering a forced smile. Melinda smiled back at them and waved before driving past their driveway. She looked around the wooded area surrounding the driveway and sighed.

“See, that wasn't so hard, was it?” Clark grinned back at her.

“Right.” Lois sighed, walking up the steps that led to the front door. She fished the keys out of her pocket and unlocked the door. The phone in her purse began to chirp and she reached inside to pull out the mobile phone as she stepped inside.

Clark closed the door behind them and she made her way inside the living room. “Hello?”

“Lois, it's Alice.”

“Alice, hi.” Lois felt her features relax when she heard the familiar voice on the other end. “Everything all right?”

“Lois, where are you right now?” Alice asked.

“The cabin,” Lois said, glancing over at Clark who had taken a seat on the couch.

“You need to be careful,” Alice said in an eerie tone.

“Careful?” Lois looked to Clark and mouthed, ‘Something's wrong,’ before she pressed the speaker phone button. “What's going on?”

“Perry and I had a visitor this evening.” Alice's voice was shaky as she added in a harsh whisper, “It was Lex Luthor.”

The blood drained from Lois' face as her hand immediately went to her mouth, trying to calm her nerves. “Are you...I mean, is anyone...?”

“Mrs. White, this is Clark Kent,” Clark took the phone from her. “Are you sure it was Luthor?”

“Positive.” Alice let out a low breath over the line. “He was searching for someone...though he didn't come out and say it we all know who he was looking for.”

Lois shared a look with Clark, placing a hand over his tight fist that gripped the edge of the coffee table. “Are you and Perry okay?”

“We're fine,” Alice gave a chuckle. “Though I don't think Mr. Luthor's driver was so lucky. I fired a warning shot and I think I scared the poor guy stiff.”

“What about Jimmy?” Clark asked.

“He and Jack are on their way to meet a detective that had information on that Cox woman.” Alice explained with a sigh. “Thankfully they weren't here when the confrontation happened.”

There was a silence between them and she added, “I know he doesn't know where you are, Lois, but is there anyone else close to Clark that he might try to go after?”

The tight grip on the table caught Lois' attention and she moved her hand up to his wrist, rubbing her palm against the top of his knuckles, trying to get him to relax. He glanced over at her and loosened his grip before speaking up.

“My parents.”

“I'll give them a call and warn them,” Lois offered.

“Just be careful,” Alice added.

\*\*\*

The sound of the ferry horn blaring in the distance caught Jack off guard as he boarded the ferry to cross over Gotham Bay, leading into the heart of Gotham City. He knew this trip was risky when Jimmy had suggested it but he also knew it would possibly pay off in a big way. He watched his friend pull out the tickets and get in line to board the ferry.

“Where are we supposed to be meeting this guy at?” Jack asked, looking around the crowd that had begun to form near the dock leading to the ferry.

“He said to take the ferry into Gotham and he'd meet us there.” Jimmy said with a shrug. “I'm not sure.”

“Any idea what this guy looks like?” Jack asked as the line began to move.

“Nope.” Jimmy sighed.

“How about something other than the name *Gordon*?” Jack pressed.

“He didn't give me a lot of information to go on,” Jimmy said, moving with the line to where the attendant was checking tickets. “We'll figure it out when we get there.”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous Gotham City is?” Jack asked. “The crime rate there is insane...literally. The criminals aren't just bad...they're crazy.”

“That is why they expanded Arkham Asylum,” Jimmy said with a sigh, handing his tickets to the attendant to check.

The woman checking their side of the line nodded for them to continue on and Jack followed Jimmy to the dock where the ferry was boarding. “So, say this Gordon guy has info on this woman Cox. Then what?” Jack asked. “It's not like we can go run to the police with it.”

“We figure out what we're up against and use it to help us break the hold Luthor has on everyone,” Jimmy said with a determined expression.

“The only way to do that is to give them something to be more afraid of,” a voice came from behind them and they turned to see a tall man with gray hair and a mustache standing behind them.

“Who are you?” Jack asked.

“I'm assuming you're Olsen?” the man asked, looking at Jimmy.

“You Gordon?” Jimmy asked.

The man pulled out a Gotham P.D. badge identifying him as Commissioner James Gordon. Jack's eyes widened as he stared back at the man, “Commissioner Gordon?”

“Call me Jim,” he corrected, motioning to the ferry. “Looks like they're boarding.”

\*\*\*

Martha sighed, setting the coffee cup on the table as she listened to Lois' voice on speaker phone. She glanced over at Jonathan who was hurriedly packing a bag for them. She did her best to remain calm as she responded, not wanting to worry Lois or Clark.

“We'll be fine, Lois.” Martha forced a smile.

“I don't think you understand, Martha,” came Lois' warning. “He showed up at Perry's. Not one of his goons. Him!”

“Lois, it's going to be okay,” Martha reassured, looking up at her husband who wore a grim expression on his face.

Jonathan thankfully took that moment to add in, “Lois, just try and focus on keeping you and Clark safe.” His gaze shifted to Martha as he added, “Luthor can send all the goons he wants but no one in this town is going to help him.”

“Don't worry about us,” Martha added, swiping her cheek. “We'll be fine.”

“But...”

“No buts,” Jonathan cut her off. “We'll be in touch.”

With that he ended the call and Martha gave herself permission to release the emotion she'd been holding back. Jonathan placed a hand on her shoulder. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she felt a hard lump build in her throat from the

tension. “He’s never going to give up, is he?”

“They’ll stop him,” Jonathan said firmly.

“And if they don’t?” Martha looked at him accusingly. “This man ... this monster was holding our son hostage and...”

“And it’s our job to make sure that doesn’t ever happen again,” Jonathan said firmly. “The only way we can do that is to make sure Luthor never has an opportunity to hold anyone over Clark’s head.”

“Are you sure Wayne will be all right?” Martha asked.

“He’s made of tough stuff,” Jonathan grinned. “Wayne knows how to rattle guys like Luthor.”

“He knows,” Martha said in an eerie calm.

“We don’t know that,” Jonathan said grimly.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, Jonathan, how else do you think Clark was hurt?” Martha asked tearfully. “He *knows*.”

Jonathan still refused to acknowledge the fact that she laid at his feet. “We’ll go to Topeka and figure it out from there.”

\*\*\*

*He knows*, Lois thought to herself, staring at the blank walls surrounding her in the living room. It was a fact she’d held in the back of her mind, fearful of letting it out and letting the terror that was associated with that fact out. She knew there was only explanation for how Clark had been rendered powerless and how he had been locked away from everyone and everything he knew.

Lex knew Clark was Superman.

She wasn’t sure how or when he figured it out but she knew it couldn’t have been an intentional revelation. She glanced toward Clark who was sitting on the other side of the couch. She knew he had to be struggling to deal with everything. Knowing Lex was hunting him down, searching for everyone he cared about and Clark not being able to do anything but sit back idly. She reached her hand out and took his hand in hers, squeezing it.

He looked up and smiled at her. “You okay?”

“Okay.” She shrugged. “I, uh, called your parents to warn them.”

“Good.” He nodded, shifting his gaze down to her hand.

She did her best not to react to the lack of response on his part. It had been nearly two months since his rescue and he still hadn’t tried to call his parents. She tried...really tried to rationalize what could possibly be preventing him from at least talking to them but try as she might she couldn’t comprehend it. It was cruel punishment to listen to his parents ask questions she didn’t know the answers to. It was even crueler to know how tormented his parents were in wanting to know how he was doing and she couldn’t honestly answer the question because he refused to talk to her until recently. That at least had changed but the silent wall he kept up was still there, peeking through in times of stress. She wanted desperately to shake him and tell him to snap out of it and talk to the Kents but found herself unable to speak up.

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“I, uh, called your parents to warn them.” Lois’ words were mixed with torment as she glanced toward Clark.

“Good.” Clark nodded, shifting his gaze down to her hand, admiring how perfectly her palm fit in his.

Panic had flooded through him when Lois had offered him the phone to call and warn his parents that their lives could be in danger. Perry, Jimmy, Jack...everyone he knew and cared about was at risk. Still he couldn’t bring himself to have that conversation with his mom and dad. It was easier this way. Pretending there wasn’t imminent danger lurking around every corner, waiting to strike.

There was a plan in place of course. There had been a plan from the beginning. His dad had insisted on having some way to rebuff any threats from exposure. The paranoia his dad carried with him had been irritating at times but in those early days of Superman’s first appearance in Metropolis he had been grateful to know there was something protecting those he cared about most.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel as if he’d let them down. He had been the one to insist on going public to satisfy his need to help where he could. He had been the one to step into the lion’s den and put everyone’s lives at risk. He had been the one to reveal everything to his mortal enemy and put their lives at risk.

After years of listening to the fears his parents had carried and living with that fear inside him as well he found himself more afraid than he’d ever been in his life. Afraid for his parents, afraid for his friends, and most of all afraid for himself. What would be the end result when they finally did catch Luthor? He held the bargaining chip that guaranteed Clark Kent’s life would never be what it was.

In one moment, life as he had known it ceased to exist. Lois continued to talk about reclaiming her life after this was all over but he didn’t have the heart to tell her he couldn’t do the same. Luthor would make sure of that.

He had failed everyone.

Now all he could hope for was to see justice served for the pain Luthor had caused and pray by the end of this his friends and family didn’t hate him for what he’d done. Luthor was hunting everyone down because of him. All because he had selfishly taken the risk and put on that red and blue suit, essentially putting a target on his back.

“Clark?” Lois squeezed his hand, pulling his attention back to the present. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” He cleared his throat and forced a smile on his face. “It’s really late.” He let out a yawn, hoping to present a believable semi-exhausted face to her.

She stared at him for a moment and nodded. “Yeah, we should turn in. We can check in with Jimmy tomorrow. Figure out what our next move is then.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, looking down to his lap.

She pursed her lips for a moment, staring at him for what felt like an eternity. “For what it’s worth, I think you should give them a chance.”

“Who?” He looked back at her in surprise.

“Your parents,” Lois said, running a hand through her hair, releasing her other hand from his. “You know, whatever it is...it can’t be as bad as leaving them wondering.”

“It’s not that simple,” he replied carefully.

“Then explain it to me, please.” Lois looked at him in disbelief. “You know you can’t shut them out forever.”

“Lois, please, just let it go,” Clark groaned.

“Fine,” Lois remarked in a huff, standing to her feet. “You want to keep shutting everyone out. Go right ahead.” She stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her in a huff.

He let out a groan, leaning his head back against the couch and staring up at the ceiling. “Life, one million three hundred and eighty-six. Clark, zero.”

\*\*\*

Jimmy looked around the gloomy building he and Jack were being led inside. Gotham City certainly lived up to its reputation of having a dark and creepy vibe to it. He looked over his shoulder for what felt like the umpteenth time, following Commissioner Jim Gordon into a small room with a single window. Jimmy glanced at Jack who shared the same uncomfortable expression.

“Nice place,” Jimmy said uncertainly.

“It’s not mine.” Gordon shrugged with a snort. “Salary isn’t the best at the police department, but I can afford a lot better than this dump.”

“So, what is this place?” Jack asked staring at the rundown appearance.

“It’s where I typically meet a, uh...we’ll call him a consultant.” Gordon offered a smile beneath the mustache and glasses and Jimmy glanced over at Jack uneasily.

“Consultant?” Jimmy asked, unsure he wanted to know.

“Nothing for you to worry about,” Gordon pointed to the desk

in the corner. “You wanted information on Mercy Graves?”

“That’s Beverly Cox’s alias, right?” Jimmy asked, recalling the name he’d come across in his research.

“This is where it happened,” Gordon stared at the empty room.

“Where what happened?” Jack asked.

“Where Mercy Graves died.” Gordon’s tone grew dark as he pulled out a large file and handed it to Jimmy. He then added with a smirk, “Supposedly that is.”

Jimmy stared at the file in his hand, pulling the first page out detailing the suspected victims of Mercy Graves. He frowned and turned to Gordon. “What’s this?”

Gordon let out a long breath and turned toward the window. “A disease. That’s what the league called Gotham during the raid.”

“Raid?” Jack asked.

“Twenty-four hours of nothing but fire, blood, death, and carcasses covering the streets of this city.” Jim Gordon’s face took on a solemn tone. “Ra’s al Ghul, their leader disappeared when he realized he was losing the fight for Gotham. Mercy Graves and many of the league’s members disappeared along with him.”

“And became Beverly Cox,” Jimmy reasoned aloud, following what Gordon was saying.

“They say trouble travels in threes, don’t they?” Gordon asked, turning to look back at Jimmy and Jack. “Ra’s al Ghul found the best of the best and trained them to be cold blooded killers, capable of taking out the world’s most nefarious criminals and the most powerful leaders in the world. And he’s still out there.” Photo after photo were laid out on the desk of some of the richest families in the world that had been killed over the years.

“Mercy Graves was responsible for destroying Gotham and if you’re not careful she’ll take Metropolis down with her.” Gordon warned, then added more darkly, “You are dealing with a woman trained to torture and kill people for sport. You will never break her.” He gave a snort. “Or her employer.”

“Seems like you got personal knowledge on this Ra’s al Ghul,” Jack remarked with a knowing look. “And something more.”

Jim Gordon took a deep breath. “I’ve devoted my life to restoring Gotham to the once prestigious city it was before the plague of this city was infiltrated by scum like the league.” He then snorted. “The man your city looks to as its golden child is nothing more than a puppet for the league.”

“What do you mean?” Jimmy frowned.

“Ra’s al Ghul brought the plague with him and he infected many. One of which is the man signing the checks to most of Metropolis citizens.”

“Luthor,” Jimmy spat the name out and Gordon nodded in recognition. “But, why haven’t you done anything? Said anything?”

“The hold the league has is something that continues to be beyond my reach.” Gordon snorted. “If you can find someone willing to take a stand against him then you might have a shot but Luthor is small potatoes compared to the league.”

Jimmy stared at the file in his hand, uncertain how to respond to the information he’d just been told. His mouth felt dry and he cleared his throat. “Um, can I keep this?”

“It’s yours,” Gordon responded with a nod. “Not that it’ll do much good.”

“We’ll be the judge of that,” Jack retorted.

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Emmet Vale tapped at his keyboard furiously, searching for something that would help lead him to something tangible for Nigel. He had heard the rumors of what had happened to those that disappointed Lex Luthor’s right hand man. The eerie calm Nigel remained in made it abundantly clear how at ease he was with the suffering and torture he put his victims through.

A frown crossed his face when he uncovered a hidden file marked ‘Mayday.’ He clicked on it and ran the decoder, filtering

through the options for a password until the screen clicked green and access was granted. A smile spread across his face when the file and was greeted by the sight of a meticulously kept log of unnamed patients, injuries, dates, and addresses where the injuries were treated.

Curious, he began to scroll through, uncertain if this was what Nigel was looking for or not, but it was important to someone.

\*\*\*

*One Month Ago...*

“Harder,” Christina Wallace cheered, tightening her arm around Lois’ neck from behind. Lois gasped, gripping Christina’s arm as she struggled to release herself from her grasp. “You think you can hope to hold your own with a few fancy kicks and punches?”

Lois found the leverage she needed and struck Christina in the abdomen, causing her to cry out in pain. Lois jumped back, turning to face her as she held her hands up, preparing herself for the next attack. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” Christina challenged, circling around her. “You want to take down a trained assassin.”

“I can hold my own,” Lois spat back, keeping her eyes on Christina as she lifted her arm to throw a fake punch her way.

“Can you?” Christina challenged, swinging her leg in a one-eighty to sweep Lois’ legs and knock her off balance.

Lois jumped back and spat out angrily, “You missed.”

\*\*\*

Lex slammed his fist across the mahogany desk, vibrating the contents under the strength of his anger. He heard a sharp intake of breath as he looked up to see both Asabi and his Director of Communications standing in the doorway of his office, waiting for him to calm his raging nerves.

“How did this happen?” Lex demanded angrily.

“I...I don’t know, Mr. Luthor,” his director responded.

“You cannot let these setbacks take over your mind and spirit, Mr. Luthor,” Asabi advised carefully. “It is when we become consumed with anger that we lose sight of the true goal.”

“Yes, of course.” Lex gathered himself, straightening his posture. “This is just a...minor setback.”

Asabi nodded. “I’m sure your director can assist in finding a way to fight Stern Media’s recent purchase.”

“Well, actually, no.” The director winced, expecting Lex’s rage to be cast toward him.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” Lex demanded.

“The deal was pushed through a month ago. The publications were done in an obscure paper to prevent backlash. The deal is within the letter of the law.”

“I will not be at the mercy of Franklin Stern,” Luthor warned. “Fix this.”

“You can’t,” a voice came from the hallway.

Lex looked up to see Franklin Stern standing behind Asabi. “What are you doing here?”

Stern entered the office, pushing past Lex’s director and Asabi as he made his way toward the desk. “I’m here to make you an offer.”

“I don’t negotiate with terrorists,” Lex spat out angrily.

“Sour grapes, Lex?” Stern laughed as he set a large manila envelope down in front of him. “You’ll find it’s more than generous given your recent hiccups.”

“What makes you think I’d sell any part of LexCorp to you?” Lex hissed out angrily.

“Because if you don’t, then I will make it so you can’t run any part of your multimedia empire anywhere,” Stern growled back. “You have to have a company willing to do business with you and Stern Media has no interest in keeping LNN on the air.”

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Danny Malone set his beer bottle on the table and turned to Jack Davenport’s slumped over body on the floor. A smile spread

across his face as he pulled out a syringe from his pocket, tapping the clear liquid as a few drops escaped. He turned his attention to the unconscious body of John Black and whispered, "Oh, Johnny Boy, you never should have left home."

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"We have a witness," Christina said, setting a large 8x10 photo on the coffee table for Lois.

Lois wrinkled her nose, recognizing the name at the bottom of the photo. "John Black? Isn't he...?"

"The same witness that Mrs. Cox scared off the first time?" Christina finished for her. "You bet. Jack is taking him into protective custody and he'll be testifying to what his brother told him."

"That's everything with the Planet," Lois reasoned aloud, instinctively reaching for her side where she'd been stabbed so many months ago. "What about the rest?"

"We'll get there," Christina reassured her. "We have to take the first step with John and then hopefully we can get Pete Black to testify on his involvement with Mercy Graves and any activities that might lead back to Lex Luthor."

"It's not enough," Lois snorted.

"It's a start," Christina reassured her. "Given how little we had a few months ago I'd say we're on the right track."

"So any thoughts on getting Lexel Investments to admit to the insurance policy they had on the Planet?" Lois asked. "We prove intent and we can nail him to the wall."

"Agent Malone is pulling the insurance records from the federal bureau. All policies have to be filed with the Insurance Commissioner of New Troy," Christina explained. "If there was a record he'll find it."

The phone on the table chirped and Christina reached over to answer it. "Hello?"

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### Chapter 13

*Present Day...*

"Look out!"

The screams for help continued to echo throughout the dark tunnel. Images of the bridge falling apart and Clark frozen in place by a Kryptonite blade covered in Lois' blood filled Clark's mind. He opened his mouth to scream only to have nothing but pain course through his throat. He couldn't move as he struggled to fight back.

<<"Lois Lane won't be a problem. She's sure to have bled out by now anyway.">>

<<"You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I'd say that's personal.">>

<<"I live in a fantasy world? Perhaps, but my fantasy's about to come true.">>

<<"A blade is so underused and underappreciated these days, don't you agree?">>

<<"The man of steel brought to his knees by a simple rock and unable to hear the screams for help from Lois Lane herself.">>

<<"It's only fitting she should die from the same blade as her hero.">>

Clark bolted up in bed, staring around the familiar room. 'Just a dream,' Clark told himself, climbing out of the bed. He could feel his heart racing, pounding against his chest as sweat poured down his face from the mental hell his mind has just escaped. When would he escape these nightmares?

He gripped the side of the bed for a moment before standing to his feet and making his way to the kitchen. The hallway was dark but he could still make out the corner of the hall that led into the kitchen. Thankfully Lois kept the oven light on at night, giving him enough light to make his way over there without fumbling for the hallway light.

He made his way into the kitchen and grabbed a glass from the cabinet, pouring himself a glass of water from the sink. He sighed

in relief when he felt the cool liquid on the insides of his throat. Flashes from his nightmare continued to plague his mind. That blade covered in blood and Luthor's sinister threat of killing him with the same blade he'd used to ...

He took a shallow breath, trying to will his mind to remove the memory of his captivity. Try as he might he still couldn't escape the terror he'd endured at the hands of Dr. Kelly and Lex Luthor. Night after night he'd dreamed of escaping but now that he had, he wasn't sure what to do with himself.

There was a part of him that missed Superman. Everything that came with the superhero had been a dream come true. He had a chance to finally use his gifts and he missed those powerful gifts that were now lost to him.

He wondered momentarily if that would ever be enough. Was the risk that came with wearing the cape and boots worth what danger it put his family in? He still had yet to make that call to his parents. His decision not to reach out to them obviously troubled Lois in part because of her own relationship with her family and the forced blackout she was enduring. He knew it had to be hard knowing there was no way to reach out to her family, even if the relationship left a lot to be desired.

Still, he couldn't bring himself to dial the number and have a conversation with his parents about everything he'd endured. His father had spent nearly his entire life warning him of what would come if he let anyone find out about his alien origins and he had been right. Superman had put a target on his parents, himself and everyone he cared about. Now he was forced to face the consequences of his actions and wonder when everything would come crashing down around him. He just couldn't bring himself to reveal how badly he'd let his parents down.

His mind briefly flashed back to Luthor's cage and the bloody knife he'd seen as Luthor had taunted him with the news of Lois' death. A part of him died in that moment, realizing that any chance of saving her from Luthor's monstrous clutches was futile. He had lost everything. Despite the heartache she'd put him through, confessing her love to Superman and claiming to love him even if he was an ordinary man all the while rejecting that ordinary man, he still couldn't change the fact that he still loved her. Losing her had become a soul crushing hell that he was sure Luthor got far too much pleasure from.

Now here he was enduring a different kind of hell. Stuck in a weird twilight zone of sorts where he was forced to act out the dream he once had, wondering if it would ever come to light. That was what made all of this so painful. Here he was, face to face with the woman he thought he'd lost and forced to face the feelings he'd long buried months ago. Not only that, but adding the torture of having to play the part of husband and wife in public with her only added salt to the gaping wound of his broken heart he was still healing from.

Lois Lane was and always would be his ultimate weakness.

He loathed the feelings of jealousy and inadequacy he'd juggled throughout their partnership. Given the months of isolation and the reality of losing Lois completely in the hell Lex Luthor put him through he found himself wondering if his need to have Clark be the one Lois opened her heart to hadn't been the reason he lost her all together. Self-loathing and blame became an everyday occurrence during his torture.

The truth would come out eventually. He knew that. Luthor would make sure of that, but would Lois ever be able to love him—Clark Kent—the man beneath the suit, without the powers? A few months ago he knew his answer would have been a loud no. Now he wasn't so sure.

Lois had changed.

Whatever hell Luthor had put her through had changed her outlook on everything. The way she talked about her family was different. The way she spoke about Jimmy was different. Hell, the way she talked to him was different. Her guard had come down.

She went out of her way to help him through some of the worst moments. Talking him through the night terrors and offering a friendly ear to listen. Letting him work through everything on his own when he needed and calling him out on his crap when he got too stuck in his own head.

He snorted to himself, recalling the way she called him out on ignoring her the first few weeks they'd been in the cabin together. Things were different between them. He felt closer to her than ever before and still his heart ached for more. He knew without a doubt he still loved her.

Though his memories from the day of his rescue were still jagged, he remembered Lois kissing him as she dug out the kryptonite laced tracker Dr. Kelly had placed inside his chest. In that moment all he could focus on was the pain running through him, but his memory clung onto the sensation of Lois Lane's lips against his. It hadn't been a simple peck or friendly exchange. The spark that he'd felt from her immediately flashed him back to the kiss she'd exchanged with Superman just before he'd left to stop the Nightfall asteroid.

He'd come close to kissing her. He'd come *really* close to kissing her, but before he could she'd pulled away. The subsequent weeks of silence had been welcomed by him as he struggled to come to terms with what had happened. After finally breaking his silence he and Lois seemed to have found a comfortable existence between them. She continued to dig into what she could to help build the case against Luthor and kept herself busy with her job at the library.

It was their new normal, yet a part of him still wondered if there was something more behind that look she gave him from time to time. He had become increasingly aware that his continued time of living under the same roof with her made it impossible to ignore his feelings for her. Despite having his heart trampled on, he found himself unable to stop wondering if something might have changed on her part. The look she kept giving him was enough to make him melt beneath her gaze.

'*There is only one way to find out,*' his mind taunted him. The crippling thought moved to the forefront of his mind and he felt his chest tighten recalling his heartfelt plea in Metropolis park. He knew the only way to get the answers he wanted was to talk to Lois, but that meant putting himself out there again and risking everything once more. Though he knew the possible rejection could break him, he wasn't sure he could bear another day not knowing if there was at least a chance. He was running out of time. He knew once Luthor was behind bars the chance of her ever loving just Clark Kent would disappear forever.

He glanced up at the window by the sink. Light was slowly trickling in from the sun rising. He sighed, staring at the clock on the wall. He had to get ready for work.

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<<"I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this city without me knowing about it.">>

<<"I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.">>

<<"Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I've had you?">>

<<"Goodbye, Lois.">>

Lois let out a muffled scream as she pulled herself from the nightmare that continued to haunt her. The images were still so raw as she felt her heart pounding in her chest and the sweat drenched sheets and t-shirt press against her back. She grimaced, sitting up and stripping the nearly soaked shirt from her body and tossing it to the ground.

<<"Well, it's no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.">>

<<"How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?">>

<<"Do you really think Superman will take you back once he

knows I've had you?">>

The image of Lex's deranged face pressed against her flashed through her mind and she felt a chill run down her spine, forcing the image back down. Her eyes moved to her left side where the mangled scar—the evidence of what Lex had done to her—stared back at her. She swallowed hard, running a hand over the pink scar, uncertain if she should wear it as a badge of honor for having survived the unthinkable and won or as one more thing that Lex had taken from her.

Her life.

Her sense of dignity.

Her pride.

Her self-worth.

All of those things had been lost when she found herself at his mercy, left to bleed to death with the shredded remains of her dress the only thing she had left to cling onto as she desperately sought out help. Thank God for Perry. Thank God for Bill Henderson. If Perry hadn't forced Henderson to go looking for her there never would have been a need for Mrs. Cox to pull Lex off of her just when he was about to...

She shivered, not allowing her mind to wander down too far on what might have happened. She sprung from the bed and made her way to the closet to grab a clean shirt. She quickly tossed the cotton tank shirt over her head, smoothing the fabric over the hidden scars and letting out a sigh of relief. She could feel her hands shaking as she ran her hands up and down the cotton fabric, reassuring herself the scars were covered.

She felt a lump in her chest as she let out a muffled cry, uncertain if Clark had left for work yet. She couldn't let him see her like this. His first instinct would be to ask what was wrong and confessing the awful truth of what had happened all those months ago...what had almost happened to her was something she couldn't bear to do.

Her legs began to waver as she sank down in the corner of the closet, burying her face in her hands as she tried to push the images of Lex's taunting out of her mind. The tears ran down her cheeks one by one, as she swallowed back the hard lump of tears in her throat that threatened to become too much for her.

<<"You think I wouldn't have a contingency plan, hmm? Your precious Superman? Gone. Your partner? Gone. Your career? You won't be able to show your face anywhere without me knowing. I'll make sure you never so much as edit a note on a post-it. You never should have crossed me.">>

<<"That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I'm unstoppable.">>

She could feel her hands clench into fists as she stared up at the ceiling, cursing fate once more for the hand she had been dealt. How long would she be forced to endure this torture of reliving the most painful moment of her life? How long would she have to sit here and bury her feelings when she knew all that needed to happen was for one conversation to take place between Clark and his parents. She certainly wasn't going to be the one to tell Clark that she knew he was Superman. He'd already had so much change thrust on him with losing his identity, his powers, and being forced to pretend to be married to her just months after they both had systematically crushed one another's hearts. No, she would not be the one to tell him she knew he was Superman. He would have to tell her that on his own...or Martha would have to tell him.

'*If he ever calls them,*' she thought to herself in disgust.

Almost two months now since his subsequent rescue and Clark still had yet to pick up the phone and at least give them some kind of confirmation that he was indeed alive and healthy. How she wished she had that luxury to pick up the phone and call her mother. How she'd ever taken for granted that simple freedom to call her family she'd never know. It all seemed so pointless now. The fights. The arguments. Looking back on it all now, she could

see her mother's constant nitpicking and need to know everything wasn't her trying to control her but just how she showed that she cared. She felt so ungrateful as she recalled every conversation she'd taken for granted over the last year. She had allowed herself to become caught up in things that were so trivial. So what if her mother insisted on talking about her Aunt Marie's hip surgery for an hour. So what if Lucy went on a tangent about her latest boyfriend. So what if her father had made mistakes. He was trying to mend their relationship now.

Tears ran down her cheeks and she let out a soft wail. Unless she brought Lex to justice she'd never have the chance to right the wrongs between them. She'd never have a chance to reclaim her life if Lex won. Determination washed over her and she smoothed her hands over her face, forcing herself to stand up and not give in to the fears that continued to haunt her in the middle of the night. She ran a hand across her face once more, before stepping out of her closet and into the bedroom that led into the hallway.

She was certain Clark had already left for the day. Nate and his crew usually picked him up by now. She made her way to the kitchen and spotted a note by the coffee maker where a fresh brew of coffee waited for her. A smile spread across her face as she looked at the note Clark had written.

*'Don't make dinner plans-CK'*

She felt the corners of her mouth twitch, uncertain what that was supposed to mean. Her mind drifted to the past few weeks with Clark. Though things had been rocky and strained at first, she could tell, at least to her, they were getting closer. It was scary how comfortable they had become around one another. How easily they both had stepped into the roles that they desperately needed to keep up in order to survive.

<<“I've just really missed you.”>>

<<“I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

*“For not believing you. I have a knack for getting in over my head and this time, I'm so deep in I'm not even sure if I'll ever get out. Anyway, I know you tried to warn me and like an idiot I didn't believe you. I'm sorry.”*

*“You were able to see the truth eventually. That's what matters.”>>*

<<“Clark, what did they do to you?”>>

<<“We're partners, right?”>>

<<“...no one's ever made me pizza before.”>>

Though they put on a good act for everyone. Standing close enough to one another to be believable as a couple and not reacting when the other referred to one another as ‘husband’ or ‘wife.’ It was strange how easily it rolled off her tongue. Here recently she found herself wondering just how far they would have to go to keep up the pretense. Neither of them had stepped into anything she would consider personal space for the other one, but she knew the more public appearances they made around town the more likely they might be put into such a situation.

Small towns had a knack for celebrating holidays in a way that forced you out of your comfort zone. After all, it was in a small town that the mistletoe tradition was born. Clark kept accepting invitations to events with many of the guys he worked with and she played her part, pretending to be the happy newlywed wife when forced into the social outings of dinner or a movie. The longer she played the part the more she felt the blurring of the line between fact and fiction. Clark was the only person she interacted with on a day to day basis that called her by her name. She found herself seeking the name out, desperate to hear it uttered as a form of reaffirmation that Lois Lane still existed beneath the pretense of Leila Kane.

She'd sworn for so long that she wouldn't allow herself to become involved with Clark unless he told her the truth. The problem with that logic was she was already involved. She had been from the moment she'd sought Martha out for help, up until

she rescued him. There was no denying what was happening. She could fight it and pretend it wasn't there all she wanted but the reality was she was in a losing battle with herself in a war that she'd already lost.

He hadn't told her he was Superman, but he had trusted her enough to help him through some of the more difficult times. She wasn't even sure Superman still existed after what Clark had been put through. She hadn't seen any signs of his powers returning. It would be so tempting to just throw caution to the wind and give into the pent up emotions that had been rolling through her for the last few months. How easy would it be to pretend the act they both put on for everyone else was real?

She bit her lower-lip, uncertain what to make of the note Clark had left. The closer they had gotten over the last few weeks the harder it was to find the line between fact and fiction. In moments like this she wasn't sure she wanted to do.

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Lex smoothed the back of his hand against the wrinkles on his Armani suit and reached across the seat for his mobile phone. He dialed the number on the card in his lap then listened to the static ring. A moment later a feminine voice answered the phone. “Lex, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Your honor, I'm afraid this is a business call,” Lex apologized.

“Lex, it's been a month now,” she chastised. “One might begin to think you're avoiding me.”

“Ignore a magnificent woman like yourself?” he responded smoothly. “Never.”

“Just don't forget who it was that suggested your name for the Senate run to begin with,” she remarked darkly.

“Of course not, darling,” Lex reassured. “This is just a bit of business I have to handle out of town. Sometimes things need that personal touch. I'm sure you understand.”

“Of course,” she whispered in a sultry tone. “When will you be back in Metropolis?”

“I'll call you as soon as we arrive,” he reassured, glancing up as Asabi drove past the sign welcoming them to Smallville Kansas.

\*\*\*

The sweat poured down Clark's back as he climbed down the fifty-foot ladder. It had been another grueling day of hard work in the sun. He could feel the redness in his face as he jumped down the last step, removing the hard hat from his head and shaking his sweat drenched hair as he made his way toward the table that was setup with bottles of water and ice chests.

“Catch!” Nate tossed him a bottle of water and he caught it gratefully.

Clark nodded his thanks and poured the cold water on his head, allowing the cool liquid to run down his face, neck and shoulders. The tan shirt he wore was covered in a mixture of body odor, perspiration, and water from the hard day's work.

Nate walked up to him with a good natured smile on his face. David, one of the engineers walked up behind him. “We're actually ahead of schedule.” David looked at his watch and added, “Go ahead and cut everyone loose for the day. I need to rework the budget with the contractors.”

“You never rest do you, Dave?” Nate chastised, placing a hand on his shoulder. “You know some of these guys do have something more than a bottle of bourbon and the late night reruns of *I Love Lucy*.”

“It's *MacGyver*,” David corrected with a snort. “And I prefer my brewski to any bourbon.”

Nate let out a laugh. “Ah, yes, I forget David brews his own brand of beer.” He patted David on the shoulder and grinned at David. “You bringing the brew to the festival tomorrow?”

“Festival?” Clark asked, curiously.

“Fall festival the town holds every year,” David explained,

handing him a flyer. “Come by, take the little missus out and knock a few back with pumpkin spice in everything.”

“You swore you wouldn’t do that again, Dave,” Mike, one of the laborers, chastised, walking up behind them.

“I didn’t say the beer would taste like pumpkin spice,” David corrected. “Just everything else.”

Nate let out a jovial laugh and grinned. “Why don’t I believe you?”

“Because he burned the crap out of your nose last year,” Mike winked.

Clark let out a laugh as he took the flyer from David. Nate shook his head. “In all seriousness, it is a lot of fun. I’m sure you newlyweds could use a night out.” He shot David a look.

“Someone’s been working you like a dog here.”

Clark grinned. “I’ll think about it.” He took the flyer from him and glanced at the bright orange paper with pumpkins and bats on the printed page. In the center, ‘Fall Festival’ was printed in all caps. He wondered if Lois would even be interested in going given her apprehension about the Corn Festival.

\*\*\*

LexLabs was dimly lit as Nigel made his way through the long corridor leading to the office of Dr. Emmet Vale. He was one of Lex Luthor’s most brilliant minds and he had just recently gone through a nasty divorce which made him broke and desperate. Two attributes Nigel loved to take advantage of whenever he could.

He had spent weeks searching for any of Lois Lane’s former colleagues and friends. Asabi had informed him of Lex Luthor’s visit to Perry White’s home in the south of Florida. He had searched high and low for anyone that might lead him to Lois Lane’s whereabouts but had come up dry. Mrs. Cox had dropped out of sight and he knew he would be soon to follow if he didn’t come up with some answers fast. What Lex Luthor was doing visiting Perry White of all people in person, he wasn’t sure but he knew it couldn’t be good for him or Mrs. Cox.

Nigel flashed his security badge and the door opened, revealing the four large computers Dr. Vale was working on. “Bad time?”

“Whatever it is, I don’t have time,” Vale remarked not even bothering to look up from his computer. “Your boss has me pushing the limits of ‘Project K’ and ...”

Nigel dropped a large stack of cash on the man’s keyboard, silencing him mid-sentence. “I believe you’ve forgotten who has been paying your bills for the last month, Dr. Vale.” Nigel smiled as Vale looked back at him nervously. “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”

“Look, like I said on the phone, I decoded a file that looked like some sort of log but there’s no names or anything so I don’t think...”

“Pull it up!”

\*\*\*

Clark set the grocery bags down on the dining table next to a large manila envelope. Once a week he and Lois were checking for new information from Jimmy or Davenport in the PO Box outside of Greenville. It was a long drive but it helped keep anyone that might be tracking the PO Box that had been setup by Jimmy under an alias that couldn’t be traced to either the Kanes or his and Lois’ former names. The taxi rides were expensive but the return was worth it.

He glanced at the flyer Nate had given him before. A smile crossed his face as he recalled the time they spent together at the Corn Festival. Lois had stopped seeing him as just a colleague but a friend. By the end of the festival she’d let her guard down enough to enjoy the small town atmosphere. She’d even initiated dancing with him.

<< “Last year I had a girlfriend convince me it was a great way to meet guys.”

“Was it?”

“Define ‘guys.’”>>

<< “I’ve just really missed you.”>>

<< “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For not believing you. I have a knack for getting in over my head and this time, I’m so deep in I’m not even sure if I’ll ever get out. Anyway, I know you tried to warn me and like an idiot I didn’t believe you. I’m sorry.”

“You were able to see the truth eventually. That’s what matters.”>>

<< “Clark, what did they do to you?”>>

<< “You know, Clark, I’ve never seen you so... I don’t know... so relaxed... so ‘Clark.’”

“Well, that’s who I am. Clark.”>>

<< “Clark, it’s okay, I’ve got you.”>>

<< “Liar.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, liar!”>>

<< “Not exactly what you had in mind, huh?”

