

On the Long Way Down

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Summary: Dashing, duplicitous, dangerous—billionaire Clark Kent may have more than one skeleton in his closet and several women on his heels, but he's always been single-minded in his goal: to destroy Lex Luthor. All that changes when he meets Luthor's girl. Torn between revenge and stealing Lois Lane's heart, Clark must decide what means more to him before it all comes crashing down in this anti-verse tale.

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Chapter 1: Not How the Story Goes

"If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other books. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle."

Lemony Snicket, *The Bad Beginning*

The tremor didn't come back until after her act ended. She stepped away from the microphone, gave a little bow, and stepped off stage. She breathed through it, shaking off the nerves. A showstopper she was not, but she could carry a tune, and she could flirt with the best of them. And with the club's smoky, seedy atmosphere, those two things would get her far enough. She took a moment to breathe backstage, ran a finger under each eye to make sure her makeup was intact.

"Hey, Lola! Good set, but you gotta work the floor a little. Get back out there."

She shot Johnny a dark scowl.

"And ease up on the attitude a little."

He wisely ducked away before she could reply to that, but his words left her stewing with anger. She knew this wasn't the best of places, but she honestly couldn't believe this guy. Part of her wished that he would get raked over the coals by these so-called Toasters. He was lucky she had her own job to do. Lois gave herself a quick once-over in the mirror, cocked her hip to the side and plastered on a dazzling smile.

Showtime.

She waltzed back out there, a suggestive sway to her hips, and took command of the room once again. A thrill chased up her spine as she absorbed the atmosphere of the club and exuded the same sort of unearned confidence. The dingy bar, smells of expensive smoke and cheap perfumes all swirled together. The almost palpable excitement that bustled through everyone in the room.

Well, not everyone. Tall dark and handsome in the corner over there at the bar seemed too broody for the club tonight, not at all like most of their other patrons. He sat, swirling his three fingers of scotch, deep in thought. Suddenly, he seemed to become aware of her staring, and dark, fascinating eyes stared back at her through thick glasses. There was something hidden in them—a kind of spark, but not the kind you read about in romance novels—a kind of intellect, a sharpness to them that, as hard as he tried to keep hidden, it simply couldn't be dulled.

Lois shuddered as his gaze dropped down to the rest of her body and the rather obvious lack of attire. She suddenly wished that she had worn something a little less skimpy for her act tonight—something that didn't essentially boil down to a one-piece swimsuit and some pantyhose along with what her sister would designate as stripper heels. And at the same time, when his gaze

met hers once again, a warm feeling flooded through her bones and part of her was glad that she didn't. Lust knifed through her brutally, and if she were in any other circumstances, she was worried with how she would react to such a feeling. As it was, his gaze was intoxicating.

She was compelled to approach him, why she did not know. Something about him just screamed that they should meet, would meet, had met before. It would almost be eerie, if it weren't downright exciting. She lightly smacked a grabby hand out of the way as she weaved through the smoky crowd to his side.

He watched her carefully as she approached him, seeming to size her up as though he wasn't sure whether to show interest or run away. Something in her expression must have loosened him, though, and he turned to face her more fully when she reached his side. Lois smiled encouragingly. "Hey there, stranger."

He glanced at her face briefly before picking up his scotch once again and taking another sip. "Hey yourself."

Okay, so strike one. She'd get him to open up yet. He was a story, she just hadn't figured it out yet. "Why the long face?"

A sour look crossed his expression before he turned away from her completely. "Sorry. I'm not here for that kind of companionship tonight."

Lois was about to fire back a smart retort, asking who it was he thought she was when she suddenly remembered herself and bit her tongue. She allowed herself to take a few calming breaths before deigning to reply. It was hard to remember sometimes; the role was just so easy to absorb.

It frightened her how easy it was.

Instead she gulped back her indignation and spoke up. "Hey, I didn't say I was offering anything more, now did I? I just asked a question, that's all. You looked lonely. A gal like me knows what that's like. Now, you gonna talk or what?"

The man seemed surprised at the amount of fire and passion in her before remembering his melancholy state and closing in on himself as he downed the rest of his drink. Lois sighed and tapped the counter of the bar. "Hey, Joey, could I get some neat scotch for my friend over here? On me." The bartender gave her a curt nod and quickly fulfilled her task. She passed him the drink with a smile. "There you go."

"Thanks..." He frowned, as if waiting for her to fill in the blank with her name.

"Lola," she supplied rather easily. "Lola Dane."

"Lola," tall dark and dangerous repeated, a slight smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Thanks."

"You're quite welcome. Now, were you gonna tell me what brings you here on this fine Sunday evening?"

He looked down at the countertop, and for a moment Lois feared that she had lost him again when he finally spoke. "My... my father. It's the ten-year anniversary of his death."

Lois was suddenly awash with pain for the stranger. He only looked maybe a year or so older than her, but there was so much depth to those features. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

He grimaced. "It's okay. We weren't all that... close for a while."

"Do you mind if I ask how it happened?" She spoke timidly, almost afraid to speak up.

The man shook his head. "It doesn't matter. He's gone now. And it's probably for the best anyway."

That certainly was a one hundred and eighty-degree pivot, Lois observed. His reaction didn't match his response. So of course she probed more. "How is your mother handling it?"

He scoffed at that, taking her by surprise. "I wouldn't know. Haven't seen her in... about as long." He scowled bitterly into his scotch, not at all remorseful for what he'd just said.

Lois was taken aback. He seemed so nonchalant about it, but there was still that something there, lurking in his eyes, behind those heavy frames. And it was the exact opposite of nonchalant

and unaffected—lying somewhere on the spectrum between anger, sadness and cold calculation.

And as nice as he looked and as genuinely sad as he seemed, it gave him a sharp, almost dangerous edge. Lois wasn't quite sure what to make of it all, and yet somehow with all of that going on, she still found herself somewhat attracted. *You always do this, Lane. Don't fall for the bad boys.*

She gave him a small, sad smile. "I'm sorry to hear that. I don't have the most stable of relationships with my parents, either, but that really sucks."

He gave a small scoff. "Yeah. Anyway, I'm over it."

No, he wasn't. Lois gave him a dubious look, but didn't verbalize her thoughts on the matter. You never knew how someone was going to react. Especially someone who was already giving off a don't-mess-with-me vibe.

"So that's pretty much my story. What's yours, Lola?"

Suddenly the tables had turned and Lois wasn't prepared. She didn't know how to respond to that—after all, she was undercover here at the club, and she was waiting for her date to come and rescue her, to help the act flow smoothly without interruption. "Oh, you could probably guess. I had a troubled childhood. My mom went crazy when I was young and left us in my horrible father's capable hands. I got thrown out of the house at sixteen, been doing my best to make it in the city. You know, the usual."