“Let’s see. So far I’ve been given a glimpse of ritual crop worship, been treated as your girlfriend, and insulted your parents. No, I couldn’t have planned this.”>>

<< “We’re partners, right?”>>

<< “...no one’s ever made me pizza before.”>>

He also couldn’t resist the undeniable pull he continued to feel toward her. He had to know if she felt the same way. He took a deep breath, pulling the white paper covered ribeye steaks from the bag, followed by a bottle of Lois’ favorite wine. He no longer had an alter-ego to keep him from pursuing a relationship with her. He no longer had the threat of her finding out about his deception because there was no longer anything to give him away. He was normal—just like anyone else. A part of him hated that fact but instead of sulking about what he’d lost he decided he might as well embrace it.

Lex Luthor had won.

Superman was gone.

Clark Kent was gone.

All that was left was Collin Kane.

\*\*\*

Lois let out a long sigh as she pulled into the carport, putting the truck into park. She grabbed her purse from the bench seat next to her and stepped out of the truck, slamming the door behind her. The smell of charcoal hung in the air and she looked up and saw smoke rising from the side of the house. Curious she skipped around to the side deck where she found Clark hard at work at the grill.

She smiled to herself, watching him sprinkle seasoning on the red meat that was currently sizzling over the hot irons of the grill. Steak was definitely a luxury item neither of them had had since leaving Metropolis. Truth be told they couldn’t afford it. The budget they were living on kept expensive meats and name brand food off the grocery list most of the time. Everything they had needed to go in savings to keep them afloat for if they had to move without notice.

Clark obviously felt things were secure enough to splurge tonight. “Smells good,” she finally said, approaching him from behind. “But aren’t those a bit out of budget?”

“Payday,” Clark responded, tapping the salt and pepper shaker over the meat that was on the grill. “We can afford it, Lois. I promise.” He flashed her a broad smile and added, “Plus there will be plenty leftovers to last a few days too.”

“So what’s the occasion?” she asked, glancing over at the meat that continued to sizzle on the grill. “I mean, not that I’m not salivating at the idea of finally having a medium twelve-ounce steak after months of nothing but sandwiches, salads, and stir fry, but...”

Clark chuckled, leaning toward her with a chuckle as he flipped the steak on the grill. She could feel her mouth water, staring at the perfect sear he'd managed to get on the now brown exterior of the ribeye he was watching intently. "Maybe I wanted to be spontaneous."

"Spontaneous?" she inquired curiously.

"Dinner should be ready soon," he reassured her. "Why don't you relax?" He pointed toward the door. "I picked up Jimmy's latest package from the PO Box. We've got more information to dig into on Danny Malone."

"Whatever hasn't been redacted you mean," Lois said with a groan, watching as he pulled the steaks off the grill. "It is really not fair that you can cook so well."

"Why?" he asked, turning to face her with the plate of steaks now neatly wrapped in aluminum foil.

"You're making me look bad," she retorted half-jokingly.

"Oh come on." He chuckled. "You did a great job with the stir fry the other night."

"The pan was black," Lois reminded him.

"And the vegetables were extremely well done." He chuckled, walking toward the sliding glass door with the plate of steaks in his hand. He slid the door open for her.

"Anything to escape the dreaded sandwiches, huh?" she teased, stepping inside.

Her gaze shifted to the dining table where he had already set the table. Two long candlesticks were setup on opposite ends of the table. A bowl of mashed potatoes was in one large bowl, another had sautéed green beans, and finally there was a tray of baked macaroni and cheese on the far end. In the middle of the table was a small bucket of ice with a bottle of red merlot in it. She glanced at him as he set the steaks next to the bucket and pulled the cork out of the bottle with a cork screw. She stared at him for a long moment, uncertain what he was up to as he handed her a glass of red merlot.

"So, steak *and* wine?" she asked curiously.

"Well, we can't really enjoy a good steak without wine," he reasoned aloud, holding his glass up.

She recognized the label on the bottle as the brand she used to get in Metropolis. It had been a long time since she'd treated herself like this. She met his gaze for a moment, feeling her stomach turn upside down as the drowning sensation that had become all too familiar these days began to take over her. She was in trouble.

She took a sip of her merlot and claimed the seat across from him. "Well, let's dig in."

\*\*\*

The exhaust from the public bus made Jack Davenport cringe. He'd gotten a tip on Mrs. Cox's location here in D.C. but so far all he'd found was whispers and innuendos. He was beginning to think it was all smoke and mirrors, but he still had one last lead to follow before he packed it up and met back up with Christina for B.D. Kahn's testimony next week.

Then he saw her. The unmistakable profile that screamed Beverly Cox with striking short blonde hair in lieu of the brunette voluminous hair she once donned. He reached inside his jacket, gripping his sidearm as he surveyed the surrounding patrons on the city bus he was on. No one seemed out of place.

He watched as she tucked her bag beneath her arm and took a seat in the corner, just three seats away from him. He smiled as he saw the LED light indicate the next stop was the Washington International Airport. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed. "Hey, Talley? I'm going to need backup. Motherbird is trying to fly."

\*\*\*

Nigel scanned through the document in front of him, uncertain what to make of the log he had been given by Vale. The good doctor had been keeping records of unnamed patients and the only

reason he could think of was to document treatments for people that didn't want to be found. He let out a sigh and turned to Emmet Vale who was tapping away at his keyboard. He needed something to help narrow the list down. Any of these treatments could have been Lois Lane. Gunshot wounds. Stabbings. He needed something concrete.

"Any luck on tracking Dr. Kahn on the dates I gave you?" Nigel asked, running a weary hand through his thinning hair.

"I've run the hard drive through everything I have but I'm not getting any hits. There's no geocode anywhere in the system. The API system was completely overwritten—not uncommon for government issued computer, but you said this came from a civilian doctor..."

"There's got to be something that can give us a clue," Nigel argued, shaking his head.

"There was a weak signal outside of Greenville a few months ago, but nothing on the log matches up with that location," Vale remarked with a grunt.

"Print all the locations near or around Greenville and cross reference it with a list of all known associations for these names," Nigel pushed the pad he'd been jotting names down on toward Emmet Vale.

"Perry White, James Olsen, Lucy Lane, Sam Lane, Ellen Lane, Clark Kent..." Emmet Vale read the list aloud. "Isn't Kent *dead*?"

"Just pull it up," Nigel ordered.

\*\*\*

Lois took a seat on the corner of the couch, reaching over to smooth the wrinkles on her shirt. Clark had been withdrawn through most of dinner. She hadn't been sure what to expect when she arrived home. She'd been thrown through a loop when she found herself walking into an intimate dinner setting with wine, steak, and a chocolate mousse that she was sure would put some of the fine dining restaurants in Metropolis to shame. A part of her wondered if she'd inadvertently agreed to a date with all the trouble he'd gone to and not realized it.

The dinner had been out of this world and the company just as friendly as always. Her initial uncertainties disappeared as the night went on and now she found herself yet again fighting against her inner thoughts. Clark seemed to be having the same problem. She'd caught him a few times during dinner lost in thought during lulls in the conversation.

<< "I've just really missed you." >>

<< "I'm sorry,"

"For what?"

"For not believing you. I have a knack for getting in over my head and this time, I'm so deep in I'm not even sure if I'll ever get out. Anyway, I know you tried to warn me and like an idiot I didn't believe you. I'm sorry."

"You were able to see the truth eventually. That's what matters." >>

<< "Clark, what did they do to you?" >>

<< "We're partners, right?" >>

<< "...no one's ever made me pizza before." >>

Things had certainly changed between them. She felt the unmistakable pull, tugging her unconsciously toward him each day. The closer they got the harder it was to resist. A flutter in her abdomen reminded her of his closeness as goosebumps rose on her arm. She ran her hand up and down her arm and turned back to him, leaning against his shoulder. "Thanks for dinner."

\*\*\*

Clark glanced across the couch to where Lois was curled up on the corner of the couch. He'd blown it. A romantic dinner with Lois' favorite meal and wine had been the perfect opportunity to say what had been weighting on his mind but he lost his nerve. He couldn't seem to find the courage to ask her if things had changed between them. He knew there was a very real possibility he might

not ever get his answer if he waited too long but still he found himself frozen in place, unable to take that leap of faith and ask the question that had been hanging over him.

"Thanks for dinner," Lois said, leaning her head against his shoulder.

He nodded, uncertain what to say. He wondered momentarily if Lois suspected there had been more to the dinner, but at the moment he was grateful she didn't push the issue. He already felt like enough of a heel, unable to ask her a simple question without his brain freezing up and refusing to cooperate.

"What's this?" Lois asked, taking the flyer that was sitting on top of the package he'd picked up from the PO Box earlier.

"Oh, yeah." He cleared his throat recalling the invitation from his boss. "It's a festival they're having this weekend. I thought it might be worth checking out...if you're interested."

"As long as I don't have to worry about Bureau 39 wannabes showing up," Lois teased.

"I can't guarantee anything, but given Trask is gone and no one's heard from any of his fellow agents I think we're safe," Clark joked, brushing a strand of hair out of her eyes.

She smiled back at him and he wondered momentarily what would happen if he tried to kiss her. His heart lurched in his chest at the idea, uncertain if he could take the possible rejection. Then she moved closer, placing a hand on his chest. "If there are caramel apples involved, I'm game."

A smile curled across his lips, recalling her confession for her love of caramel apples. The warmth from her hand resonated through him as he fought the internal battle with himself. He could sit here and bury his feelings or he could take a leap of faith and act on the emotions he struggled to keep hidden.

"In my experience no Fall Festival is complete without caramel apples," he finally spoke, pulling his hand back.

"And when is this?" Lois asked.

"Tomorrow," he responded, letting out a sigh. "I'm told there will be home brewed beer to sample as well."

Lois made a face. "That could be dangerous."

"I think that's the idea," he chuckled.

\*\*\*

Wayne Irig spotted the dark black town car pulling into the drive as he was finishing up the afternoon's chores at the Kent farm. Martha had insisted someone might come looking for them but the idea of someone trying to harm the Kents seemed preposterous. He of course had agreed to take care of things while they were gone. What kind of neighbor would he be if he didn't?

Still, when he saw the town car pull into the drive he immediately flashed back to the morning on his farm when his property had been swarmed with agents posing as the EPA to 'cleanses' his property after his discovery of a certain meteorite that Jonathan still to this day wouldn't talk about. Wayne reached the top of the steps, leading to the farmhouse and grabbed his rifle that was leaning against the door where he'd left it.

A man in a dark suit and thin brown hair stepped out of the driver's side and turned to the rear passenger side door to open the door. Wayne gripped the barrel of his rifle, preparing himself for who might be behind the door. To his surprise, out stepped none other than Lex Luthor.

Lex Luthor wore a custom pair of shades and his entire wardrobe probably cost more than he ever saw in a year. A smile smoothed across his face as Lex approached Wayne. "Yes, hello, I'm hoping you can help us." He gestured back to the man standing behind him. Wayne saw the hint of something in the man's pocket reflect the strong sun's rays glimmering a blinding light toward him. He was definitely armed.

"That depends," Wayne commented carefully as Lex reached the top step to the farmhouse.

"I'm looking for a Jonathan and Martha Kent," Lex said smoothly.

"Not here," Wayne replied gruffly.

A frown crossed Lex Luthor's face and he remarked, "I see." There was a silence before he turned toward Wayne and asked, "Any idea when they might return?"

"Didn't ask," Wayne responded with a smile.

Lex took a step toward him. "Mister..."

"Irig. Wayne Irig," he supplied.

"Mr. Irig, you wouldn't be holding information out on me, would you?" Lex asked, taking another step toward him.

Wayne scowled back at him and let out a snort, "Even if I did know where the Kents were, why on earth would I tell you, Mr. Luthor?"

A look of recognition crossed his face and Lex retorted darkly, "If you know who I am then you must certainly know how influential I am in these parts." His chest puffed out smugly as he added, "I hear the crop season isn't doing so well this year. It'd be a shame for the bank to foreclose on your property, Mr. Irig."

Wayne took a step toward him and let out a laugh, "Unlike many people around here I actually own my property, lock stock and barrel. In fact, your bank has to pay *me* each month because of that plant you decided to open on part of *my* property." He felt a small thrill run through him as he added, "You might be used to getting your way by threatening everyone with your purse strings but it ain't working this time. Now unless you have something of value to discuss I'd highly suggest you leave unless you want to play a game of chicken with the end of this barrel here." He patted the rifle in his hands happily. "I must warn you I ain't missed a shot once and I don't intend to start now."

\*\*\*

The smell of exhaust hit Clark's nostrils as they rode down the steep hill in Mike's makeshift hayride. The back of the pickup had straw littered on the inside for the hayride feel. Unfortunately, it wasn't the soft grass hay that was normally in the hay rides he'd been on in Kansas. It was the coarse barley hay that pricked every inch of exposed skin. A fact he'd become painfully aware of as he rode down the hill with Lois and a few of the neighbors.

The sun had been noticeably present during the day so he'd opted for a pair of cargo shorts and a t-shirt. Lois surprisingly had dressed more appropriate for the hayride, wearing a long jean skirt and green blouse. He had admittedly stolen more than just a glance when the sharp turns had slid her skirt up her leg, revealing their smoothness from the long slit in her skirt. At the moment he found the current seating arrangements to be a combination of torture and bliss as she leaned her head back against him.

"I swear he's got to be doing at least fifty on these turns," Lois commented, gripping his knee as they took a sharp left. "I don't remember the hayride in Smallville being nearly this uncomfortable."

His arm hung across her waist, helping prevent her from sliding across the bed of the truck. Next to them were a few of the others that had caught a ride down the narrow hill into town for the festival. "Barley hay and hay rides definitely don't mix," he commented, holding up a golden strand.

She gave him a sympathetic smile. "I forget I'm talking to the expert in hay grains."

"Grass hay is much more comfortable," he said, tightening his grip on her waist as they took a right down a long rocky road.

"Not as prickly, huh?" Lois picked up the strand of straw and teased the side of his face with it.

As they turned the corner Lois gripped his knee to keep from sliding across the bed of the pickup and into one of the other passengers as the mixture of apple, cinnamon and pumpkin reached his nostrils. He looked up and saw the large white banner billowing in the warm wind as the truck pulled into the grass near the entrance.

The normally quiet street was now littered with booths, rides, and a crowd of orange, yellow, and brown. The sound of the

screaming of the speakers being set up on the corner lot could be heard and he winced as the high pitched sound hit his ears.

“Looks like they’re just setting everything up,” Lois commented, turning her head to look back at him as Mike parked the truck.

\*\*\*

The sweltering sun was already making its presence known as Nigel St. John took a deep breath of the dry air. He looked around the shopping center where cars were already beginning to take their place amid the gray and white asphalt that wore a tan cover of sand and dirt. The light dusting of sand and dirt ground beneath his feet as he crossed the parking lot toward a small shop with the name ‘*Marie’s*’ hanging on the green awning above the glass door. A woman in her mid-fifties was unlocking the door, holding a large tote bag and a red purse on her shoulder.

Nigel immediately recognized the woman from the photos he’d pulled up from the DMV. He held up his hand as he took the step on the sidewalk so he was standing in front of Marie Olsen. “Mrs. Olsen, so nice to see you out so early.”

She stopped, looking up at him with a peculiar expression on her face. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“No,” Nigel shook his head. “We haven’t had the pleasure, but I do know James.” Her face tensed and Nigel then amended, “*Jimmy*.”

She pursed her lips as she sized him up and down. “Well, if you hear from him maybe you can tell him to call his old mother?”

“Or maybe you can have him call me,” Nigel pressed, taking a step toward her placing his hand on the door and preventing her from opening it. “Your son is in a lot of trouble with a lot of dangerous people, Mrs. Olsen.”

“Who are you?” she demanded angrily.

“Someone with a lot of power and a lot of influence when it comes to your son,” Nigel said simply, removing his hand from the door.

“He’s missing,” she replied flatly.

He could tell she was lying. “Why don’t I believe you?”

A voice came from behind him, “Hey, Marie, you open yet?”

She glared back at Nigel. “If you’ll excuse me, I have customers to tend to.”

Nigel straightened up, adjusting his jacket as he pulled out a card. “If you hear from Mr. Olsen again have him call me. It’ll be better for me to find him than someone else.”

\*\*\*

Lois glanced around the crowded street, taking in the sights, smells and sounds as she and Clark followed Mike and his girlfriend, Tonya toward the Ferris wheel that was lit up, letting out a burst of wind with each turn. The music playing from the band on stage kept a small crowd around the stage dancing. The line of booths serving the festival treats that taunted them with their sweet scents.

All in all, it had been easy to forget the impending danger that lurked around the corner and just enjoy the day. She glanced to where Tonya and Mike were in front of them, stealing kisses between one another as one of the guys from Nate’s crew, David popped the top of the home brewed beer.

Lois looked away, trying to give the couple some semblance of privacy. She felt a hand on her shoulder and glanced behind her to where Clark was standing. His hand moved down her shoulder to her elbow, sending a warmth through her. She felt a flutter inside her, turning back to where Tonya and Mike were still wrapped in one another’s arms. It was moments like this that made the pretense hard. Trying to stand close enough or share gestures that made their supposed marriage believable among those around them.

For the most part Lois liked Tonya. Unlike some of the other people she and Clark had spent time with, Tonya wasn’t one to partake in the local gossip which was refreshing. She wasn’t sure

how she felt exactly about the small town and the group of friends Clark had acquired for them. Many were loud and obnoxious at times but seemed to have a good heart. The town itself was different from Metropolis. It was quiet and out of the way which helped when staying off the radar. But she missed the excitement of the city and the thrill that came from chasing criminals, instead of being the one chased.

“Man, get a room!” David teased, setting four brown bottles with a blue and white label in front of them.

“Just cuz you’re a lonely scrooge doesn’t mean the rest of us have to be,” Mike shot back good naturedly.

Lois bit back a laugh, uncertain what to make of the stern expression on David’s face. She glanced back at Clark who was chuckling at the banter between David and Mike.

“If the newlyweds can keep it PG in public so can you,” David retorted with a snort, passing the open bottle to Lois. “Best brewski you’ll ever have this side of the Mississippi. Stake my life on it.”

Mike gave Clark a pleading look. “You see what I have to put up with from this guy?”

Clark shrugged his shoulders, picking up a bottle. “I’m just standing here, man.”

Mike picked up a bottle and eyed it warily. “You swear you didn’t put anything weird in it this time?”

“Never gonna live that down, am I?” David asked, throwing his head back to take a big gulp of his own beer.

“I still can’t eat pumpkin pie without thinking about it,” Mike reminded him.

“Just shut up and drink it,” David ordered.

“Bottom’s up,” Mike held his beer up before taking a drink.

\*\*\*

Jimmy sat at his laptop, scrolling through the articles he’d found on Dr. Emmet Vale. He seemed to be at the top of his game. Cutting edge research into robotics and weapons that would revolutionize the way the military fought wars—if that was indeed what this research was going toward. The patent Emmet Vale had filed referenced military contracts and LexLabs as the benefactor of the weapon he had filed the patent on.

It was a clear link back to LexLabs but given Lex Luthor’s strong ties to Metropolis and his position within LexCorp that still left a large leap in order to connect this patent to the former Man of the Year of Metropolis. His brow furrowed as he looked through the paperwork. He was missing something. He knew it.

A hand tapped Jimmy on the shoulder and he jumped, turning to see Bill Henderson standing behind him. “Man, don’t do that!”

Bill Henderson gave him a smirk. “You’re the one that came back into the lion’s den without a plan.”

“I can’t get a response from Dr. Sayer,” Jimmy grunted. “I figured the direct approach would be better.”

“Does Perry know you’re here?” Henderson asked.

“Jack will tell him,” Jimmy said, reaching for his cup of lukewarm coffee. “You hear anything from Davenport or Wallace?”

“I know we’ve got a witness that can connect Nigel to a hit on their doctor, B.D. Kahn,” Henderson shrugged. “Other than that it’s been pretty quiet.”

“Yeah, I think Lois knows more than we do at this point,” Jimmy agreed.

There was a silent lull between them and Henderson spoke up. “She doing okay?”

“As well as can be expected I guess,” Jimmy shrugged. “Not easy living your life on the run.”

“No, it isn’t,” Henderson agreed with a sigh. “But for what it’s worth, I think those days are numbered.” He set a photo down in front of him. It was a dark town car with a blurry photo of a man in black standing next to Lex Luthor in a rural setting.

“What’s this?” Jimmy asked.

"I got a call from a Wayne Irig from Smallville, Kansas," Henderson explained. "We picked up this photo from a local gas station out there. Seems Luthor is trying to find the Kents. Not sure why." He then added with a solemn expression, "A few weeks ago he made a visit to Perry and Alice's place."

"I know," Jimmy said with a scowl. "Jack and I were lucky we had already left to meet Gordon."

"He's getting sloppy," Henderson mused. "Whatever his reason for wanting to talk to the Kents is—this is personal for Luthor. He wouldn't make the visit himself unless it was something he'd invested a lot of time and a lot of energy into."

"Yeah," Jimmy nodded, feeling uncomfortable under the detective's gaze. Lois had sworn him to secrecy on his help in rescuing Clark. Henderson had been given a brief detail that Clark had been found alive. He hadn't been told how. He hadn't been told any of what Lois had done in order to rescue Clark. She'd been concerned he might try to stop her or try to include Clark in the case against Luthor. Now it seemed the detective was putting the pieces together. He knew it would only be a matter of time. Still, Jimmy remained silent, unwilling to break the promise he'd made to his friends.

"So what do you think would make Lex Luthor go all the way to Smallville, Kansas of all places?" Henderson asked, narrowing his eyes at Jimmy.

"Don't know," Jimmy shrugged. "I guess, like you said, he's getting desperate."

Thankfully the phone in his pocket chose that moment to ring. Jimmy rustled the inside pocket, searching for the phone before pulling it out. The loud chirp filled the room and Jimmy glanced around the semi-crowded library he was in. "Hello?"

"Is that...?" Henderson asked at the same time Jimmy heard his mother's voice on the other end of the phone.

"Jimmy?"

\*\*\*

Lois Lane was drunk. She stumbled out of the back of the pickup truck with an equally inebriated Clark Kent. Tonya called out from the passenger window, "Bye you two!" The sound of the engine roaring as the truck continued up the hill made Lois jump and she turned to face the long driveway.

Clark placed his hands on her shoulders, smoothing his palms down her arms and joining them around her waist in half loop. She let out a soft sigh as her back pressed against him. He was too close. Unbearably close but if he let go she knew she might fall. She stared at the rotating driveway in front of her with a frown.

"This is...not a good idea," Lois slurred out. She was drunk. She knew it. The hill leading up to the driveway kept swerving back and forth.

"It's just a hill," Clark mumbled in her ear, pointing to the tall incline in front of them.

A shiver ran down her spine as Clark pulled her closer, tightening his grip around her waist. She could smell the liquor on his breath. A warm sensation washed over her as his palms fumbled down her side. She knew there was a reason she should pull away from him but the reason escaped her thoughts in that moment.

"A tall hill." She let out a shaky breath as she began to make her way up the dreaded hill in front of her.

Clark leaned in closer. "It's not so bad."

"Forever the optimist," she remarked, letting out a low moan as she felt her ankles waver from beneath her. Her balance as the incline increased began to decrease and she fell back against Clark.

"You okay?" he asked, catching her before she could hit the pavement.

She let out a nervous giggle, looking up at him and responding, "Never better."

\*\*\*

"A man was here." The voice of Marie Olsen echoed inside the headset Nigel St. John was listening to. "He was looking for you and he didn't look like he was trying to trade comic books if you know what I mean."

"Are you all right?" Jimmy's voice came on the line.

"I'm fine, but I'm telling you that man is up to something."

Nigel looked down at the screen in front of him, watching in amazement as the location for Jimmy Olsen pulled up an address for Metropolis University. "Looks like our young Mr. Olsen is looking to further his education." He turned to Emmet Vale. "Can you get the number he's calling from?"

"Got it." Emmet Vale pulled up the number and tapped at the keys on the keyboard. "It's a pay-as-you-go phone so you don't have much flexibility on tracking."

"Can you tap the line and find out who he's calling?" Nigel asked.

"I can get the numbers." Emmet nodded, tapping away at the keyboard and the call log pulled up for the phone Jimmy Olsen was using. "No names or anything but it looks like all of these but the last call made were all pay as you go phones."

"So I wonder which one she is," Nigel mused aloud.

"Pardon?" Emmet asked.

"Never mind." Nigel shrugged, pointing to the screen, seeing the green icon next to one of the numbers. "He's calling someone."

Emmet tapped into the call and Nigel heard Jimmy Olsen's voice on the voicemail, "Lois, you and CK better have a really good reason for not answering the phone. Give me a call when you get this. This is an emergency!"

"Where is this call going to?" Nigel asked, tapping at the screen.

"I can ping the nearby cell tower," Emmet Vale remarked.

"It'll get you within a ten-mile radius of whoever he contacts."

"That's all I need," Nigel said darkly.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 14

Clark let out a muffled groan as he reached the top of the driveway. He was sure if Lois hadn't been hanging onto him he would have collided with the pavement at least a dozen times. His head felt like it was in a cloud as he staggered toward the porch.

Lois let out a slow breath in his ear as she whispered, "I knew that was a bad idea."

His whole body felt warm as he held her against him, helping hold them both up as she moved up the path that was now covered in autumn colored leaves. The moonlit sky reflected down on them, offering a path to the front door. He let out a low moan. "Almost there."

Her hands wandered up and down his chest, sending the blood rushing to his brain as he struggled to focus on the task at hand. Putting one foot in front of the other seemed like such a simple thing but the actual act was proving to be a challenge. The movement of Lois' hands against the back of his neck wasn't helping things either.

He could definitely feel the change in temperature as he staggered forward with her arms wrapped snugly around him. That pull that taunted him for months flared up again, teasing his brain with the thoughts that had been haunting him for the past year. He knew his normal defenses were down, but so were hers.

Still he couldn't seem to convince his brain to stop the train of thought it was on. His foot hit the first step on the front porch and he felt his feet give out from beneath him. Lois laughed, helping catch him at the last minute as they leaned back against the railing of the porch. The light from the moon hit Lois' face and he took in a deep breath, running his palm against her face, brushing his thumb out to trace her cheekbone.

"I think...I'm drunk," he admitted sheepishly.

She let out a low giggle and smiled at him, cupping his cheek.

“Mmm hmm, me too.”

“I’ve never been drunk before.” He let out a low chuckle.

“Really?” her eyes sparkled back at him.

“You know what I’m thinking?” he asked, hearing the slight slur in his words as she helped him up the last step.

“You shouldn’t have let Nate enter you in that Drunk Jenga game?” Lois asked, running her index finger down the front of his shirt.

“That was fun.” He grinned back at her.

“You must have a... *high* tolerance,” she mumbled against him.

“I’ve never been drunk before,” he repeated.

“You’ve said that before.” She smiled back at him.

“I like it. Everything feels ... warm.” He emphasized his point by leaning closer to her and tightening his grasp on her waist.

“Warm is...good.” She let out a shaky breath, pulling him closer as she leaned back against the door. “God this is hard.”

“What is?” he asked curiously.

“Drinking was a bad idea. Really, *really* bad idea. And you’re really...” she mumbled aloud.

“I’m what?” he responded with a caress to her cheek.

“We should go inside,” she whispered, clearing her throat.

“Where is the key?” he asked, leaning closer.

“I think you have it...” She staggered forward and his arms instinctively reached out to grab her before she could fall.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Uh-huh,” Lois whispered, leaning forward. He let out a low moan when he felt her hand slip inside the front pocket on his shorts. She held up the key to the front door. “Found it.” She turned back toward the door. He helped hold her steady as she turned the key inside the deadbolt, unlocking the door. She turned the knob, opening the door for her to enter.

“After you,” he gestured to the open door.

She nodded, taking another step and falling forward, pulling him down with her as they fell against the wooden paneled floors. “Oh, God.” She let out a sharp gasp as he hovered over her.

“You okay?” he reached down to cup her cheek.

“Yeah,” she let out a sharp gasp, running her hand across his cheek.

He found himself slowly falling into a trance, captivated by the light in her eyes as she stared back at him. God, he wanted to kiss her so badly. He knew there was a reason he shouldn’t. The warmth that washed over him felt like a nagging reminder of him not being in the right state of mind. That’s what made everything exhilarating and scary at the same time. He wasn’t in control. The normal inhibitions that kept him from saying and doing the many things that continued to flash through his mind were gone.

“I should get up,” he finally said, yet still not making a move to do so.

“One of us should close the door at least.” Lois giggled, craning her neck to the door that was open behind them.

He nodded, pulling himself back and reaching back to grab the door knob and pull it closed. He reached up to lock the door, hearing the click of the deadbolt before he turned his attention back to Lois who was sitting up from where they’d fallen on the floor.

“It’s late,” he said with a shrug.

“Very.” Lois sighed, leaning up so she was sitting on her knees.

“I feel ... funny,” he said lazily.

“You’re drunk,” she reminded him with a laugh.

“Oh, yeah.” He grinned back at her. He lowered himself down on the floor next to her. “Know what I was thinking?”

“That you’re a cheap date?” She giggled.

“I had *two* shots,” he reminded her.

“You don’t do the whole drinking thing back in Smallville, do you?” Lois breathed in his ear teasingly. He felt his heart rate pick

up as she leaned closer.

“Nah, I just thought alcohol didn’t affect me for a while,” he said with a long moan.

“Well it did tonight.” She grinned back at him.

“I’m not the one that fell,” he pointed out.

She laughed against him and he felt that pull once more. He reached out to cup her cheek. She let out a low breath. “I knew you were there to catch me.”

“Always,” he breathed. There was a long pause between them and then he whispered, “You know what I’m thinking?”

“Hmm?” she turned back to him, reaching out to cup his cheek.

“I really want to kiss you,” he whispered.

Her response was a heated gaze as she whispered, “I’m not stopping you.”

A thunderstorm of emotions moved inside him as he moved closer, stroking the side of her face with his hand. His lips found hers and lightning crackled between them as a year’s worth of longing bubbled into the present. Her hands roamed up and down the back of his head, fingering the strands of his hair.

“Lois,” he could feel the heat between them begin to build as his body sank down, dissolving the distance between them with a loud moan. His lips smoothed over hers in soft caresses as he found himself falling deeper into the hazy fog that had enveloped him. Her long legs curved over his hips and her arms wrapped around him, pressing the softness of her flesh against him.

“I love you,” the confession escaped her lips, vibrating the words against his mouth as each kiss became more and more insistent. His heart soared, feeling the dark cloud that had been hanging over him finally lift. He pulled back, running his hand against her cheek as he stared back at her, hoping he hadn’t misheard her. She placed a hand over his, gripping his wrist in a tight circle as she met his gaze. “I love you, Clark.”

His body settled against her, running his other hand against the length of her arm, tracing the curve of her elbow with his palm. “I love you, Lois.” His heart felt like it would pound out of his chest as he stared back at her, uncertain what to make of the confession that had finally escaped both their lips.

\*\*\*

The room began to spin. Lois let out a low moan as Clark’s hands roamed up and down her sides, riding the skirt further and further up as his lips pressed against hers, seeking more from her with each caress. They stumbled into the bedroom, hands and mouths blindly seeking one another out. She knew there was a reason she should stop. There were several unattainable reasons that they both probably had to stop, but right now she couldn’t think of them. All she could focus on was how right he felt pressed against her.

“I love you,” his slurred confession escaped his lips as he ran his hands down the curve of her side, tracing the outline of her ribcage with his thumb. Her hands began a dangerous path down to his hipbone, tracing the waistband of his shorts with her fingertips as they fell back into one another, sinking into the soft bedsheets together.

She let out a low moan as his hands moved up and down the curve of her arms, sending a featherlight chill down her spine as his lips smoothed against the nape of her neck, teasing the sensitive flesh.

“*Oh, God,*” she let out a soft moan as he pressed against her and her body began to instinctively react to his. She felt the sparks flying between them the moment his lips touched hers. All the doubts and lonely nights of mourning touch could have been fueled her exploration of his body as her palms moved up his back, blindly gripping the edge of his t-shirt in her futile attempt to rip it from him.

“I love you,” she let out the slurred confession once more as the top button to her blouse came undone. Her hands moved to the

back of his head, gripping the soft strands of hair as his lips moved across the exposed silk and lace of her strapless corset. His hands slid further and further up, hiking her skirt up in a bundled collection of jean material.

"This is probably a really bad idea," he murmured in her ear, not making any moves to stop what they had already started. "We're both drunk."

His hands moved up and down her thighs. She could feel the heat from his body against her as he smoothed his lips against her. She could feel her body responding to him as he ran his left palm up the length of her leg. His arm laid stretched out, keeping her arm pinned over her head as he continued the treacherous path down her body.

"We make better decisions drunk than sober," she reasoned aloud, gliding her legs up and down his backside.

"We could stop," he murmured against her, brushing feather light kisses against her cheek.

"No, we can't." She ran her hand down the front of the cargo shorts that hung loosely around his waist. She let out a low moan as his head dipped down, pressing his lips against her collarbone and trailing a heated path down the front of her chest.

"I love you, Lois," he whispered in her ear as he ran his hands up and down her thighs. She let out a low moan. "I've always loved you."

She felt a shiver run down her spine as she felt his breath tickle her ear. "I love you too, Clark." She let out a low growl as his fingertips ran across the silk and lace covering her chest. His hand moved to cup her cheek and she hiked her left leg up, running her heel against his backside and helping to push the cotton fabric of his shorts further down.

He let out a low moan as her hand moved down his backside. His hands continued to move up and down her thighs, seeming to hesitate before reaching her hipbone. She wasn't sure if it was genuine hesitancy or the haze from the alcohol that kept him from taking what she was so eagerly offering.

She leaned forward, propping herself up on her elbows as she stared back at him. "Clark?" She took his hands in hers, removing them from her thighs as she leaned back on the bed. "Are you okay?"

"I've never been more okay about anything in my life," he murmured, leaning in to kiss her. "But this might not be a good idea," he whispered against her lips. "You're drunk."

"So are you," she reminded him, looking up at him through her hazy eyes. "Aren't you?"

"Right now I'm not sure which is the alcohol and which is you," he admitted with a sly grin.

"And that's a problem?" she asked him curiously, running her index finger down the front of his cotton shirt that was still halfway on.

"I love you, Lois," he whispered solemnly, "and I would love nothing more than to keep kissing you senseless until we both pass out from whatever liquor was in those shots..."

"But?" Lois asked uncertainly, hearing the hesitation in his voice.

"But I don't want to wake up in the morning and have you regret tonight," he whispered, cupping her cheek.

"What makes you think I'd regret it?" Lois asked.

"We're drunk," he reminded her.

"So?" she grinned back at him, leaning her head back as she guided his hands up and down the sides of her ribcage. She could feel the tension within her build with every second that passed by.

She ran her hand across his cheek, forcing him to look at her and slipped the other hand between their bodies, eliciting a low growl from him. "I don't know if you've noticed but I am capable of making decisions while intoxicated."

"This means too much to me. You mean too much to me," he murmured in her ear, gliding his hand down her side and over her

left hip. "I couldn't bear it if I lost you because a night of drinking and ...*unbelievably* strong hormones got the best of me."

"Just don't lie to me and you won't lose me," she reassured him, stroking his cheek.

"I love you," he murmured, against her lips. A satisfied grin moved across her face as he settled his weight against her more fully.

"Yes."

"Your legs are trembling," he commented, tracing the curve of her knee.

"Five years," she said between heated kisses.

"What's five years?" he asked, seeming to not understand what she was trying to say.

Unable to find the brainpower she needed at the moment in order to tell him, she ran her leg up and down the curve of his hip and whispered, "Make love to me."

\*\*\*

*Two Months Ago...*

The engine roared beneath the hood of Christina Wallace's SUV as she sped down the empty highway, hitting redial on her phone once again. The familiar sound of Jack Davenport's voicemail clicked on.

"Hello? Hello? Ohhh, gotcha! I'm not here right now but you can leave a message at the beep and I probably won't listen to it at all because I hate voicemail. Just call back later."

Christina let out a frustrated growl into the voicemail, "Jacob Martin Davenport, if I have to listen to that immature sorry excuse for a voicemail one more time I'm going to take that government issued phone and stick it up your rear! Where the hell are you?"

\*\*\*

Danny Malone held his jacket up to his mouth as he gripped the jacket of Jack Davenport with him, dragging him toward the front door. He glanced up at the unconscious figure of John Black that was still slumped over on the sofa.

The phone in Davenport's pocket continued to ring and Malone shook his head. "You're a popular guy, aren't you, Jack?" He reached the door and opened it, dragging the unconscious body of Jack Davenport with him outside the door. Once he was sure he had a good grip on him, he lit a match and tossed it into the methane gas filled room, closing the door behind him. He heard a large blast as he dragged Jack toward the parking lot. He turned to see the building in flames.

"So long, Johnny boy," Danny muttered, reaching over to rip his jacket sleeve. He counted to ten then took his fist and hit himself in the face. Immediately he felt the droplets of blood trickling down from his nose and he smiled, reaching for his phone.

"Christina?" he croaked out, putting on a show of despair as he heard her yelling into the phone at him about Jack. "Yeah, he's here, but... we've got a big problem, Wallace." He waited for her to quit hammering him with questions and then responded, "There's been an accident. A bunch of guys broke in and overpowered me and Jack. I woke up and the place was in flames. I got Jack but I couldn't get to Pete..."

\*\*\*

"Project is complete, Lex," Mrs. Cox's voice echoed from the speaker of his phone. "John Black will no longer be a problem."

"Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter, Mrs. Cox." Lex let out a sigh and tapped his hand on the desk. "See to it that Mr. Malone is rewarded for his assistance."

"With pleasure," came her response before he hit the end button on the phone. He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the doorway where Asabi was standing. "Yes, Asabi?"

"Mr. Bender is here with the update on the liquidation of Luthor National Network and Entertainment," Asabi explained with a solemn expression.

"What's more to discuss?" Lex grumbled angrily. "Stern

outplayed me and now I've lost a quarter of my company." Asabi looked down at his feet, unable to respond and Lex scowled, "Send him in. Waste of air that he is."

Sheldon Bender appeared in the doorway a few minutes later holding a large manila envelope, "Everything from the LNN deal with Stern Media, Mr. Luthor. Paperwork was filed this afternoon. The check has been deposited."

Lex glared up at Bender uncertain what his attorney expected from him. "Is that all?"

Bender shook his head. "You said you wanted a way to get out of this without appearing weak." He laid a large packet on Lex's desk. "This is how you do it."

"What is this?" Lex asked, gesturing to the thickness of the packet he had no intention of going through without good reason.

"Your bid for Senator of New Troy," Bender retorted with a smile. "You can spin the selling of LNN to Stern Media as an act of good faith and we can write off the loss as a part of the campaign."

"Senator," Lex mused aloud, mildly impressed that Bender had come up with something so devious in such a short amount of time. "Very well." He pointed to the door. "Get me a meeting with Governor and Judge Winkler. They can start the groundwork. I'll get Mrs. Cox on this right away."

"Yes, Mr. Luthor," Bender nodded graciously.

"And Bender?" Lex called out to him.

"Yes?"

"Good work." Lex nodded to his attorney with a pleased smile. "But don't let a loss like this happen ever again."

\*\*\*

*Present Day.*

The loud pounding of the woodpecker drilling into the elm tree outside the window reached Clark Kent's ears with a head splitting awareness. The sound of the car's stereo blasting the whining tune of one of the latest pop bands combined with the neighbor's cat's whining at full force added to the piercing pain that drummed through his ears, causing him to let out a low groan. He let out a muttered curse, running a hand across his face, hoping for the pain to stop as the noises he knew he shouldn't be able to hear hit him over and over again.

He became increasingly aware of the fact that he was not alone when he opened his eyes and saw the auburn hair scattered across his bare chest. He glanced to the side, noting she appeared to at least be wearing something. He swallowed hard, when the glance he stole quickly gave him more than he bargained for. Not only was he seeing through the comforter, but he was given the alarming visual of Lois' ilium and femur wrapped around his midsection. He quickly clamped his eyes closed, running his hand across his face. '*X-ray vision, check.*' he thought to himself as panic began to set in.

'*No, no, no,*' This was the last thing he needed. '*Go away,*' he tried to push away the subtle reminder that his powers—the abilities that made him different from everyone else—were returning. Whether they had returned completely he wasn't sure. He let out a low moan, stealing another glance at the sleeping figure of Lois Lane next to him. A muffled moan escaped her lips and he felt her hand brush against his thigh. He held his breath, uncertain if she was awake or just moving in her sleep. He clamped his eyes closed, mentally racking his brain for what to do.

One by one each delicious caress and sigh came back to him. After twenty-eight years he'd lost his virginity to hormones and mystery liquor. What had been in those shots? The mystery liquor coupled with the home brewed apple cider beer and his yearning for so much more with Lois had resulted in not only a drunken confession but consequences he knew he would have to face as soon as she realized he'd already broken the one promise she made him make.

<<"*Just don't lie to me and you won't lose me.*">>

How had things gone so terribly wrong? He should be thrilled to finally hear Lois say the words he'd been so desperate for her to say to him—Clark Kent. The confession had been what he'd been longing for since his own realization of how deep his love for her was.

His powers had returned. To what extent he wasn't sure yet, but one thing he was abundantly clear on was just how big of a hole he'd dug himself in. Last night he'd passed out drunk in Lois Lane's arms, and woken up with both super-hearing and x-ray vision working at full force. If he ever did find the courage to tell her about Superman there was no way she'd believe the timing was coincidental.

He was *so* dead.

"Oh, God," the sound of Lois' voice came muffled from against his chest and all nerves went on alert, uncertain how to react. He could still feel the piercing pain behind his eyes and he wasn't sure if it was from his returning powers or if it was the lingering effects of their drinking last night.

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Lois let out a low moan as the pain in her head slowly throbbled her awake. She opened her mouth, feeling the dryness as she pried her bleary eyes open. She immediately regretted it as a bright ray of sunshine hit her pupils and she squinted her eyes closed again. A masculine moan echoed in her eardrum and panic quickly set in. She turned her head, prying one eye open to confirm what she suspected to be the source of the sound.

There nestled beneath her was a shirtless Clark Kent. She swallowed hard, reaching beneath the comforter and amended mentally, '*Correction: Naked Clark Kent.*'

'*How much did I drink last night?*' she wondered feeling the skin to skin contact of her bare legs and hips pressed against Clark's midsection. She felt a hand on her backside, making it evident just how comfortable Clark had gotten with her last night.

This is bad.

This is very, very, *very* bad.

She winced, feeling a piercing pain between her eyes as she attempted to lift her head up. Immediately she could feel the tenderness between her legs and let out a frustrated whimper. They'd definitely had sex. From the soreness in her back and tenderness she felt throughout her body she'd venture to guess it had been more than once.

Fragmented memories from last night came back to her and she let out a groan. There was a lot of alcohol involved for both of them. They'd both been inebriated by the time they got back home and that coupled with her drunk confession of love for him had led her here, half naked in bed with Clark.

<<"*I think...I'm drunk.*"

"*Mmm hmm, me too.*"

"*I've never been drunk before.*">>

<<"*Drinking was a bad idea. Really, really bad idea. And you're really...*"

"*I'm what?*">>

<<"*I really want to kiss you.*"

"*I'm not stopping you.*">>

She squinted her eyes, and the sunlight hit them once more, sending a pulsing pain through her head. "Oh, God."

A hand slid up her back and a muffled groan caught her ears, "What the hell was in those drinks?"

She held a hand to her head, rolling over on her side as she blindly searched the nightstand for the bottle of aspirin she kept there. She grimaced when she found the cotton fabric from her discarded panties and tossed them on the floor, feeling the wood surface for the white bottle she was searching for. Finally, she found it tipped over in the corner of the table. She fisted the bottle and blindly twisted the cap, trying to open it and get some relief for the pounding her head was taking at the moment.

"Here," Clark reached over and took the bottle from her,

twisting the cap and shaking four capsules in his hand. He handed her two and tossed the other two in his mouth.

"Thanks." She still couldn't bring herself to open her eyes for fear that the splitting headache would get worse. She propped her head up just high enough to toss the capsules in her mouth and swallow hard, willing the pills to go down her throat with the small sample of saliva that coated her throat. She let out a muffled groan, leaning her head back on the pillow.

She should say something. She knew that. There were so many things that needed to be said after last night but right now she couldn't focus on anything other than the pounding between her eyes and the fact that the only thing she was currently wearing was half a sheet and the corset she'd been wearing beneath her blouse yesterday.

"Lois?" Clark's hand brushed against her cheek and she let out a groan. "Are you okay?"

"I just need my head to stop pounding," she pleaded, still not opening her eyes to face him yet.

"Okay," he whispered, gliding his hand down to her shoulder. "I'm going to take a shower. Do you want me to get you anything while I'm up?"

"Uh-uh," she shook her head, burying it beneath the comforter to block out the sunlight.

She felt him rise up from the bed and heard a few retreating footsteps head into the bathroom and the door close behind him. She let out a low moan, covering her face with both hands from beneath the covers. One by one, the memories from last night came back to her with the subtle reminder of just how out of control they both had been.

<<"This is probably a really bad idea. We're both drunk."

"We make better decisions drunk than sober."

"We could stop."

"No, we can't.">>

<<"I love you, Lois, I've always loved you.">>

She couldn't even determine where to focus her emotions. She was angry but mostly at herself for not having more willpower. She was mortified over how easily she had succumbed to the overpowering urges of her hormones. Five years and she still hadn't learned her lesson. She quickly blanched at that thought. She knew Clark wasn't Claude but she should have been in more control of the situation. After all, it was alcohol and her hormones that had resulted in her losing the gun-running story to Claude in the first place. To his credit Clark had tried to slow things down between them but at that point she was already well past the point of no return. Even in her drunken state she knew she never would have acted so brazen with him if she were sober.

<<"I would love nothing more than to keep kissing you senseless until we both pass out from whatever liquor was in those shots..."

"But?"

"But I don't want to wake up in the morning and have you regret tonight."

"What makes you think I'd regret it?"

"We're drunk."

"So? I don't know if you've noticed but I am capable of making decisions while intoxicated."

"This means too much to me. You mean too much to me. I couldn't bear it if I lost you because a night of drinking and ... unbelievably strong hormones got the best of me."

"Just don't lie to me and you won't lose me.">>

What was there left to say? She'd said plenty and done plenty to make her feelings perfectly clear. There was no going back to where things were. That part she wasn't as concerned about. The hard truth that she knew she would have to face at some point was that he still didn't know she knew he was Superman. He hadn't told her. He hadn't talked to his parents yet. There was no way she could tell him after last night. Knowing what she did from the

journals, she knew he'd probably assume everything she had shared with him was because of Superman. She couldn't tell him.

*'What have I done?'*

\*\*\*

The boardroom for Stern Media was dimly lit as Franklin Stern's board sat on one side of the table and the new members of the recently acquired Luthor Media sat on the other side.

Franklin's top attorney was on his left side and his recently hired campaign manager on his right.

"I don't understand, Mr. Stern." His attorney shook his head.

"This sudden urge to run for senate is ludicrous!"

"Lex Luthor already has the governor's backing," his VP of Public Affairs piped in. "I know you want to make a statement but is this the right way to do it?"

"Luthor's got some pull," Stern amended, "but I've been given the support of a few friends with their own resources.

"Such as?" The question came from Stern's Public Affairs VP once more.

"Oh, just a little tech company out of Gotham City." Stern shrugged. "I'm sure you've never heard of it. WayneTech?" A soft murmur filled the room and each board member nodded their recognition.

"You know if you do this Luthor will come at you with everything he's got," the warning came from the LNN Director.

"Luthor crossed the wrong billionaire," Franklin Stern remarked with a grunt. "He thinks he can outmaneuver me, but I've been doing this a long time boys and girls and there's nothing he can do that will make me back down." He pointed to the binders in front of everyone. "Which brings me to our first announcement under the Stern Media merger."

He flipped his own binder open and smiled at the familiar globe on the front of it. "We'll be reopening the Daily Planet, after an overhaul on expansion and updates to the facility of course."

"You sure that's a good idea?" the LNN director asked. "It's been months since the fire. The clients the Planet had have moved on."

"The Planet spent two hundred and nineteen years delivering the news to this city. It's a miscarriage of justice to continue to let one man's mistake ruin the hard work so many have put into it." Stern folded his hands over his lap. "I've been assured that if it is rebuilt the staff is willing to return. We just have to build it."

\*\*\*

Sheldon Bender made his way through the seventh floor of the Metropolis Federal Building. He held the file in his hands with a fierce grip as he neared the corner office for Victor Talley. He approached a brunette woman sitting outside the closed door to the FBI's Director of Major Crimes. He fished his wallet out of his pocket and tossed it on her desk. "My name is Sheldon Bender. The Sheldon Bender of New Troy and legal counsel of Alexander Luthor. I need to see Victor Talley now. I don't care who he's in a meeting with or what you *think* is more important on his schedule because right now nothing and no one is more important than *me*." He flashed her a stern expression before adding confidently. "Trust me."

A sardonic smile crossed her face and she pursed her lips. "Go on in, Mr. Bender."

\*\*\*

*Two Months Ago...*

The monotone beeping of a monitor next to him reached Jack Davenport's ears. He let out a low moan as his eyes fluttered open, piercing his pupil with the bright light from the fluorescent bulb up above. He let out a groan of agony and clamped his eyelids shut to stop the pulsing pain that ran through his temple.

"Jack?"

He heard his wife's voice and murmured her name in an incoherent attempt to speak, but the only sound that came out was a gurgled groan.

"It's okay," she reassured him, placing a hand on his chest. "Don't try to talk just yet. You're in the hospital. You were drugged and..."

\*\*\*

Lois gripped her phone, leaning back against the couch as she listened to Jimmy retell the news once more. John Black had been murdered. The star witness that was supposed to put an end to Lex's reign of terror on Metropolis had been murdered before he'd even had a chance to testify in front of the judge and go on the record. Because the video recording didn't have any rebuttal in the statement the testimony was now inadmissible unless they could find someone to corroborate his statement.

"How many people?" she finally found the strength to ask.

"The apartment building they were in had about three floors and it was partially occupied. There's still reports of injuries coming in. So far no deaths besides John's," Jimmy explained mournfully over the phone. "I'm really sorry, Lois."

"I just want this to end," Lois croaked out in-between tears. "We were so close and..."

"I know you do." Jimmy sighed over the phone. "Believe me, we're all right there with you." He let out a sigh and muttered, "What we could really use right now is Superman."

"No one knows where he is," Lois said in a monotone voice.

"Yeah, him or CK," Jimmy muttered. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall when they finally do get enough to slap the handcuffs on that smug face and lock Luthor in a two by four cage for the rest of his miserable life."

"He's going to get away with it." She let out a defeated sigh. "Everything he's done to the Planet, Jack, me... Clark. He's going to get away with it, Jimmy."

"No he's not!" Jimmy shouted back angrily. "He is not going to win, Lois, and don't you dare start giving up. We've come too far and fought too long to let him win now."

"How are we supposed to do anything, Jimmy?" Lois snapped back. "I'm all out of moves."

"We need to find Superman," Jimmy said in an even tone. "He'd know what to do."

"I wouldn't know the first place to start looking." Lois sighed.

"Who would?" Jimmy asked.

"Lex Luthor." Lois let out an uneasy laugh, "You want to go ask him?"

"You think Luthor did something to Superman?" Jimmy asked.

"I think he made it clear he was responsible for Superman and Clark being gone," Lois said carefully. "I think he did something to them and I don't know what that is and I'm afraid to even think of what that could be."

"But you still think Clark's alive," Jimmy reminded her.

"I hope he is," she whispered.

"So then why aren't we doing anything to rescue him?" Jimmy asked.

"Because I don't know where to look," Lois said with a bitter grunt. "Because the last time I reached out to someone that could help me find him, someone almost died."

"That was not on you, Lois," Jimmy reassured her.

"Yes it was," Lois said tearfully. "I went there and I stayed longer than I should have and because of that Jonathan nearly died. Don't try to sugar coat it."

"You didn't pull the trigger," Jimmy reminded her. There was a long pause on the line and then Jimmy asked, "What if I did some digging into Luthor's mainframe and see what I can find out? Maybe I can find a clue or something."

"If there's anything to be found it's not going to be kept somewhere that could be hacked," Lois said with a sigh. "He's not stupid. It'd be head knowledge within his inner circle."

"His inner circle being Mrs. Cox, Nigel and that butler of his." Jimmy said aloud.

"Yeah," Lois wiped her hand on her cheek, brushing her tears away. "None of them are going to talk to us."

\*\*\*

Christina Wallace sat in her office, listening to Victor Talley's update on Jack's condition. She felt a pang of guilt run through her as he relayed the severity of Jack's injuries to her. He had a drug in his system that wasn't even legal in the US or even on the FDA's radar. Whoever had done this had connections not only within their department but also with the criminals that cooked up the witch's brew that had nearly killed Jack.

"Christina are you listening to a word I just said?" Victor barked at her.

"Jack's in ICU. He's going to make it but I need to take the lead on the Luthor case." She gave him a dark expression and snipped, "I've got it, Talley."

"I've got two agents in the hospital right now, Wallace." Talley gave her a warning glare. "Davenport is gonna make it through but Malone is still unconscious. We won't be able to get a lead on these guys until Davenport can give us something. I need your head in the game."

"My head is in the game," Christina retorted, standing to her feet. "I'm going to find them."

"See that you do," Talley added. "They just cost us our star witness in the Luthor investigation."

"We'll postpone," Christina reasoned aloud. "We have plenty on him."

"We have two witnesses against the most influential man in the country." Talley barked. "One of which is supposed to be dead."

"We'll get more," Christina promised.

"How much time do you need?" Talley asked, burying his hands in his pockets.

"Get me six months," Christina said with a deep sigh. "That'll get me enough time to get enough witnesses so that Lois' testimony is just corroboration."

Talley took a deep breath and sighed. "I really hope you know what you're doing Wallace."

"Just trust me," Wallace pleaded with him.

"I guess I owe Robert Drake a game of golf," Victor Talley mused aloud.

"Thanks Victor."

"Just get the sorry piece of crap that did this, Wallace,"

\*\*\*

Bobby Bigmouth stood on the corner of Broad Street watching as the woman identified as Beverly Cox walked toward Hobb's Bay. He jotted down the name of the warehouse she entered and took a bite of the apple in his hand.

The kid had said he needed to know this lady's routine and he was going to deliver. How he'd arranged for a free meal for a week at Mike's diner he wasn't sure but the job was easy enough for him.

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Jimmy grabbed his bag and shoved his laptop into it with a change of clothes. Jack stood in the corner watching him with a shake of his head. "You know this is crazy, right?"

"If it means finding CK, I'm going to try," Jimmy said with a grunt, zipping up the bag.

"What makes you think he's even going to be in any condition to help us?" Jack asked him, pointing around the room. "We're five states away and we can't stop looking over our shoulder." Jack reminded him. "My brother's foster family is in witness protection right now..."

"I know," Jimmy said solemnly. "And I'm sorry for that. But we can't stop him just sitting on the sidelines waiting for him to strike."

"If Luthor really did keep him alive all this time, what the hell do you think he was doing, having tea?" Jack snorted angrily. "No,

the guy is a freaking psycho! What are you going to do against a bunch of high rolling gangsters?"

"Which is why we need to find Clark and rescue him," Jimmy argued with him. "Lois is convinced that Luthor did something to him and so am I."

"How do you know he isn't dead?" Jack asked.

"I don't," Jimmy admitted. "But I trust my friend. Lois says she knows he's alive and right now I've just got to have faith."

"This is insanity," Jack warned.

"Just keep an ear out for me and make sure nothing happens to the Chief, would ya?" Jimmy placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"You didn't answer my question," Jack pointed out.

"Just look out for the Chief," Jimmy repeated.

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Lois Lane gripped the steering wheel, mentally preparing herself for what was to come. It had been three months since she'd last stepped foot into this city. Three months since everything had come crashing down around her and she'd been forced into hiding.

<<"Clark wouldn't just give up.">>

She shook her head, recalling the conversation she'd had with Martha and Jonathan. The last few weeks had been difficult for all of them. Missing. The idea that Clark Kent—her partner, her best friend, her...

What? Her mind called out to her, taunting her at how easily she had dismissed his declaration of love to her.

<<"I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.">>

<<"If that's what you want, then fine! Get in bed with the devil!">>

<<"Superman, is there any hope for us?">>

<<"There are things about me that you don't know. That you may never know.">>

<<"I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.">>

<<"Clark wouldn't just disappear.">>

<<"When did you last see him?">>

<<"I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.">>

"I'm an idiot," she told herself, staring into the rearview mirror as she approached the bridge leading into New Troy. She let out a shaky breath, "I can do this. I can do this."

With that she hit the gas, speeding across the bridge as the path cleared.

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"What do you mean you don't know where they are?" Jack Davenport practically shouted into the phone. His blood was boiling when he received the call from Perry White that Jimmy Olsen and Lois Lane had hatched a plan to go after Luthor's assistant, Beverly Cox. He groaned, running a hand through his ragged hair.

"Jimmy left last night," Perry said in a gruff tone. "Lois, I'm sure, is on her way to meet him. Jack says they've hatched a plan to try and find Clark."

"If he hasn't shown up in this long, he's probably not going to," Jack hissed into the phone. "Does she have any idea how risky this is?"

"Lois is not going to just give up on her partner, Agent Davenport. If there's even a chance that he might still be out there she won't stop looking for him. No threat or court order is going to stop her," Perry instructed in an icy tone.

Jack let out a deep sigh. "If Luthor finds her..."

"Have some faith, Agent Davenport," Perry instructed. "I'm sure she'll be reaching out to you soon."

With that the phone call ended and Jack let out a disgusted snort. "I swear to God if she wasn't my only witness linking that sorry piece of garbage to this case I'd kill her myself."

"Jack, calm down," Christina warned him as she placed a hand on his shoulder. "You're supposed to be taking it easy."

"Yeah, I am, Christina." Jack let out a long sigh. "Looks like we're going on a road trip."

"To?"

"Metropolis," Jack said with a grunt. "After I print a new ID for her probably dead partner."

"You're making that face again," Christina warned.

"She knows this case could fall apart if anything happens to her. She knows it and she still drives right into the lion's den," Jack fumed angrily.

"And what if her partner is alive?" Christina asked him. "He could be a potential witness that could tie up the case."

"Don't count your chickens before they've hatched,"

Davenport warned. "Remember what happened with John Black."

"No one could have known Malone was on the take,"

Christina Wallace said with a cross expression. "He lied to everyone."

"Danny Malone never should have been on this case, Christina. We let him talk his way in and we let him tag along with the relocation team. We let John Black down and blew it. John Black was killed because we failed to protect him," Jack corrected. "I'm not going to make that mistake again."

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*Present Day...*

Victor Talley leaned back in his executive chair, tapping his foot against the tile floor as he mentally prepared his response.

"What are our options on shoring up this scandal with Lex Luthor?"

"What do you have on him?" Robert Drake, the Attorney General asked, looking back at him for a response.

"I've got a witness that he tried to kill and that he thinks he succeeded in the murder. I've got a kid that's heard a lot but won't testify if he's the only one taking a stand against Luthor," Talley listed off.

"What about this doctor?" Drake asked, lifting up the file in his hand.

"It'll lead us to Luthor's hitman, Nigel St. John." Talley gave a scowl. "Davenport wants to try and get St. John to flip on him."

"He'll never do it," Drake warned him.

"Then there's the possibility of coercing information from Luthor's personal assistant." Talley set down the file in front of Robert Drake to read. "Only problem is she's on the run from one of the most notorious assassins in the world. Ra's Al Ghul."

Robert Drake let out a low whistle. "You think she has enough on him to tie up the case?"

"I think if we can offer a deal I can get the names of every dirty politician on Luthor's payroll and make sure he never sees sunlight outside of a prison cell for the next three thousand years," Talley said with a growl. "I can't just go in and arrest him, Drake. When I go after him I've got to go after everyone...all at once or it'll never stick."

"How far up do you think it goes?" Drake asked.

The door swung open and an irate Sheldon Bender stood in the doorway demanding their full attention. "Mr. Talley, you and I have some business to attend to so I highly suggest that you ask your guest to leave because this cannot wait."

Robert Drake stood to his feet, turning to face a now bewildered Sheldon Bender. "Is that so?"

"Mi-Mister Attorney General," he stammered out. "I'm sorry. I had no i-idea you were..."

Drake turned to Talley. "Send me the brief in the morning. Let's get the ball rolling on this." He turned to Bender. "He's all yours Mr. Bender."

Victor Talley's eyes twinkled with amusement as he turned toward Sheldon Bender. "You wanted to see me?"

Sheldon Bender straightened his jacket and tossed the

summons in his hand on Talley's desk. "You added a new name to the witness list but no contact information."

"If I give you my witness' contact information then that's like leading the grizzly bear to the innocent little fawn." Talley retorted with a smug grin. "Tell Mr. Luthor if he's nervous about a little evidentiary hearing he should come talk to our prosecutor. I'm sure she'd love to carve out a deal for him."

"Not in this lifetime," Bender retorted.

"No, he'll still be serving time well past this lifetime and probably most of my grandkids' too." Talley chuckled.

"You look awfully smug for a man that's about to be eating crow in front of Judge Winkler," Bender retorted.

"Aw." Talley grinned happily. "You changed judges on me." His eyes narrowed. "Do you really think a simple change like the judge hearing this case will get your client off?" He made a clucking noise with his tongue. "I've got your client by the jugular. If I were you, Mr. Bender, I'd figure out how to replace that hefty retainer you get every month."

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Jimmy Olsen took a deep breath as he looked around the dark walls of the prison waiting room, glancing at the deteriorating condition of the metal door that separated him from some of the most dangerous criminals in Metropolis. He knew this was risky. Jack had all but hit him upside the head when he realized Jimmy wasn't coming with him on the ride back to Perry and Alice's. After hearing what had happened with Luthor and discovering how deep Luthor's assistant's ties were to the underworld of not only Metropolis but the entire country's criminal element he knew there was never going to be a safe place for him until he had enough to nail Lex Luthor to the wall.

The bloodied image of Lois when Henderson and Perry had brought her into Dr. Kahn's office was still seared into his mind. The minute they'd gotten the call Jack had disappeared. He thought he was next and didn't want to put a target on anyone's back. Little did they know at the time, Jack was the last thing on Lex Luthor's mind.

Lois had been hysterical when they'd been attempting to treat her wounds. The screams had been hard to listen to from the hall but the silence that followed once she'd been sedated enough to treat the wounds had been unnerving. Guilt and anger coursed through him on a level he'd never known before.

Lois had finally seen the truth—the real truth behind Lex Luthor's eyes—and it had almost been too late. Where was Superman? Where was Clark? No one could find any of them. He still didn't know where Superman was. Lois had hinted that Clark might know where Luthor was hiding him. She seemed to think that Clark would know how to find him, but he still couldn't understand how Superman could ignore the crime and pleas for help. That's what Superman did, right? He showed up when there was trouble.

Except this time, he didn't.

At first they thought he'd been killed but that theory was quickly squashed when an agent looking for his missing Superman lookalike identified the body in Hobb's Bay as Barry. Now they were left with the question of where was Superman? Lois didn't seem worried. Clark had yet to provide any leads for them and right now the only thing they had was an impressionable twelve-year-old that was terrified of Lex Luthor.

So here he was with yet another criminal trying to get someone to testify against Lex Luthor. The door creaked from the other side and he looked up to see a very surprised looking Pete Black at the door.

"What are you doing here?"

Jimmy stood to his feet and put on the best front he could, knowing full well that if Pete smelled his fear he'd lose his chance. "I'm here to talk about the deal you made to get in here."

Pete let out a laugh. "I don't know what you're talking about,

kid."

"You told John you made a deal to pay off his gambling debt." Jimmy noticed the angry expression that crossed Pete's face but continued, "John said you were paid by a woman to go to prison and take someone named 'Jack' out by orders of the boss."

Pete pointed his finger at him. "Don't you dare talk to me about my brother!"

"He was murdered for trying to do the right thing," Jimmy said evenly. "You really want to continue to serve time for a crime you didn't commit and cover for your brother's murderers?"

"He was killed by a crooked FBI Agent." Pete snorted. "From what I hear he got his in the end."

"You and I both know Malone wasn't the lone gunman in that job," Jimmy retorted.

"I don't know nothing," Pete said with a scowl, walking back toward the door and banging on it. "and I'm done with this conversation."

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## Chapter 15

Lois stared down at the dark liquid in her coffee mug, searching for answers that wouldn't come. She'd gone over her options from the time she'd stepped into the shower until now and she didn't like any of them. The lingering effects from her hangover weren't helping things either. After getting dressed she'd checked the phone and seen over a dozen missed calls from Jimmy. She tried calling him back but it went straight to voicemail. She had two voicemails which she could only imagine were from Jimmy probably yelling at her for not answering the phone. She could listen to them later. Right now she just needed to process the drastic change that had occurred between her and Clark.

Before last night she never would have thought alcohol could affect Clark. He certainly appeared to be in as much pain as she was. Was it a lingering effect from his exposure to the Kryptonite? Was that what made him susceptible or was it something that had always affected him? If last night hadn't happened she could have just asked him. She grunted at the wasted opportunities over the last few months where she could have just told him she knew he was Superman without having him hate her for it. Now of course she couldn't tell him, not without ruining everything.

If there was one thing she'd learned from the journals Martha had given her it was just how insecure Clark was about his alter-ego. If he found out she knew, then everything would be over. The game of charades and pretending the two weren't the same person as well as any chance of him trusting her enough to tell her himself.

A tear fell down her cheek as she swallowed hard. That was what she wanted more than anything. She wanted him to trust her. Her second option gave her hope that that might happen one day but if she continued to say nothing she'd be lying to him every day as not only a former colleague and friend but now as something more. She couldn't do that. The idea of trying to pursue any attainable relationship with him and still not tell him what she knew felt wrong.

Both options left a bitter taste in her mouth. There was, of course, the third option, which she liked even less, which was to pretend last night didn't happen and try to go back to the way things were before. Right as the thought entered her mind, a memory from last night was right behind it, reminding her of the mind-numbing ecstasy that had been coursing through her again and again. It was probably the hardest of all the choices to make but it left her conscience less burdened. She couldn't consider starting any kind of a romantic relationship with him knowing she wasn't being honest and she knew if he ever found out she'd known all this time he'd never forgive her.

It seemed ironic really, the superhero she'd worshiped and longed for was the very reason she couldn't be with him now.

She'd had months to process the revelation. She had long ago set aside the hero worship she'd once had and looked beyond the cape and the 'S.' It wasn't until then that she realized her attraction to the superhero had been the same things that drew her to Clark as a friend.

The realization that she not only had turned Clark's confession of love for her down, but had also unwittingly twisted the knife further by asking him to fetch his alter-ego had been a bitter pill to swallow. In the same day she'd turned the man behind the cape and spandex down she'd pleaded with him that she would love him as an ordinary man. Realizing how badly she must have hurt him she'd done her best to try and earn his trust back and be there to help him as the friend she hadn't been for the last year.

Now, everything was gone.

She was just thankful she hadn't confessed she knew he was Superman last night. That was her saving grace at the moment. Still, they needed to talk. The longer things were left unresolved the more opportunity for things to go wrong. Putting her feelings aside and stepping back was the best decision. It was too risky to start something that was destined to fail from all the secrets being kept. It was better this way. Blame it on the alcohol and walk away.

Deciding she had prolonged the dreaded conversation long enough she stood up and walked toward the backdoor. She gasped in surprise when she saw Clark knelt down on the ground and smoke coming up from the steps. She stood outside the glass door, gripping the handle for a long moment before deciding to open the door. Whatever it was that Clark had done or was attempting to do had taken a lot out of him. She could see the exhaustion on his face as he approached the steps to grab something.

She opened the door, stepping out on the porch and closing the door behind her. She watched as Clark climbed the steps to the porch and she stole a glance once more at the back yard. There was a large pile of leaves on one side of the hill leading into the woods that hadn't been there before. What was he doing?

Clark reached the top of the steps and saw her, apprehension covered his features as he walked toward her. She took a breath, uncertain how to begin. "Hi." She ran a hand through her damp hair and nervously toyed with the hem of her t-shirt with the other as he approached.

"Hi." He cleared his throat.

"Getting some air?" She looked around the backyard behind him uncertain how to begin.

"Uh, yeah." He nodded, taking another step toward her. "I figured the fresh air would do me some good."

He gave her a half-smile and she could already feel her knees going weak. She looked away, staring down at her feet before looking back up and asking, "How's your head?"

"Sore."

"Yeah." She sighed, clearing her throat. "First one's always a doozie."

That comment seemed to catch him by surprise and he looked back at her quizzically. "First one?"

"Hangover," she clarified. "Last night you mentioned you'd never been drunk before."

"Yeah." He nodded recognition.

He stared back at her and she could already feel herself wavering on what she knew she needed to do. She cleared her throat, breaking the silence. "We should probably talk."

"Isn't that what we're doing now?" He flashed her a teasing smile.

"About last night," she clarified, twisting her hair nervously with her hand. "It's tempting... unbelievably tempting to indulge in everything that happened, but is this really the smartest move? I mean, we literally have hired hitmen chasing after us and a sociopathic crime lord lurking in the shadows. It would be so easy to pretend that none of that existed but we can't. This is already a

complicated enough of a situation and we just made it even more complicated. I don't think this is a good idea and..."

He placed a hand on her shoulder and she could feel the electricity flowing through her from the simple touch. He looked back at her and whispered, "You're babbling."

<< "But I don't want to wake up in the morning and have you regret tonight."

"What makes you think I'd regret it?"

"We're drunk." >>

"Sorry." She looked down, trying to force her mind to focus on anything but the close proximity between them. Why did this have to be so difficult? She wanted more than anything to throw caution to the wind and pick up exactly where they had left off last night and let her mind forget everything, but she knew she couldn't.

He moved his hand to her face, stroking her cheek with his thumb and forcing her to look at him. "Lois, complicated is an understatement of how things have been for the last few months but that's not how I'd describe *this*."

<< "I love you, Lois, I've always loved you." >>

"It's dangerous," she said weakly as he stared back at her. It was a cop-out and she knew it. It was no more dangerous than what they'd been doing for the last few months. She couldn't think when he was this close to her. "I'm not good at letting my guard down. If I let my guard down I could make a mistake and..."

"You keep acting like it's just you against the world," he said, stroking her cheek. She felt a flutter in her abdomen as his other hand traced the curve of her neck. "Lois, we're in this together. We're a team." She felt her insides waver as he leaned closer and whispered, "This isn't easy, but nothing worth fighting for is."

<< "This means too much to me. You mean too much to me. I couldn't bear it if I lost you because a night of drinking and ... unbelievably strong hormones got the best of me." >>

"We're on the run from professional killers," she reminded him, weakly.

<< "I would love nothing more than to keep kissing you senseless until we both pass out from whatever liquor was in those shots..." >>

"So no matter, what we have one another's back." He shrugged his shoulders, stroking her cheek. "That doesn't have to change any of this." She silently listened as he poked holes in her theory and she found herself debating internally with just how sold she was on putting an end to things. He leaned in closer and whispered, "If you want to forget last night, I will, but not because of what Nigel or Luthor might do. I've let Luthor take over too much of my life already. I won't let him dictate this too."

"I know." She gave him a watery smile, knowing all too well how he felt. Lex had taken so much from both of them already.

"Do you regret last night?"

<< "So, there may not be a Planet or a story to chase, but we can still learn to work together as a team to bring down Luthor."

"Lane and Kent."

"I guess now it's Kane and Kane?"

"Hottest Team in Town." >>

The question came out of nowhere and she struggled to respond truthfully. She could lie and say she regretted it and didn't want anything more than friendship but after everything that had transpired between them over the past few months she knew she couldn't do that.

"I regret the hangover." She gave him a weak smile. "And not taking anything last night after drinking."

<< "I love you, Clark." >>

"That's not what I asked," he reminded her.

She sighed, leaning her head back against the door and looked back up at him. She had to answer truthfully. "No."

"Me neither..."

"So where does this leave us?" she asked.

<<“I really want to kiss you.”

“I’m not stopping you.”>>

“Here.”

Before she could formulate a response his lips were on hers. His hands were in her hair and any recollection of why this was a bad idea was silenced as she parted her lips, allowing his tongue to smooth its way into her mouth. Her knees were growing weaker by the second and all she could focus on was how very right he felt pressed up against her.

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Clark took a deep breath, opening the back door and stepping outside. He held his hand up, squinting his eyes as he walked across the porch and looked around the backyard. The wooded barrier prevented anyone from seeing into the back of the cabin. It was as perfect a place as any to test himself.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stepped down the wooden steps leading into the yard. He could still feel the lingering effects from what he could only assume was the hangover and the painful shock of his powers returning. The ringing in his ears had subsided somewhat and as the morning progressed he felt less of the dull ache behind his eyes.

He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose and took another step into the yard, checking behind him to be sure there was no one around that could see him. It was late enough in the morning that most of the neighbors had already headed into town so he didn’t have to worry about someone driving by this time of day.

He took another breath, clearing his mind of the turmoil from the last few months and focusing his senses on the sounds around him. The soft chirping of the birds in the trees above him teased his ear drums.

<<“I love you, Clark.”>>

<<“I have a knack for getting in over my head and this time I’m so deep in I’m not even sure if I’ll ever get out.”>>

<<“I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known.”>>

<<“I love you, Clark.”>>

<<“Lois Lane won’t be a problem. She’s sure to have bled out by now anyway.”>>

<<“You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I’d say that’s personal.”>>

A burst of air brushed across his face and he moved around the yard, causing the leaves around him to fly up in the air. He halted to a stop, turning behind him and looking over his shoulder at the street to make sure the coast was still clear. It wasn’t nearly as fast as the normal speed range he’d once had but the super-speed was definitely there.

<<“I love you, Clark.”>>

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

<<“So, there may not be a Planet or a story to chase, but we can still learn to work together as a team to bring down Luthor.”

“Lane and Kent.”

“I guess now it’s Kane and Kane?”

“Hottest Team in Town.”>>

<<“I know you tried to warn me and like an idiot I didn’t believe you. I’m sorry.”>>

<<“I love you, Clark.”>>

He took a shallow breath, clamping his eyes closed, trying to will his mind to clear. He flashed back to the first time he’d accidentally levitated when he was sixteen. The experience had been so shocking he hadn’t come out of his room for a week. After all this time he still found the gift of flight to be his favorite of his powers. He opened his eyes, glancing down at the ground. It wasn’t much, but it was a start. He let out a long breath, lowering himself back to the ground.

He pulled his hand down on the stairs, contemplating his next

move. Dare he even attempt to test the heat vision yet? Super-strength? The dull ache behind his eyes reminded him of just how weak he might possibly still be. But he had to know.

He picked up a glass bottle from the recycling bin and set it on the third step of the wooden stairs. He counted back ten steps and then stared up at the green bottle. It happened so fast he couldn’t stop the blast and let out a low groan, hitting the ground as he clamped his eyes closed. The pain hit the inside of his eyes lids and he let out a muffled growl, pounding his fist on the ground. He felt a thud beneath him at the impact.

He let out a low breath, peering up carefully to see the once green bottle to be nothing more than a melted black glass mass on the step. He hoisted himself up, wincing as he brought his hand to his face, feeling for any sign of damage. His eyes flickered open and he looked around, taking in the burn marks on the steps and picked up the melted bottle and set it inside the trashcan, burying it under a few cardboard boxes. Hopefully that would be enough to hide the evidence. He turned back to the stairs and saw the black burn marks on the third step with a distinct round mark inside it.

He took a deep breath, setting his foot over the burn mark and climbing the steps. He needed to get back inside before Lois finished her shower. They needed to talk about last night and where to go from here. There was a lot that needed to be said but he still wasn’t sure how much to reveal right now. The fact that his powers were returning definitely complicated things. Despite the fact that he had no intention of returning to his Superman duties he couldn’t deny the fact that his differences were now a complication Lois needed to know...before she found out the hard way.

He stopped when he reached the top of the stairs and saw Lois standing by the backdoor. “Hi.” She ran a hand through her hair, meeting his gaze.

“Hi.” He cleared his throat, uncertain what else to say. How long had she been standing there?

“Getting some air?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah.” He nodded, walking toward her, watching her carefully. “I figured the fresh air would do me some good.” He gave her a half-smile.

“How’s your head?” she asked.

“Sore,” he said carefully, uncertain how to explain the after effects he was feeling.

“Yeah.” She sighed, clearing her throat. “First one’s always a doozie.”

He looked back at her in surprise. “First one?”

“Hangover,” she clarified. “Last night you mentioned you’d never been drunk before.”

“Yeah.” He nodded recalling the confession. He’d said a lot of things he shouldn’t have last night.