A quizzical look crossed his face for a moment before he replied. "That is the usual, but it's not what I would have guessed."

Lois felt her pulse quicken. "No?"

He shook his head before tilting it and looking out at her sideways. "No. I'd wager that you grew up in the city. You might have had a troubled past and an abusive father, but unfortunately you grew up with both parents—which made your home worse. And most of all, I don't think you belong here."

Lois' mouth was dry out of fear. "Boy, you sure know how to sweet talk a girl." She blanched. He couldn't possibly know that, she told herself. It was a good guess and nothing more. And even though her mother did leave when she was thirteen for a rehab facility and never returned, somehow arming him with that information in an attempt to correct him felt like the wrong choice.

He smirked. It was a delicious, toe-curling thing that Lois fought her body on tooth and nail. How could she go from scared witless that he'd blow her cover or worse to hopelessly turned on in a matter of mere seconds? "Yeah, well, I've had a little bit of experience in the matter."

"Have you now?" Lois asked, feigning disinterest. She had to get some distance from this man.

But the man didn't respond. In fact, he didn't acknowledge he'd heard her at all. He had gone totally stiff, straightening up and narrowing his gaze on someone behind her. She turned to see what he was looking at, only to find her beau, her rescuer just walking in the bar. She couldn't help but smile at the sight of him. Lois turned back to find her current companion scowling at the man, and wondered what could have provoked such a reaction out of him.

After all, Lex Luthor was the biggest philanthropist in Metropolis.

She shook herself of the thought. This was her out. "Looks like my regular's arrived. If you'll excuse me—"

He seemed to consider for a moment before he nodded. "Of course. I'll let you get back to work, Miss Dane."

Slightly bristling and not quite sure why, Lois made her way away from the stranger and to her boyfriend who was putting on quite a good show of getting comfortably settled in his environment, like it was something he did every single day. No one would question him, no one would question her with him, and the strange man would be out of her mind.

Briefly she gave one last look back and saw him practically

glaring at herself and Lex.

It made her shudder.

The glass made a satisfying thunk as it hit the counter. The bartender's eyes darted over to him at the sound, discreetly trying to assess whether he was at a point where he'd have to be cut off. Clark laughed at himself. He was a good ten thousand glasses away from that. This was quite literally just a waste of money.

And yet, he tapped the rim again anyways, trying to get the bartender's attention for a refill. The man acquiesced with a nod, and turned to grab the top-shelf scotch. Clark almost smiled at the man as the amber liquid splashed against the confines of the glass. He told himself he would savor the flavor of this one longer, appreciate it. Sure he had more money than God, but that didn't mean he had to draw so much attention to himself.

That was his father's voice, slicing through his head like a hot knife. Clark winced, took another sip. Back to the reason he was here. If only it was so easy to forget. He swished the drink between his teeth as if it were mouthwash, the thickness of it coating his tongue and momentarily distracting him once again, even if the alcohol didn't do much of anything.

Clark was doing his very best to keep his composure. This was the closest he had come to Lex Luthor in public in a very long time. It put him slightly on edge. And the woman—

He didn't know quite what to make of her. She couldn't possibly be who she said she was. He'd had eyes on Luthor for a while now, and never once did he recall Luthor making a stop at this club. So he wasn't a regular, and there was no way this woman should know him as such. Unless she was his cover for something else—what, he had no idea. In that case, Lola Dane was nothing more than an alias.

Whoever she was, though, she was smokin' hot. As in drop dead gorgeous. Clark took the time to appreciate her figure once more. He had been with many different women before, all beautiful and from numerous places across the globe, but for some reason, this one was different. There was this air about her that went further than just looks, deeper than just intelligence. That must have been how she got him to open up so much. She was a mystery, a challenge.

Clark loved a good challenge.

He finished his drink and debated whether or not to have another when he decided he had better things to do than literally waste his money. He slammed the glass down and tossed a couple of bills on the countertop effortlessly before getting up and putting on his jacket.

Joey, the bartender, came by and picked up the glass and the cash. His eyes nearly bulged out of his sockets when he saw what was left. "Um, sir? I don't think you meant to leave—"

Clark waved a hand at the kid. "Keep it. From what I hear of your boss, you guys don't get paid nearly as much as you should for what you put up with."

The bartender's eyebrows rose to his hairline, and Clark watched with a smirk as all the pieces fell into place. Rich man, wearing glasses, making snarky comments about a man that *no one* dared talk about behind his back... "M-Mr. Kent?"

Clark raised a finger to his lips and the young man shut up instantly. "I don't need anyone else knowing I'm here. In fact, I'd prefer it if you forgot, too."

The kid nodded fiercely. "Yes, sir, Mr. K—er—"

"King. Charlie King," Clark corrected as he made his way towards the door.

"Right. Mr. King. Have a good evening." The kid looked down once more in shock at the hundred-dollar bills he had in his hands before shoving them in his back pocket. Clark smiled as he heard the man whisper with awe under his breath. "Clark freakin' Kent."

He hunkered his shoulders down a little as he walked past, trying to pass by unnoticed, only to pause briefly at the door and

give Lex Luthor and his assumed escort one last glance. His gaze staying longer on the latter. Only this time, he wasn't looking purely for recreational purposes. It was with a cold calculation he evaluated her. Beautiful, of course. And her voice—that sultry voice wrapped around his heart like a vise. But there was something more to it than that. The way Lex looked at her, as though he were in love with her; the way she seemed in control and unaffected by his attentions... Not to mention, of course, the way that something inside him was drawn to her.

She changed things. Always before, it had simply been about Luthor and taking him off his pedestal. But now, it wasn't enough to just destroy the man's financial empire, or his reputation, or his business or even the man himself.

No. Now, he wanted Lex Luthor's girl.

With a silent vow to himself that he would find out who she was, Clark Kent strode out of the Metro Club and into the brisk night air.

Chapter 2: The Pretty Reckless

Smallville, 1975

Clark started noticing it yesterday. That feeling of being watched. At first, it was nothing. But then, he started running around the farm, *really* running. A jolt of excitement ran through him. Right when he began running faster than the barn cat when he'd accidentally lit his tail on fire, he felt as though someone had noticed him. It caused him to trip, skid to a stop and rip through his mother's garden in the process. He cringed. Mom was going to be so mad. He picked himself up, dusted himself off, and for a brief moment when he looked up, he thought he saw someone in the distance, staring at him. He couldn't quite make it out. By the time he was able to focus his vision, however, the watcher was gone.