There was a silent lull between them and she finally cleared her throat, breaking the silence. “We should probably talk.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing now?” He flashed her a teasing smile.

“About last night,” she clarified nervously. Before he could respond she cut him off in full-babble mode. “It’s tempting... unbelievably tempting to indulge in everything that happened but is this really the smartest move? I mean, we literally have hired hitmen chasing after us and a sociopathic crime lord lurking in the shadows. It would be so easy to pretend that none of that existed but we can’t. This is already a complicated enough of a situation and we just made it even more complicated. I don’t think this is a good idea and...”

He placed a hand on her shoulder, drawing her attention back to him and she stopped. Flashes from the passionate lovemaking that had overtaken both of them moved to the forefront of his mind and he swallowed hard. He felt like the world was tilting on its axis threatening to destroy everything. One wrong move and he

knew there would be no going back. His only regret about last night was the fact that it had happened when they were both drunk. He looked back at her, uncertain how to voice everything that was running through his mind in that moment as he tried to process what she'd said. "You're babbling," he finally said.

"Sorry." She looked down at her feet.

He moved his hand to her face, stroking her cheek with his thumb and forcing her to look at him. "Lois, complicated is an understatement of how things have been for the last few months but that's not how I'd describe *this*."

"It's dangerous," she said weakly as he stared back at her. He could hear her heart pounding in her chest as he stared back at her. "I'm not good at letting my guard down. If I let my guard down I could make a mistake and ..."

"You keep acting like it's just you against the world," he said carefully. "Lois, we're in this together. We're a team." She was silent as he leaned closer and whispered, "This isn't easy, but nothing worth fighting for is."

"We're on the run from professional killers," she reminded him.

"So no matter what, we have one another's back." He shrugged his shoulders, stroking her cheek. "That doesn't have to change any of this." She was silent and he pressed onward. "If you want to forget last night, I will, but not because of what Nigel or Luthor might do. I've let Luthor take over too much of my life already. I won't let him dictate this too."

"I know." She gave him a watery smile.

"Do you regret last night?" He finally found the strength to ask the question weighing on his mind.

"I regret the hangover." She gave him a weak smile. "And not taking anything last night after drinking."

"That's not what I asked," he reminded her.

She sighed, leaning her head back against the door she was leaning on and looked back up at him. "No."

He let out a shuddered breath against her, feeling as if the weight of the world had been lifted off of him. "Me neither..."

"So where does this leave us?" she asked.

"Here," he whispered, brushing his lips against hers. He ran his thumb over the outline of her jaw, drawing his hands against her face as he slowly broke off the kiss. She let out a shaky breath and gazed back at him. He could still see the uncertainty on her face but this time it was coupled with the same longing and desire he knew was written on his face.

She was right. This was dangerous. She had no idea how risky this budding relationship was. It was probably safer to do what she was suggesting and not act on the firestorm of emotions that were currently mounting inside him at the moment. But after over a year of sitting on the sidelines and doing nothing and nearly losing his chance, he couldn't do it. He couldn't just walk away knowing she felt the same way. He couldn't let Luthor take anything else from him.

If she ended up hating him for it, so be it, but he would not allow Luthor to control his life anymore. He had already taken so much from both of them. He was not going to let him destroy this too. *'You'll destroy it yourself if you don't tell her,'* his conscience chided him.

He swallowed hard, silently willing the thought to leave the forefront of his mind as he struggled to figure out a way to salvage his relationship with Lois without taking the risk of losing everything. He needed to tell her about Superman and he would, but right now he needed to give her the reassurance that she could trust that the sky was not going to start falling.

"There's a new place on North Main Street that's supposed to have a killer royal burger," he smiled back at her. "You want to check it out?"

Lois gave him a half-smile. "As long as there is no mention of liquor or beer in any of the ingredients."

He winced, recalling how bad his head had been aching earlier. "No mystery shots, I promise."

"Or David's beer," she added.

"Or David's beer," he echoed with a grin.

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Jimmy fumed angrily as he stormed up the steps to City Hall where he knew he would find Dr. Edward Sayer. He still couldn't believe Pete Black was so callous to not want to help put his brother's murderers behind bars. He spotted the sign that directed him to the New Troy Department of Energy.

He tightened his jaw, pressing the button for the elevator to take him up to the fourth floor. From what he was able to find out in his research, Dr. Edward Sayer had not only been the one to point the finger at Superman for being the source of the heatwave this past year but he had also led the investigation with the NRC into LexCorp's Nuclear Power Plant that had been the source of the problem to begin with. He was the reason there hadn't been anything more than a fine issued. He was sure of it.

The elevator pinged and a group of attorneys stepped into the lobby. He reached over to press the fourth floor. He let out a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for his confrontation with Edward Sayer.

\*\*\*

The rain drizzled down against the glass window outside the Mountain Eatery, a new burger joint Clark had heard about from a few of the guys at work. Lois glanced across the table at Clark, uncertain how to react. What was she supposed to do now? Wait for him to tell her he was Superman so they could finally talk about what had really happened in that underground prison he was in. Where did any of this leave them?

She wanted more than anything to stop pretending she didn't know he was still recovering from obvious effects of Kryptonite. She wanted more than anything for him to just be honest with her and tell her what was going on. He couldn't seriously think they could start any kind of relationship without telling her he was Superman.

*'Used to be,'* she reminded herself. *'Superman doesn't bleed or bruise.'* She'd helped treat the wounds after rescuing Clark. The only explanation Martha had given her was Kryptonite. That was the common theme in every conversation she'd had with the Kents. Lex must have gotten his hands on Kryptonite. Clark must have been attacked with Kryptonite. Lex must have overpowered him with Kryptonite.

Kryptonite that was still out there. Clark's powers were gone. The Superman Metropolis had come to know was gone. All that was left was Clark and the demons he was left with after whatever hell Lex had put him through. Now here she was, uncertain how to move forward with any type of relationship with Clark knowing he was hiding so much from her.

Last night she made a mistake. She could not afford to get swept up in her emotions, but in her inebriated state she'd found herself indulging in the sinfully tempting feelings she'd been harboring. It had been liberating. Intoxicating. That was the problem. The electrical storm that had ignited between them when his lips touched hers had made her forget. She had lost control. They both did.

She'd tried to put an end to things and backtrack to the painful awkwardness of harboring her feelings of longing and desire in order to look herself in the mirror without feeling the pang of guilt that was eating her from inside. She knew it was a long shot. Trying to pretend the passionate lovemaking that they had shared hadn't changed everything was futile. She found herself fighting the urges that she thought had been long buried for the past five years. Pretending she wasn't thinking of how perfectly his body fit against hers when he was mere inches away from her. Pretending that half-smile on his face didn't bring the memory of his lazy grin when he had collapsed in her arms again and again.

This was a bad idea.  
 She knew it.  
 Still she couldn't seem to convince herself to pull away.  
 He reached across the table, stopping her hand from its nervous tapping against the table. "You okay?"  
 "Okay I guess." She shrugged. "This place seems...nice."  
 "Got a nice charm to it," he said tapping his thumb against her wrist.

"Yeah." Lois nodded. "Burger was good." He nodded in agreement and smiled back at her. She felt her knees go weak as she stared back at him. She could keep avoiding it or just talk about the nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach. She was in trouble.

She set the mobile phone on the table, deciding a distraction was a much better thing to focus on at the moment. "Jimmy called earlier. I never could get him to answer. We need to call him later."

"He leave a voicemail?" he asked.

"Two. But I haven't listened to them yet." She sighed and offered him a weak smile. "He's probably just yelling at me for not answering the phone again."

"He worries," Clark reminded her.

"I know," she said with a knowing look. "A little too much sometimes."

He pointed to the phone on the table. "So, you going to listen to it?"

\*\*\*

"You won't get away with this!" Jimmy Olsen screamed from the hallway as he was taken into custody by two armed guards that had been called up to Dr. Sayers office.

"I do hope you can get the help you need young man," Dr. Sayer responded evenly. "Wild accusations like this can be harmful to your health."

"You really think he won't come for you next?" Jimmy shouted as the door to the elevators closed behind him.

\*\*\*

John Baker looked at his watch, throwing an irritated look toward the flight board showing the arrivals and departures for New Troy International. He had been waiting for the signal to get ready to board but the red light still remained lit on 'Delayed.' He stole a glance across the aisle where the passengers were waiting and growing restless.

What was he supposed to tell them?

A man in his mid-thirties approached him with a determined expression. John Baker gulped, mentally preparing himself for the barrage of questions that were to come. "I'm not sure when they'll be boarding, sir..."

"I'm not here about the flight," the man said firmly. "I need a room with a phone." He pulled out a black square shaped object with a silver badge on the front and flipped it open, revealing his identification.

John Baker squinted his eyes at the identification and swallowed hard. "What's the FBI doing here?" He spotted a group of dark suited men surrounding the corner of the waiting area where one of the passengers was sitting.

"We just need a room with a phone, Mr. Baker," the man responded.

"Of course," John reached over and pressed the speed dial on his phone to dial reception. "I'll get right on that Mister..."

"Davenport, Jack Davenport."

\*\*\*

Clark stole a glance toward Lois who had been silent since leaving the restaurant. The voicemail from Jimmy was still echoing in his mind. The call from Jimmy hadn't been a friendly one.

*"Lois, you and CK better have a really good reason for not answering the phone. Give me a call when you get this. This is an emergency!"*

Unfortunately, Jimmy hadn't given any information on what the emergency was other than it was important. They'd called repeatedly and gotten no answer. When they reached out to Perry he had informed them that Jimmy had been in Metropolis for the last two days trying to gather evidence for their case against Lex Luthor. Two days Jimmy had been in danger of being taken out by Luthor's thugs.

He tried not to ponder too long on what could have happened in that time. It seemed Jimmy had taken after Lois' reporting style in act first and think about the consequences later. The update they'd gotten from Perry hadn't been a good one. Nigel had shown up threatening Jimmy's mom for information. How he thought Jimmy's mom would give him anything he wasn't sure but it was clear the hitman was getting closer. He wanted to know where Jimmy was for some reason. Did he think Jimmy was hiding Lois? Was he looking to take Jimmy out like Pete Black was supposed to take care of Jack?

He shook his head, mentally pushing the dreadful thought from his mind. Thinking about what Nigel or Luthor's intentions were wouldn't help anyone. They needed to get ahold of Agent Wallace and Davenport so they could figure out what to do. The only problem was neither of them were answering their phones.

He pulled into the driveway and turned the engine off. "We're here." He looked over at Lois and noticed her body was trembling. "Lois?"

\*\*\*

Nigel reached the state line for South Carolina and let out a groan when he saw the miles left until he reached Clover, South Carolina. He'd finally gotten a break in his search for Lois Lane. Not only was he able to get a location on Lois Lane but the added bonus was getting a location on Clark Kent. He still wasn't sure what Lex Luthor's business was with the former reporter but he knew if the search required a visit from Lex Luthor himself it had to be important.

After comparing the geocode location points with known addresses of all relatives of the former Daily Planet staff—the only people Lois Lane could have turned to—he was able to find something he hadn't before. He'd looked into Perry White and his older son, Steven White but had made the mistake of not looking into the relatives or *late* relatives of Alice White. Fifteen houses. Four condos. Three apartment complexes. The real estate mogul had more than enough properties to keep Lois Lane hidden in plain sight without anyone being the wiser. How he'd missed such a vital clue he wasn't sure but the important thing was he'd found the link and now had a list of all the addresses under Tim Westman's name. One of which was located in Clover, South Carolina. Five miles outside of where the call from Jimmy Olsen came to.

"I've got you," he said with a deep sigh as he pulled into the rest stop.

\*\*\*

"Lois?" Clark placed an arm around Lois, sitting next to her as he attempted to calm her shaking body. He continued to talk to her, listening to her panicked sobs come flooding out with every possible scenario that could end with Nigel or Luthor finding them. He wanted to tell her everything would be fine but he couldn't promise that. She was right. They could find them at any moment but the knowledge that his powers were returning helped ease his mind to know he could protect Lois against Nigel at least. He wasn't as confident about Luthor. Unfortunately, he couldn't tell her that.

"Hey, it's okay, just breathe," he whispered, running his hand up and down her shoulders. He noticed the volume in her frantic wails was coming down with each whisper of reassurance. He leaned closer, holding her to him as she continued to cry through the anxiety attack she was having. "It's okay."

Her eyelashes fluttered open and unshed tears glistened in the

corners of her eyes. He felt a pang in his chest as he held her, unwilling to break the contact just yet until he was sure she was okay. He immediately recognized the signs and he held her close, whispering in her ear, “Just breathe.” His hand brushed against her cheek and she jumped. She took a deep breath, panting frantically. “Lois, listen to my voice. Everything’s fine.” Clark instructed, holding her against him. Tears ran down her cheeks and he brushed his thumb against her cheek, swiping the tears away.

“Clark...” she let out a strangled sob as she stared back at him.

“I know,” he whispered, running a hand across her cheek.

“I...”

“You’re having a panic attack,” he whispered, tracing the frame of her face. “Just focus on my voice.”

“Clark...” she repeated, staring back at him. “I...”

“I know. Just relax,” he instructed. After what felt like an eternity of holding her and talking to her he felt her relax in his arms. “You’re going to be fine.” He met her gaze, keeping it as he held her close. What he wouldn’t do to be able to give into every impulse that was screaming at him. After everything that had happened last night he knew it wouldn’t take much. But he couldn’t. She was in a vulnerable state and he knew if he acted on his heart’s desires he wouldn’t be able to stop.

“We should go inside,” he whispered, removing his hand from her cheek and pulling away from her.

“Clark,” she whispered his name, calling after him.

He looked back at her expectantly with a questioning glance. Her hand snaked around his neck, pulling him to her as she devoured his lips with hers. His hand reached up to cup her face on instinct as he allowed himself to be pulled into her arms, forgetting every reason why he shouldn’t.

\*\*\*

Nothing. Weeks and weeks of searching and no sign of Clark Kent or even a whisper of where he had disappeared to. The return to Metropolis had been bitter sweet to know his enemy still was out there. He would have to act fast in order to prevent this mishap from arriving at his doorstep. Though it seemed there wasn’t anyone he could trust anymore.

Lex stared at the image in front of him, tightening his grip on the pen in his hands. The woman in the picture was familiar to him. Though her hair was different and her clothing wasn’t that of the Beverly Cox he knew. She was on the run.

He turned to Asabi who was standing nearby. “When was this taken?”

“About two hours ago, Mr. Luthor.” Asabi answered.

“Send out the order. \$100,000 for her dead. \$500,000 for her alive.” Lex gave the order with a bitter scowl.

\*\*\*

Jimmy stared at his hands, sitting in the small room he’d been escorted into after his outburst with Dr. Sayer. The lying snake was in on this with Luthor. He knew it, but he couldn’t figure out why. He couldn’t understand how anyone would put their career at risk for Luthor yet so many people he’d uncovered had done that and more in order to cover up his crimes.

The door opened and he looked up to see a very stern Bill Henderson standing in the doorway. “You wouldn’t believe the strings I had to pull to get Sayer to drop this.” He gave a stern expression toward Jimmy. “You better have a *really* good story to explain this.”

\*\*\*

Electric.

That was the only way to describe it. Lois felt her body go numb as she sank back into the front seat of the truck, letting out a low moan against Clark’s lips. She let out a muffled sigh as the unbearable distance between them closed and his body sunk down, pressing her into the leather seat. She slinked her arms across his back, feeling her way over the cotton of his t-shirt.

His hands moved through her hair, framing the sides of her

face as his body pressed into her. “Lois.”

“Clar...” she let out a muffled sigh as he drew her closer, tracing the frame of her face with a single hand as he pulled her closer, deepening their embrace with each caress. She felt his mouth leave hers, dipping his head as he grazed lips against the curve of her throat. His hand moved across her collarbone, feeling the soft flesh beneath the worn out t-shirt she wore.

The momentarily fleeting thought of how good of an idea this was given the unaddressed issues between them crossed her mind before it disappeared into a cloud of nothingness. Any further protests became an afterthought as the tension building up inside her began to grow. There was no longer an alcoholic beverage to blame on the incredibly bad decision they’d made last night. She knew what she was doing as much as he did and all she could think of in that moment was how right he felt pressed up against her.

“Oh, yesss,” she let out a satisfied cry as he glided his hands up and down her torso. She could feel her body pulsating, encouraging each movement as her right leg slid up over his hip, hooking her leg across his backside and increasing the contact between them. She let out a low moan.

His hands moved up and down her thighs, pushing the fabric to her t-shirt further up. She could feel the heat from his body against her as he smoothed his lips against her. Her body was rapidly responding to him as he ran his left palm up the length of her leg, pushing the oversized t-shirt she wore further and further up.

Her body shuddered against him as he dipped his head down, nibbling at the exposed flesh across her neckline. Her fingers wedged their way through his hair as he peppered his lips against her throat. His other hand moved up her body, pushing the t-shirt further up. His hand moved up her side and then he stopped, looking down in concern.

Lois instinctively reached down to pull the t-shirt back down and he moved to stop her. A sob escaped her throat. ‘No,’ her mind screamed, realizing what had happened. The mangled scar sat there exposed to him as she shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. A lump formed in her throat as his eyes shifted downward, brushing his thumb against the scarred tissue.

“My God, Lois, what happened to you?” The question came with a painful sob as his voice cracked from the emotion weighing on him.

“It’s not important,” she insisted, hiding the evidence of what Lex had done to her so many months ago.

“Lois?” He stilled his motions, looking at her with regret as she felt a sudden chill fill the cab of the truck after his discovery. His hand moved to trace the frame of her face and she shook it off, pushing herself off of him.

“Just stop.”

“Lois?” he quickly pulled back, turning to look at her in concern.

“Just get off of me,” she hissed angrily, jerking the passenger door open and slamming it closed after her. She could feel the heat fill her cheeks as tears ran down them. She quickly sprinted toward the front door, slamming it behind her.

\*\*\*

“My God, Lois, what happened to you?” Clark stared at the lone jagged line from the middle of her side, mangled with rough patches of skin down into her waist. Before he could finish the question he immediately felt her withdraw.

“It’s not important,” she insisted, pulling her shirt down to cover the scar.

He felt a lump in his throat, flashing back to the bloodied knife Luthor had threatened to kill him with. He wanted nothing more than to lose himself in her arms and forget about every wretched thing Lex Luthor had done to him but this felt wrong. He looked back at her, already seeing the pain on her face as she pulled away

from him. “Lois?”

She flinched away when he moved his hand to trace the frame of her face. “Just stop.” He felt his heart lurch in his chest, seeing the tears glisten in her eyes. She pushed his shoulder back.

“Lois?” he repeated her name, trying to get her to look at him. Something had happened to her. Something so awful she refused to talk about it. Was that what she had been hiding all these months? Was that the uncertainty he read in her eyes every time they got close?

“Just get off of me.” She jerked the passenger door open and slammed it behind her, leaving him alone inside the truck. He watched her race toward the front door and slam the door behind her. He let out a groan, uncertain what to do.

\*\*\*

“Either you know where he is or you don’t!” Christina Wallace shouted into her phone, jamming her foot onto the accelerator as she raced down the highway. Two hours ago she’d gotten the call that someone fitting Nigel St. John’s description was spotted in the area outside of Clover, South Carolina where both Lois Lane and Clark Kent were hiding out. She couldn’t get ahold of Jack and was now relying on some of the agents in the field to get her a location on Nigel and no one seemed to be able to find him.

B.D. Kahn’s location continued to be moved in order to keep him off the radar and it looked like they’d have to do the same thing for Lois and Clark. She let out a frustrated growl and jabbed her finger on the end button of her phone. She had to get to the cabin before Nigel and move them out of the area before it was too late.

\*\*\*

Nigel groaned, glaring at the map in front of him and trying to determine where this nonexistent road was that held Tim Westman’s cabin. He gritted his teeth glaring at the red and blue lines on the map, trying to will it to show him where to turn. He was missing something

“Hey mister you gonna hog up the tank all day?” a voice came from outside his window and Nigel peered up, doing his best to look congenial to the local residents.

“Yes, I’m just trying to find something,” he said to the woman standing outside his window.

She glanced at the map in his hands and laughed. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No, I’m not.” He gave her what he hoped was a genuine smile.

“You’re not going to find your way around here with those old things. Harris hasn’t updated those maps in the last three years.”

“You don’t say,” Nigel said evenly, relieved to know his sense of direction wasn’t at fault.

“Where are you trying to go? Maybe I can direct you,” she offered.

“It’s a cabin of an old friend of mine,” he explained. “Tim Westman.”

“Tim?” she frowned. “He passed away last year.”

“Yes, I know.” He offered a deep sigh, “I’m a friend of his niece, Alice White’s. She wanted me to check on the place for her.”

“Oh, yes, I remember Alice,” the woman beamed. “Such an adorable young girl. You wouldn’t believe the trouble she used to get into when she was visiting up here...”

“Yes, I’ve heard the stories,” he responded pasting on a good natured smile he thought would break his face.

“I was surprised to see her rent the place so quickly. Though the couple seems to be nice enough.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Yes, what were their names again?” he asked.

“Kane. Leila and Collin I believe it was,” the woman responded. “Wife’s a bit anti-social, but that husband of hers is pretty, um... I think I saw them in town earlier.” She pointed to the

shopping center across from where he was parked.

“That’s perfectly fine, but I’d really prefer to just find Mr. Westman’s cabin,” Nigel gave her a pleading look.

She nodded, taking a look at the map and pointing. “City split the road here about two years ago. You can’t get back here where his cabin is without taking this road here.” She pointed at the map with her perfectly polished nails.

“And this road here leads up to the cabin?” he asked, pointing to the winding highway next to the x on the map.

“That’s it.” She grinned back. “Harris really needs to update those maps but he’s a stubborn old bat.”

“Well thank you for your help, Miss...”

“Hemingway.” She beamed back at him. “Melinda Hemingway.”

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Lois held her breath, watching as Clark silently entered the dining room. She didn’t dare look up, still feeling the pang of guilt washing through her over what had almost happened again. The images from Lex’s attempt on her life flashed through her mind and she swallowed hard, trying to will the images to sink back down to where she’d buried them. She couldn’t keep doing this. She was losing control and putting everything at risk.

No matter how tempting it was to just forget the threats that lurked in the shadows and indulge in the rare moments of pleasure with Clark, she knew it couldn’t last. He knew exactly how to touch her to make her melt in his arms and make her want to forget the rest of the world. He could make her lose herself in that passionate look he gave her. She could let him do the many, *many* things she knew he was so talented at that made her toes curl. That was the problem. It was too easy to forget and lose herself except when she got a call like they had earlier that set her straight into a panic attack.

She’d had a panic attack. The last one she’d had had been shortly after Jonathan’s shooting. She couldn’t afford to put herself under this much stress. She couldn’t afford to keep harboring this secret and hoping that Clark would eventually tell her the truth. She had to keep her mind sharp. She had to stay focused on the goal at hand. As satisfying as the previous night of drunken lovemaking had been she knew it could only end in heartache.

There was no more hiding what had happened. He’d seen the ugliness she’d been scarred with by Lex. She knew there would be no going back now. Images from Lex’s attempt on her life flashed through her mind and she felt the tears sting the corners of her eyes. She couldn’t keep doing this. She couldn’t hide what Lex had done. She couldn’t hide the mental and physical scars she carried with her. She couldn’t hide the lies and half truths that weighed on her like an anvil plunging down onto the concrete and crushing everything in its path.

Tears stung the corners of her eyes as she recalled the sucker punch to the gut she’d taken when Martha had told her the truth. It had been humbling to process everything and realize how close she had been to her infatuation without knowing it. All this time it had been nothing more than Clark using his gifts to help those in need. She had spent a year working side by side with him, unknowingly sharing her deepest secrets with the object of her infatuation.

Things had changed. They were both different. If last night had proved anything it was how much things had changed between them. They weren’t just colleagues. They weren’t just friends. She had put up with a lot in the last few months. Along with fighting her own demons, she’d tried to help him through his. In doing so, it seemed the wall she’d kept wrapped around her had crumbled down. Even at his worst she couldn’t make herself give up on him. The closer they’d gotten the harder it had been to pretend like there wasn’t a tsunami of unresolved tension between them.

Now here she was left with the fallout from his discovery of

what Lex had done. She knew he'd put the pieces together. It wasn't a hard stretch. Still she couldn't bring herself to talk about what had happened. She couldn't bring herself to open up about the most painful moment of her life with someone that still refused to let her in. That was what hurt her the most. He trusted her enough to help him work through some of the ugliest sides of what Lex had done to him, make love with her, and yet he still couldn't tell her he was Superman.

She glanced over at him carefully, uncertain what to do or how to respond when he brought it up. She felt her heart pang in her chest, staring at him as he took a seat across from her. It would be easier to forget but she knew the likelihood of that happening was slim to none. The memory of him pressed against her flashed through her mind and she felt a chill run down her spine.

"Lois?" She didn't respond, looking down at her hands that were folded on the table, unwilling to meet his gaze. "What happened?"

She looked away, brushing him off hurriedly. "I don't want to talk about it. Please just forget about it and forget about last night."

"I'm not talking about last night, Lois." He said, looking at her in concern. "That scar..."

"It's nothing," she snapped with more force than necessary. The look on his face told her he wasn't going to let this go. She tried to change the subject. "Perry said Jimmy got detained when questioning Sayer. I think we should probably pull up what we had on him and see if anything else stands out..."

"That scar was not *nothing*," he argued, refusing to be distracted. "It looked like someone carved out your midsection..."

Lois refused to acknowledge the comment, continuing her train of thought. "We need to try and call him later..."

He slapped his hand on the edge of the table making her jump. He let out a sigh. "Lois, would you stop talking about the case for a second?"

"Clark, it's nothing. Just drop it." Lois responded, hearing the hitch in her own voice.

"It's not *nothing*!" He shook his head at her.

"I *don't* want to talk about it," Lois shrugged, glaring back at him.

He cradled his head in his hand, peering up at her pleadingly. "Please, I'm trying here..."

"Just leave it the hell alone," she spat out angrily. She could already feel the hot tears building up inside her.

"Lois, wait." He gave her a pained expression and she stood to her feet. Something seemed to click in his mind and realization dawned on him. "Luthor did this to you, didn't he?"

"Leave it *alone*," she ordered, trying to push past him.

"That's what happened, isn't it?" he took a step closer to her. "He did this to you. That's why you..."

"Why what? Why I want to see a thief, gangster, psychopath, and murderer pay for his crimes? Why I want justice served isn't any of your business." Lois snapped angrily, growing more and more irritably the closer he got to her.

"Lois," he placed a hand on her cheek and she felt her knees go weak as she stared back at him. He leaned into her, tracing the frame of her face, leaving a few millimeters between them as she fought for control. He was too close. "Please talk to me."

"I can't," she let out a muffled scream, pushing him away.

"This is a mistake. I told you before this is too dangerous and..." He looked at her, shaking his head. "I know what you're doing here. You're scared and I get that."

"I am not scared." She harrumphed angrily, feeling her heart pounding in her chest as he moved closer.

"Yes, you are," he challenged, taking a step closer. "You put on a good front, but both of us know what happened last night was..."

"It was ... a mistake," she swallowed hard, trying her best to

keep her emotions in check.

"Why?" he pressed her, running his fingers through her hair. "You're so afraid of letting anyone close to you."

"I'm not afraid of anything," she snapped angrily. "I am just careful. There is a big difference."

"Careful?" His hand moved to cup her cheek and she could feel her defenses begin to waver. "Lois, after everything we've been through you have to know I would never hurt you." He looked down shamefully. "You helped me through some of the worst moments of my life. Now, whatever it is that happened could never change how I feel about you. You have to know that. Please let me help you..."

"Just stop," Lois flinched away from his touch. "Why can't you just let it go? I don't want to talk about it. What part of that is so hard to understand?"

"I can't," he said solemnly. "I'm sorry, but that's not something I can just set aside and pretend not to see. Those scars..."

"Are none of your business!" she hissed out angrily. "If I can ignore the burn marks and...and bruises and gashes you can give me the same courtesy. Not once did I push you or...Not once did I try and press you for a single detail about what happened to you. Not once did I try and make you relive the worst moment of your entire life and force you to talk about something that is so painful it makes you have night terrors and panic attacks!"

"It's not the same," Clark said in an even tone.

"Right, because I wouldn't know anything about being terrorized by the sociopath everyone's trying to put behind bars." She let out a snort.

"You have every right to be upset. If anyone understands the power of that white hot anger at Luthor, it's me," Clark began calmly. "But the longer you keep this bottled up the harder this will be on you. Trust me."

"You're joking, right?" Lois spat back venomously. "You want me to what? Share victim stories? No thanks."

"You had a *panic attack*, Lois," he reminded her.

"I've got a professional hitman looking for me," Lois retorted angrily. "It's not like I had a whole lot of control over the situation."

"You've been in dangerous situations before and never lost control like that," he reminded her.

"Things are different," Lois fumed angrily. "I had a panic attack. It's not my first one and it probably won't be my last. I'll probably have another one before this is over." She shook her fist in anger.

"That's not exactly what I'd call managing the problem," he said softly.

"Well, I don't have a whole lot of choice in the matter, now do I?" she spat out angrily.

"Lois, you can't possibly think that you can deal with this on your own," he said with a deep sigh. "If anyone understands that it's me..."

Lois crossed her arms defiantly. "Fine, I'll share mine when you share yours."

He looked back at her in surprise. "What?"

"Answer the questions that you never had to answer from the FBI that could probably put the nail in this case and make sure Lex Luthor stayed behind bars for the rest of his miserable life." She pressed on, feeling a bold confidence as she swung the pendulum closer and closer to the point of no return. "How in the world did you end up in that place? Who was that doctor? What the hell was *Kryptonite* doing in your chest?" She spat out the last accusation with a jab to the chest where she'd dug the green glowing device two months ago.

He stared back at her in shock then quickly recovered. "You can deflect all you want and attack me to your heart's content but none of that is going to erase last night and it isn't going to erase

the last two months.”

She shook her head at him, unable to hold back any longer. “Right, that must be what it’s all about.”

“Isn’t it?” he pressed, tilting her chin to look at him. “I would never hurt you, Lois, you have to know that. I trust you more than anyone. I don’t know what I have to do to prove it to you, but...”

“Oh, puh-leaze!” Lois looked at him incredulously, unable to fathom how after all this time and everything they’d been through he still insisted on this ridiculous charade of pretend. Did he really think she was that gullible not to figure it out? “You trust me? That’s a joke and you know it!”

“Lois...” He placed a hand on her shoulder and she brushed him off.

“No! Enough of this! Just stop it! God, you must think I’m the dumbest person on the planet!” Lois gave him a dark expression and snapped. The games and pretending had to stop. She turned to face him and growled. “How long? How long are you going to keep lying to me and ...and acting like I’m an idiot! I mean, it’s not like I have a paper to go publish your stupid secret in or really a way of talking to anyone. So, how long do I have to watch you continue this ridiculous charade before you deem me trustworthy?”

“You know.” He stared at her for a moment. It wasn’t a question but rather an observation, confirming what they both knew to be true.

“Of course I know! What do you think, I was born yesterday?” She growled at him angrily and jabbed her finger in his chest accusingly. “Did you seriously think I wouldn’t figure it out? Give me a little credit! I’ve known for *months!*”

“Of course,” Clark muttered, turning to her with a growl. “This whole time...that’s what this has been about.” He shook his head. “It’s what it’s *always* been about.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“You!” he pointed his index and middle finger at her accusingly. “All you care about is *him!* Superman!” he snickered, shaking his head at her. “Why did I ever fool myself into thinking otherwise?”

“It’s so easy for you to dismiss everyone around you and act like this wounded victim...” she hissed angrily, letting out a frustrated growl. “You have no idea...”

“Don’t I?” he challenged, his eyes narrowing at her. “You wouldn’t have thought twice about leaving me in that hell hole if it weren’t for the fact that you knew I was Superman.” Anger flashed in his eyes and he muttered under his breath, “Why would Lois Lane go to all that trouble unless there was something in it for her?” Clark slowly clapped his hands as he turned to accuse her, “Congratulations! You finally have that Pulitzer Prize story to give you what you’ve always wanted. Step on anyone in the way and don’t worry about who gets hurt.”

Storm clouds crackled as she did her best to control her anger at his insinuation that she would put a story above those she cared about. “If you seriously think I would ever do something so heartless...What would ever give you that impression that I would ever put someone’s life in jeopardy for a story?”

“I don’t know maybe the last year of you chasing down every single Superman exclusive,” he snapped back. “You would have printed this in a heartbeat if the Planet was still around.”

She could feel the fury pulse through her as she challenged, “It’s called professional discretion and I know the difference between something that’s newsworthy and something that belongs on the front page of the National Whisperer. Hate to break it to you, but exposing your secret isn’t exactly what the Daily Planet does and it certainly isn’t something I would *ever* do—not that you ever gave either of us a chance.”

“Why should I believe a word out of your mouth when you spent...”

“You want to talk about trust?” she scoffed angrily, jabbing

him in the shoulder with her index finger. “You lied to me! Over and over and over again and then when I really needed my friend...”

“Friend? I think you need to go look up the definition, Lois, because you are no friend!” he growled back angrily. “You were manipulating me this whole time!”

“Manipulating you? Oh, that’s rich! You spent over a year lying and pretending to be two people and you want to accuse me of manipulating you?”

“I did what I had to to protect those closest to me,” he growled back at her. “I don’t owe you anything!”

“Right, you sat on evidence that could have thrown that psychopath behind bars. You lied to me every day for over a year!” she snapped angrily.

“You never would have believed any of it!” he shouted back at her. “How many times did you ignore my warnings? I gave you everything you needed to look into that psychopath and you ignored me every time!”

“Don’t kid yourself! You didn’t give me anything but veiled insecurities and conspiracy theories. Not once did you give me anything concrete or tangible...”

“What would you have done if I had?” he challenged. “Go running to Luthor with it. I couldn’t take the chance.”

Her jaw tightened and she jutted out her chin, holding back the tears that were threatening to overtake her. “If you really think that then you don’t know me at all. You never did.”

“Right,” he rolled his eyes. “You almost married him, didn’t you?”

Lighting crackled in her eyes and she pulled away from him, slapping him hard across the face. “Go to hell!”

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“If you really think that then you don’t know me at all. You never did.”

“Right,” Clark rolled his eyes, staring back at Lois with malice as he threw the verbal blow. “You almost married him, didn’t you?”

The minute the words were out of his mouth he immediately regretted it. He saw the pain flicker in her eyes, quickly replaced with anger as she struck him hard across the face and shouted, “Go to hell!”

She moved to leave and he stopped her. He held her by the wrist and growled back at her, “You were the one that made that choice. You were the one that ignored every warning and ...”

“And what?” He’d never seen Lois like this. Her tone was calm and yet rage ignited in her eyes as she challenged him with a daring look and scoffed, “I deserve whatever I got, right?” She jerked her hand back from him. “You have no idea what you’re talking about and this conversation is over. It’s real clear how little you know me. So do us both a favor and stay the hell away from me!”

He watched her leave, shaking his head as he sunk back down into the chair he’d been sitting in moments ago, burying his head in his hands. How had he been so stupid? He’d actually thought there was a chance to salvage their relationship after everything. He thought she might actually care about him...Clark Kent. But no, it had been a ruse. This whole time she had known. She had known and had only done those things because she knew it was Superman she was helping. If it had been just him, Clark Kent he probably would still be sitting in that cell rotting away.

She’d made it perfectly clear where Clark Kent fell in her priorities. Without his powers, Superman was nothing but a distant memory and he knew all too well how painful Lois’ rejection would be when she realized the man she had risked everything to rescue was nothing but a shell of who she thought he was.

*‘She never wanted me.’*

She wanted *Superman*.

He shook his head bitterly.

All this time...

She knew.

She knew he was Superman.

The question was how?

Had Luthor told her?

His gaze drifted to the phone on the table. He really needed answers but he couldn't just drop in like he normally did. He couldn't call like he normally did either. He picked up the phone and dialed Jimmy's number, hoping to get an answer

"Hey Jimmy," he did his best to hide the strain in his voice.

"Yeah, Perry updated us. I'm sorry about all of this..." He waited for Jimmy to finish his own sentiments and then asked, "I need to get a message to Wayne Irig."

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Nigel pulled up in front of the cabin, taking in the secluded area he was in. It was the perfect place to set up a home when you didn't want to be found. He needed to get a closer look to be sure but he was fairly certain this was the right house. His grip tightened on the rifle in his hands, preparing to open fire and put an end to the loose end that was Lois Lane once and for all. Lex Luthor would never have to find out and who knew? He might be solving his boss' problem for him. If Clark Kent was in here as well he could take care of two birds with one stone.

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Lois balled her fists up, beating the mattress as she let out a muffled scream of fury into the pillow. She could feel the burn in the back of her throat from where a lump had begun to form.

She could feel a heaviness in her chest as she rolled over on her back, allowing the tears to fall freely down her cheeks.

One year.

That was how long he'd lied to her. That was how long he continued to masquerade as two people and keep her in the dark about everything. He was never going to trust her. He was never going to let her in. She had been an idiot to think he ever would. Why would he? It was clear even in all the months of working together he didn't know her at all. The fact that he thought so little of her left a bitter bile in her mouth.

How could he think she would do something so horrendous as to tell Lex Luthor about his suspicions or publish his identity in the paper? Did he really think she was that shallow? Did he really think that she would put someone's family and personal safety at risk for a *story*?

The sound a sonic boom echoing in the distance caught her attention. She sat up, wiping the tears from her eyes. She recognized that sound anywhere. She bolted up from the bed and looked out the window. She could still see the pigment of green and blue in the sky from where Clark had disappeared into the sky. She felt a catch in her throat as she let out a strangled wail.

A loud tapping came from the back door and Lois stalled for a moment, wondering if it could be Clark. A half second later Christina Wallace's voice came from the other side of the door. "Open the door, it's Christina."

Lois rushed through the hallway, jerking the door open to answer the agent's insistent knocking. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Get a bag and start packing," Christina ordered, slamming the door behind her.

"What?" Lois gasped, feeling her throat dry up as the reality of what Christina was telling her began to hit her.

"Lois, this is *real*," Christina pleaded with her, looking down the hallway. "Where's Clark?"