Perhaps he hadn't seen anything. After all, he was quite a ways away. And Dad would flip if he even thought that someone might have seen him do something a little more than ordinary.

Clark looked over the damage done to the garden and cringed once more. Yeah, that was definitely more than ordinary.

So, for now, Clark decided to ignore what he thought he saw, and he'd tell his parents about it when he either had more concrete evidence or at a time when he wouldn't already be in big trouble.

Metropolis 1993

"Lois, Chief wants to see you about something in his office," James remarked quietly as he rushed past her desk.

Lois sighed irritably. Kids these days. Sure, she understood taking your work seriously, but at least she knew how to cut loose sometimes, live a little. James Olsen—who hated being called Jimmy but Lois called him that anyway—was only an intern, but as far as he was concerned, he was going to be the best damn intern the world had ever seen... until he got promoted.

She caught the scrawny kid looking her way once again with a frown on his face and decided to head towards Perry's office before he came back over. He arched an eyebrow and she threw her hands up in surrender and stood up. "Fine!" she muttered, marching straight into Perry White's office.

Perry startled when she threw the door open. "Whaddya want, Perry?"

He glanced outside into the bullpen nervously. "Would you mind shutting the door, Lois?"

Lois did as she was told. If there was one person she responded the best to, it was Perry White. She took a seat across from his desk and softened her tone. "What's going on, Chief?"

He looked stressed and more concerned than usual. A hand flew to the top of his head and began worrying at the hair there. "It's the paper. I... I don't know how to explain, really—"

Lois furrowed her brow in confusion. "Is there something wrong with my articles?"

"Hmm? Oh, no—honey, this has nothing to do with you or

your writing."

"Then what—"

"It's our advertisers. They're dropping like flies. It's like they know something we don't... I don't know what's going on, but if things keep going at this rate, I'm worried that the *Daily Planet* isn't going to stand for much longer."

Lois felt like she'd been punched in the gut. "The *Planet*? Go under? B-but—"

"I don't like it any more than you do, Lois."

She was in shock. Lois slumped back into her chair. How could this happen? The *Daily Planet* had been printed for two hundred and nineteen years! A newspaper like that going out of business was unheard of! And just why were the advertisers backing out? What happened that scared them off so much? What were they hiding? Obviously, there had to be some reason for it; they couldn't just back out for no reason! And how could they stop it?

Wait a minute. Lois forced her wayward thoughts to grind to a quick halt. Before she overwhelmed herself with all of this anxiety, she should at least find out more details. "Perry, why are you telling me this? What am I supposed to do about it?"

He shifted in his seat, looking uncomfortable with what he was about to say and eyeing her warily like she was a long-dormant volcano. She scowled and crossed her arms. He acted like she was a child sometimes. "Now listen, darling. I wouldn't ask this of you if I didn't think it was my only option. And I don't want you to worry about anything just yet—barring any major changes in circumstance, we've still got some time here, thanks to contracts—"

"Perry, just spit it out already."

Perry nodded as though steeling himself. "Okay. Do you, uh... well see, I know you have a personal relationship with Lex Luthor. And I know this may be out of line for me to ask, but he's the only man I can think of who would have the means, but could you ask him to look into it? Maybe try to see what's going on with the advertisers and such..."

Lois furrowed her brow in thought. "You can look into that yourself, Perry, and you know it. What's the real reason?"

He sighed and shifted some papers around on his desk. "I want it on his radar in case all this hits the fan. I'm hoping that he cares enough for you to keep the place you work intact, you know what I mean?"

Lois fought the urge to let her mouth hang open. "You want Lex to buy the *Daily Planet*?"

Perry leaned forward, quick to defend himself in this one matter. "It makes sense, doesn't it? The man's got deep enough pockets. He might not even have to buy it—just pay off some of the advertisers or something to stay onboard. And he's already said he'd do pretty much anything for you—"

"He never said that," Lois interjected, starting to feel uncomfortable with all this speculation.

"Lois, the man proposed to you! And you turned him down! And he's still stuck around! If that's not commitment then I don't know what is."

Lois flushed. She hadn't told anyone except Perry about Lex's proposal, and now here he was using it as blackmail. *Low blow, Perry White.* "It's not that simple, Perry—"

"You think if you told him what was going on with the *Planet*—the job you love so much—that he wouldn't jump and buy us out?"

"He already has one media outlet—"

"Perfect! Then he's got experience in the field."

Lois rubbed her temples soothingly. "Perry..." Her tone took on a note of pleading.

Her boss noticed how this was all impacting her and laid off it for a moment. "I'm sorry, darling. But I'm just trying to get you to see what's going to happen. If we can't get more advertising

support, the owners are going to have to sell the paper. And it can go to someone good, or it can go to someone bad, or it can just wither away. If push comes to shove, I'd rather it be Lex than that last one."

Lois sighed audibly. She knew he was right. It wasn't fair, but it was true. "I'll think about it, okay?"

Perry nodded at her. "Good girl. That's all I ask."

Clark Kent stood outside in the alleyway, waiting patiently for his informant to meet him. If he knew the man at all, he'd be walking around this corner in five, four, three, two, one—

"I say, sir, do you have the time?"

Clark grinned devilishly. "Only if you give me your watch."

The taller, old English gentleman mustered a smug smirk of sorts, which Clark knew to be about as good as it got when it came to Nigel St. John cracking a smile at a joke. They walked a bit farther into the darkness of the alleyway before uttering a word, making sure they were away from prying eyes and ears.

"Hey, buddy... You got a buck?"

Clark was rifling through his wallet the moment the homeless man's voice reached his ears. He pulled out a few hundred-dollar bills and thrust them into the beggar's hands irritably. "Here. Grab your things and get out of this place. Go buy yourself a meal."

The man's eyes opened wide at seeing all of the money that literally just fell into his lap. He looked up at Clark with wonder in his eyes. "You must be some kind of angel, bro—"

"Did I stutter? Get the hell out, before I change my mind!"

The man recoiled, and Clark fought back his wolfish grin. He knew what a picture he must make. The generous businessman, going from kind to belligerent in a matter of moments, frightening him. He watched behind the homeless man's eyes as it clicked that he must have intruded on some very private business and that if he didn't do what was asked, he'd be in trouble, so he did as told and bolted.

Clark rolled his eyes, back to irritated and impatient. Nigel simply chuckled, speaking only after the man left. "You've always had a bit of an issue with patience, haven't you, sir?"

Clark shrugged. "What can I say? I had an unstable childhood and a nearly unlimited supply of funds. If I can throw money at a problem to make it go away, I will."

"Sort of going for the opposite approach now, aren't we?"

Clark nodded fiercely as Nigel brought him back on track. "Right. So how goes the ad hunt anyways?"

"All but three companies have dropped their support of the *Daily Planet*, with another one... shall we say, in negotiations. And not to worry, I used some of the lower-level people involved with LexCorp, so it'll still track back."

"Excellent." Clark was brusque, no muss, no fuss. Exactly the way he liked it. "Let me know when the others pull out."

"Sir, if I may enquire," Nigel spoke slowly, as though slightly frightened by what sort of response he may get. Clark knew Nigel better than anyone could, and knew that he wouldn't have spoken up if it weren't for good reason. He paused as though considering a moment, before finally Clark nodded to get him to continue. "Why is ruining the *Daily Planet* so important? Everything you've had me do before has had some kind of direct impact on Mr. Luthor. But Lex doesn't have any part in the *Daily Planet*."

"You're absolutely right, Nigel. He does not."

The ex-intelligence agent frowned. "But why?"

Clark laughed a bit menacingly. "Oh, Nigel. You are good. You know, if it were anybody else, I wouldn't even let them question me."

"I am well aware, sir." He did a good job trying to hide his spike of fear at Clark's words. Pointless, but a good effort, Clark thought.

"Okay. So let me put it this way. Lex isn't directly involved with the *Planet* yet. But he is involved with someone at the *Planet*. I'd like to know exactly how involved he is."

A single arched eyebrow betrayed his surprise. "Ms. Lane? What do you want with her?"

"Nothing. I just know that the deeper involved he gets with her, the more complicated my life becomes. So, we're going to push everyone into their place on the stage, and let the chips fall where they may."

If Nigel was any more surprised by his friend and colleague's comment, he didn't say so. Clark took that as a good thing. "Is there anything I should know about Lois Lane that I don't already?"

Nigel nodded. "A few odds and ends, of course. She's the *Daily Planet's* top reporter, loves undercover work, likes to cut loose sometimes. She's known Lex Luthor for about a year now—they met at a press conference for some pretentious cause or other that he'd signed up for, and she'd gotten to know him. They've been officially dating for about ten months now."

Clark nodded, taking all of it in with slow deliberation. "What are their feelings towards each other?"

"Lex is absolutely enamored with her. In fact, rumor has it he proposed to her a couple of months ago. Lois turned him down though. Something about not wanting to tether herself to anyone, give up her freedom or some other self-righteous speech of the kind."

"So his feelings obviously run deeper than hers," he stated flatly, putting the pieces together.

"I would say so. They're not broken up, so I know she still likes him well enough, and Lex would hang around to the bitter end like a puppy if she'd let him. I know he still keeps the ring in his desk drawer, just in case."

Clark filed all this information away in the back of his brain, to be judiciously used later. "Is that all you have?"

Nigel shrugged his shoulders slightly. "All I can think of that's pertinent."

Clark nodded absently. "All right. Let me know if anything else comes up." Nigel gave a curt nod of his own and began to walk away when Clark's voice pulled him back. "Oh, and Nigel?"

"Yes, Mr. Kent?"

Clark smiled. "I have a feeling that we're closer to the end of this road than ever before. Be prepared for anything."

A twisted sort of grin suddenly took over Nigel St. John's expression. "I'm never unprepared, sir."

Clark eyed him judiciously, and gave him a slight nod. And with that, they went their separate ways.

Chapter 3: Fragile

"Lois, my dear, what's on your mind tonight?"

Lois startled from her thoughts suddenly and glanced up at Lex. "Hmm?"

Lex looked even more concerned, if that were possible. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, yes. I'm fine Lex."

"Well, you most certainly are *fine*," he said, wagging his brows, prompting Lois to roll her eyes at him and Lex grew serious again. "But you have a funny way of showing it if you are."

Lois huffed a sigh as she stabbed another forkful of leafy greens and directed it into her mouth. Lex was right. She was not all right. Her earlier conversation with Perry had completely thrown her off of her game. The idea that she might not work at the *Daily Planet*—that there might not be a *Daily Planet* to work at soon—completely devastated her. This was her life's work. This was how she coped. Chasing stories, running headlong into danger, having new experiences—it meant the world to her. And she often was able to choose her own assignments, manage her own time, partner-free... Would any other paper she worked for allow her such freedoms? Would any other boss be as forgiving as Perry White?

“Lois?” Lex’s voice intruded again, this time accompanied by a caressing hand over her own. Lois glanced down at it briefly and was suddenly awash with guilt. Lex cared so deeply for her. She didn’t know why. “Tell me. What is it?”

She sighed finally before looking up to meet her boyfriend’s earnest eyes. “Perry thinks the *Planet* is going under.”

Lex’s reaction was instantaneous as his eyebrows practically jumped to his hairline. “What? How is that possible?”

Lois shook her head fiercely, letting it all tumble out of her now. “I don’t know. Sales haven’t been as good lately. Perry says a lot of the advertisers are backing out and not giving a reason why.”

Lex cleared his throat and jumped into the fray. “Maybe there’s an explanation for all this—”

“Oh, don’t give me that kid glove crap, Lex. You know as well as I do what that means. They don’t want to cause a stir so they’re going to let us just ride it out until there’s nothing else to say except have fun with the job hunt.”

Lex folded his hands calmly, and Lois scowled. How could he be so calm when she was clearly stewing? She supposed it was a good thing. They couldn’t both go flying off the handle all the time. But it wouldn’t hurt if he got outraged on her behalf some of the times. She picked over her plate again. “I don’t know. You’re right. There has to be some explanation. I didn’t think our numbers were doing that bad. We’ve got better readership than the *Metropolis Star*, and they’re still kicking. But this is just out of nowhere. I don’t know what to do. Perry thinks we need a buyout, get some fresh blood into the company...” She trailed off when she looked up again only to find Lex’s eyes glazed over, fixated on her mouth. She stopped and gave him a dirty look. “Lex? Lex Luthor, are you listening to me?”

He shook himself, as though he hadn’t realized she had been speaking the whole time. “I’m sorry, darling. I was distracted by your immense beauty.” That earned him an eye-roll and another forceful stab at her dinner. “What were you saying?”

Lois sighed and put her fork down onto the white tablecloth gently. No sense beating around the bush. “Perry thinks you should try to buy the *Planet*. You know, as a backup plan in case things do go south. But I don’t know if that’s a good idea—”

Lex’s eyes lit up almost instantly. “You’re joking, right? That’s a fantastic idea! Why, I can’t believe I didn’t think of it myself!”