Lois bit her lip, uncertain how to respond. If this was really it, then she had no way of warning him or letting him know what was happening. Though at the moment she wasn't sure she wanted to even be in the same room with him let alone the same vehicle.

"Lois?" Christina pressed. "Where is he?"

Lois looked up, opening her mouth to respond when a loud

crash intruded on her thoughts. The eruption of gunfire and glass shattering around them echoed around her as Christina pushed her down on the ground, flattening her against the wooden floor.

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## Chapter 16

Clark ran a hand through his hair, feeling the sense of dread rise up inside him as he waited in the lobby of Masie's Bed and Breakfast in Kansas City. He glanced at the clock once more. It had been twenty minutes. What was taking so long?

"Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes." He heard the mid-western drawl of his parents' neighbor behind him. "Beard looks good on you."

Clark ducked his head down, eying the patrons in the dining area warily. "Place looks good, Wayne."

"Well, Masie handles most of the day to day but I help where I can." Wayne puffed his chest out proudly. "But you're not here to talk about my business ventures."

Clark shook his head. "No."

Wayne pointed to his office in the back. "Let's get out of the open here. No reason to give someone a reason to talk if you catch my drift."

Clark nodded, following Wayne into the back office where papers were scattered everywhere. "Organized chaos," he guessed recalling the way Masie always kept things organized at the local diner in Smallville.

"You know Masie she likes things where she can find them even if no one else can." Wayne gave a shrug of his shoulders. "As long as everything runs smoothly I'm not going to argue." He eyed Clark with a knowing look. "You done making small talk or you wanna ask about my chickens too? They're fine. Still laying eggs and got all their feathers."

"Am I that obvious?" Clark asked, raking his hand over the back of his head. Wayne's raised eyebrow answered the open ended question for him and he sighed, uncertain where to begin. Deciding to start with Luthor's latest excursion to Smallville seemed like the safest bet. "I heard about the visit you got."

"That Luthor character means business," Wayne warned him. "You need to be careful."

"I know." Clark nodded his head. "Do you know if they're all right?"

Wayne was quiet a moment before he answered, "They're doing as best as can be expected. Sticking with the plan for now. I'm not sure where exactly they're at right now." He placed a sympathetic hand on Clark's shoulder. "I know your mom's been worried about you."

Clark didn't respond to the comment, feeling a wave of guilt wash over him as he pondered what there was even to say. He had turned down every single attempt Lois had made to make him call his parents before Luthor had dropped in on Alice and Perry. Now he had to go through the long line of friends to even determine where they were. Now more than anything he needed answers that he knew only his parents could give him.

"Your girlfriend kept them up to date from what I heard," Wayne continued with a sigh.

"She is not my..." Clark stopped himself, realizing his instinct to correct Wayne's assumption was a moot point given how well the man could read him. "It's complicated," he amended.

"I'll bet it is." Wayne chuckled. "Well, *not* your girlfriend went to a lot of lengths in order to keep them informed on this Luthor business." He shot Clark a look. "I'm assuming that's what this is about?"

"You could say that," Clark responded evenly. "I just need to find them...to figure out what to do next."

"Wasn't the idea behind this safety plan to make it so they couldn't be found?" Wayne asked.

"Yeah," Clark said evenly. "That *was* the plan, but things have changed."

"If you say so." Wayne sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I'm not sure if the phone your, uh..." He stole a glance at Clark and threw in, "...lady friend... gave your mom made it with them or not." The phone on his desk rang and he reached for the phone in his pocket to answer it. "Wayne here." He glanced toward Clark and waved him over. "Speak of the devil." He let out a snort.

"Wayne, I just got a call from Perry. I think Lois and Clark are in trouble, and no one can get through," Jonathan's voice crackled through the speaker phone.

"What kind of trouble?" Wayne asked, looking over at Clark.

"Perry said he heard gunfire and a loud scream when Lois tried calling him earlier," Jonathan's tone was grave as he added, "We've got to do something."

\*\*\*

Lois held her breath as she listened to the footsteps approaching. She heard the sound of the bullets firing around her and she squinted her eyes closed, trying not to react as the gunman approached. The sound of glass shattering on the floor from a few feet away echoed in her eardrums and she tightened her lips, trying to keep from making a sound.

She didn't dare open her eyes. She could feel Christina's limp body on top of her and she knew if she had to see her face like that there would be no way to prevent the screams from escaping her throat. The weight of the wooden door that had fallen on top of them pressed the weight of Christina's body into her and she felt a strangled sob fill her lungs and she struggled to push it back down.

"And where pray tell has that pesky partner of yours wandered off to, Mrs. Kane?" Nigel's voice came from a few feet away. "It really is a shame we couldn't have completed this reunion all at once."

Another shot fired and she heard glass shatter around her. "Nearly five months of searching and I finally get my chance to deliver on the promise of your death." She felt a hand reach down to feel beneath the door. She said a silent prayer hoping he wouldn't figure out she was still breathing.

*'Don't open your eyes. Don't breathe,'* she told herself as she heard Nigel withdraw.

A phone beeped and she heard Nigel gloat to the caller, "It's done. All that's left to do is find Kent." His footsteps faded as he walked out of the room. She listened with baited breath as she waited for some sign that she could call for help without signaling to Nigel that she was alive. The sound of a car engine turning over could be heard coupled with the slamming of the car door.

She turned her head, forcing herself to open her eyes and look to the side where shards of glass covered the floor. She spotted the mobile phone she'd been using to try and dial Perry's number earlier on the floor. Her arm stretched out from beneath the weight of the bedroom door and she reached her hand toward the phone, drawing it to her with gentle tugs of her index finger until it was finally within her grasp.

Her hand trembled and she could feel her teeth chattering from the panic rising inside her. *'Just breathe,'* she told herself. *'No time for panicking now.'*

She hit the speed dial to the number she knew by heart now and pulled the phone up to her ear, waiting for the other line to pick up. "I thought I told you never to call this number unless it was an emergency," she heard Jack Davenport say on the other line.

"He...lp," she gasped out in a strangled sob.

\*\*\*

Jack Davenport sat in the small meeting room with four other agents. Beverly Cox sat in the corner silently seething as the other agents attempted to get her to respond. He leaned back in his chair, making himself comfortable as he prepared to give the hard blow that he was sure to crack her. He glanced at his phone one more time, seeing the missed calls from Christina Wallace. He would have to return her calls after he closed this deal.

He planted his hands on the table preparing to stand up when he felt his phone vibrate in his hand. He looked down and saw the number calling was from Lois Lane. He cleared his throat and turned to one of the agents next to him. "I'll just be a sec."

He stepped outside the room and answered the phone, "I thought I told you never to call this number unless it was an emergency,"

"He...lp," came the strangled cry through the phone line.

"Lois?" Jack could barely make out the whimper on the other line.

"I'm trapped... under a door and what I think... is your partner's very lifeless body." Came Lois Lane's harsh response. "Does that count as an emergency?"

"Where are you?" Jack asked.

"Under... a door." Lois responded vehemently. There was a sound of a crash and then her muffled voice came through the line with, "What... are you doing here?"

"What happened?" a male voice cracked on the line that Jack thought might be Clark's.

"What do you think?" Lois' wheezed voice came through.

"Lois, is that Kent?" Jack asked. There was a crackling of static on the line and then the line went dead. "Damn!" Jack fumed, taking a deep breath as he jabbed the digits in his phone. He waited for the phone line to pick up and then heard his director's voice on the line. "We've got a problem."

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Clark flew through the sky, zeroing in on the familiar cabin from above. He felt a sense of dread run through him as he landed in the woods behind the cabin. He clenched his fists as he stared at the broken glass door riddled in bullet holes. He used his x-ray vision to survey his surroundings. Whoever had done this had left recently. There were shell casings inside the cabin and two bodies under the bedroom door that had the hinges broken off of it by gunfire.

He felt his heart clench in his chest as he listened for the two heartbeats and only one drummed in his ears.

<< "Lois Lane won't be a problem. She's sure to have bled out by now anyway." >>

<< "You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I'd say that's personal." >>

<< "A blade is so underused and underappreciated these days, don't you agree?" >>

<< "The man of steel brought to his knees by a simple rock and unable to hear the screams for help from Lois Lane herself." >>

<< "It's only fitting she should die from the same blade as her hero." >>

"Lois..." He moved at super-speed, sprinting inside where he found the two panel door lying on the floor. He saw the brown hair splayed across the floor and a familiar hand reaching out from beneath the door. *'Two. Two bodies'* he reminded himself.

"What... are you doing here?" Lois spat out angrily. The venom in her voice slapped him with the reminder of their argument from earlier. He did his best to bury down the guilt that was threatening to overtake him. Christina Wallace was dead. If he'd been here...

"What happened?" Clark asked, kneeling down next to her.

"What do you think?" Lois hissed back between gritted teeth.

"Hold still," he ordered, doing his best not to react to the venomous tone she used to talk to him. He hung his head, placing his hands on the side of the door. He took a deep breath and lifted the large wooden door off of Lois and Christina. He grimaced when he saw the large pool of blood on the wood floor. He clamped his eyes closed, looking away as he pushed the door back against the wall. His hand brushed against the blood stain on the door and he felt the tears sting his eyes.

"She's dead," Lois wheezed out. "Isn't she?"

"Yeah," Clark croaked out. He stole a glance toward her and

saw Lois roll out from beneath where the door had been and crawl to the left side of the room. He glanced down and saw the lifeless body of Christina Wallace on the floor with a red blood stain to the temple of her head. She was wearing a blue and black vest that he could only assume was bullet-proof.

Lois' voice trembled as she attempted to stand to her feet. "Your speed's back?"

He didn't dare look at her, choosing instead to focus on the door in front of him. "Yeah."

"Since when?" she asked.

He contemplated not answering but given everything that had happened over the last few hours he decided to just bite the bullet and admit when his powers had returned. "This morning," he said evenly, still refusing to look at her. Was it really only just this morning that he'd woken up to the pain of his super-hearing returning coupled with the mind numbing pain from the hangover that had lingered on. From what he could tell most of his powers had returned just not at full capacity. He refused to let his mind wander into the memory of how he'd woken up for fear his anger would get the best of him.

<<"I love you, Clark.">>

<<"If you seriously think I would ever do something so heartless...What would ever give you that impression that I would ever put someone's life in jeopardy for a story?">>

<<"It's called professional discretion and I know the difference between something that's newsworthy and something that belongs on the front page of the National Whisperer.">>

<<"What makes you think I'd regret it?"

"We're drunk.">>

<<"Exposing your secret isn't exactly what the Daily Planet does and it certainly isn't something I would ever do, not that you ever gave either of us a chance.">>

<<"You want to talk about trust? You lied to me! Over and over and over again and then when I really needed my friend...">>

<<"Manipulating you? Oh, that's rich! You spent over a year lying and pretending to be two people and you want to accuse me of manipulating you?">>

<<"I love you, Lois, I've always loved you.">>

<<"Right, you sat on evidence that could have thrown that psychopath behind bars. You lied to me every day for over a year!">>

<<"If you really think that then you don't know me at all. You never did.">>

<<"This means too much to me. You mean too much to me. I couldn't bear it if I lost you because a night of drinking and ... unbelievably strong hormones got the best of me."

"Just don't lie to me and you won't lose me.">>

<<"And what? I deserve whatever I got, right?">>

<<"It's real clear how little you know me. So do us both a favor and stay the hell away from me!">>

She didn't say anything. An involuntary wheeze came out of her throat and she choked out a sob, "She didn't deserve this. She was a really good person. Christina..."

"I know," Clark responded with a solemn expression. "No one deserves this." He stole a glance toward her and blanched at the sight of blood covering her right side. Her body was trembling as she attempted to stand to her feet. "Here." He reached out a hand to place it on her shoulder and she pushed him away.

"Don't," she warned in an uneven tone. Her teeth were chattering and her hands were trembling from whatever had happened here. She straightened up and he saw the dark spot below her right collarbone from where she was bleeding.

"You've been shot," he pointed to her shoulder.

"I know," she said through gritted teeth, making her way to the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" he asked with an annoyed tone.

"I am going to go wash Agent Wallace's blood off of me and then I'm going to pack. I'd suggest you start doing the same thing," she hissed out angrily before slamming the bathroom door behind her.

He glanced around the room, staring at the splinters of wooden panel walls that had been shredded beneath the attack of gunfire. They had to pack because it wasn't safe here anymore. It wasn't safe here because they'd been found. He used his x-ray vision to look outside, checking to make sure there was no sign of anyone lurking nearby. Who did this? Luthor? Nigel? Or someone else on Luthor's payroll.

At super-speed he moved through the cabin, packing what he could of his belongings in a small duffle bag. He contemplated cleaning up the shells scattered on the floor but thought better of it when he caught sight of Christina Wallace's body on the floor once more. They would need the evidence in order to charge the person responsible for her death. He let out a low moan, burying his head in his hands.

Flashbacks from his time in the prison with Dr. Kelly threatened to take over and he let out a low growl, pushing the memory back to where he buried it. 'Not now,' he told himself.

A loud thud came from the bathroom and he raced inside the bathroom to discover the source of the noise. He found Lois huddled on the floor in a small pool of blood that was coming from her right side. He let out a frustrated curse and leaned down to check on her. "Lois?"

"Get away from me," she spat out angrily.

"You can be angry at me all you want but right now we need to get out of here before someone shows up over here looking for the source of all that gunfire." He pointed to the open bathroom door leading into the bedroom. "Just let me look at it."

"What the hell do you care?" she snapped angrily, jerking away from Clark. "Just leave me alone." She reached up to grip the counter, standing to her feet. "I've done this before...I can do it...again."

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Jack Davenport took a shallow breath, leaning his head against the door, preparing himself for the confrontation with Beverly Cox. If what Lois Lane had said was true then that meant either Nigel or Luthor had found them. '...and Christina is gone.' His mind flooded with the reality of his partner's demise. He had already called into Talley after the line went dead. There was nothing left for him to do other than get Beverly Cox to talk.

He slammed the door behind him reentering the small meeting room inside the New Troy International Airport. He smirked to himself when he saw Beverly Cox jump at the noise. "I startle you?"

She wore a smug expression but refused to respond.

Jack shrugged his shoulders, pulling up the chair across from her. "You really think you can hold off on cooperating with us and everything will just magically disappear?" He let out a cluck of his tongue. "That might have worked before your boss lost all faith in you, but not now."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Cox snapped back at him angrily.

"Oh, don't I?" He looked at her with a broad grin. "I'm not the one with a one-way ticket to Zurich and a new identity." He leaned forward. "Now Mercy..." He smiled when he saw her react. "That's right you changed your name didn't you? Which do you prefer? Beverly, Mercy or Tonya?"

"Go to hell," she snapped back.

"I don't know why you cling to this misguided loyalty to your boss. I mean, you know he's going to kill you, right?" Jack snorted. "I mean, if he wasn't before, he definitely is now that we've leaked those photos of you talking with the FBI. I'm sure he's already convinced you're working with us now and is trying to close ranks as we speak."

A flash of anger ignited in her eyes. “What do you want?”

“I want the list,” Jack said with a determined grunt. “I want the list of everyone that is on the take with Luthor.”

“And what makes you think I’d agree to something like that?” she retorted with a sneer.

“That bag you had packed and your new identity of ‘Tonya Evans.’” He pushed her passport toward her. “Just one phone call and we can make sure he knows exactly where you are and where you’re headed.”

“You’d help him commit murder?”

“He’s an upstanding citizen.” Jack shrugged. “I’m just informing him of his employee’s whereabouts.”

“I want immunity,” she challenged.

“And I want to learn how to fly, but unfortunately God did not gift me with the power of flight, so that’s going to be a negative,” Jack challenged.

“I have something you want,” she reminded him.

“You also killed one of our agents, helped orchestrate the mass murder of over three hundred citizens of New Troy and are wanted in Gotham City for the deaths of some of the more prominent citizens during Ra’s Al Ghul’s raid.” Jack Davenport snorted.

“Then what good would come of me helping you?” she challenged.

“A clear conscience isn’t good enough?” he retorted.

“I don’t have a conscience,” she snapped back.

“No, but you do have something or someone you don’t want to find you,” Jack responded vehemently. “I mean unless you want both Luthor and Ra’s Al Ghul to be gunning for you.”

“You can’t protect me,” she shrugged. “No one can.”

“I can if I have the names,” Jack challenged.

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Lois winced as she limped toward the truck. Clark followed her muttering under his breath about how stubborn she was. She bit her lower lip, ignoring the remarks as she reached the driveway. The glass crackled beneath her boots as she limped toward the truck.

“You don’t need to be walking on that leg,” Clark said with a look of disapproval.

“I’m *fine*,” she spat out angrily.

“You need to go to a hospital,” Clark added.

“I can’t go to . . . a hospital,” she shot back irritably, limping toward the truck. “In case you forgot I’m supposed to be *dead*.”

“Where exactly do you expect to go with not one but *three* bullets inside of you without drawing attention to yourself?” Clark demanded stepping in front of her. “It would be a lot easier if you would just let me . . .” Something flashed on his face. “Get back!”

Before she could respond she felt a rush of air hit her and she fell back on the pavement and let out a cry in agony. Clark quickly hovered over her, shielding her as the truck she’d almost gotten into a minute ago blew up, sending metal and glass flying through the air.

She lifted her head up, staring at the flames in shock. “I really liked that truck.”

“We need to get out of here,” Clark whispered in her ear.

“How?” she choked out, looking down at the blood stain on her leg that was growing darker and darker by the second.

He held out a hand for her. “You need a doctor.”

“I’ll be . . . *fine*,” she attempted to argue, hearing the hitch in her own voice. She could feel the loss of blood and adrenaline leaving her as she struggled to focus on the conversation at hand. She wasn’t even convincing to herself. “You don’t even have . . . your suit.”

“Lois?” she heard Clark call her name just before she gave into the dark nothingness that flooded through her.

\*\*\*

Robert Drake wore an annoyed expression as he took a seat in Victor Talley’s office. Not only had his office received a formal

complaint regarding the Lex Luthor case but he himself had been named as a conspirator in the complaint to harass the supposed victim. This went beyond Talley’s case against Lex Luthor and his supposed crimes. This was now threatening his career.

Victor Talley looked back at him with a grim expression. “I get the impression you’re not here for a fourth in bridge.”

“Have you seen this?” Drake threw the complaint across Talley’s desk.

“Bender’s trying to push us into a corner.” Talley shrugged.

“This is going to ruin me if we don’t do something,” Drake warned. “You’ve been investigating him for months and hardly have a case.”

“I don’t know about that,” Talley argued.

“Your star witness is legally dead on paper,” Drake shot back. “How exactly do you plan on getting anything she has to say admissible without Bender having grounds for an appeal?”

“I’m going to let Bender open the door for it,” Talley remarked calmly, pushing a large file toward him.

“What is this?” Drake asked, flipping through the large file.

“Names,” Talley said smugly. “Hot off the press.”

“Names?” Drake asked.

“Every crooked politician and officer on the take with Lex Luthor,” Talley said evenly. “Once I get the approval the largest arrest in history will take place, picking up every dirty copy and politician that has helped Luthor continue his reign on this country.”

“How long do you need to put this together?” Drake asked, impressed.

“It’s gonna take at least a few days of round the clock manpower to pull this off.”

“Do it,” Drake ordered.

“We’ll need your support in ensuring Mr. Luthor remains in solitary once we have him behind bars,” Talley added. “I can’t have him taking my witnesses out or getting wind of what’s coming.”

“What about his hitman?” Drake asked. “Is he still in the wind?”

“We’re tracking him down as we speak,” Talley promised.

“That’s what you said the last time,” Drake reminded him.

“We’ll get him,” Talley said firmly. “Just get me the budget to pull this off and we won’t let you down.”

“You want it? You got it,” Drake said, standing to his feet.

\*\*\*

Five hundred miles. Clark had flown Lois as far away as he could to ensure she was out of harm’s way. She was right. He didn’t have his suit but he knew from experience that as long as he stayed out of sight and used the clouds and night sky as cover, he couldn’t be seen. He wasn’t sure where to go. He’d found a motel outside of Lincoln Nebraska and paid for a room for the night. Lois had been drifting in and out of consciousness from the blood loss. He was getting worried about her labored breathing.

‘*She needs a doctor.*’

Lois had mentioned a Dr. Kahn that had helped them before but given he was now under protective custody and taking the stand to point the finger at Nigel he doubted the man would be much help. Clark let out a frustrated curse when he listened to yet another busy signal blaring in his ear. He hit the end button and turned his attention back to Lois who kept drifting in and out of consciousness. As angry as he was at her he still couldn’t bear the thought of losing her. He ran a hand across her cheek. “Lois, you need to stay awake.” He grimaced when he felt the clamminess of her face against his palm. “Come on, stay with me.”

“I told you . . . not to . . . fly,” came her labored response.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t have much of a choice.” He offered her a half-smile. “I couldn’t have you bleeding all over Perry’s driveway. It’d be a pain to get out.”

“You’re a . . . jerk.”

“You’re stubborn,” he retorted calmly, refusing to engage in her verbal jab.

“I don’t need your...help,” she said between coughing fits.

“Yeah, I can tell you’re perfectly capable of fending off anyone with three holes in your right side,” he pointed out sarcastically.

“Jerk,” she wheezed out bitterly.

“Can we not do this right now?” He let out an aggravated sigh. “You need to focus your energy on resting not fighting.”

“Quit...telling me...what to do,” she snapped angrily.

“Well, if you were a better patient I wouldn’t have to,” he retorted.

“You left,” she wheezed out. He felt a hot wave hit him as he watched her wince from the pain of her wounds. “You’ll do it...again. Just...go.”

He ran a hand through his already ragged hair and sighed. “I’m not going to leave you like this.”

“Why, not the...hero thing to...do?” she spat out angrily.

“You need to get to a hospital,” he said, ignoring the dig.

“I...can’t,” she wheezed out.

“Then what am I supposed to do here?” he asked. “No one’s answering the phone. You’re getting worse by the second.”

“I’ll be...fine.”

“No, you won’t,” he said, running a hand across her cheek.

“What do...you care?” she wheezed out through labored breaths. “One less...person to know, right?”

Anger flooded his mind at the dig. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, Lois.”

“Maybe if you...trusted me...I would,” she coughed out with a deep labored breath.

“I *did* trust you,” he said evenly.

“Just not enough,” she whispered.

Lighting crackled in his eyes. “You already *knew*. What difference does it make?” He let out a stiff chuckle and added, “Exactly how did you figure that out anyway? Did Luthor tell you?”

“He knows?” Her question came just before she let out a deep sigh.

“Of course he knows.” He let out a bitter laugh. “How do you think I ended up with that Kryptonite tracker inside me?”

“Right, sorry,” came her labored response.

Flashbacks to his time in Dr. Kelly’s clutches came rushing back mixed with the threats Luthor had made, hinting at Lois’ death. The anger, guilt, and pain came flooding back as he stared at the dark red stain on her shoulder.

<<“Lois Lane won’t be a problem. She’s sure to have bled out by now anyway.”>>

<<“You stabbed her. Left her to bleed out. I’d say that’s personal.”>>

<<“I live in a fantasy world? Perhaps, but my fantasy’s about to come true.”>>

<<“A blade is so underused and underappreciated these days, don’t you agree?”>>

<<“The man of steel brought to his knees by a simple rock and unable to hear the screams for help from Lois Lane herself.”>>

<<“It’s only fitting she should die from the same blade as her hero.”>>

“I thought you were dead,” he said evenly. “Then all of a sudden there you were. I spent months trying to find a way out of that place. Luthor made sure I never escaped and I still don’t know how you were able to get through the security he had setup around there.”

“Christina helped me,” Lois choked out. “Despite what you think...I would have...gone after you whether I knew or...not.”

He twisted his mouth uncertain if he could trust the words coming out of her or not. “You would?”

“I wouldn’t wish that...on my worst enemy,” she responded

lazily. “I wasn’t going to just...leave you there.”

“Well, thanks, I think,” he caught her gaze. Her face was flushed and he could see the shine from sweat on her forehead.

“I really...don’t like you...very much right now,” she said bitterly, “but I do love...you.”

His chest tightened, uncertain how to respond to her confession. He placed a hand on her cheek, feeling the heat on her face. “Lois?” He shook her arm and she didn’t respond. “No, no, no, no.” He shook his head, pulling her to him. “Come on, Lois, you need to stay awake...”

*‘She needs a doctor.’*

\*\*\*

Dr. Pete Ross bolted out of bed when he heard the phone ring. He looked to his wife, Lana Lang Ross as she slept soundly, feeling his way over her to reach the phone on the nightstand. “I thought you weren’t on call tonight,” came her sleepy response as she reached over to hand him the ringing phone.

“Sorry, Honey.” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. He sat up in bed and answered the phone, walking into the hallway to allow his sleeping wife the quiet she needed to rest. “Hello?”

“Pete?” came the familiar voice on the other line.

He immediately recognized it and choked out, “Clark?” A thousand thoughts raced through his mind and he stammered out, “How is this even possible?”

“It’s a long story and I’ll be happy to explain but right now I need some help. More specifically my friend needs some help and I can’t take her to a hospital,” Clark’s response came.

“Why can’t you take her to a hospital?” Pete asked.

“Because on paper she’s dead,” Clark’s response came.

“Please, I need someone I can trust and...she doesn’t have a lot of time.”

He knew he should have hung up the phone right then.

Providing anyone with medical care outside of hospital protocol was against so many laws and so many rules that could cause him to lose his medical license. He should just hang up but this was Clark. His best friend from grade school up and if he was asking for help like this it was because he had exhausted all other options. He needed help and Pete couldn’t turn his friend down. Not after spending months thinking he was dead.

“Where are you?”

\*\*\*

Bill Henderson swiveled in his chair, tapping his foot on the tile floor as he waited for Edward Sayer to enter. The thrill and excitement that came when he knew a case was close to cracking wide open always made him giddy. Still he did his best to portray a sense of calm to the outside world. Jimmy’s information on Sayer hadn’t been substantiated but it was something he could use to try and squeeze a confession out of the crook and hopefully get him to turn on Luthor before he had a chance to get pulled into Bender’s web of lies in order to protect Luthor.

The door opened and Edward Sayer stepped into the office, running a hand over his forehead. “I, uh, thought we handled this situation already.” He took a seat behind his desk.

“We handled the situation with Mr. Olsen, but I’m here on a more personal matter, Dr. Sayer.” Henderson replied calmly.

“Oh?” Sayer looked at him with a questioning gaze.

“You really are a busy man, Dr. Sayer. I mean, not only do you represent New Troy with the NRC, but you also do research at LexCorp’s Power and Energy Lab, consult on all reviews for New Troy’s Energy bills and still have time to handle the day to day work with the Department of Energy.” Henderson leaned forward, folding his hands on the desk as he leveled the accusation at him with a smile. “So, tell me, how much extra do you get paid for your extracurricular activities?”

“Pardon?” Sayer choked out.

“Your extra jobs. Your involvement in everything Luthor Power and Energy has done since its founding in 1983.”

Henderson clucked his tongue as he leaned back in his chair. “I mean, you have to be paid extra for the lengths you’re going to in order to protect Metropolis’ Golden Boy, right?”

“I suggest you leave,” Dr. Sayer told him coldly reaching for the phone.

“I’d rather stay,” Henderson pointed to the phone on his desk. “You can call security and we can discuss this downtown in an interrogation room with attorneys that are paid to protect Lex Luthor or you can answer my questions and maybe get out of this without any jail time.”

Dr. Sayer placed the phone back down and turned to Henderson with a nervous twitch. “What do you want?”

“Pack a bag,” Henderson ordered. “You’re going on a road trip.”

\*\*\*

Clark stared down at his hands covered in blood, frozen in place as the sound of Pete Ross cursing under his breath reached his ears over and over again. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t think. He just sat there frozen in place as Pete worked on trying to save Lois.

“Got it!” Pete cheered and Clark heard a metal clank following the victory.

Lois had been shot just below the collarbone, in the hip and upper thigh. The bullet from her collarbone hadn’t been straight through and began moving toward her internal organs. He knew if the bullet hit her lungs or heart the chances of her surviving would be slim due to the ‘*no hospitals*’ rule he had to abide by. Between being crushed by the door and the bullet heading further down into her chest he knew she didn’t have a lot of time.

He’d tried Davenport but gotten nothing. He’d tried Talley and gotten nothing. His only other choice was to find a doctor to treat her.

Luckily he knew a really good one. Pete graduated top of his class and completed his residency at one of the top cardiology hospitals in the country. He could have gone anywhere in the country but he chose to settle down close to Smallville. Clark suspected Pete’s relationship with Lana had a lot to do with that. Pete Ross was the best person he knew and the only person he knew he could trust to help Lois and keep them safe.

The snapping of rubber gloves and Pete’s heavy sighs of relief followed. Clark looked up to see his friend stretching his arms over his head. Pete threw him a reassuring smile. “She’s gonna be okay. Might have some therapy on that shoulder for a few months but we got all three of them.”

“Good.” Clark nodded toward him.

Pete pointed toward the door. “Normally I’d be washing up and having the staff take the patient to a room.”

Clark shook his head. “She can’t stay here, Pete. It’s too dangerous. The second you put her into the system…”

“I know,” Pete said, glancing at Lois’ unconscious form that laid under the blue surgical sheets she’d been under. “Lana’s going to kill me. You know that right? Like you might as well dig up my grave and pick out a headstone.”

“You can blame it on me,” Clark offered. “I’m the one that put you in this mess.”

“I’m the one that agreed to it,” Pete said with a sigh. He pointed toward the room behind them. “There’s some scrubs in the backroom. Get yourself cleaned up and changed then we can figure out what to do here.”

“Thanks, Pete,” Clark felt a wave of guilt continue to nag at him for what he’d put his friend through.

“Let’s just get through tonight and hopefully your FBI friend will have some answers in the morning,” Pete said with a sigh. “I’m going to call Lana.”

\*\*\*

Jonathan felt a pang in his chest when he heard the message on the voicemail of Martha’s mobile phone. It was from Wayne.

Clark was looking for them. After months of silence he was finally ready to reach out. With a heavy heart he turned to Martha who was sitting in tears, rocking herself. He knew this had been far worse on her than it had been on him. She insisted on continuing to reach out and keep herself informed with what was going on. Even if Clark wasn’t ready to talk she wanted to know he was okay.

That had been fine in the beginning but now months later he still refused to reach out and each phone call that was answered by Lois was like a knife to his wife’s heart, wondering what to do. How could they help him if he wouldn’t talk to them? After the short two weeks Lois had spent with them Jonathan had had his eyes opened to what kind of monster Lex Luthor truly was.

He had been desperate for answers when he made the decision to tell Lois, hoping it might help her find Clark. In the end, he knew it was the right decision, but now he feared that revelation might have caused more harm than good. After being held captive by Luthor and told whatever lies that spineless weasel had mustered up, Clark’s need for self-preservation would be in overdrive. If he found out Lois knew, then he would close himself off even further. He was sure of it.

“What do we do?” Martha asked between sobs. “What are we supposed to do?”

“He’s reaching out,” Jonathan said evenly. “There has to be a reason.”

\*\*\*

“Who was that?” Alice asked, walking up to Perry after he hung up the phone. She could tell from his demeanor that whatever it was probably related to the call he’d received from Lois a few hours ago. “Any word?” she asked, after a few minutes of silence from Perry.

“We’re going to have to make a drive up to the cabin and assess the damage,” Perry said with a strain to his voice. “Director Talley said we can file a report with him and they’ll compensate us for the …repairs.”

“What about Lois?” Alice asked, placing a hand on his arm.

“I don’t know,” he choked out.

“Has anyone heard anything from Clark?” she asked cautiously.

“I don’t know,” Perry said grimly. He was quiet a moment before clearing his throat. “We should pack up. I’m not sure how many days this is going to take?”

“What about Jack?” Alice asked, glancing toward the door leading out into the hallway.

“He’s safer here away from all this mess,” Perry grunted.

\*\*\*

Lois felt a warm cloth against her cheek and slowly began to stir. She heard a feminine voice whisper to her, “Everything’s fine. Just take a deep breath.” Lois felt her eyes flutter open and a woman with long auburn hair and blue eyes stared back at her. “You gave everyone quite a scare last night.”

“Who are you?” Lois croaked out.

“Lana Lang Ross,” she held her hand out to shake Lois’.

“You’re a lucky girl. Most people have to wait in a long line to get Pete to take them on as a patient.”

“Lucky me,” Lois said with a wince as she attempted to sit up. She felt a pain course through her right side.

“Don’t try to move just yet,” Lana said, pushing her back onto the bed by her other shoulder. “I can’t have you messing up my husband’s handiwork. You will be resting for the next few days.”

“Listen, you seem really nice and all, but I can’t afford to stay *anywhere* for a few days,” Lois tried to argue

“It wasn’t a request,” Lana replied coolly. “My husband put his career on the line to help you. Which is fine. Clark’s been a good friend to Pete for years. I know if put in the situation again Pete would do it in a heartbeat. That being said I don’t have to be okay with you taking unnecessary risks that might land you in the

hospital or worse. This isn't just about you, Ms. Lane. This is Pete's career. He put it on the line to save you and you're going to follow doctor's orders and *rest*." She straightened up and smiled. "Bathroom is right outside. If you need anything just let me know." Lana stood up, smoothing the sides of her cotton top and turned toward the door.

Lois let out a deep breath, leaning back against the large pillow that was positioned behind her. Before she could wonder too long on who this woman was and what this Pete person's connection was to Clark, the door opened and a man with blonde hair and stern features opened the door.

"Ms. Lane, you gave us quite a scare." He offered her a smile and held out his hand for her to shake. "Dr. Peter Ross. We met last night but you weren't really up for the whole talking thing."

Lois gave him a weak smile. "I hear you saved my life."

"Well if you want to call digging three bullets out in a dimly lit patient room and preventing any damage to your major organs saving your life, then sure. You could say that." He gave her a grin. "Clark will be back in a bit. I sent him on an errand."

"Errand?" Lois looked at him curiously.

"Well, given he's alive and had yet to so much as call his parents I figured now was as good a time as any to kick his stubborn butt out the door and make him let them know he's okay." As Pete spoke he motioned for her to sit up, holding out his stethoscope to listen to her back. "Deep breath."

"You'll have to let me know how you did that. I've been trying for months to get him to call them," Lois replied sadly.

"Simple. Make him owe you one." Pete grinned back at her as he moved the stethoscope up her back, continuing to listen. He stood up and cleared his throat. "Everything sounds good, but like I told Clark last night, that shoulder's going to need some physical therapy. The bullet that nicked your hip hit an artery that I was able to repair. The one on your thigh was just a flesh wound. The tendons in your shoulder blade however received a lot of the damage. Thankfully we got to the bullet in time before it hit your lungs or heart."

Lois looked down, realizing how close she'd come to being too late. She'd been so angry at Clark she insisted on not letting him help her until she didn't have a choice. That decision nearly cost her her life. "Thank you," she whispered, uncertain if there was anything left to say.

"Just don't go back to wherever it was you were that you got shot at." Pete instructed.

"I won't," Lois said with a deep sigh. "How much did Clark tell you?"

"FBI is helping you and Clark to stay 'dead' so they can build a case against Lex Luthor and put him away for the rest of his life. Luthor apparently faked Clark's death and you rescued him." Pete shrugged his shoulders. "That's all I got and believe me if there's more I don't want to know."

"I can understand that," Lois responded.

"You two can stay here until everything blows over." He pointed to the window. "Not a LexCorp plant within a hundred-mile radius." He offered her a smile. "But I must warn you, Wichita can be a bit boring compared to city life."

"If boring means no hitmen chasing after me with guns then I'll take it," Lois said with a weak smile.

\*\*\*

Clark landed outside the small Bed and Breakfast he'd visited just hours before having his entire world tilted on its axis. He wasn't sure if he should be angry or relieved that Wayne had been providing his parents with a place to stay as they moved throughout the Midwest. He'd been ten feet away from them the entire time he'd been in Wayne's office and not known it.

*'Don't think about that now,'* he told himself.

Pete had made a deal with him. He would continue to keep Lois safe and treat her if he reached out to his parents. The way

Pete had snuck that in should be considered an art form. He always had a knack for finding just the right buttons to press to get his way. Pete had put himself on the line and he knew Clark wouldn't have done it unless he'd had his hand forced, so Pete had blackmailed him into calling them.

His dad's voice had been hoarse when he had picked up the phone. It took everything in Clark not to breakdown when he heard his father's voice on the other line. The heavy weight of guilt and self-loathing he'd been carrying threatened to crush him. After a short conversation and reassurance that he was indeed okay he arranged to meet with them in person.

He stepped into the dining area where he spotted a small alcove with a few rocking chairs and a sitting area. Thankfully the room was empty minus his parents who were seated in the alcove. He took a deep breath, steadying himself for the long overdue conversation that needed to take place.

\*\*\*

Lex straightened his tie in the mirror, admiring his reflection as he prepared for the annual Orchid Ball. Tonight would be the night he would announce his running for Senator after having the governor, a few judges and fellow congressmen throw their support toward him it would appear to be a move made to satisfy his supporters not a political one. This would help sway the swing votes toward him and guarantee his place as New Troy Senator and if things went well possibly the White House would be his next Everest to climb.

He looked down at the silver box on his desk, popping the lock on it to open it. A smile spread across his face as he saw the green and silver metal that had been molded together. After retrieving the knife the police had discovered in his wine cellar, he had the metal molded down with the powdered residue of the Kryptonite he'd used to hold Clark Kent at bay during his capture. There still had been no sign of him but knowing what he knew about Kent he wouldn't leave anything to chance.

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Officer Grant looked up from inside his patrol car and spotted a man fitting the description of the suspected bomber stepping out of the back door leading to the restroom of the local Hardee's. He took a bite of his burger, watching as the man climbed into his car and started the engine. He looked at the sketch he'd been given this morning once more. "Dead ringer," he said, reaching for the radio and calling in the location.

\*\*\*

"You look good," Martha heard her husband say after the emotional reunion threatened to become too much for the both of them. She stole a glance toward her husband then back to Clark where he sat in the chair across from them. He looked different, hardened from the young man she and Jonathan had last seen so many months ago.

She hadn't understood what Lois meant when stressing how much he'd changed. It wasn't anything physical that gave it away. He wore the same face behind the neatly trimmed hair that covered his face. He had the same expressions, but they seemed harder and more stern. There was a part of him that was missing it seemed. She knew he'd been through a lot, but still she couldn't help but mourn for the loss of the son she once knew.

"Lois knows," Clark said in an uncertain tone. "I don't know how, but she knows."

Martha exchanged a look with Jonathan, wondering if they should tell him what they knew of the revelation.

"Well, Clark, I mean, given everything that's happened, isn't that a *good* thing?" Jonathan asked.

"Good?" he choked out angrily. "She's known for *months*. She spent the last few months manipulating me into..." He stopped short and looked down.

Martha bit her lip, wondering for moment what that look was about. She didn't for one minute believe Lois had done anything

she wouldn't have done without her knowledge of his alter-ego. It was clear how the young woman felt about Clark when she had arrived at the Kent farm. From the moment Clark had begun talking about Lois Lane, she and Jonathan had known there was something different about her. Clark was never the type to be drawn to just a pretty face. He was captivated by his partner and continued to play it off as a friendship or business relationship but Martha knew better.

Clark had spent years living a nomadic existence hiding everything from everyone and then all of that had come to a screeching halt when he came to Metropolis. He claimed there was something about the city but she knew it was more about *who* was in that city. What was frustrating for both her and Jonathan was to listen to their son continue down a path that they knew would end in heartache. He wanted Lois Lane to love Clark, not Superman but refused to see past his own insecurities and realize they were the same.

"Into what?" Jonathan dared to ask the question that Martha knew she couldn't.

"It's not important." Clark's face flushed and Martha realized this went beyond what Lois did or didn't know. There had been a change in their relationship. Whatever the change was Clark was now looking for a way to deflect his guilt over not telling Lois about him being Superman.

"I told her," Martha said firmly.

"What?" Clark choked out, looking back up at her in shock.

"I told her," Martha repeated. "She was our only way to find out what happened to you and she was distraught thinking Lex Luthor had killed you. I had to tell her the truth." Clark stared at her in shock, unable to respond. Martha looked to Jonathan who nodded.

"All she wanted was to figure out a way to find you and rescue you from Lex Luthor and that's what we wanted too," Martha insisted.

"No, she wanted to rescue *Superman* from Luthor, *not Clark*," he corrected with a cold glare.

"What makes you think there's a difference?" Martha asked. "You have someone in your life that can accept you for who you are... *all* of you. Do you know how rare that is? I'm sorry she had to find out this way, really I am, but under the circumstances it needed to be done."

Clark let out a harsh grunt. "This is the same person that went to great lengths just to land the first interview with Superman. Do you really think it's a good idea to have her knowing her former partner used to be him?"

"Used to be?" Jonathan asked.

"There is no Superman anymore," Clark said in a harsh whisper.

"All your life you've hidden who you are. You've kept moving and done what you could to help others.... Do you really want to go back to that?" Martha asked.

"It was safer like that," Clark said bitterly.

"You were also *alone*," Martha pointed out. "No friendships because you never stayed anywhere long enough to form any."

"I was better off alone," Clark buried his head in his hands.

"I don't think you believe that," Jonathan said with a grunt. "I also don't believe you can walk away from everything like that. I know you've been through hell and back. We all have, but giving up on everything isn't going to change anything. You walk away from who you are and you let Lex Luthor win. Is that what you want?"

"He's not going to win anything," Clark said darkly. "but I'm not going to compete with myself and...and play second fiddle to some hair gel and a cape."

Martha's tone was harsh as she glared at her son. "It's not just hair gel and a cape. It's not just a suit. It's *you*. It's who you are and it's who we raised you to be. All of the things we instilled in

you is what and who Superman is. Do you honestly think a woman smart enough to win awards for her investigative journalism wouldn't be able to look past a flashy costume and see the man behind the suit?" She shook her head, feeling her hands tremble as she spoke. "She was a mess when she arrived here, nearly died on the way but was still determined as ever to find and rescue you."

"What are you talking about?" Clark asked, his eyes widened and Martha realized he had no idea what she was referring to.

"You don't know what he did to her, do you?" Martha asked.

"I knew there was a scar but I was never told what happened," Clark shook his head.

"She said she tried to end things with Lex Luthor and he went into a rage," Jonathan spat out bitterly.

Martha bit her lip and continued in a shaky breath, "He made her call for help over and over and kept laughing when no one arrived." She met her son's gaze and stressed, "When *Superman* didn't arrive."

"We still don't know all the details other than he stabbed her and left her for dead," Jonathan explained. "We got a call from her just outside of Kansas City." Jonathan turned toward her, "Your mother had to help stitch that gash in Lois' side. She found Lois bleeding to death in her truck. She brought her here to recover."

Martha added, "I'm not a hundred percent sure what happened, but she spent the first few weeks having night terrors."

"Sent a chill right through you to hear the screams," Jonathan growled out.

Martha placed a hand on her husband's knee, reminded all too well of how angry he'd been when he'd discovered what Lex Luthor had done to Lois. The memory of the nightmares still haunted her. If she could have convinced Lois to stay she would have, but Nigel showing up had ruined any chance of that.

"Then that Nigel character showed up," Martha added. "She left town shortly after that and has been checking in regularly." Martha sighed, running a hand through her thinning hair. "She cares about you, Clark. She never would have told anyone."

Clark was silent for a long time. Martha looked to Jonathan, uncertain what to do or if there was anything left to say. She saw the anger and storm clouds crackling in her son's eyes as his features hardened and he looked up. Anger flashed in Clark's eyes and he let out a growl. "I'm going to *kill* him."

\*\*\*

Jack let out a sigh, readjusting his bag that he kept on his shoulder as he looked around the empty bus stop. Perry and Alice had left when they thought he was still sleeping. If Jimmy could go to Metropolis, so could he. Hiding from Luthor was futile. They needed to bring him down and Jimmy couldn't hold his own against characters like this. He needed his help.

The bus pulled in with a soft wheeze, letting out steam as the doors opened. Jack looked over his shoulder as he climbed on the bus with a ticket in his hand. "Metropolis?"

The bus driver looked at him with a wary expression. "How old are you kid?"

"I'm seventeen and I'm emancipated. You want the paperwork?" Jack responded with a stern expression.

"Stay up front," the driver ordered, motioning behind him.

\*\*\*

Edward Sayer swallowed hard as he looked around the glass walls that filled the office space he was in. The man in front of him wore a grim expression as he motioned for him to follow. There was a long table in the middle of the room and on top of it was a collection of photos and sticky notes.

"What is this place?" Edward Sayer asked nervously.

"Five hundred and eighty-six," the man said, pointing to the chair behind him.

"I'm sorry?" Sayer asked.

"Five hundred and eighty-six," the man repeated. "That's how

many crooked politicians and judges and officers and agents in the field that we'll be arresting today." The man wore a smug expression. "If you cooperate with us that number might go down to five-hundred and eighty-five."

\*\*\*

Nigel pulled into the gas station, preparing to fill up his tank. He stepped out of the car and went inside to pay for his gas. The drive back to New Troy had been long and he knew he'd have some explaining to do but given the current political environment he was sure Lex Luthor would not notice his absence. Now that Lois Lane had been taken care of he could focus his attention to the political campaign and dig up dirt on Lex Luthor's potential opponents.

A hard metal object pressed into the back of his head and a voice whispered, "I'm disappointed in you, Nigel. I've been tailing you through the last two cities and you had no idea you were being followed."

"Officer," Nigel nodded as his hands were locked into handcuffs. "What is the charge?"

"You can ask the Feds," the officer guided him toward the door where two large men in dark suits stood waiting for him.

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Jack Davenport pointed to the long line of warrants on the conference table. "We'll split these up evenly and we'll move in at the same time like an orchestrated symphony," Davenport spat out. "No one gets a head's up. No one gets a warning. I want Lex Luthor's ugly mug in my custody with all his crooked cronies before sundown."

"What about the officers?" Bill Henderson asked. "We'll have to get IAB involved."

"They can get involved after they're in custody," Jack said with a snort. "I don't want to give these guys any hint that this is about to go down."

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## Chapter 17

Clark arrived at Luthor Towers, landing outside the towering building as he searched for Luthor with his x-ray vision. He could feel anger and hate raging through him like he'd never felt before. Even with his fight with Jason Trask he had never felt such rage simmering inside him. He held onto his hatred as he pondered how he would make that worm suffer for what he did. He had kept his anger and rage at bay for months, refusing to let it out and deal with the raw emotions that demanded justice for the months of torture Luthor had forced him to endure.

He wanted justice. He wanted revenge. But right now more than anything he wanted Luthor to feel the fear he'd made Lois endure. He knew Luthor would suffer and find himself behind bars soon enough but it still wouldn't be enough. Not after everything he'd done.

There in the penthouse he spotted him. He checked the room, ensuring there were no hidden radioactive materials that could cause a problem later. He saw no signs of Kryptonite or any unexpected guests nearby. Luthor's manservant was by the front door. He counted the flights of stairs and guessed it would take half a second to speed up the stairs.

He took a deep breath and disappeared into a blur of black from the dark clothes he was wearing. A loud wheeze escaped Luthor's throat and Clark felt a wave of satisfaction wash over him as he stared back at him and roared, "I will end you!"

"So glad you could make it to the party, Kent," Luthor shot back unfazed by the threat as Clark threw him against the wall and pinned him in place. "I do think you're forgetting one small tidbit here, hmm? One story in the paper exposing your secret to the world and everyone and everything you care about will come to an end." He let out a low sneer and added, "I've got you, Kent and there isn't a thing you can do to stop me...nothing you'd actually do anyway."

"Try me," Clark growled. "I know what you did, you demented piece of garbage!" He pinned him in place, feeling the rage inside him threatening to boil over. "I oughta tear you limb from limb and make you scream for help. Sound familiar?"

"Well, I'll give Mrs. Cox some credit. When she turns she certainly does a full one-eighty," Luthor snarled out. "What do you want a medal? The hero coming to his heroine's rescue months later is so overdone don't you think?"

"You don't deserve to live," Clark growled out angrily.

"Yes, we've been here before. You threaten to do away with me and yet you can't bring yourself to do it, can you?" Luthor challenged. "You are too weak and crippled by your sense of right and wrong to take your revenge, aren't you?"

Clark's grip on him tightened around Luthor's throat as he narrowed his eyes at him. "Still think I'm too weak, Luthor? You really think I wouldn't hunt you down like the animal you are and end your miserable life after what you did to her?!"

Clark contemplated ending him right there. He knew his heat vision could get hot enough to turn him into a pile of ashes and leave him as nothing more than a burn mark on the pristine hand-crafted wood floor. Or maybe he could squeeze his neck hard enough to snap his head off. There were so many ways in which he could rid the world of Lex Luthor, but something stopped him...someone rather.

<<"It's the idea of Superman. Someone to believe in. Someone to build a few hopes around. Whatever he can do, that's enough.">>

<<"All of the things we instilled in you is what and who Superman is.">>

"Go ahead, do it! I dare you!" Luthor challenged him from beneath his grasp. "You and I both know you won't be able to do it. You're pathetic." A maniacal laugh escaped his throat as he added, "You'll never know the thrill that comes from taking a life in your hands and watching it slowly simmer out. You were never worthy of her. A coward in a cape that she continued to cry for as I took what was rightfully mine again and again and again and..."

<<"Five years.">>

<<"I love you, Clark.">>

<<"What's five years?">>

The memory of Lois' confession flashed through his mind and Clark tightened his jaw, jerking Luthor to him as he let out a low snarl. "You're lying." He grabbed him by the belt buckle and hoisted him up toward the ceiling, watching as the fan blades came closer and closer to giving Luthor a deadly haircut.

"Perhaps," Luthor's giddy response came with a chuckle, "but you'll never know for sure, will you?" Clark's grip on him lowered with each taunt and he could feel the anger flooding through his veins as Luthor continued, "How does it feel to know you'll never have her, hmm? I won. You can do whatever you want and it won't matter because the one thing you hold dear in this world has been taken from you and you will never have anything but a mere memory to keep you warm at night for the rest of your miserable life."

In a fit of rage, Clark threw him across the room, knocking him into the bookshelf as a piercing pain flooded through him. "You murderous sociopath..."

He let out a groan and fell to the ground when he felt the burning sensation in his side. He turned to see a metal blade sticking out from his shirt. "Quite a remarkable piece of work there," Luthor said standing to his feet. "Molded from the metal of the knife used to kill Lois Lane and then mixed with a heavy dose of lead and Kryptonite to keep you from finding it. "But just enough Kryptonite on the blade to be deadly. A blade is so underused these days, wouldn't you agree?"

Clark grunted, pulling the blade from his side and throwing it across the room. He felt the wound begin to heal as he stood to his feet. "You can stab me with a hundred of those things and it still

won't stop me." Just as he was about to grab Luthor the doors opened and a swarm of officers pushed their way through Luthor's study and surrounded him with their weapons drawn.

One of the officers pulled his helmet up and addressed Clark, pulling him aside. "Kent? What are you doing here?" It was Henderson.

Clark glared toward Luthor but didn't respond, still feeling the rage and hatred running through him after his altercation with him.

"Yes, detective, I was being assaulted by Mr. Kent here or do you prefer your other name? I just can't remember..." Luthor chuckled out loud. "Superman?"

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Lois stared at the television set in shock, unable to focus on anything else as she watched the long line of officers escorting judges, senators, police officers, and even the governor out of the Luthor Mansion in handcuffs. The news anchor narrated the coverage and she gripped the side of her bed, unable to turn away from the shocking news.

"This evening the nation sits in shock as over five-hundred agents and public officials have been taken into custody in connection to organized crime and RICO charges from the FBI. No one is saying anything and we're seeing more and more people coming out of Luthor Towers. As you all know the Orchid Ball is an annual event LexCorp holds to drum up support for the charities Mr. Luthor works with each year..."

"Lois, are you all right?" Lana's voice brought her back to the present and Lois turned back to the auburn haired woman looking at her in concern.

"Fine," Lois lied, wiping the tears from her eyes to cover up the fact that she'd been crying.

Lana's face twisted, staring at her for a long moment before taking a seat in the chair next to the bed. "How about I just sit here until Clark gets back?" Lana offered. Lois nodded uncertain what to think or say. She glanced at the television and saw the image of the governor being led out in handcuffs. A hard lump formed in her throat and Lana pointed at the TV. "You don't have to watch this."

"Yes, I do," Lois said tearfully.

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"Yes, detective, I was being assaulted by Mr. Kent here or do you prefer your other name? I just can't remember..." Luthor chuckled out loud. "Superman?"

Clark felt a panic rise inside him as all eyes turned to him. It was out. The truth of who he was was out. His greatest fear had been uttered by his enemy and every reporter and paparazzi looking for a soundbite could look no further than the individuals standing in this room. The story that would put an end to any hope of a normal life for him – Clark Kent – had been told. He stared at Luthor's smug expression from behind the swarm of officers that held their weapons on him. It was too late to stop him. The damage had been done.

His life was over.

His chance at resuming any semblance of a life that is.

His parents would now be targets.

Lois would be even more of a target than she had been in the past.

It was all over.

"Is that blood?" he heard Henderson ask, looking at the dark navy shirt Clark was wearing that had a dark stain on the fabric from where Luthor had stabbed him earlier.

"Uh, yeah," Clark shrugged. "It just grazed me."

Jack Davenport let out a snort. "Last I heard Superman didn't bleed." Clark let out a deep sigh of relief as Jack snorted. "You know if you've got some *issues*," Jack did a drinking signal with his thumb and pinky finger, "we have doctors that can help you out with that. I've got a guy in lockup that thinks he's Elvis Presley and belts out *Jailhouse Rock* completely off tune."

Davenport grinned back at Luthor. "You're not getting out of this one."

Henderson motioned to Davenport who was standing a few feet away. "Get the knife."

"Oh, you can't be serious!" Luthor shouted as Davenport slapped handcuffs on Luthor. "*He* attacked me!"

"If you think we rushed in because of your disagreement with Kent here, then you're in even more trouble than you could imagine," Davenport said, flashing his badge. "Congratulations Lex Luthor you've just won an all expenses paid trip to Federal Prison where the food is lousy the company is even worse and the entertainment is so dull you'll beg for someone to put you out of your misery."

"Federal Prison?" Luthor choked out in laughter. "You'll be writing parking tickets by the time I'm through with you and I'll be out before the ink dries on your supposed warrant."

"Is that so?" Jack Davenport looked at Henderson and laughed. "You hear that boys? Mr. Luthor thinks he's above the federal government."

Clark felt a strong grip on his shoulder, keeping him from doing what Henderson probably thought would be a stupid move. Clark glanced around the room, fighting the urge to take matters into his own hands. He had to trust Luthor would see justice. He had to trust he would finally pay.

"You've made the biggest mistake of your career," Luthor sneered.

"I wouldn't get so cocky," Davenport shot back smugly. "I mean, after all, you haven't met your new cellmates..."

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Jimmy cleared his throat, looking around the questionable atmosphere of the bar he was in. It was crowded with people listening to music and ordering drinks. A short man with balding hair and a sailor's hat was behind the bar serving drinks to the patrons.

"Take a load off," he heard Jack say from behind him, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Jack!" Jimmy groaned, turning to his friend and yelling at him. "Don't do that!"

Jack pointed to the back corner of the bar. "Come on, I've already got us a table."

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Pete Ross stood in the kitchen watching the shocking images on the television in the living room. Lex Luthor had been arrested. From what Clark had told him it was a long time coming. Still, watching not only a handful of thugs be taken into custody but enough public service agents to fill a small town be named in such a large corruption scandal and arrested was appalling.

The back door opened and he saw Clark in a dark jacket, a torn shirt and dark jeans. His friend looked like he'd been hit by a truck. Pete sighed, taking a step toward him and placing a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay." He could tell Clark was struggling to remain in control of the emotions he was holding in. "It's over," he said calmly.

"It'll never be over," Clark croaked out angrily. "Not really." he glanced toward the stairs where Lois and Lana were.

Pete spotted the dark stain on Clark's shirt and sighed. "Maybe not, but you can at least stop hiding." He pointed to the laundry room a few feet away. "Here, you need to change before Lana sees you like that and freaks."

"I'm fine," Clark said with a shrug.

"Yeah? Since when is having blood all over you fine?" Pete asked with a firm tone, looking back at Clark with a stern expression. Clark looked back at him in surprise and he shrugged. "You need to get changed."

Clark hung his head and stared at the gash in his shirt. "I went to confront Luthor."

"You didn't kill him, did you?" Pete asked before adding, "I'd

understand if you did, but I really don't want to start making regular trips on Sundays to the New Troy prison in order to see you. It'd really cut into my golf time."

"You couldn't play golf if your life depended on it." Clark chuckled.

"Probably just as well." Pete sighed. "I just can't make that sweater vest look work for me." Clark cracked a smile at him and Pete sighed. "I take it Luthor walked away." He pointed to news coverage. "I didn't see him being wheeled out on a gurney or anything."

"It wasn't without trying," Clark admitted in a grave tone. "I wanted to kill him, but I couldn't."

"He'll pay for what he did," Pete reassured him.

He wanted to say something—anything to reassure his friend that it was okay to feel that kind of hate and anger toward someone that reflected pure evil. But he knew Clark wouldn't be able to justify it to himself. He held himself to a higher standard. He always had and for the longest time he didn't understand why Clark was so hard on himself. It wasn't until Junior High when he caught his friend floating in his sleep that he truly understood why. Clark never knew and telling him would only add to his stress so Pete continued to do what he could to help him when he could and be his friend. To him he would always be just Clark Kent the same guy he'd grown up with. He just happened to also be Superman.

"He thinks Lois is dead." Clark let out a bitter chuckle. "He thinks she's dead and he was gloating about it and..." He hung his head. "I should have snapped him in half when I had the chance."

"That's not you," Pete said with a heavy breath.

"Don't be so sure," Clark shook his head.

"Hey, I've known you since grade school. I think I would know." Pete snorted.

"I'm not even sure who I am anymore." Clark let out a defeated sigh.

"You're the guy that does the right thing even when it doesn't feel right," Pete said with a deep breath. "You're the guy that is there for his friends and protects those that can't protect themselves." He pointed toward the stairs. "Case in point, that friend of yours that's recovering from a one-man surgery and still alive because of you."

"She's alive because of you," Clark argued.

"And you," Pete reminded him.

There was a silence between them and Clark looked at him with a curious expression. "You know, don't you?"

"Kinda hard to get from Lincoln to Wichita in under ten minutes," Pete said calmly, not looking up. "I deleted it off the caller id."

"Does Lana know?" Clark asked.

"Nope," Pete said calmly. "You talked to your mom?"

"Yeah." Clark sighed.

"She give you the recipe to her sugar cookies?" Pete asked.

"She said you can have them over her dead body," Clark retorted with a smirk.

"I was really looking forward to those cookies." Pete sighed and pointed toward the stairs. "So is there a reason why you're hiding down here with me? I mean, not that I don't enjoy catching up, but your friend was shot and you haven't even tried to check on her."

"I know she's in good hands," Clark said with a shaky breath.

"You're full of crap," Pete retorted.

"And she and I aren't exactly on speaking terms right now," Clark said.

"She mad at you?" Pete chuckled. "Flowers, groveling, chocolate and some more groveling should help get you back onto speaking terms."

"You don't know Lois." Clark snorted.

"She's nice to me," Pete said with a grin. He let out a sigh.

"I'm telling you, grovel. It'll save you a lot of headaches. Practice

these words 'you were right and I was wrong.' Make it your mantra and the fight magically disappears when you apologize."

"What makes you think *I'm* the one that needs to apologize?" Clark asked mildly offended.

"Because you're *you*," Pete said with a grin. "You and I both know your bonehead meter tends to hit higher than usual when women are involved. The bonehead meter is off the charts with this one." He patted Clark on the shoulder. "Just apologize and get it over with."

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"I'm not even sure who I am anymore." Clark let out a defeated sigh. He'd come close to killing a man tonight. Really killing him. He'd stopped himself but the fact that he had been that tempted left him disappointed in himself and wondering how he'd gotten this far away from the idealistic farm kid that just wanted to make a difference in the world. He'd known Pete most of his life and he knew he was one of the few people he could let his guard down with and be vulnerable.

There was a long pause and then Pete spoke up, "You're the guy that does the right thing even when it doesn't feel right." Pete turned to him and let out a deep breath. "You're the guy that is there for his friends and protects those that can't protect themselves." Pete pointed toward the stairs leading up to where the bedrooms were. "Case in point, that friend of yours that's recovering from a one-man surgery and still alive because of you."

"She's alive because of you," Clark argued. Pete had put everything on the line to help save Lois and he would be forever grateful to his friend.

"And you," Pete reminded him.

Clark looked back at him and caught a hint of something in Pete's eyes. He was hinting at something, like he knew... *He knew*, Clark realized as he looked back at his friend. "You know, don't you?"

"Kinda hard to get from Lincoln to Wichita in under ten minutes," Pete said calmly, not looking up. Clark recalled the phone call from last night when he'd been in Lincoln, Nebraska and then shown up at Pete's clinic in Wichita a few minutes later. He'd been in such a rush he hadn't even thought about the timing. He just knew he had to get Lois to Pete as fast as possible. "I deleted the call off the caller id."

The admission of Pete's willingness to cover for Clark's misstep that could have exposed his secret sent a mixture of relief and uncertainty through him. Clark looked over at his friend, uncertain if he wanted the answer but he knew he had to ask, "Does Lana know?"

Pete and Lana had begun dating Pete's junior year of college, a few years after Clark had left Smallville to attend KSU. Lana and Pete seemed to be a perfect match. Pete had mellowed out from his wild hair raising days. Lana had matured and let go of her more stubborn attributes that had contributed to the very quick breakup between Clark and Lana during their sophomore year of High School.

Her insistence on taking charge on everything – even things that didn't affect her – had been the straw that broke the camel's back for him. Lana's need to push him to be something he wasn't had resulted in him walking away and choosing isolation over her. Looking back, he knew it wasn't meant to be. He could never see himself opening up to her and letting her see the real him and she would never be happy traveling and being exposed to different cultures and parts of society that were a part of what he loved the most about journalism.

After the sting from the breakup had worn off they were able to become friends again, but he still wouldn't want Lana knowing he was Superman. He couldn't imagine any scenario where Lana would keep that kind of a secret without holding it over his head in some way. Having Lois find out that not one but two other people also knew after he'd failed to 'trust her enough' and tell her the

truth would only add salt into the gaping wound of his fragmented relationship with Lois.

“Nope,” Pete said calmly. “You talked to your mom?”

“Yeah,” Clark sighed.

“She give you the recipe to her sugar cookies?” Pete asked with a glint in his eyes. Clark smirked recalling the request Pete had made in order to test if he’d actually spoken to his mom. She was never going to give him that recipe but he sure loved to try and ask.

“She said you can have them over her dead body,” Clark retorted recalling his mom’s response.

“I was really looking forward to those cookies.” Pete sighed and pointed toward the stairs. “So is there a reason why you’re hiding down here with me? I mean, not that I don’t enjoy catching up, but your friend was shot and you haven’t even tried to check on her.”

Clark felt a pang of guilt wash over him once more. He wanted to check on her. He just didn’t want to find himself in another fight with her. Not while she was still healing. It still amazed him that so much could change in just two days. How had they gone from being on the brink of starting a real relationship to barely speaking to one another in forty-eight hours.

The conversations he’d had with his parents and his confrontation with Luthor weighed heavily on his mind, preventing him from talking to her. He was still upset about their fight, but his anger was directed more at himself than Lois at the moment. She didn’t want to talk about what had happened and he’d pushed her. Then like a cornered animal she’d lashed out in anger and everything he thought he knew disappeared into nothingness. He was left feeling numb and uncertain if anything they had shared had been real.

<<“*He made her call for help over and over and kept laughing when no one arrived. When Superman didn’t arrive.*”>>

Then of course there was the confrontation with Luthor that had sent him into a rage. It was almost like he wanted to see how far he could push him. Luthor’s perverted account of Lois’ death left a mental scar so deep he had actually been tempted to end Luthor’s life right there. That knowledge alone made his fight with Lois even worse. He felt like the scum of the earth and couldn’t bear to face her after hinting that she had done anything to deserve what Luthor had done to her.

<<“*You were never worthy of her. A coward in a cape that she continued to cry for as I took what was rightfully mine again and again and again and...*”>>

<<“*If you really think that then you don’t know me at all. You never did.*”

“Right, you almost married him, didn’t you?”>>

<<“*And what? I deserve whatever I got, right?*”>>

<<“*It’s real clear how little you know me. So do us both a favor and stay the hell away from me!*”>>

“I know she’s in good hands,” Clark said with a shaky breath.

“You’re full of crap,” Pete retorted.

“And she and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms right now,”

Clark said.

<<“*One less...person to know, right?*”

“*You have no idea what you’re talking about, Lois.*”

“*Maybe if you...trusted me...I would.*”

“*I did trust you.*”

“*Just not enough.*”>>

“She mad at you?” Pete chuckled. “Flowers, groveling, chocolate and some more groveling should help get you back onto speaking terms.”

“You don’t know Lois.” Clark snorted, knowing full well there weren’t enough flowers and chocolate in the world to get Lois to listen to him if even half of what Luthor had said was true.

<<“*You’re lying.*”

“*Perhaps, but you’ll never know for sure, will you?*”>>

<<“*You want to talk about trust? You lied to me! Over and over and over again and then when I really needed my friend...*”>>

<<“*He made her call for help over and over and kept laughing when no one arrived. When Superman didn’t arrive.*”>>

<<“*Right, you sat on evidence that could have thrown that psychopath behind bars. You lied to me every day for over a year!*”>>

<<“*You were never worthy of her. A coward in a cape that she continued to cry for as I took what was rightfully mine again and again and again and...*”>>

“She’s nice to me.” Pete grinned back at him. Clark didn’t respond, uncertain how to at this point. “I’m telling you, grovel. It’ll save you a lot of headaches. Practice these words ‘*you were right and I was wrong.*’ Make it your mantra and the fight magically disappears when you apologize.”

“What makes you think I’m the one that needs to apologize?” Clark asked mildly offended.

“Because you’re *you*,” Pete said with a grin, patting him on the shoulder. “You and I both know your bonehead meter tends to hit higher than usual when women are involved. The bonehead meter is off the charts with this one.” He pointed toward the stairs and added, “Just apologize and get it over with.”

<<“*You want to talk about trust? You lied to me! Over and over and over again and then when I really needed my friend...*”>>

<<“*He made her call for help over and over and kept laughing when no one arrived. When Superman didn’t arrive.*”>>

<<“*Right, you sat on evidence that could have thrown that psychopath behind bars. You lied to me every day for over a year!*”>>

<<“*You were never worthy of her. A coward in a cape that she continued to cry for as I took what was rightfully mine again and again and again and...*”>>

<<“*And what? I deserve whatever I got, right?*”>>

Deciding he’d sat there stewing in his own head long enough Clark let out a deep breath and muttered, “Just remember this was your idea if this doesn’t end well.”

“No way.” Pete shook his head and laughed.

Clark let out a deep breath and contemplated how serious he was about continuing up the stairs when he heard a door open. At the top of the stairs he spotted Lana making her way down the steps. “Oh, Clark, you’re back.” Lana beamed at him with a knowing smile. Her voice was loud enough he was sure Lana was subtly trying to let Lois know he was there.

“*No backing away now,*” he thought to himself.

“How’s your mom doing?” Lana asked, looking at him expectantly.

“She’s fine,” he replied on autopilot. Lana continued to stare at him expectantly and he smirked realizing what she was waiting on. “And I already told Pete she’s not giving that recipe up without a fight, so you might as well give it up.”

Lana smiled back at him, “Had to try, right?” She looked behind her then back at him with a solemn expression. “She saw the news coverage already.”

Clark nodded, unsure what to say as he moved past her and continued up the rest of the way to the spare bedroom Lois was in. Lois knew about Luthor’s arrest. That was a good thing, right? He didn’t have to explain how he knew about the arrest or what he’d been doing there in the first place. He hung his head, realizing this line of thinking was how he’d gotten where he was to begin with.

Pete was right. He needed to make things right with Lois. They both had hurled a lot of hurtful things toward one another in the last forty-eight hours but the knowledge of what Luthor had done to Lois made his verbal jabs seem that much more vindictive and callous. Every verbal jab she’d thrown his way had been the truth. The painful ugly truth of his own insecurities and

unwillingness to give her what she so desperately wanted.

<< “Just don’t lie to me and you won’t lose me.” >>

<< “I love you, Clark.” >>

<< “Exposing your secret isn’t exactly what the Daily Planet does and it certainly isn’t something I would ever do, not that you ever gave either of us a chance.” >>

<< “And what? I deserve whatever I got, right?” >>

<< “You want to talk about trust? You lied to me! Over and over and over again and then when I really needed my friend...” >>

The door was open and he could hear the news anchor’s voice from the television set as he stood outside the bedroom. He wasn’t sure how to even begin this conversation. Should he knock and let his presence be known? The reminder of how rude it was to stand outside someone’s door came to mind and he took a deep breath choosing to press on.

“When you’re done debating whether you’re coming in or not, can you hand me the remote?” Lois’ voice penetrated his internal thoughts. “Apparently I’m not allowed to walk around without assistance.”

Clark spotted the remote on the bookshelf by the door and grabbed it, taking the first step inside the room. She looked a thousand times better than she had last night. The color had returned to her face and the scratches she’d received were quickly healing.

“Hi.” He finally found his voice as he reached over to hand her the remote.

“Hi.” She caught his gaze for a split-second before pulling away. She took the remote from him and nodded. “Thanks.” She pressed the red button, turning the news cycle off and sighed in relief. “I couldn’t listen to that for another second.”

“Yeah.” He took a seat in the chair next to her bed, praying she would at least let him get what he needed to say out before pushing him away. “I guess now we know why no one was answering their phones last night.”

“Yeah,” Lois nodded, looking down at her lap.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, desperate for anything to focus on other than the boulder sized guilt that continued to weigh on him.

“Sore,” she said cautiously. She glanced toward the television that was now off and added, “A little out of my depth I guess.”

“It’s not easy sitting on the sidelines,” he commented. “Watching.”

“No, it’s not,” she said with a sigh. “But I’m not allowed to do anything that could cause any further damage.” She flashed him a half-smile. “I’d hate to put Pete through the trouble of patching me up twice. And I really don’t think I want to be on his wife’s bad side.”

He let out a chuckle. “No, probably not.”

There was an uncomfortable silence for about half a minute before Lois broke it. “How’d the visit with your parents go?” He looked at her in surprise and she shrugged. “Pete mentioned he made you go see them.”

“Yeah.” Clark gave her a pained smile. “I wasn’t left with much of a choice in the matter.”

“Your mom’s been worried sick about you,” she said softly.

“I know.” He felt a lump in his throat. “I wasn’t ready. I’m still not even sure if I was ready to see them today, but I did.”

“Must be nice,” Lois said twisting her mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I just...” She let out a deep breath. “This has been harder than I ever could have imagined.” She looked away and he felt his heart contract in his chest when he saw her move her hand to her forehead, attempting to cover up the fact that there were a few tears escaping the corner of her eyes.

He let out a deep breath and placed a hand on her elbow. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need your pity,” she said roughly, straightening up.

“I know you don’t,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “But I do owe you an apology. I tried to push you to open up about something you weren’t ready to talk about. I never should have done that.”

“What’s done is done,” she said hoarsely, still not looking at him, but he could hear the wavering in her voice that told him her words were just displaying a false bravado to keep him from seeing how hurt she really was.

“Mom said she was the one that told you.” Clark could hear the strain in his own voice as he spoke. There was no more hiding or pretending. All that was left was the raw ugly truth of what he’d hidden for so long.

“Yeah,” Lois said cautiously. “I didn’t manipulate her into telling me either if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I know,” he said letting out a long breath. “I never should have... I’m sorry,” he finished his apology lamely.

“Seventeen months,” she bit out angrily.

“What?” he looked at her in confusion.

“Seventeen months,” she repeated with an eerie calm. “That’s how long you’ve known me. Why? I mean, in all that time what did I ever do to make you think I would ever put someone’s life in jeopardy for a story?”

“I said a lot of things that I shouldn’t have,” he said cautiously. “That was one of them. You’re right. You have never done anything that would put anyone’s life in danger, but I’m not very rational when it comes to this.” He glanced toward the door and stood up, walking toward it to close out any possible peering eyes and ears.

She was silent as he walked back toward the bed and took a seat next to her, propping himself on the edge of the bed. “I’m not good at this. I’ve never shared this part of myself with anyone. I spent the better part of my youth trying to figure out why I was so different and where I came from. It wasn’t until recently that I even discovered the answers to those questions.”

Lois twisted her mouth and looked up at him. “It’s not just about Superman. You had all this information on that... psychopath that could have made us all look harder but you never said anything.”

“I... tried,” he finished weakly meeting her hurt expression.

“You tried?” she echoed, turning to face him. “Just one. Just one conversation that you had with that monster would have been enough. We’ve got a kid prepared to testify to the conversation he overheard between Superman and Lex Luthor. A kid. Even if you never told me about Superman you could have told me or Jimmy or Perry or anyone.” She shook her head adamantly. “But instead I got you acting like a two-year old that had his favorite toy taken away rather than open your mouth and tell me what the hell you know.”

“I didn’t know how to tell you without giving myself away,” Clark explained cautiously. “It’s not an excuse but it’s the only thing I’ve got. This thing with Luthor started when I first got to Metropolis and at that time I didn’t know who I could trust. I didn’t know how far his reach was. I didn’t know what to do.” He let out a deep sigh. “Think about it, Lois, what was the likelihood of you believing the word of the new guy you just met versus the billionaire that at that point was the city’s Golden Child. You never would have believed me and you know it.”

“Maybe.” She let out a sigh. “I guess we’ll never know.” She was quiet for a long moment before finally speaking up. “I’d like to think I would have believed you though.” A tear ran down her cheek. He felt her hand brush against his side and she looked back at him with an accusing stare. “Why is there *blood* on your shirt?”

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“Think about it, Lois, what was the likelihood of you believing the word of the new guy you just met versus the billionaire that at that point was the city’s Golden Child. You never would have believed me and you know it.” Clark’s statement was

telling on just how little he thought of himself.

Lois fought the urge to argue her point and make him see how wrong he was, but the pain in his eyes stopped her. “Maybe.” She let out a sigh. “I guess we’ll never know.” The silence that fell between them was deafening. She looked up at him, trying to read his body language and figure out what he was thinking. He seemed so sure of himself at times but it wasn’t until she’d had her eyes opened to the truth that she allowed herself to see the cracks beneath the façade he put up for the world. He was just as scared and uncertain as anyone else. The only difference was if he made a mistake it left more damage.

She took a deep breath and whispered in a hopeful tone, “I’d like to think I would have believed you though.” A tear ran down her cheek as her inner doubts began to nag at her making her question if she really believed that. She could feel the walls around her close in as she looked down and spotted a tear in his shirt with a dark stain on it. She let out a shallow breath, staring at the stain outside of the large cut in the side of his shirt. She ran her hand against the smooth surface of his skin. She looked back at him with an accusing stare. “Why is there *blood* on your shirt?”

He stared back at her with uncertainty in his eyes. She looked back at him expectantly, waiting for an answer as to why a man that was invulnerable could have blood on his shirt. A million thoughts ran through her mind as she waited for his response.

“Because I was bleeding earlier,” he said softly.

“I thought your powers were back,” Lois said, placing her hand over the blood stained material once more.

“They are,” he said.

“Then how...?”

“I might have run into some Kryptonite,” he said with a heavy sigh.

“Might have?” she looked back at him with a disapproving stare. “Where exactly did you run into Kryptonite?”

“In Luthor’s penthouse,” he said evenly, “...when I was confronting him.”

She immediately pulled away and lowered her head in her hands. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“I was not going to let him get away with what he did,” he said calmly, placing a hand on her right side.

She brushed him off, pushing him away and looking back at him with a scowl. “This is none of your business.”

“I made it my business,” he growled out. She could see the anger simmering beneath his dark eyes as he continued. “After everything he did. He needed to have the fear of God put into him.”

His hand brushed against her cheek and she swallowed hard. “I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“I know,” he said. “I didn’t ask you to rescue me but you did it anyway.”

“That’s different,” she accused.

“Is it?” he asked.

She swallowed hard, turning away from him as he stared back at her expectantly. She bit the inside of her lip, attempting to hold in her anger. “This has nothing to do with you. You had no right to go and what... Pick a fight and possible jeopardize this case and my safety because you can’t control your macho instinct to ram someone’s head through a wall?”