Lois beat back the urge to roll her eyes once again and instead focused on her concern over the matter, wringing her hands slightly. “But Lex, if there really is a problem with the paper and you sink yourself into it, then—”

“Lois, my dear, you must know I’ve got deeper pockets than that,” he chided. “Besides, then I could have a legitimate excuse for hanging out around your place of work all day long. It would be perfect.”

Lois turned her eyes away and once again started playing with her food. She hated it when he got too sentimental. She liked Lex, a lot, maybe even a little too much. But he was a bit intense for her. She hadn’t ever said she’d loved him, and he spouted off the phrase like it was nothing. It was hard for her to trust. “You wouldn’t have to do it just for me.”

His jaw slackened, and she braced herself for an impending argument about her self-worth and his undying love.

Lex’s shoulders slumped slightly, and Lois squirmed in her seat as he examined her discomfort. She went through these mood spirals every so often. He hated that she had such self-esteem issues. He hated her father for instilling them into her, for ever laying a hand on her that wasn’t loving and gentle, for telling her she would never be good enough. He didn’t know how to prove to her that he was in this for the long haul any more than he already had. He did things for her, spent time and money on her—not for any ulterior motive—but because he wanted to. It was a constant battle with the demons her abusive father had created within her, and a lot of times, it felt like a losing one. But he also knew he

couldn’t give up. He had to power through, keep showing her how amazing and wonderful she was, in spite of her inner monologue.

After all, he knew what it was like to have an abusive father, too.

He placed a gentle hand over hers and looked into her face. “Look at me. Lois, look at me.” She finally dragged her gaze over and locked eyes with him. He couldn’t let himself get too lost in those shimmering pools of brown or else he’d lose track of what he was trying to say. “I’m doing it because I love you.” He ignored the flinch that ran through her as he said the words and kept his hand and his gaze steady. “I want to share all that I have with you. I don’t want you to be sad, ever, and losing the *Daily Planet* would make you inconsolable. I know you, Lois. I know how you feel about your job. So if there’s a chance I can save it, I will. End of discussion. Understand?”

She simply nodded in response and took another bite of her salad, but she didn’t feel like she was understanding him. It didn’t feel like she was even listening to him.

Lex didn’t move his gaze away, instead staring at her in the tense silence. “You know, Lois, my offer is still on the table.”

She froze, fork halfway to her mouth and jaw hung open.

He mistakenly took her silence as a cue to continue. “You know there’s nothing more I would want in the world—”

“Lex.” Lois’s voice was low with warning.

“I would be honored if you would become my—”

“Don’t!” Lois bolted upright out of her chair and threw down her fork. “Don’t you say the word, Lex! You know how I feel about this—I thought we went over this twice already!”

“Yes, but my darling—” He tried and failed to cut in.

“No! I thought you understood, I’m not ready yet, and the more you push the issue the longer it’s going to take me to be ready for... the next step. I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready because of how many walls I have up, but for God’s sake, Lex! You can’t re-propose to me every time the mood strikes you!”

“Lois, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to catch you off guard, I just thought the moment was right and it was kind of a good segue—”

“Well, it wasn’t.” Lois pushed her chair in and bent over to pick up her clutch.

Lex sighed and stood to follow her. “Lois, where are you going?”

“I’m suddenly no longer hungry. And I remembered that I’ve got work to do.” She started to stomp off towards the door.

“Lois, please, stay. Chef Andre prepared your favorite dessert—his seven-layer chocolate cake—”

“Well, have him make me a to-go bag, then!” Lois retorted.

“Lois, wait.” He placed a gentle hand on her forearm and ducked when she flung her other arm back at him. He quickly realized his mistake and released her, putting his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

Fire burned in her eyes as she whirled on him. “Don’t,” she hissed dangerously, “don’t you *ever* grab me again.”

Lex, finally defeated, hung his head with a sigh. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I just don’t want to fight.”

Lois ran her eyes searchingly over his expression, as if she were looking for any hint of deception, but came up empty. Her shoulders slumped slightly, and Lex saw that she knew she’d overreacted. “You know how that gets to me,” she said in a tone of apology, which Lex knew was about as close you got to an actual I’m-sorry from Lois Lane.

He nodded and repeated himself once more. “I know. I’m sorry. I don’t want you to leave angry.”

Lois made a clicking noise with her tongue unconsciously which reminded Lex of her mother—words that he would never utter in this lifetime or the next. Then finally she sighed and acknowledged his words. “I know, I’m not angry. I just... I’m tired and stressed. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Lex nodded and leaned forward to place a peck on her cheek

before she had the chance to object. “All right. Would you like one of my drivers to take you home?”

She shook her head. “No, I think I could use the walk to clear my head a bit. It’s a nice night.”

“You sure?” he asked, concern written plainly across his features, but he dared not say anything else that might land him in hot water tonight.

She leveled him with a sharp glare.

Lex raised his hands once more. “Okay. See you tomorrow, then. And I’ll talk to some people about looking into the *Planet’s* finances, all right? I’ll try to get to the bottom of this.” He’d try to buy it first, he thought. He could dig into their finances after. But he wasn’t going to let this opportunity pass him by. He gave her a quick smile and blurted out yet another “I love you.”

She nodded blankly, not really caring at this point, and Lex regretted ever bringing the topic up. “Bye,” she muttered and turned quickly to head to the elevators and out towards the night, yet again not returning the words.

Chapter 4: Smoke on the Water

Lois finally got inside her apartment and slammed the door heavily behind her. She stomped halfway across her living room before returning and locking the deadbolts. Feeling a bit better already, she smiled smugly to herself.

With a sigh of relief, Lois began removing her coat and unbuttoning her blouse as she made her way back to her bedroom, shedding layers as she went. She could feel a major weight lift off her shoulders as she changed into her more comfortable pajamas and finally let loose a little. Of course, as soon as she started to get comfortable, her mind decided to turn to Lex Luthor.

Why did he always have to do that? He knew her history better than anyone. He knew how much marriage, and the L-word, scared her. He knew she watched her own parent’s marriage tumble into pain and suffering, and an eventual split, how her father had abused their whole family in the process, how her mother had a permanent room in rehab due to the fallout of it all. What in his right mind made him think that she would possibly ever be ready for a relationship as serious as the one he wanted?

And then, of course, there was the whole issue of what Lois felt for him.