“I couldn’t just do *nothing*,” he said, looking back at her with a scowl. She could feel the tears glisten in the corners of her eyes as he revealed a hard truth. “I wanted to kill him.”

“Superman doesn’t kill,” she said hoarsely.

“Superman doesn’t exist anymore,” he said solemnly.

“Yes, he does,” she whispered.

“Maybe he shouldn’t,” he said with a bitter tone.

“You can’t change who you are,” she said softly, “...and you can’t let him win. After everything he did, you *can’t*.”

He seemed to be mulling over what she said and he cracked a

smile. “That’s what my parents said.”

“They’re smart people,” she nodded. “You should listen to them.”

“Luthor knows,” he admitted softly.

“He’s also in *prison*,” she argued. He let out a shallow breath and she sighed, setting her anger aside for the moment to address whatever demons he was struggling with. She was still unbelievably angry at him and didn’t know how she could ever move past it but allowing him to walk away from everything out of fear of what Lex could do was not an option. This was bigger than her. It was bigger than Clark. If the last few months had proven anything it was just how much the world needed Superman. One man could make a difference. She just wished she could make him see that.

She looked down at his shirt. “What happened?”

“I wanted to kill him after Mom told me about him forcing you to cry for help. I wanted to break him in half and make him know what it felt like to be helpless,” he admitted in a dark tone. She could feel the hair on her arms stand up from the tone in his voice. It was chilling to see this side of him. Here he was, Superman, the man that stood for truth and justice and yet even he had his breaking point. It seemed Lex had pushed him so far and now the Superman the world knew felt like a distant memory.

“But you couldn’t,” Lois said, looking back at him.

“No, I couldn’t,” he admitted. “I came really close though. Had him hoisted up in the air about to give him a close inspection of his ceiling fan.” He let out a deep sigh. “But I couldn’t go through with it. That’s how I ended up with a Kryptonite laced blade inside me.” He let out a grunt. “It healed as soon as I pulled it out. Just stung more than anything. I was too angry to focus on anything else though.” He let out a long sigh. “Luckily the SWAT Team came in when they did.”

“Luckily?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know that I would have been able to stop myself at that point if I’d gotten my hands on him again,” Clark admitted hoarsely. “Then of course, in classic Luthor fashion, he threw down the gauntlet. Tried to out me in front of Henderson, Davenport and the rest of the officers in the room.”

Lois placed a hand on his chest, feeling a sense of dread wash through her. If Clark’s secret got out it wouldn’t be just him that was in danger it would be everyone close to him. “Clark?”

“Lucky for me I had blood on my shirt to prove otherwise,” Clark said bitterly.

“That’s a lot of *luck*,” she said cautiously.

His hand brushed against her cheek again and he sighed. “I’m sorry. So unbelievably sorry, Lois.”

“I wasn’t manipulating you,” she said cautiously. “I was just trying to be your friend. I never would have told anyone.”

“I should never have said that,” he said carefully.

“Then why did you?” She stared back at him accusingly. “You weren’t just mean. You were *cruel*. Then you come in here with a half-assed apology and I’m supposed to what? Just accept your apology and forget everything?” she asked looking back at him expectantly. “You were a jerk.”

“I know,” he said with an apologetic expression.

She knew he was sorry and he probably meant it but it wasn’t enough. The fact of the matter was she had gone through hell and back to save him and put everything at risk. She’d done everything she could to prove she could be trusted, hoping one day he would trust her enough to tell her himself. But he never did... he probably never would.

That was what hurt more than anything. She didn’t ask to be included on the secret. She didn’t ask to be put in the situation she’d been thrust into but she’d made the best out of it, trying her best to let him work through what he needed. He never even came close to trying to tell her the truth. He was never going to tell her. He’d much rather think the worst of her than tell her the truth.

She clamped her eyes closed, trying to push the tears that threatened to reveal the depth of her sorrow away. She leaned her head back against the headboard, feeling the anguish overtake her emotions. “Clark, please... just go.”

“I can’t leave things like this,” he said looking at her with a pleading expression. “Not after...”

She took a deep breath, recalling everything over the past few months. Five months. How had it only been five months? She wanted to hold on to her anger and resentment and continue to push him away but she still felt that pull toward him that reminded her how deep her feelings were. Despite everything she knew walking away from all of this wasn’t a viable option. Still she wasn’t ready to forgive him. She wasn’t ready to forget her anger and pain.

A lot had changed between them.

There was no going back.

The fighting between them after the revelation had subsided but now she just felt numb. She didn’t know which way to go or how to work through everything that had happened. She’d been stabbed, shot, and attacked more times than she cared to remember. She had spent months looking over her shoulder and playing the part of someone docile and content with the ordinary. Now here she was facing the possibility of reclaiming her life back in Metropolis while Lex and his underlings awaited trial for the crimes he’d committed against her and her home.

How could she move forward with that hanging over her?

“Just leave me alone,” she choked out, swiping her hand against her cheek. “Fine, you’re sorry. That’s great. You got it off your chest and now you can leave.”

“Lois?” the pained expression covered his face.

She shook her head. “I’m not supposed to be moving around,” she said, pointing toward the door. “There’s no reason for you to be hanging around anymore. Leave.”

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Jimmy took a seat across from a man in a checkered blue shirt and another man with a green striped shirt and glasses. He glanced at Jack for some sort of clue as to who these men were but got nothing from him. “You Olsen?” the man with glasses asked.

“Yeah,” Jimmy held out his hand to shake the man’s hand.

“Rollie Vale.” He pointed to the man next to him. “This is my brother Emmet.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jimmy said, still not certain what this meeting was about. He stole another glance at Jack but still had nothing to go on. How his young friend had arranged a meeting with these two brothers within less than a day of being back in Metropolis he wasn’t sure, but what bothered him more was not knowing what this meeting was about.

Emmet cleared his throat. “We’re told you have an in with this case against Lex Luthor?”

“We know the detectives and the agents leading the case,”

Jimmy said carefully.

“And Superman,” Rollie added. “You’re friends with the big guy, right?”

Jimmy looked to Jack who nodded, “The best!”

“As good of friends with him that you can be I suppose,”

Jimmy said cautiously. “Why?”

“Say we had information that could help your case and we wanted to make a deal that would guarantee no prison time and protection,” Emmet began cautiously.

“What kind of information?” Jimmy asked.

Emmet looked at Rollie and the brothers nodded before Emmet continued, “The kind that can prove the bomber that hit Clinton Street was the same one to make the bomb at the Daily Planet.”

“Among other crimes that lead back to Lex Luthor,” Rollie added. “You want the information we want a deal.”

“And protection.” Emmet pulled out his business card and

handed it to Jimmy. “You can reach me at this number.”

Jimmy looked at Jack uncertainly, “How exactly are we supposed to do this?”

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## Chapter 18

*Two Weeks Later...*

Clark took a deep breath, looking around the empty apartment building. What he’d been able to salvage from the fire had been stored in Perry’s beach house while they’d been laying low researching what they could on Luthor. It wasn’t much but it was a start. That combined with the things he’d retrieved from the cabin were all he had left to start over.

He pulled out a photo from the office party Perry had thrown when they had cracked the Messenger scandal. The naïve Kansas boy that stared back at him seemed like a stranger to him. How little he knew about life or how cruel it could be. He let out a deep sigh and set a few of his other restored photos and knickknacks on the mantel next to it.

The money he had left from his last check from his job in Clover combined with the money he’d had in savings before he’d been declared dead left him with enough to keep him afloat until he found another job. Once the paperwork was finished he was also supposed to get a check from the insurance company that would help pay for refurbishing his apartment. He stole a glance toward the photo on the mantel. He missed his friends at the Planet. He missed working there and knowing he was making a difference whether he wore a cape or not.

Most of all, he missed Lois.

She still wasn’t talking to him. He’d attempted to come by after she had basically kicked him out and Pete refused to let him in for fear it would upset Lois and risk her recovery. He found himself faced with the possibility of a future where Lois Lane wasn’t a part of his life. He had busied himself with anything and everything to keep his mind busy. He helped move Perry and Alice back to Metropolis. He helped Jack move to Bangor, Maine, of all places, where his brother’s now adoptive family had been moved for their protection. He helped his dad rebuild the barn, repair the wraparound porch and he still couldn’t keep his mind off the aching hole he felt inside his heart.

It was like losing a limb. He hadn’t realized how dependent he’d become on having Lois there with him. Now here he was facing each day without her and slowly wishing he would wake up from this nightmare he was in.

He pulled out the large bag his mom had sent with him on his last trip to Smallville. Four suits. He knocked on the hollow wood of the closet in his new bedroom, pushing it back to reveal the hidden closet he’d built in last week. He still wasn’t sure when he would make his return but he wanted to be prepared. Continuing to fly around the city dressed like a cat burglar wouldn’t be the smartest idea now that the officers on the force were law abiding.

Lois was right.

He couldn’t let Luthor win.

He refused to let Luthor decide whether Superman would return or not.

He pulled the suits out of the bag and hung them on the hangers in the hidden closet, straightening the red cape before pushing the hidden panel back and closing it. He stole a glance toward the clock. It was nearly two o’clock. He was supposed to be meeting Perry and Jimmy in front of the Daily Planet for an update on the Luthor case at five.

He glanced around the apartment. It felt so empty without his furniture but it felt more welcoming than some of the places he’d been in over the last few months. He recalled all too well the cold tiny room he’d been trapped in for three months before Lois had found him.

*“Mayday, Air Traffic Control this is Flight 317. We are in distress! Repeat, we are in distress. Losing altitude by the*

second....”

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It all looked the same. The same street. The same building. The same everything. Lois sat in the car staring at the building where she knew her apartment was. Perry said her landlord had moved her to the fifth floor and everything the police had confiscated of hers had been moved into the apartment. Still she felt sick to her stomach as she stared up at the building that held so many haunting memories.

Her hand gripped the door handle as she sat there, contemplating how she could do this every day. How could she go back to the place where she'd almost lost her life?

“Sometimes the hardest step is the first one,” she heard Jack Davenport say.

She turned to him, uncertain what to say in response. “Easy for you to say. Your first step isn't retracing the steps that nearly got you killed.”

“Come on, I'll walk with you,” he said, pointing to the building.

“I don't want to be here,” she said hoarsely.

“Then where do you want me to take you?” Jack asked. “I can't leave you on the street.”

“I don't care,” She said tearfully. “Just not here.”

“Okay,” he turned the engine on and the radio announcer's voice filled the car.

“Shocking news rocked the city this afternoon when just moments ago Flight 317 was stopped at the last second from impact by none other than Superman. A press conference has been called and...”

Lois turned the dial, changing the station and leaning back in her seat. Davenport looked over at her. “Don't you want to know where he's been all this time?”

“No,” Lois said coolly.

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***Largest Crime Syndicate Exposed!***  
***Lex Luthor = Crime Boss!***

Franklin Stern took a long puff from his cigar as he read through the morning paper, seeing the front page photo of the disgraced Lex Luthor being escorted out of his own party in handcuffs. It was going to be a good day.

“Mr. Stern?”

He looked up and saw his head engineer looking at him with a pleading expression. “The plans? What did you think of them?”

“I love them,” Stern replied with a broad grin. “Get these filed with City Hall and let's get started...”

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Lois sunk into the warm water of the bathtub, enjoying the feeling of the water enveloping her as she tilted her head back against the porcelain edge of the tub. She'd checked into a hotel room for the week until she could figure out what to do next. She'd have to get her things but she couldn't do that alone. She'd have to figure that out eventually.

Lois stared at the ceiling feeling the water begin to cool the longer she remained submerged in it. She knew what she was doing was the right thing. She needed to put some distance between her and Clark. Still she couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt over not at least trying to go to the press conference. She had been the one to push him to return to his Superman duties.

It hurt.

Everything hurt with an intensity she couldn't explain.

She felt a lump in her throat and she let out a sob, gripping the side of the tub as another wail came out. She couldn't explain it. Five months of constantly looking over her shoulder and having to hide had taken their toll on her. Now that she wasn't forced into living on the lam and trying to survive she found herself being hit with the magnitude of emotions she'd been suppressing for so long.

Her hand clamped over her mouth and she stifled another wail, sitting up in the tub and burying her face in her hands. She rocked herself back and forth, trying to calm the tsunami of pain, hurt and anguish that she'd kept suppressed for so long.

Unable to stand it any longer she reached for the stopper, pulling the plug up and allowing the water to drain out. She felt the cold air hit her moist skin and goosebumps raise all over. She let out another sob and reached her hand over the side of the tub to give her the support she needed to stand up. A few wobbly steps later she reached for the towel hanging on the towel rack and wrapped it around herself. She could still feel the cold air on her back and shoulders as she hugged her arms around herself. Her teeth chattered and she reached up for the long terry cloth robe hanging on the back of her door. She wrapped it around her, tying the sash tightly around her waist and walking into the bedroom to escape the anguish that had overtaken her.

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The crowd around him seemed to blend together into a blur of color as Clark scanned the faces, searching for the one person he wished was there. He knew it didn't make sense for her to be there. There was no Daily Planet to report for so there was no reason for Lois to be there. He wasn't even sure if she'd returned to Metropolis. All he knew was that Pete said she'd left with Jack Davenport yesterday.

He knew it was unrealistic to expect her to want to return after everything. As much as he wished things could go back to the way they once were he knew that ship had sailed. Things could never go back to how they were. His relationship with Lois would never be the same. He couldn't unsay the hurtful accusations he'd thrown at her. He couldn't change the fact that she knew the truth. He couldn't erase the past five months of living on the run.

Nothing was the same.

He looked down, stepping away from the podium, ready to rid himself of the crowd that was all too eager to welcome back their hero. Superman's absence was something he never would have rectified if it hadn't been for Lois forcing him to step out of the shadows and do what he was born to do. She refused to let him sit back and allow Luthor to win. Though that wasn't the story he could tell these people as they pressed him for photo ops and exclusives. They wanted the feel good version of Superman fighting the good fight and walking away the victor. They didn't want to see the ugly truth or be exposed to how close he'd been to walking away from it all.

The truth was, Superman wouldn't be standing here if it weren't for Lois. He may have the powers and the need to help but Lois was the one that helped keep him centered. Every time he came close to giving up, there she was, pulling him back and forcing him to keep fighting.

Except this time.

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Ellen Lane straightened her jacket, looking behind her to make sure her daughter was behind her. She followed the man in front of her, hoping against hope that this wasn't a fluke. She'd spent months clinging to every tidbit of news that was sent her way as she faced the harsh reality that she might never be able to return home. Not only had she been isolated from everything she knew and loved but she had endured the cruel torture of mourning the loss of her firstborn—told that she had been killed—all in an elaborate hoax to keep Lois' former fiancé from discovering the truth.

They could have told her.

They could have saved her from the heartache she and Sam had been faced with.

“I haven't told her,” the man said, looking behind him. “Just prepare yourself. She's been through a lot.”

“But she's alive?” Ellen clarified. “You're sure that's Lois?”

“Positive,” he responded. With that he lifted his arm up to

knock on the door.

She looked back at Lucy who was holding her hand with a death grip. There was a noise of someone walking inside the room. A voice came from the other side of the door. “Who is it?”

“Davenport,” the man responded. “I thought you might need something to eat after the drive.” He held up the takeout bag from Luigi’s that they’d picked up. “I’m told it’s your favorite.”

The door opened and a woman with short auburn hair and her daughter’s face burst out of the room accusingly. “Luigi’s is not my favorite,” she retorted. “I...” She stopped short when she caught sight of Ellen and Lucy standing behind Agent Davenport. “Mom?”

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Perry looked around the familiar street, walking up to the tall structure that had once held the mystical Daily Planet. He’d spent many late nights here, pouring his blood, sweat and tears into the newspaper he’d come to love like one of his own children. A hand pressed into his back. “Are you okay?” he heard his wife ask.

“It’s just hard seeing this place run down like this,” he whispered, feeling the emotion begin to get the best of him.

“I know,” Alice said carefully. “It’s got a lot of good memories.”

“We started our family here,” Perry said softly.

“Literally.” Alice grinned back at him. “I thought you were nuts when you tried to propose in the middle of the newsroom.”

“I figured that was where I asked you to go to the Annual Charity Ball with me. I needed all the good luck I could get,” Perry recalled fondly.

“I wish they’d just tear this place down. There’re too many memories here...” a voice came from behind them.

Perry turned to see Jimmy walking up to the entrance.

“Jimmy, good to see you.”

Jimmy had gotten himself a job as a freelance photographer with Stern Media after he moved back to the city. He’d been able to get himself into a new apartment with a few of the guys that used to work in the printing press which made the apartment he was living in more affordable. It had been eye opening to see how well Jimmy had taken to journalism and needed to learn the dos and don’ts of investigative journalism. His writing still lacked the luster that needed to be there but his photography was spot on. Jimmy was coming into his own self and he couldn’t be prouder.

“Most of them good,” Clark said, walking up the steps.

“Clark, you look good,” Perry drawled, reaching his hand out to shake the young man’s hand.

He noticed the worry lines on Clark’s face as he looked around the worn-down building that used to house their place of employment. It was hard to believe the man standing before him was the same man that had waltzed into his office asking for a job with articles from the Borneo Gazette. The country charm and naïve outlook on life had been a refreshing change to those reporters fresh out of Met-U with a chip on their shoulder. He’d taken a chance on Clark and it had paid off ten-fold.

Gone was the long mullet and baggy suits, but in their place was a young man that had found himself and maybe lost himself all at the same time. He hadn’t asked what had happened between his former reporting duo. A part of him didn’t want to know, but he knew there had been a change between them. Lois refused to talk to or about Clark and the young man’s mournful expression kept him from pressing for any information. He looked like he’d been up for weeks despite the clean cut appearance he tried to portray to the world.

“Thanks.” Clark forced a smile that Perry was sure would break the young man’s face with the pained expression it came with.

“Any word from Jack Davenport?” Alice asked cautiously. “I know he arranged this meeting for the update on the Luthor case, but he seems to be missing.”

“I think that’s him,” Jimmy pointed to the car that just pulled up to the curb. The car parked and the passenger door opened, followed by the driver’s side. From the passenger’s side out stepped Lois.

“Lois, darlin’ you are a sight for sore eyes.” Perry beamed, clearing his throat and letting out a choked whisper with a strain in his voice. The last few months had been hell on her but it didn’t show unless you looked past her façade of a forced smile. The haunting despair in her eyes was enough to break him right there where he stood. It tore him to pieces to know how deeply the scars that Luthor had left still remained.

“Thanks, Perry,” Lois said, approaching him cautiously.

Behind her Jack Davenport approached. “I guess the whole gang is here?”

“Jack moved out to Bangor to be near Denny,” Clark said softly.

“Yeah.” Davenport nodded his head. “Well, I know you all have been through hell. I wanted you to be the first to hear the news. We found the golden goose to connect Luthor to ... everything.” Jack pointed at the building behind them. “Including this.” He let out a long breath. “Pete Black has agreed to testify. We had a few employees from LexLabs hand over crucial evidence in exchange for protection against Luthor. Given everyone Lex Luthor has a connection with is behind bars and the man has been put in isolation with a complete media blackout thanks to our wonderful federal prosecutor that wants to take advantage of Mr. Luthor’s misconception that Ms. Lane is dead that won’t be a problem.”

A look exchanged between Lois and Clark but neither said anything. Jimmy spoke up. “That’s great. Really.”

“Don’t everyone celebrate all at once.” Jack Davenport smirked. “Look, I know this isn’t going to change the last few months but it will give you the peace of mind to take that first step forward.”

“What about the Planet?” Clark asked. “What’s going to happen to it?”

Perry sighed. “I know. I know. I hate it that Luthor got his way in this one thing.”

A voice behind him bellowed, “He didn’t!”

They all turned to see a large truck and crane carrying the globe of the Daily Planet. Franklin Stern sat in the driver’s seat of the truck. “Look!” Jimmy pointed. “Mr. Stern?”

“Great shades of Elvis!” Perry shouted, approaching Franklin Stern with a grin on his face.

“I think you have your answer.” Jack Davenport patted Clark on the shoulder. “I’ve got to head back to the office.” He looked at Lois. “You going to be okay?”

“Yeah.” Lois nodded, looking toward the globe on the forklift. “More than okay.”

Davenport nodded and headed back to the car he’d driven up in.

“We’ll start on the building next week, but first I thought we’d announce to the world we’re back in business,” Franklin Stern said with a broad grin. “I agree with you, Mr. White. Metropolis needs the Daily Planet.” Stern stepped out of the truck and Perry shook his hand eagerly.

“You won’t regret this, Mr. Stern.” Perry smiled broadly.

“There were some ideas I had about modernization,” Mr. Stern added.

“Modernization?” Perry asked wearily.

“Yes, improvements, expansions... Would you like to see the plans?” Mr. Stern pulled out the blueprints from his truck.

“Now, Mr. Stern! Wait, just a doggone minute here...” Perry followed Mr. Stern as he rolled out the plans.

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“Now, Mr. Stern! Wait, just a doggone minute here...” Perry followed Mr. Stern as he rolled out the plans and Lois cracked a

smile.

She stared up at the Daily Planet globe as it was lifted on the crane to return it to its rightful place in the center of the city. It appeared the metal globe had been polished and repaired from the damage the fire had done. She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Alice standing next to her.

“Amazing how one building can change so many lives, isn’t it?” Alice White asked, squeezing her shoulder.

“Yeah.” Lois allowed a smile to spread across her face. She could feel tears threaten to make their presence known. The emotional afternoon of finally reconnecting with her mother and sister left her feeling off balance. Now seeing the Planet restored and coming face to face with Clark again she was faced with a wave of emotions that she couldn’t decide what to do with. Her eyes drifted to Clark who was leaning against one of the columns, watching as the crane lifted the globe above them and placed it in its home nested above the windows he’d flown her through after Superman’s debut almost a year and a half ago.

Lois wiped a few tears out of her eyes. “All is right in the world.”

Clark nodded his head looking up at her. “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful in my life.”

She felt a flutter in her abdomen when she caught his gaze. It would be easy to let herself give in to the pull that was constantly drawing her to him. It wouldn’t take a lot of convincing. After so many months of fighting it and then finally giving in, she knew the temptation to give into the less rational parts of her brain was much stronger than before. That was the problem.

Alice cleared her throat. “Uh, Jimmy, why don’t you come look at those plans of Mr. Stern’s with me?”

“What?” Jimmy looked at Alice in confusion, not following the subtle hint she was giving him. She gave him a look and then he got the message. “*Ohhhh*, yeah let’s look at those blueprints.”

Lois watched them leave and muttered. “Traitors.” She looked back at Clark for a split-second. “I should go.”

“No, Lois, wait,” Clark called out to her as he took a step toward her, closing the distance between them.

“What?” she looked back at him, crossing her arms over her chest.

He stole a glance toward the crowd of engineers surrounding Franklin Stern and Daily Planet staff that Mr. Stern had invited over. “Is there someplace we can go to talk?”

“What’s left to say?” Lois asked half-heartedly, turning to walk away. “You’ve already made it perfectly clear how little you think of me. How little you trust me...”

“I trust you more than anyone, Lois.” He gave her a pleading look.

“Because you *have* to,” Lois said dismissively. She felt a pang in her chest as she stared back at him. This would be so much easier if they could just go back to how things were before. Before she knew about the deceit. Before she knew how broken life could be, but she couldn’t. She didn’t ask to be let in on his secret life and he didn’t choose to share it either.

“Look, it’s whatever. Neither of us asked for any of this.” She shrugged it off, trying to hide the gaping wound of how deeply she was still hurting from him. “Just forget it. What happened ... it’s over. I’m not going to tell anyone. Your secret is safe you don’t have to pretend...”

“I’m not pretending anything,” he said with a hurt expression on his face, “And I don’t want to forget.” He took a step toward her. “These last two weeks have been...hell.”

“Yeah, well, it hasn’t exactly been a picnic for me either.” she scowled back at him.

“I know,” he said with a sigh.

She fought the urge to bite back a callous remark, trying to remain in control of her emotions that were threatening to become too much for her. “I didn’t ask for this,” she said harshly. “I didn’t

ask to be told and you didn’t choose to share your secret. I get it. I do, but quit trying to twist the facts.” She felt her voice waver and swallowed the lump in her throat. “I can’t take another person lying and deceiving and...” She stopped short feeling the tears begin to build up. “I won’t go through that again.”

“I never meant to hurt you,” he said cautiously.

“But you did,” she whispered tearfully. “I’m just the idiot that thought maybe just maybe if I gave you a chance you could trust me enough to tell me yourself. But you never did and you never would have.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” Lois bit out vehemently. “The minute you found out I knew you assumed I must be after a story or manipulating you or whatever twisted version of facts you had planted in your head. Can’t even give me the benefit of the doubt.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“Look, I can’t do this,” she said shaking her head. “I can’t keep listening to the same apology and having the same conversation. The fact of the matter is, good intentions or not, we both made some mistakes but hashing over this again and again is draining me. You don’t trust me. There’s nothing left to say after that.” She turned to walk away and then heard him call out to her.

“I wanted to die.” She felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up as he continued, “A part of me died that night Luthor gloated about your death. I can still smell the blood on that blade.” She bit her lower-lip, unable to move as he continued his monologue. “I spent months wishing and hoping for a way to end everything because I didn’t know how to go on without you in my life. The only thing that kept me going was the thought of taking revenge on Luthor for what he did.”

She turned back to face him, unable to form the words that were trapped in her throat. Fragmented memories flooded through her mind as she stared back at him, frozen in place as he continued. “It was a trap.” He took another step toward her. “I got a call from Luthor’s secretary asking for a meeting with Superman. I never should have gone. I never should have even entertained the thought but I did and here we are.” He took another step toward her. “I can keep going if you want or we can go somewhere else. It’s up to you.”

“You don’t have to,” she began cautiously, unsure if she wanted to go down this path.

“Yes, I do,” he said, taking a deep breath. “After everything you deserve the truth. You’re the only one that would understand.” He placed his palm against her cheek and whispered. “I trust you more than anyone, Lois.”

Lois twisted her mouth uncertain how to respond. After months of waiting for some kind of explanation as to how he’d ended up in that hell hole of Lex Luthor’s here he was offering it to her on a silver platter. After the emotional afternoon she’d spent with her mother and sister and having the news of the Daily Planet’s return announced she knew she was in no condition to deal with whatever horrific details he was about to share in front of a group of strangers. She swallowed hard. “I’ll call a cab.”

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Clark took a seat across from Lois, looking around the empty meeting room at the hotel she was staying at. He glanced across the table at her, trying to find the words to begin the confession that he knew was his last hope at salvaging what was left of his relationship with her. He set his hands on the table, staring at the wood grain as if it would give him the answers he was searching for. He felt Lois reach her hand across the table and squeeze his hand in hers.

“I heard about the rescue earlier,” she offered, breaking the silence.

“I figured it was a good time to announce Superman’s return.” He looked up, meeting her gaze.

“How’d the press conference go?” she asked.

“As good as can be expected.” He shrugged. “Trying to explain Superman’s absence as being needed to help someone in need and keep it vague.”

“Probably for the best,” she agreed. “And you’re okay with the return?”

“I think so,” he said.

“Good.” Lois nodded as her eyes drifted around the empty room.

“This isn’t easy for either of us, is it?” Clark asked, following her gaze.

“No,” she said with a deep sigh.

“If this is too much, I can stop,” he offered, meeting her uncertain expression.

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m fine.” She tightened her grip on his hand. “You said Mrs. Cox left a message for Superman?”

“Yeah,” he glanced down at her hand, noting the tight grip she held on his hand as he spoke. The moment the words were out there would be no going back. There would be no protecting her from the ugly truth of what he endured. Maybe that was the point. He took a deep breath and pressed on. “It was a trap and I was too arrogant to think Luthor could get his hands on Kryptonite. I thought since I destroyed it in Smallville it was gone...”

“During your fight with Trask?” Lois asked.

“Yeah.” He felt her hand tighten around his and clung to the sensation of having her this close to him. He’d spent the last two weeks going over every second and every moment wondering if he’d ever get this chance again. He couldn’t blow it again. He’d already screwed things up so royally he knew everything depended on how this conversation went.

“I think he either got the sample that was sent to the lab for testing or he tracked more of it down somehow,” Clark explained. He was silent for a long moment before continuing. “He had a steel cage in his wine cellar. He painted the entire thing in that poison.”

Lois bit her lower lip and he looked back up at her with a pained expression. “I’ve been shot before, stabbed, burned...all of it, but nothing and I mean nothing comes close to the pain that comes with that rock. It literally feels like your insides are melting and your bones are being crushed under the agonizing radiation from that poison.”

He looked up and saw tears in her eyes and she let out a soft whimper. “If I knew that rock was real I never would have printed that story.”

“That was not your fault, Lois.” He squeezed her hand in his, running his thumb over her knuckles. “I was just as responsible for that article being printed.” He looked at her with a questioning gaze. “Do you want me to stop?”

She shook her head, moving her chair closer so she was sitting next to him. “No, I’m okay.”

“I tried to escape...and I almost did.” He frowned, recalling the painful panic that had filled him when he realized Luthor had discovered him. The image of the bloody knife that Luthor had threatened him with.

“It’s okay.” She placed a hand on his chest.

“I spent months thinking you were dead because of that animal. I thought it was just empty threats he’d built up to get inside my head. I never realized how real those threats were until I saw what he did to you,” he let out in a hoarse whisper.

“But he didn’t,” she reassured him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I’m right here.” She tightened her grasp on his hand and he could swear he saw tears falling down her cheeks.

“That bloody blade he swore he killed you with...He probably would have killed me with had whoever was at the door not shown up when they did.” He let out a shaky breath. “It was my own fault. I’m the one that told him. At that point I was delirious and couldn’t tell what was real and what wasn’t.

“A part of me died in that cell. When I realized...or *thought*

you had died...that he had killed you. I lost it.” He let the hard truth escape his lips and looked over at her shamefully. “I let you down. I promised if you called, I’d be there, and because of one dumb decision I broke that promise. I’m sorry.”

She looked back at him with tears in her eyes and reached her hand up to stroke his cheek. “Don’t you dare blame yourself for what that monster did.” He let out a slow breath, leaning his forehead against hers. Her hand brushed against the side of his face, tracing his jaw before she leaned into him, pressing her lips to his ever so slightly. The simple touch of her lips against his was enough to rock him to the core. He let out a low moan as she leaned further into him, deepening the kiss.

“I love you, Lois,” he whispered against her lips.

“I love you too,” she murmured against his lips.

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“I love you, Lois,” he whispered against her lips, slowly breaking off the kiss.

She could feel a flutter inside her abdomen as she looked back at him, feeling the weight of the world lift off of her as she stared into his dark brown eyes. She felt a nagging in the back of her mind, reminding her that he still had Lex’s twisted version of things in his head. If there was any chance of salvaging her relationship with Clark then she needed to tell him what happened to her. He’d trusted her enough to open up about his capture. He deserved to hear the truth from her.

“I love you too,” she murmured against his lips slowly pulling away.

A look of relief washed over his face. “You do?”

She nodded, taking a moment to collect her thoughts as she mentally prepared herself to divulge the truth she’d buried for so long. “I know that wasn’t easy,”

“I do trust you, Lois,” he said placing his hand on her cheek. “I wish I could take back the things I said.”

“I’m just going to need time,” she said slowly. “I can’t just snap my fingers and make it all go away,”

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “So where do we go from here?”

“Rip the band-aid off and take the first step forward,” she said cautiously. She swallowed hard as she prepared to do just that. “I’m not good at this. A part of me wants to just hide under a rock and pretend the last few months never happened. But I can’t do that because then...” she felt her voice tremble and clamped her eyes closed as she fought back the tears glistening in her eyes. “I know that wasn’t easy and that’s why I know you’ll understand when I say this isn’t easy for me. But the only way to move forward is to talk about it.”

“Lois, you don’t have to...” he began to argue.

She shook her head and cut him off, “Yes, I do.” She took a deep breath, preparing herself mentally to divulge the painful truth to him. “I wanted to call off the wedding,” she said, hearing her voice tremble beneath the strain she felt from holding her tears in. “I got called just about every name in the book when he figured out he couldn’t convince me to change my mind.”

Clark didn’t say anything. He sat there with his arm around her shoulders, holding her close as she continued her tale of shame. “I was beaten, choked and threatened with the barrel of his gun to my head while he sat there taunting me. He forced me to scream for help and in the back of my head I knew he’d done something...*awful* to be so certain that you wouldn’t show up.”

Clark let out a shallow breath but still didn’t say anything, choosing instead to lace his fingers with hers as she continued. “I fought him with everything I had in me, but I wasn’t...” A single tear escaped her eye and she felt it run down her cheek.

“It’s okay,” he whispered in her ear. “You don’t have to...”

“I thought I was going to die. He was sitting there gloating about everything he’d taken from me and I knew there was no way he was going to let me go.” She whimpered out a quiet sob and a

shuddered breath as his arm tightened around her. “I tried everything. All the Tae Kwon Do. The martial arts and self-defense classes were worth nothing when you had a gun pressed against you. That was when he taunted me, asking me how it felt to be so close to discovering the boss of Metropolis and failing.”

She tightened her hand into a fist. “And then he sliced my dress off with that knife and stabbed me.” She felt the tears begin to fall at their own accord. “That’s the scar. The reminder everyday of what an incredibly bad judge of character I am and how close I came to dying.” She let out disgusted grunt. “If Perry hadn’t convinced Bill Henderson to check on me I probably would have ended up dead and probably raped.” The last word escaped her throat with a sob and she added, “He threatened it enough I’m pretty sure he would have done it.”

A comfortable silence fell between them as she leaned her head into his shoulder. One by one tears began to fall out of the corner of her eyes. It was out. The ugly truths they both had been harboring. No more hiding. His arm wrapped snugly around her and he pressed his lips to her temple.

“Thank God for Perry,” he whispered.

“And Jimmy,” she said looking up at him. “He hacked into LexCorp’s security system and kept anyone from finding out I was in there rescuing you.”

“And Jimmy,” he agreed tightening his arm around her waist. There was a long pause as she contemplated what was left to say or do at this point. Clark cleared his throat and asked, “You want to get out of here?”

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The moonlit sky reflected off the clouds as Clark floated himself and Lois into the night sky. He looked up, smiling at the diamond lit sky that surrounded them. He kept his arms wrapped snugly around her as a burst of cold wind billowed past them, moving the clouds below. Lois leaned in closer to him and he tucked the red fabric of his cape around her, acting as protection from the harsh winds.

“Thanks.” Lois beamed back at him, looking around the moonlit sky that was close enough to touch. He smiled to himself as he watched her take in the wonder of it for the first time. “This is...incredible.” She looked down at the clouds that continued to drift back and forth from the wind.

He could see the pointed tip of the Burj al Arab in Dubai several feet below. “We’re just above Dubai.” He pointed to the famous hotel below.

“It’s beautiful,” Lois commented, looking back up at him.

“When I first learned how to fly...really fly, I discovered if I stayed above the clouds here I could stay hidden and watch the city below. It had a calming effect. Drifting over the city and watching it from a view no one else had,” he explained.

“Sounds like an interesting way to travel.” She grinned back at him.

“I did go down there eventually,” Clark countered. “But there was always something so thrilling about being able to just drift up here and take in the world.”

“It’s breathtaking.” Lois smiled back at him.

“It is.” He smiled, running a hand across her cheek. “I spent a lot of my life hiding up here, constantly moving afraid I was going to be found out.”

“What changed?” Lois asked, covering his hand with hers.

“I met you,” he whispered back solemnly. “I met you and I found a way to keep helping people without risking discovery. I couldn’t have done any of this without you, Lois.”

“You would have found a way,” she responded cautiously.

“I wouldn’t have *wanted* to,” he whispered, looking back at her. “I wanted to give up so many times. Every time I thought I couldn’t go any further you were there charging in, making me want to try again. You’ve saved me from myself too many times to count. Superman and Clark Kent.”

She smiled back at him, linking her arms around his neck. “So what you’re saying is I’m top banana in this partnership?”

He grinned back at her, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “Yeah, from what I recall you prefer it that way.” Lois shot him a look and he laughed.

“You’re out of your league.” She laughed, repeating the line she’d thrown him on their first assignment together.

“I know I am.” He smiled back at her. “But I’m up to the challenge.”

“We’re taking things slow this time,” she said, leaning in closer.

“I can do slow,” he agreed.

“No drinking any type of liquor for at least...another month,” she added as a crimson red flushed across her cheeks. “We obviously can’t be trusted to make good decisions when drunk.”

“Kryptonite is the only thing that’s going to make liquor affect me,” he reminded her. “And I would never take advantage of you.”

“No liquor,” she repeated.

“No drinking,” he amended, cupping her cheek. “You can’t drink with the pain medicine you’re on anyway.”

“No more secrets,” she said slowly, leaning closer.

“You know all of mine,” he whispered, leaning closer to her. “Now are you done making up rules?” He pointed his head toward the city below. “There’s a really great curry down there I want you to try...”

She leaned into him, capturing his mouth in a soul-crushing kiss. He let out a low moan, cupping her cheek as he traced the frame of her face and buried his hands in her hair. “Take things slow. No...repeats of getting drunk. No more secrets,” she repeated pulling away from him.

“I have one, no kissing while flying,” he added, looking down at the loss of altitude that had occurred when she’d been kissing him. “It’s *way* too distracting.”

“I don’t like that rule,” she challenged, leaning in to kiss him again.

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## Chapter 19

### *Three Months Later...*

Clark soared through the morning sky, fresh off a rescue of a stalled oil tanker that had lost power. He couldn’t help but smile to himself as he spotted the Daily Planet globe below. Today was the first day the newly restored building would be open for business. Though the Planet had technically been in business for the last two months, working with different printing companies and couriers to get the paper out each day this would be the first day everyone would be under one roof again. A smile spread across his face as he hovered above the familiar golden globe.

It wasn’t the same. Nothing would ever be exactly the same as it once had. Looking back on thing now he wouldn’t want it to be. The torturous months he and Lois had gone through to get where they were now had changed both of them, but for the better. He had finally found the one person he was able to share everything with. The freedom of being able to connect with her and know, no matter what, she was there and understood was new to him. He’d spent so long hiding so much of himself and longing for that connection he saw so many people share. He had almost lost his chance because of his natural instinct to close himself off from the world and hide.