Lois groaned loudly and stomped off towards the kitchen. If she was going to get existential and debate herself for the rest of the night, then she was going to need *something* to get her through it. She flung open the freezer door however and found it bereft of anything that could be arguably considered chocolate. Spying what looked to be an ice cream container in the back, she rummaged around a bit, face lighting up as she pulled it out—

“Lemon cheesecake?!” she uttered aloud in disgust upon reading the label. “Dammit, Lucy! Why can’t you be normal and like Rocky Road!”

Frustrated, and wishing she had taken up Lex’s offer of cake for the road, she tossed the carton back in haphazardly and slammed the door of the freezer, feeling more and more upset without anything to pour her feelings into.

Her gaze immediately shifted over to the cabinet where she kept her basic food staples like flour, sugar, and her spice rack.

No! her subconscious rang out. *Don’t even go there. You’ve been doing so good lately. Lex has been so proud of you.*

Lois stood there, tapping her short nails furiously on the countertop, trying to beat back the craving. It had been a week already, and she was doing well so far. Apart from those first few days—those were tough. Hence her bitten-down nails and the obvious lack of chocolate in the house. She listened to how quiet the apartment was, how clean it looked without Lucy there. It was so calm, so quiet.

“Ah, screw it,” she cried out and spun on her heel to reach up into the cabinet, blindly looking for what should have been there.

She couldn’t take it anymore. There was no distraction, no chocolate, and she didn’t have a single nail left to chew on anxiously.

“Aha!” Her fingers found what she was looking for, and a little thrill of excitement ran up her spine. Quickly, she opened the pack and drew out the first cigarette of the pack—the first of her week—and lit it. Taking a long drag off of it, she finally felt the tension leave her shoulders and was delighted at the puff of smoke that followed her sigh. It suddenly seemed like a lifetime had gone by since her last smoke, and she had no idea why she quit in the first place.

No, she knew why. Lex. Lois found herself growling irritably and raised the cig up to her lips once again. Well, she was mad at him right now. Served him right for being an ass. He had no control over what she did with her life. It was *her* life! Who was he to tell her what she can and can’t do? If she wanted a smoke, then she was damn well gonna smoke. Feeling a bit smug now, Lois smirked to herself and happily puffed away at her well-deserved treat. It wasn’t like many people even knew she smoked anyway. What was a harmless puff every now and again?

She heard the front door shake and someone clearly trying to open it from the outside. Frowning, Lois set down her cigarette on the countertop and went to investigate. It couldn’t be Lex, could it? He wouldn’t come by so soon after a fight.

A loud curse reached Lois’ ears from the other side of the door and she rolled her eyes to herself. She decided to let her sister squirm a moment, shouting her name and knocking fiercely, before swiftly opening the door and almost causing Lucy to fall inside.

“God, Lois! You have to lock all the deadbolts every time?”

Lucy strolled past her, the smell of alcohol coming off her in droves. “Geez, Lucy, maybe if you didn’t get so roaring drunk all the time, it wouldn’t be this big of a problem.” Lois shut the front door firmly.

“I am not drunk! I’ll have you know I can hold my liquor quite well, thank you very much.”

It was so nice to have her sister temporarily living with her. Lois barely smothered the urge to laugh at her own joke.

“Judas Priest!” Her sister’s voice carried loudly across the apartment. “Lois, did you try cooking something real or are you just smoking like a chimney again?! Crack a window, for Pete’s sake!”

Lois scowled at the sound of her kid sister criticizing her again. “You know, you’ve been living here rent free for the past three months—”

“All right! All right. I get it. Geez, someone’s snippy tonight.”

Lucy grabbed a soda from the fridge and gracelessly plopped down on a barstool in the kitchen. “So, what is it this time, sis?”

Lois weighed the options in telling her sister what had happened tonight. It certainly would take some weight off her shoulders, then again—

“Let me guess: another fight with Lex?” Lois opened her mouth to protest, but when met with the arched eyebrow of Lucy Lane, she promptly shut it. “Yeah, I thought so. What was it about?”

Lois reached for her cigarettes again, lighting a second one. “He proposed again.”

Lucy lost her calm composure as quickly as she had got it. “Again? Are you kidding me? What is that, the tenth time? What did you say? I don’t see a ring on your finger.”

Lois shot her a sharp glare that silenced *that* train of thought. “Third, if you must know. And anyways, that’s not what it was really all about.”

“Okay, so what was it this time?”

The constant repetition of the phrase was grating on her, but she knew she couldn’t get away with avoiding the topic. Lois chewed her bottom lip before confessing all. There wasn’t much

she could ever keep from her little sister. She was basically the only real family Lois had left. “Perry is worried the *Planet’s* going under. Our advertisers keep dropping, and if he can’t find someone to inject some new life into it, a.k.a. money, then it might not make it at all.”

“Lois, that’s awful! I’m so sorry.”

“It gets worse.” Lois fidgeted with her smoke for a moment. “He thinks I should talk Lex into buying it.”

Lucy’s jaw dropped slightly. “And he said no? To you?”

Lois shook her head vehemently. “No, of course not. He basically said he’d do whatever it takes to make me happy, and that’s when he led in with the whole marriage bit.”

Lucy sat pensively for a long moment of suspicious silence. Lois cut her eyes to her with a glare, waiting for the wheels in her slightly-more-than-intoxicated sister’s head to turn. “He’s nice. Good guy.” Lucy looked up with her lips pursed. “You’re not happy, though, are you?”

Lois simply shrugged as she continued to puff away.

“Maybe it’s just the stress of it all,” Lucy started carefully. “Your relationship issues—”

“Watch it,” she bit out defensively.

“Maybe the worry about the *Daily Planet* failing has just got you all riled up. I mean, look at you, you’ve gone through what looks like two cigarettes already in one night when you haven’t smoked this much in so long. And you know you smoke when you’re stressed.”

Lois eyed her sister mock-suspiciously. “You’re starting to sound a little bit like a therapist there, Luce. I thought you’d switched majors to boys or something,” she teased.

Lucy threw her hands up. “You know, you’re incorrigible sometimes. I say, if you don’t like him, quit stringing him along! Cut the cord already! If you do, then stop flipping out at him every time he wants to be intimate!”

“Trust me, it’s not the intimacy that’s the problem.” Lois wiggled her eyebrows suggestively and Lucy smacked her forehead with a groan.

“Okay, that’s it for me. This is heading into I-don’t-wanna-know territory, so I’m going to bed now.”

Lois grinned at her success in getting Lucy off her back. “G’night, Luce!” A mumbled “whatever” was tossed her way from her sister’s retreating form.

As the apartment started to calm down once more, Lois finally decided it was time to put her cigarette out and head off to bed herself. She smashed the butt in the ashtray she’d returned to its rightful place on the counter and moved to turn off the lights when the phone suddenly rang and tore through the silence. Lois jumped, startled, and quickly picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“Lane, so glad you’re at home.”

She released a small breath at realizing who it was. “Bobby, this had better be good. I was just getting ready for bed.”

“Look, I don’t got a lot of time, and I don’t know much yet, but I figured you’d want to be the first to know—”

Her ears perked up at this and suddenly she was no longer tired. “What is it? Spit it out, Bobby.”

“There’s a whole lot of buzzing going on in the streets recently, for a couple of different reasons. Number one, I thought you should know about the *Planet*—”

“I already know about our advertisers, Bobby. They’re dropping like flies.”

“No, no, no. You don’t understand. They’re being paid off. Bribed into dropping their support.”

Lois frowned deeply. “Bribed? Who would do that? Why would someone want the *Planet* to fail?”

“Beats me. I told ya, I don’t got a lot of information yet. I’m still in the market for that. I heard a couple of rumors from some people I trust about the advertisers—one guy told me he saw a suspicious-looking British guy and another man talking shop

about ‘the ad hunt’ but I don’t know if I would just take his word for it. He’s a little bit over the cuckoo’s nest, if you know what I mean.”

Lois took in all the information coming at her and drilled her fingers against the tile counter. If their advertisers were being bribed, that meant someone either really wanted in or really wanted out. She filed away the information to process later. “Bobby, you said there was more than one thing?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re not going to believe this one, Lane. Word on the street is that someone’s finally coming out of the shadows.”

“Who, Bobby?” She was grateful for the information, but it was well past midnight and she was seriously getting tired.

“CK. You know, of CK Enterprises?”

“CK Enterprises? Is that the one with the glasses logo?”

She could hear the grin in Bobby’s voice as he spoke, proud of himself for finding this one out. “Yep.”

“The one that owns a third of Metropolis real estate? The one right behind Lexcorp?”

“The one and only.”

Lois was floored. “You mean the actual CK is out there? The man’s never even put out a publicity photo—no one even knows what he looks like! How could they possibly know it was him? Why would he come out of hiding now?”

“Hey, when people see you dropping huge wads of cash and you’re a well-dressed guy with signature glasses, people start connecting the dots. I personally don’t know how or why, but word is he’s not being so secretive about it anymore.”

“But why the sudden change?”

“Hell if I know,” Bobby stated. “Look, that’s all I got for ya, Lois. Just thought you should know. You owe me one heck of a meal, understand?”

She nodded enthusiastically, a smile coloring her tone.

“Bobby, you just name the day and time, and I’ll be there. Whatever you need. You’re the best, Bobby!”

“Yeah, yeah, just make sure you don’t forget it!” He hung up without saying goodbye. Typical Bobby Bigmouth.

Lois stood in the kitchen a few moments longer, now awake enough to do whatever she felt like, but instead she turned off the light and headed to her bed. If what Bobby was telling her was true, then she’d have a long week ahead of her. Unfortunately, she also knew that she wouldn’t be able to contain herself and wait till Monday morning to start working on this. It was too crucial—particularly the information about the *Planet*—to let it go two more days.

“Well,” she said aloud, “there goes my weekend off.”

Chapter 5: Red Hands

“Clark?” A sleep-addled, almost smoky voice called out to him. “Clark, wake up! Clark!”

Finally his eyes shot open, instantly concerned that he might have done something in his sleep. Checking to make sure he was oriented correctly—still on the mattress and under the covers—he breathed a sigh of relief and ran a hand across the perspiration that gathered at his hairline. Trying to bring his racing heart back under control, he spoke softly. “Wha-what happened? What is it?”

“You were screaming in your sleep.”

He closed his eyes lightly, pushing away the last vestiges of his nightmare. Of course he was screaming. Trouble was, the reality was equally as frightening.

“You were calling out for your dad?” The blonde woman questioned cautiously, digging slightly for more information as her fingertips traced a path up and down his bare chest.

A muscle in the side of his jaw twitched. “Toni,” he said, his voice low with warning.

“I’m not saying anything. I just think, if you had a bad dream, maybe you’d like to talk about it.”

Clark couldn’t repress another sigh. “Just drop it, okay?”

She acquiesced for a few moments, continuing her stroking pattern on his chest before broaching the subject once more. “What happened to your father? In your dream?”

With a groan, he rolled out of her bed and started pulling on his clothes.

“Hey, wait! Clark, what are you doing? Don’t go.”

He grimaced. “Look, Toni, you’re a nice girl and all. Beautiful, too. And tonight... well, it was pretty great. But let’s be honest with each other, I’m not here looking for a psychologist, okay? So when I say drop it, it gets dropped. Got it?”

“I’m sorry, I just was trying to help—”

“Help? Ha! Johnny’s right about you. Too damn smart for your own good. A really smart person would’ve listened to me the first time I asked. How’d you get these ideas into your head, anyway?”

Highly insulted, Toni shrank back into herself and pulled the sheets up higher over her chest in a defensive maneuver. “I didn’t mean to offend you, Mr. Kent. I’m sorry.”

Clark paused for a moment, facing away from her all ready to go, and released a long sigh. He turned back and sat on the edge of the bed. “I know. You didn’t offend me. It’s just...” There was no plausible, no honest explanation he could give other than that his dream hit too close to home. So, he lied. “I’ve got a business meeting in the morning that’s of the utmost importance. I shouldn’t have stayed over anyways.”

Toni opened her mouth, probably to comment on the fact that it was only three in the morning, but Clark silenced her with a hard, fast kiss to her lips. Satisfied that she was distracted for a moment, he made his move. “Tell Johnny that he can just focus on running that club of mine, I’ll worry about the threats from these so-called Toasters.”

He turned to walk out of her apartment. He was almost to the door when she finally spoke again. “Will you stop by and see me again? Maybe tomorrow night?”

Her question was met with a resounding thud as the door slammed behind him.

Clark opted to walk down the street to clear his head instead of calling for a car—or worse, a taxi—to come and pick him up. He didn’t know why he’d even stayed at her apartment in the first place, but it didn’t matter now. His position with the Metro Club was secured once more, it was all business as usual.

This Toasters business could be a slight wrinkle, of course. When Johnny Taylor had first approached him about the threats the bar was getting, at first he was wary. It sounded almost fake. He’d known the Taylors for a few years now, and the only thing they valued more than loyalty was the skin of their own necks. He wouldn’t be surprised if they turned on him.

Fortunately, as long as Toni had a soft spot for tall, dark and handsome, he had complete control over their business endeavors. Johnny could talk a big talk, but he knew the man would never do anything against him if there was a risk of harming his sister. And Clark had acquired those blackmail pictures a long time ago. Now it was just fun.