He had been desperate when he finally told Lois about the Kryptonite cage. It had been the turning point for both of them and now three months later they were closer than they’d ever been. Lois had laid out her rules for giving them a shot and for the most part they’d followed them. Her first rule of taking things slow was beginning to lose its appeal for both of them but he was trying his best to let her set the pace.

He knew Lois was the only one he ever wanted to be with for

the rest of his life. He'd marry her in a heartbeat if she said the word, but he also knew how fragile things were after everything they'd both been through. They both had demons to work through and they had been. He felt closer to Lois than anyone and he wanted more than anything to make it official but he also didn't want to pressure her for more than she was ready for. After everything she'd been through he didn't want to put her in that situation ever again...especially not after coming so close to losing his chance with her forever.

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Vincent Blake leaned back in the luxurious leather seat, stretching his arms over his head as he listened unamused to his opposing counsel making the case for the media ban to be lifted off of his client, Lex Luthor. He knew all too well what Sheldon Bender was trying to do. One of the benefits of this being both a criminal and federal case was the fact that he could ensure true isolation on the former billionaire and prevent him from having access to information on the happenings of the outside world. Most of all, the resurrection of the Daily Planet and the reappearance of Lois Lane.

Given the severity of the crimes Luthor had been accused of, the judge had agreed to a complete media blackout and isolation for the crime lord. Now Bender wanted to have the ban lifted in order to prepare his case, but Blake knew better. Bender had been stalling ever since he saw the list of witnesses against his client. He knew if Luthor got wind of Lois Lane's testimony against him he would try to send someone after her. Thankfully the judge was on their side as well.

"Mr. Bender, for the last time I am not going to authorize a person to person visit with your client. You have been provided a video feed to consult on the case with him." Judge Randall said with a bite in his tone.

"Your honor, this is prejudice against my client! Mr. Blake would rather delay justice and rob my client of his right to..." Bender shouted angrily.

"Well your client will have his day in court to argue that," Judge Randall interrupted angrily. "If you ever finish going through your discovery, that is."

"We're still going through it," Bender grumbled.

"Uh-huh," Judge Randall muttered, "Now who's delaying justice?"

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Lois tugged the sides of her suit jacket closed, counting the floors as she prepared to enter the newsroom for the first time. It had been three months since Lex Luthor's arrest and subsequent downfall. Today was the first day the Planet's doors were officially open. The Planet staff had been making due with sharing space at Stern Media. They had the ribbon cutting last week, announcing the grand opening of the newly restored building. Most of the office spaces had been moved over the weekend, but this would be her first time seeing the newsroom.

She let out a deep sigh. It had been hard at first to jump back in the game. The first few weeks she spent almost every interview going through the quick recap of where she'd been for the last few months before she could make any headway into the story she was supposed to be reporting. It would take time. She knew that.

Time was the answer to everything lately.

Time to recover from her injuries.

Time to recover from her mental scars.

Time to work through everything with Clark.

Time to reclaim her life.

Everything, it seemed, took time.

She wanted more than anything to fast forward time and take herself to a time when everything didn't hurt as bad. The small victories came with each article she and Clark published exposing the corruption that had been plaguing Metropolis under Lex Luthor's control. It felt like with each article she was reclaiming a

piece of herself and finding her footing. It helped having Clark there with her, knowing he knew how painful each story was.

Perry had refused to let them cover the case against Lex, but the corruption that had been exposed after Lex's arrest was fair game. Hearing some of the threats that had been made against innocent families in order to continue the criminal activities plaguing the city and even false arrests that had allowed innocent people to serve time as punishment for not falling in line brought a flood of emotions for both her and Clark.

She liked to think they were closer now. They were continuing to take things slow. He had his own baggage to work through after everything he went through with Lex and Dr. Kelly and she had her own demons to work through. It had been a hard few months, but they both seemed to be in a better place now. It wouldn't have taken a lot of convincing that night Mr. Stern announced the Daily Planet's return to resume the physical aspects of their budding relationship, but they both knew rushing into anything in the heat of the moment would have only further complicated things. It was hard to take the leap from knowing what it felt like to have Clark make love to her while at the same time feel there were so many parts of him she didn't know—things she would have known had they began their relationship under normal circumstances.

Clark was true to his word on keeping the pace of their budding relationship slow. Despite how close they'd become during their time in hiding there was still a lot they had to learn about one another. Unlike many of her past relationships, Clark allowed things to progress at a leisurely pace, not pushing things past her level of comfort when it came to the physical aspects of their relationship. Though admittedly there were times she wanted to take things further. Here recently, she found it harder and harder to be in the same space with him without touching him or wanting to kiss him. A problem she was sure would complicate the fact that they were still keeping their relationship under wraps in the office. No need to give anyone a reason to gossip any more than they already were.

The elevator pinged, announcing her arrival on the newsroom floor. She took a deep breath and stepped out into the newly renovated space. It was brightly lit with the latest technology on each desk. She spotted Jimmy in the breakroom area, pouring himself a coffee.

"Morning," she smiled at him, looking around the space and taking it in.

"Pretty impressive, huh?" Jimmy asked, looking back at her with a coffee mug in his hand. "Mr. Stern didn't spare any expense."

"I can see that," Lois commented, pouring herself a mug of coffee.

"How's Lucy doing?" Jimmy asked nonchalantly.

"She's good." Lois smiled back at him, noticing the nervous behavior he was exhibiting. Jimmy still had a crush on her sister, it seemed, and was finding any and every excuse he could to ask about her instead of just asking her out. Lois took a sip of her coffee and turned toward him. "She has a phone you know."

"I know." Jimmy grinned back at her.

"Do you need the number or something?" Lois asked with a smirk.

"Something," Jimmy began nervously. "I was actually wondering if you could talk to her for me?"

"And what exactly would I be saying?" Lois asked.

"See if she wants to go to the Kerth awards with me?" Jimmy grinned sheepishly.

Lois groaned, feeling like he was setting her up for a trap. Jimmy's photos coupled with Perry's article on the Daily Planet bombing had been nominated for a Kerth Award this year. Clark had even received a nomination for his story on the Fruit Flies earlier in the year. She'd been disappointed not to get a nod from the committee but had chopped a lot of that up to her not being

considered alive until recently. Still it was hard not to at least have a nomination after consecutively receiving recognition year after year from the Kerth Committee.

She was trying to not let it discourage her. It was just another hurdle she had to face as she tried to rebuild her life and career that had been left in shambles. She was happy for Jimmy and Clark. She knew they both deserved to win. Clark especially seemed to be in disbelief that his work had even been nominated his first year at the Planet. His nomination hadn't come as a surprise to her though. Working with him for the last year, she knew he was a talented writer, and, given the hard-hitting pieces they'd worked on together, she knew it would only be a matter of time before other people noticed too.

Clark wanted her to go to the Kerth Ceremony with him as his date. They'd been seeing one another exclusively for months but had yet to make it known to the public just yet. This would be the first time they'd be in a setting like this. Lately with the way her hormones seemed to be working in overdrive when Clark was around she suspected it wouldn't take long for a room full of journalists to figure it out. She suspected both Jimmy and Perry already knew. Jimmy often made excuses to leave when she and Clark were stealing glances at one another or casually flirting.

Jimmy was a good kid and he'd proven himself to be an incredible friend and talented photojournalist through all of this. With her and Clark having to take the backseat in the investigation, Jimmy had taken the lead and found his stride. Perry had promoted him to Junior Photojournalist and was keeping him busy with some of the recent stories on political corruption and scandals that had taken over the front page.

Jimmy and Lucy had attempted to go out last year but never could get their schedules aligned in order to plan a date. Lucy had moved and Jimmy had moved on until her return a few months ago. Both she and Lucy had moved in with her mother for the time being until she could figure out what to do about her living arrangements. Oddly enough, her mother wasn't nearly as irritating as she remembered. Whether that was a change on her mother's part or hers she wasn't sure. She'd been working through a lot of her issues with her family with Dr. Friskin. It wasn't easy but she was finally able to let go of the resentment she'd been harboring toward her father and allow herself to accept him for who he was, faults and all. Letting go of that baggage seemed to help open a flood of emotions for her as she continued to work through the hard truths in why she allowed herself to be drawn to men that hurt her over the years.

"Jimmy, I'm not getting in the middle of this," Lois warned, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Oh come on, it's my first time being nominated for anything," Jimmy pleaded with her.

"You see her every day," Jimmy pointed out. "Just feel her out for me? I'd rather not make myself look like a total moron if I can help it."

"You're not a moron," she soothed.

"Please?" Jimmy gave her a pleading look, folding his hands together to plead his case.

"Fine, I'll talk to her, but I can't guarantee anything," Lois sighed.

"Thank you," Jimmy cheered happily.

"Not guaranteeing anything," Lois repeated.

"Who's not guaranteeing anything?" Clark asked, walking up behind her.

"Hey CK!" Jimmy beamed back at Clark.

'Lucy,' Lois turned to mouth the name to Clark and he nodded, getting the message as he reached over to pour himself a cup. Clark flashed a smile to her, sending a flutter through her abdomen as he stared back at her. A small smile crossed her lips and she took a step toward him, careful to remain within a professional distance from him.

Jimmy stole a glance at them and grinned. "I've got some film to develop. See you two later," he called over his shoulder.

Lois watched Jimmy leave and Clark leaned in to whisper, "Are we really that obvious?"

"I think he figured it out a few months ago," she said, running a hand down the front of his blue dress shirt, outlining the zigzag pattern on his tie with her index finger.

"Well, he's getting better at the whole investigation side of things," Clark commented, taking her hand in his to stop it.

"He knows better than to say anything," Lois said with a sigh, walking with him toward the steps that led into the bullpen of the newsroom.

The elevators pinged and in the crowd of reporters was Perry's newest hire, Ralph Simms, the newest gossip journalist for the City beat. Lois still wasn't sure about Ralph. He was loud, crude and rubbed her the wrong way, but he did have a knack for cracking open the scandals. After the sweep the FBI did to expose the corruption within the city and even some of the higher offices in Congress and other public service positions, there had been plenty to write about.

"Nice digs!" Ralph slunk toward them taking a bite of the doughnut in his hand. "A lot better than that storage closet we were in."

Lois stole a glance toward Clark as they made their way toward their desks. She reached her desk and set her coffee mug down, turning toward Clark. "Looks like they fixed that window that kept coming unlocked." A half-smile crossed her face as she glanced toward the large windows above the newsroom that had been replaced. Unlike the previous windows there was no latch to open and fly in and out of.

"Yeah, I guess it's a good thing there's a stairwell," Clark remarked.

"Four floors of stairs. That's a lot of cardio," she teased, her eyes sparkling.

"Hey, whatcha up to?" Ralph's intruding voice echoed behind her and she felt Clark withdraw, pulling away from her as they turned to face their less than civil colleague.

"Nothing," Lois said, glancing toward the elevator and spotted more reporters trickling into the office. She really wanted to talk to Clark about tonight... alone but given the fact that Ralph sat two desks away from them trying to do that without announcing to the whole newsroom they were dating wasn't something she had a lot of control over.

"I hear there's supposed to be a new report coming out from the FBI on the Luthor case." Ralph puffed out his chest. "Should be another front pager."

"Great," Lois said mildly annoyed. "Let us know how that goes."

"Must be a real drag getting bumped to page two, huh?" Ralph grinned back at her. "How many weeks has it been now?"

"Eight," Lois bit out with an irritated growl. She felt Clark place a hand on her shoulder, and turned to meet his gaze. She knew she shouldn't let Ralph get to her but it was hard when he was such a pompous jerk about everything. She turned to Clark. "Um, Clark, don't we have that thing this morning?"

He looked at her blankly, trying to read what she was trying to say. She pointed her head toward Ralph, reaching her arm back to scratch her head and subtly point toward the hallway leading to the stairwell and copy room. He seemed to get the hint and nodded. "Uh, right." He followed her down the corridor.

"Hey, the elevator's that way," Ralph called after them.

"We're taking the stairs," Lois called out over her shoulder, tightening her hand on the door handle and pulling it open. They had barely made it inside the stairwell before Clark slammed the door behind them and captured her lips in a soul-shattering kiss.

"I've been wanting to do that for the last twenty-minutes," he murmured against her lips. She sighed against him, leaning back

against the wall as her hands buried into the hair on the back of his head, pulling him closer as he pressed his lips against hers again and again, taking advantage of the stolen moment. She could feel her insides flutter as his lips continued to trail across her cheek.

"We're getting really bad at those excuses," Clark murmured, running a hand across her cheek.

"This is...not as easy...as we thought," she whispered, letting out a low moan as he leaned in to her.

"You're the one...that didn't want to...tell anyone yet," he reminded her, running his hands through her hair.

"I thought it'd be...easier than this," she let out a deep sigh as she linked her arms around his neck.

"They'll figure it out sooner or later," he reminded her.

"I know, but I kinda like having this just between us," she said brushing her lips against his.

"I would never greet Ralph or anyone else at the Planet like this," he chuckled against her.

She let out a laugh at the mental image. "You know what I mean."

"I know my ability to think about anything but kissing you when you're this close is nonexistent," he murmured against her lips.

"Hence why I'm trying to stay away from Superman rescue stories right now," she purred, running her hand up and down his chest.

"I love you," he murmured.

"I love you too," she whispered back to him.

"Do you want to get dinner before the ceremony?" he asked, nudging her ear with his nose.

"No, they usually serve a full banquet at the ceremony," she let out a low moan as he leaned into her, brushing his lips against the curve of her throat. "I still don't get how your Fruit Fly story ended up in the same category as Leo Nunk's story on the Governor."

"I don't know how I got nominated in the first place," he murmured against her throat, "without you."

"Five months of being out of the game does that I guess." She let out a shuddered breath against him. "It's going to be a long day."

"How long do we have...before...the press conference?" His teeth grazed against the curve of her neck, nipping at the sensitive flesh as she let out a low moan.

"Half an hour," she whispered breathlessly.

"Plenty of time to..." he stopped and let out a low growl. His body posture stiffened as he lifted his head up with a faraway expression on his face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Bank robbery." He gave her an apologetic smile. "Meet you at City Hall?"

"Be careful." She nodded, loosening his tie for him. He leaned in for one last kiss before disappearing into a blur of red and blue down the stairs.

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Jack Davenport wore a grim expression as he pushed through the double doors leading into the hospital Lex Luthor had been rushed to. He knew what Luthor was trying to do and he would be damned if he would let him get away with it. Sheldon Bender had been trying every trick in the book to get Luthor out of prison. Now it seemed Luthor was playing the game too.

He flashed his badge at the guards standing outside the hospital room and they waved him in. "Doctor's been debriefed?" he asked.

One of the guards lifted his head up raised an eyebrow at Jack, giving an indifferent shrug. "Of course."

Jack Davenport stepped inside the room and smiled to himself when he saw the empty room with a hospital bed in the center of it and a very agitated Lex Luthor strapped to the bed by shackles and

bandages over his left wrist. "I'll sue every last one of you when I get out of this place! You have no idea who you're dealing with!"

"Temper, temper Lex," Jack taunted. "Don't want to leave wrinkles on that perfect skin of yours. Budget cuts make getting a dermatologist appointment...nonexistent."

"You..." Lex growled out.

"Yes, me!" Jack grinned back. "You really think you can get out of this by pretending to be suicidal?"

"I'd rather die than live this way!" Luthor snapped.

"Yeah, sure," Jack snorted. "I'm sure it's so hard on you having three square meals a day and a bed to sleep on while you await trial."

"You think you can get away with this? There are laws. I've made an attempt on my life. You have to follow procedure. You have to transfer me..." Lex hissed out.

"Yes, I do," Jack grinned happily. "Procedure says I have to give you medical treatment and get you evaluated and remove anything you can use to harm yourself. It does not say I have to transfer you *anywhere* while doing it."

Jack leaned in so he was just a few inches from Luthor's face as he hissed out, "You keep making attempts on your life and I'll make sure you end up in the worst mental hospital in the world. You think you're all big and bad with your money and your thugs but you are nothing compared to some of the freaks down at Arkham. Now you can sit here and wait for your trial like a good boy in your nice cushy cell or you can risk losing your mind to the likes of the Joker, Mad Hatter, or Dr. Strange." Davenport let out a low hiss. "I hear they like to do experiments that can be...*painful*."

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The blue lights reflected off the stage and Lois watched as the chairman pulled out the white envelope to announce the winner for Investigative Journalism. She reached over to squeeze Clark's hand from beneath the table, offering a supportive smile as he looked over at her. She felt a flutter in her abdomen as he looked back at her. A feeling that was becoming more and more common these days as they grew closer.

After a hectic day of chasing down leads and covering the press conference with the introduction of the newly appointed governor promising a new start for Metropolis, she'd barely had time to change before she had to leave again. Jimmy finally was able to muster up the courage to pick up the phone and invite Lucy to the awards dinner. She still wasn't sure what was up with the two of them or why he seemed so gun shy around her sister, but she decided that was something that the two of them would work out one way or another.

If the last few months had taught her anything it was how much things could change if you wanted them to. Never in her wildest dreams would she imagine herself to be sitting on the sidelines of a story, but her priorities had changed over the past year. Her need to stake her claim as the best of the best wasn't nearly as important as her desire to protect Clark's secret.

The Superman stories had become a regular occurrence over the last few months since his return but this time she wasn't the first in line competing for a quote. She had the story—the *real* story, but it was better left untold. There was a bigger truth to protect and if she had to sit out on a few stories to do so she was okay with that. She couldn't have said that a year ago, but she never would have imagined herself being able to do half the things she'd done in the past year back then. She'd come close to death and survived and now she was stronger, more determined than ever to fight for those that don't have a voice with the man she loved by her side. There was something so liberating about that knowledge.

"And the winner for Best Investigative Journalism piece of the year goes to..."

Lois held her breath, tightening her hand in Clark's as she waited to hear the name. He had it in the bag. Leo Nunk couldn't

write his way out of a paper bag and the Metropolis STAR reporter, Lisa Gates, had some substance to her article on the Queen of England's new grandchild but it certainly didn't measure up to the talent at the Daily Planet. 'You've got this,' she mouthed, forgetting herself for a split-second and leaning in to kiss him. A flood of light shone on the table and the chairman finished reading the winner.

"...Clark Kent."

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Judge Randall entered the room, nodding to Vincent Blake, Jack Davenport and Sheldon Bender. He turned behind him to address one of the guards, "Room is cleared?"

"Floor's been swept your honor and Mr. Luthor's doctor has been debriefed," the guard acknowledged.

Judge Randall turned to Davenport. "You mind telling me what in the hell is going on here?"

"I was just explaining due process to Mr. Luthor." Jack Davenport smiled back at him.

"He threatened my client," Sheldon Bender clarified. "This is a gross miscarriage of justice your honor. My client is being railroaded for crimes he didn't commit." Bender waved a file in his hand. "Just today they've added kidnapping and attempted murder charges that were dismissed!"

"We have new evidence," Vincent Blake retorted.

"What new evidence?" Bender shot back.

"After closer examination of the blade your client tried to stab Mr. Kent with we found the DNA of Lois Lane on it," Blake retorted with a growl. "The exam was completed by three labs. One of them was LexLabs so don't even think about trying to argue for your own lab report."

"But..."

"He's right, Mr. Bender." Judge Randall cleared his throat. "But you're right too. We can't continue to keep Mr. Luthor in isolation waiting for a trial date."

"Your honor!" Davenport and Blake both shouted at once.

"Because the trial date is being set for next Monday. If you're not prepared then too bad, so sad, you had three months." Judge Randall looked up at Vincent Blake. "You have a problem with that date?"

"No, your honor." Vincent Blake shook his head.

"How about you, Mr. Bender?" Judge Randall glared at the defense attorney, daring him to argue.

"No, your honor." Bender cleared his throat.

"Good." Judge Randall pointed to the door. "Everyone's happy."

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Clark held up the crystal statue in his hand as he walked with Lois down the steps of the Metropolitan. Perry and Alice were a few steps behind them as they made their way to the limos Mr. Stern had arranged for them.

His head was still swimming from the excitement from tonight. Winning the Kerth had been amazing, but what was even more incredible was the fact that his and Lois' relationship was no longer under wraps. He no longer had to hide the fact that he wanted to kiss her senseless when they were in public. Lois had kissed him in the middle of the ceremony. He wasn't sure if her timing had been intentional or not but he was pretty sure they'd be hearing about it in the morning.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and he finally got the nerve to break the silence between them, holding up the Kerth in his hand. "It's smaller than I thought."

Lois nodded, offering him a smile. "Yeah, they're not quite as shiny close up."

A loud whistle came from one of the fellow nominees as they walked past them and Clark felt a blush creep into his face. Tonight was a night no one would be forgetting anytime soon. He ran a hand across her cheek. "I take it we're no longer keeping up

appearances."

"I think I killed any chance of continuing that." She grinned back at him, fingering the knot on his bow tie.

"Intentional or happy accident?" he asked, leaning toward her.

"A little of both." She shrugged her shoulders. A heated gaze crossed her face and she whispered, "I think rule number one is losing its appeal."

"Never getting involved with your story?" he asked, recalling the three rules she'd listed out for him on their first assignment.

"Taking things slow," she whispered, tracing an imaginary 'S' across his chest.

"Oh, *that* rule." He smiled back at her.

"And rule number three." She let out a heavy sigh as he leaned in closer.

"Rule number three?"

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Alice hung back on Perry's arm as they made their way down the steps of the Metropolitan where the Kerth Awards Ceremony had taken place. She looked off to the side noticing the looks being exchanged between Lois and Clark. They'd certainly come a long way from where they'd been several months before, barely speaking to one another. A small smile crossed her face and she nudged Perry. "Those two certainly know how to make a statement, don't they?"

Perry let out a loud laugh of agreement. "I don't think that was intentional."

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Alice grinned recalling the bewildered expression on both of their faces when the spotlight had shone on them announcing Clark as the winner just as Lois had given him a kiss for good luck. She knew Perry had suspected more had been going on between the duo for the last month. He'd mentioned catching them coming out of the copy room with nothing to copy and no explanation for what they were doing in there.

"Young love," Alice sighed.

"As long as they can keep bringing in the stories..." Perry muttered under his breath.

"I don't think that will be a problem," Alice reassured him, tugging his hand toward the awaiting limo.

They had moved back to Metropolis after the sweep had been done to rid Metropolis of the corrupt officials and Lex Luthor. She'd accepted a job as a copywriter for Stern Media's SNN and was really finding herself again. After spending the last few months being thrown into a dangerous situation that required her to wear her reporter's hat once more she found she missed the thrill of it. After the boys were born she'd stayed home to raise them. Now that they were both grown and out of the house she was left wondering what next. She thought the next chapter would be Perry's retirement but if the last year had shown them anything it was just how not ready they both were to step out of the game.

"Who knows." Alice beamed back at him. "Maybe this time next year I'll be accepting a Kerth."

"I'm still not so sure about this second act business," Perry groaned.

"Why not? We've still got it." Alice tugged his arm, guiding him toward the waiting limos. "Come on, you old hound dog."

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The sound of Jack Davenport's footsteps echoed down the narrow hallway as he made his way into the visiting room of the Metropolis Men's Penitentiary. The steel door closed behind him and he nodded to Vincent Blake who was seated on the right side of the table across from Sheldon Bender, the legal counsel for Nigel St. John. A conflict of interest if he ever saw one.

He looked to Vincent Blake as he pulled up a chair. "What's this about?"

Vincent Blake threw a look toward Sheldon Bender. "We're waiting on Mr. St. John."

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The bedsheets laid crumpled on the floor and the pillows were strewn across the bed haphazardly. Clark let out a sigh of contentment as he cradled Lois in his arms, savoring the closeness he felt having her in his arms. It had been five hours since they had stumbled through the front door and frantically made love again and again.

This time there was no hangover to take away the euphoric haze and pure ecstasy he felt from being with the woman he loved. He had gone through hell and back with her. He couldn't imagine his life without her. It hadn't taken a lot of convincing on his part once she made it clear she was ready to cross that intimacy threshold and here, holding her in his arms fresh off the throes of ecstasy they'd just shared, he couldn't imagine anything more perfect.

"Lois?" he ran his hand across her cheek, uncertain how alert she was.

"Hmm?" she mumbled sleepily. He could hear the exhaustion in her voice as he held her to him.

"You awake?"

"Barely," she whispered sleepily. "My toes are still numb."

"You hungry?" he asked, craning his neck toward the bedroom door.

"A little," she mumbled. "More tired than anything right now."

"Sorry," he gave her a sheepish grin, but he didn't feel an ounce of regret with how they'd spent the evening tangled up in one another.

"Yeah, you're really torn up about it." She giggled at him, rolling over on her back.

"Well, I'm sorry you're tired. Not how you got like that." He wagged his eyebrows at her and leaned in to kiss her. The sound of her stomach growling reached his ears and he broke the kiss off.

"I worked up an appetite." She grinned back at him. She craned her neck, looking toward the clock. "What time is it?"

"One," he murmured, against the nape of her neck.

"I didn't even bring a change of clothes." She sighed.

"Clothes are so overrated," he argued, running a hand down the curve of her back.

"Except when you have to go to work in the morning," she reminded him. "I am not looking forward to that trip to retrieve a clean suit in the morning."

"You should just move in here," he murmured against her cheek. "Problem solved."

"Careful I might take you up on that." She grinned back at him.

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it," he whispered, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

Her mouth twisted into a half-smile. "Really?"

"Really." He ran his hand up and down the frame of her face. "I love you, Lois. More than anything. There's nothing I would like more than to spend the rest of my life falling asleep in your arms and waking up with you. You're everything to me."

"Oh, Clark." She ran a hand across his cheek, looking back at him with a smile.

He felt a wave of emotion rush through him as he stared back at her. The days of taking things slow had gone out the window. All that was left now was the future—their future together. He'd put himself out there and hinted at what he wanted and she hadn't pulled away. Deciding to just bite the bullet and say what was on his mind he brushed his lips against hers and whispered, "Marry me."

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"Bull," Jack Davenport growled out at Nigel St. John. He could feel his anger rising up inside him as he stared into the eyes of the man that had murdered his partner, Christina Wallace.

A smug expression crossed Nigel's face and he repeated, "I am the boss."

"My client is more than willing to cop to the charges," Sheldon Bender spoke up.

"I'm sure he is," Vincent Blake offered with a grimace, "but I've got evidence that your client is full of it."

"In light of this new information your case against Lex Luthor holds no water," Bender retorted smugly.

Davenport chuckled. "We'll see about that." He stood up and turned toward the door.

"We'll see you in court, Mr. Bender," Blake said with a sneer. "May the best man win,"

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*Three Weeks Later...*

Clark slipped his hand inside his wife's squeezing it in his as they waited for her name to be called. This was it. The day they'd been both dreading and looking forward to for the last few weeks ever since Davenport had called with the date of the trial. After his proposal he and Lois had eloped and he'd spent the last few weeks trying to keep Lois distracted and not focus on the upcoming trial they both knew lurked around the corner.

"Lois Lane," the bailiff called out.

"This is it," Lois said with a shaky breath.

"I'll be right there in the gallery," Clark reassured, running his hand up and down her shoulders.

"Say it again," she said with a shaky breath.

"You can do this," he reassured, brushing his lips against her forehead. "You are the strongest person I know. You're a survivor. There is nothing you can't do when you put your mind to it."

Her hand tightened in his and the trembling stopped. A determined expression crossed her face. "I'm ready."

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Jack Davenport sat in the gallery of the courtroom watching as Emmet Vale exited the witness stand. Agent Rollins escorted him out of the courtroom with two bailiffs on either side. Agent Rollins nodded to him as he heard Sheldon Bender arguing with Vincent Blake, the federal prosecutor.

"Your honor, this case against my client is a sham! They've done nothing to link these crimes to my client," Bender ranted, pointing an accusatory finger at Blake. "The FBI and the Metropolitan Police Department have conspired against my client to sully his good name because of unsubstantiated rumors and a vendetta the newly appointed police commissioner has against my client."

"Mr. Bender, there will be no grand standing in my courtroom," Judge Randall argued, pounding his gavel.

Vincent Blake argued back, "I'm sorry you feel like the corruption of our nation's government is a waste of your time, Mr. Bender, but the federal government takes organized crime pretty seriously."

"All you've done is proven Nigel St. John is the boss. There is nothing and no one to connect him to..."

Davenport saw Clark Kent enter through the double doors and take a seat in front of him. Lois Lane followed with an escort of Commissioner Bill Henderson and his director, Victor Talley. He nodded toward her and gave her a thumbs up signal as the room fell silent.

"Hello, Lex," Lois said smugly as she walked toward the witness stand.

Victor Blake turned toward Sheldon Bender. "I'm guessing from the look of shock on your client's face that he's surprised to see Ms. Lane...*alive*."

"It's Kent," Lois corrected as she stepped into the witness stand.

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Clark took a deep breath as he waited for the bailiff to bring Luthor back into the courtroom. Lois' testimony had been the last of several witnesses brought forward. Her damning testimony against Luthor along with Luthor flying into a rage after she'd

been sworn in had erased any doubt in the jurors' minds of Luthor's guilt. Bender had tried every attempt in the book to discredit her but she remained completely composed. It had taken the jury less than an hour to deliberate before finding Luthor guilty. Now all that was left was Luthor's sentencing which would take place in an hour.

He'd already taken Lois back home to rest. She didn't want to be in the courtroom any longer than she had to but he did. He wanted to be there and watch to make sure there was no miscarriage of justice. He had to be sure there was no chance Luthor could wriggle himself out of this. He had to be sure Luthor would no longer pose a threat to Lois.

The knowledge that his enemy still knew his secret identity weighed heavily on his mind. Luthor had tried to out him and he didn't doubt he'd try it again if given the chance. Still he held onto hope that once Luthor lost all credibility here, the threat of his secret identity being exposed would be gone.

The double doors opened and he saw Luthor being escorted into the courtroom in the orange jumpsuit with the number C100693 printed on the front. Clark felt his jaw tighten as he watched the bailiff lock the chains on Luthor's shackles to the defense table. The bailiff looked up, meeting Clark's eyes with a silent nod before turning toward the double doors leading out of the courtroom. As he passed by he muttered, "Do yourself a favor and try not to kill the bastard just yet. He ain't worth a life sentence."

Clark ground his teeth as he watched the bailiff leave. A chill fell over him as he turned his attention back to the man that was responsible for so much of the pain and suffering both he and Lois had endured over the past eight months. He stood up and strode purposefully toward the defense table Luthor was now chained to and stopped in front of him, slamming his palms on the edge of it just hard enough to make the table shake.

Luthor looked up unimpressed. "Am I supposed to be intimidated now?" He let out a mocking sneer. "You think you've won now, is that it? I'll admit you caught me off my game. Keeping Lois hidden from me was quite a genius move." His eyes darkened as he let out a sinister threat, "You really think you can stop me?"

"It's over, Luthor," Clark hissed in a menacing tone.

"For now, perhaps," Luthor mused. "But I happen to know a secret that every criminal in the world would pay billions upon billions of dollars to know."

"The only criminals you'll be associating with are the criminally insane," Clark bit back, doing his best to not react to the threat. "Your credibility is gone and no one is going to believe the ravings of a delusional psychopath that gets off on beating defenseless women and leaving them for dead."

"Do you really think it's that easy to just move in and take possession of what is mine?" Luthor chuckled. "You really are a desperate fool! Picking up my scraps like a rabid dog..."

Clark smiled back at him. "You can't accept it, can you? Lois finally saw you for the demented monster that you are and you're still holding on to this perverse version of the truth as if it's going to save you somehow." He narrowed his eyes at Luthor and growled out, "If you so much as breathe anywhere near Lois again... I don't care if it's a letter, a phone call, or one of your thugs showing up unannounced... come near her and there won't be enough Kryptonite in the universe to save you from my wrath, you spineless perverted psychopath."

"You think I fear death?" Luthor chuckled.

"You think I'd put an end to your misery? No, that would be too kind," Clark spat out angrily. "I would much rather watch you writhe in pain like the spineless, weak, sorry excuse of a man you are, begging for death that will never...ever come. You will spend every second of every day knowing two things: out of everyone in the world you went up against you were taken down by Lois, and

you might have thought you won the battle but she's the one that won the war." His eyes flickered red as he suppressed his anger. "Come near her again, I'll make every day after that a living hell you will never be able to escape."

An uneasy expression crossed Luthor's face and Clark sneered, "Don't look now, Luthor, but your fear is showing." He straightened up and strode toward the back of the courtroom where the bailiff had just reentered. Deciding he had said all he needed to say he walked toward the back of the courtroom as the other bailiff stepped inside, opening the door for the judge to enter. He took his seat in the back of the courtroom and watched as everyone began to slowly trickle in.

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"Mr. Luthor, I find the crimes you have committed horrendous and your disdain and indifferent attitude is horrendous. You are a dangerous criminal with no remorse for your appalling actions. Furthermore, you have proven time and time again just how far you'll go to continue a life of crime. My only hope is that the knowledge of your imprisonment and inability to do no more harm on society will bring peace of mind to your victims and their families. May God have mercy on your tortured soul though I doubt you have one." The gavel pounded and the judge ordered, "You are hereby sentenced to thirty life sentences in Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane under maximum security where you will no longer be the disease that you have been on society."

Commissioner Bill Henderson watched from the gallery as Lex Luthor began shouting out threats against his attorney as the bailiffs prepared to escort him out of the courtroom. He turned to see Clark Kent watching from the back of the courtroom with a satisfied smile. Henderson looked back at Davenport who clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's see him bully his way out of this one."

Henderson looked at Davenport. "Why do I have a feeling you had something to do with that sentence?"

"A threat to take one's life should always be taken seriously, don't you agree, Bill?" Davenport winked at him. "Those mental evaluations Sheldon Bender insisted on submitting to the judge helped too."

"Arkham?" Henderson asked uneasily. He'd heard the stories about the place, but never visited.

"I'm sure he'll fit right in," Davenport responded coldly. "Keep him from causing any further damage to his victims too." He was quiet before adding, "Lex Luthor is a delusional sociopath and he deserves everything that happens to him."

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### *Life in Arkham: Luthor's Last Mile*

*By Perry White*

### *Governor Pierce Connected to Collusion in White House*

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

"I love a front page news story in the morning, don't you?" Lois beamed, looking back at her husband as he handed her a cup of coffee.

"How are you feeling?" Clark asked, placing a kiss on her cheek.

"Good." She grinned, running her hand over the gold band snugly wrapped around her husband's left ring finger. Even after only two and a half weeks of marriage she found herself needing the reassurance that this wasn't a dream. "Better than I've slept in...ever."

"You're amazing." Clark beamed back at her. "I love you."

"Hey knock it off, wouldya?" Ralph groaned walking past them. "It's not even nine yet. Can't you save the newlywed crap for after lunch?"

Lois twisted her mouth looking back at Clark. "This weekend can't come fast enough."

"Two weeks." He grinned back at her with a heated gaze, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

"Yes, now that Lex is locked away on his way to Arkham we

can focus on more important things,” she whispered, running a hand down the front of his chest.

“Like our long overdue honeymoon,” he agreed leaning in to kiss her.

A smile spread across her face as she beamed back at him. It was hard to believe it had been three weeks since his proposal and their subsequent elopement a few days later. After everything they’d been through the idea of waiting to plan a big event just to say “I do” seemed like borrowing trouble. So after some debate on when and arranging to have Jonathan and Martha flown in and catching her mom before her trip to Seattle, they found a small gazebo to rent for an hour and exchanged their vows. Rather than rushing off to celebrate they’d chosen to wait until after the trial was done. They both needed the reassurance that Lex really was locked away forever and she didn’t want to spend their entire honeymoon thinking about the trial. Now that the trial was over they could take the time to plan a two-week getaway with just the two of them.

“Among other things,” she purred happily, teasing the knot of his tie. “We really do need to start looking at paint samples soon.”

“And furniture,” he agreed, making a face. “That couch needs to find a new home.”

“I know,” Lois sighed, running a hand across his. “There’s a long list of things to do...”

Now that the insurance money had finally come back and she’d moved everything from her mom’s and her old apartment they could begin determining what to keep and what to give away. They still had a few months to decide if they wanted to stay in the one-bedroom apartment they were currently in or find a bigger place.

It still amazed her to think about how far they’d come over the last year and a half. The days of looking over their shoulders and hiding from Lex and his goons were gone. The city’s corruption scandal had exposed all of the misdeeds those on the boss’ payroll and now with the new Mayor stepping in it looked like everything might settle down long enough for her and Clark to enjoy married life. Well, as normal as Metropolis ever got.

Jimmy held up the phone from his desk and called out, “Chief, there’s a hostage situation at the Metropolis Museum of Art.” He pointed to the television where coverage of a man in black, holding a round cylinder weapon pointed at the police squad surrounding the building aimed at one of the police cars. The car morphed before the spectators’ eyes and exploded.

Lois felt Clark’s hand squeeze hers as Perry began shouting orders for everyone to get ready to land the scoop on the newest criminal to dare make a move in Metropolis. She met Clark’s eyes, seeing the determined expression on his face. “Sounds like a job for Superman.”

They shared a tender look and he led her toward the corridor leading to the back stairwell. “Whoever that guy is it looks like he’s gotten his hands on some serious firepower.”

“Military connection or leftovers from LexLabs split?” Lois wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” he said, loosening his tie. “I’ll check it out and we can have STAR Labs take a look.”

“Superman has been slacking on his public appearances these last few weeks,” Lois said. “You think someone’s trying to test the waters?”

“He’s been extremely busy what with his insatiable wife having so much energy lately,” his eyes sparkled and he cupped her cheek.

“Are you complaining?” she teased with a grin.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he responded, pulling his hand away. “I’ll try to make this quick.” He moved toward the door to the stairwell and she stopped him.

“Forgetting something?” she asked.

He smirked, leaning in to kiss her, cupping her cheek. “I’ve

got to go.”

She finished untying his tie for him. “Try not to turn this into anything too big. We still have to stop by the airport to pick up mom.” He gave her a muddled look. “Did you forget already?”

“No,” he reassured her. “Dinner with your parents is just... complicated.”

“This was *your* idea,” she reminded him.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he reassured her, placing a hand on her abdomen, leaning in for one last kiss.

Lois watched him leave, shaking her head as she allowed her hand to move to her abdomen, resting there for a moment. One thing was for sure. Life was certainly never dull being married to Clark Kent. “You better not be late.”

THE END