His mind turned back to the events that had led him here, the nightmare that prompted his early departure from the bed of a beautiful woman. He shuddered slightly as he walked a bit faster along the sidewalk. Sadly, the reality was equally, if not more dreadful, than the visions that plagued his sleep.

A small stab of pain hit him as he couldn’t keep his mind from wandering back to that fateful evening that had started it all.

Smallville, 1975

It was a few days after the garden incident when Clark found himself in much of the same position. This time, he was fixing the garden, goofing around with his recently discovered freeze breath and creating icicles hanging off the plants and roof of the barn for the fun of it.

Then he felt the eyes of the man on him again. This time,

though, the man didn’t hang back or disappear. Clark’s heart thudded heavily in his chest as he turned his back on him and pretended to be very interested in the gardening work once more. The man was coming closer. That meant it wasn’t in his head, it wasn’t just a figment of his imagination, and he should have told his parents about it the first time he’d sensed someone watching.

Clark was hesitant when the man first approached. He didn’t sound like he was from Kansas, and he definitely didn’t recognize him from around town. He was a youngish man, younger than his parents for sure, but as usual that was all he could figure of the man’s age. To Clark, like most kids his age, an adult was an adult.

“Nice work there, son.”

Clark looked over his shoulder briefly before looking down at his work on the garden shyly. The man had come closer. Clark didn’t like that. “Thanks, Mister—”

“Just call me Jason. What’s your name?”

“Clark,” he responded warily, but not wanting to be deceitful.

“Well, it’s certainly nice to meet you, Clark. What sort of plants you got here?”

Clark was slightly suspicious, but answered the man in military fatigues anyways. At school, teachers were always telling them to trust people in uniform. Perhaps there wasn’t anything to be worried about after all. He seemed nice enough. Then again, his father’s warnings thundered through his brain, telling him not to trust anyone, no matter how likable. “Usual stuff. Tomatoes. Carrots. Some herbs.”

Jason smiled. “You seem like a good boy. When I was your age, I don’t think I would ever spend any time in the garden.”

Clark shrugged and turned back to the dirt before him. “I’m used to it.”

“You probably lived your whole life on this farm, haven’t you?”

Clark thought that was an odd question, surely it was obvious, but he nodded anyway.

“How old are you, son?”

“Nine and a quarter,” he stated proudly, chest puffed out with pride as children often did.

“Wow, nine and a quarter already. Been a long time then. You must’ve just been born last time I was out here.”

Clark’s curiosity got the better of him. “Did you used to live here?”

Jason shook his head, a grin on his face. “Nope. I came out here with a military unit to examine a strange asteroid landing in 1966. Of course, you probably were barely alive then.”

An uneasy feeling settled in Clark’s gut and he hoped it didn’t show on his face. His parents had never made it a secret that he wasn’t theirs—that he had landed in some sort of meteor crash and came to them like a miracle. This man, knowing so much about that very incident, could not be good news for him and his family.

“You ever hear anything about that? Maybe from your parents or around town?”

Clark shook his head fiercely, uneasy now. “No. What’s a-an asteroid?”

The army man looked at him in a way that made Clark’s stomach churn. After what felt like about twenty minutes of him just staring at him, but in reality had to have been only a few long seconds, Jason gave a tight-lipped smile once again. “Hey, so I was hoping to talk to somebody a bit taller. Are your parents around?”

Clark felt a shiver run up his spine. He didn’t know how to answer that. He didn’t want the strange man to think he was all alone out here. Despite all of the things he was learning to do, he wasn’t sure his abilities would behave the same in more frightening circumstances. He swallowed. “They’re always around.”

Jason nodded. “Okay. Well, maybe you could take me to

them? I don't want to get lost in all this farmland."

Another chill. Somehow Clark felt this man wouldn't get lost at all. Alarm bells were ringing in his head. All of those lessons in school about stranger danger were flashing through his mind, but none of the lines were matching up with what this stranger was saying. Maybe he was just being paranoid. Maybe it was just everything his father had ever told him that was scaring him so much.

His dad. He would know what to do. His dad always knew everything.

"Okay," he said suddenly, smiling up at the man. Jason returned the smile in a somewhat forced manner. "They're probably up at the farmhouse. Come on."

They weaved their way in and out of the fields of corn and wheat, Clark taking a confusing route simply to irritate the man. He hoped against hope that Jason didn't notice any of the little irregularities around, such as the deep holes and gashes in the ground from his speed and strength, or the icicles growing in the middle of August. He tried to take him through sections that had no such things, but there was no guarantee.

Finally, they reached the house and Clark breathed a sigh of relief. "Ma! Dad! We have company!"

Martha came out of the kitchen first, wearing an apron and a smile. The smile quickly dropped, and Clark felt his stomach turn on seeing the worry on her face. She patted on a very fake-looking smile and dried her hands on her apron. "Clarkie, I assumed you meant Lana or Pete. You have to tell me if it's new company."

"Sorry, Ma."

She recovered quickly, though, and forced a smile at the man accompanying him. "Hi there. I'm Martha." She did not extend a hand in greeting, rather turning to shout to his dad upstairs, unable to keep a certain note of panic out of her voice. "Jonathan! There's a young man here to see us!"

Jonathan Kent ambled down the stairs slowly, carefully, and cast a concerned glance at his mother. Clark tried to keep his nerves from showing, because his dad would handle it. His dad was the smartest person he knew. But the apprehensive look on his father's face wasn't helping soothe his fears.

Jonathan froze when he locked eyes on the man behind him. He brushed his hands off on his pants and approached slowly with an outstretched hand. "Hello. I'm Jonathan."

Jason looked at it witheringly and did not take it. "Yes, I am well aware of who you are, Mr. Kent."

Clark's heart pounded. He knew who he was? Jason didn't say he knew his parents. Jonathan withdrew his proffered hand and folded his arms over his chest. "So you do. What can I do you for?"

"My name is Sergeant Jason Trask. I believe you remember when a few of my compatriots and I came by last time, about nine years ago. We were asking you about that meteor shower that happened."

Clark looked between Jason and his father, scrutinizing them. Neither had ever mentioned this moment to him.

"Yes, I do remember that. I also remember hearing something about that organization disbanding about six years ago?"

"Project Blue Book did, yes, but we're under new jurisdiction now, got a new name. Now Bureau 39 handles everything related to exobiology, xen archaeology and all things of extraterrestrial origin."

Clark swallowed and looked at his dad, who had paled at Jason's speech. He didn't know what all of those big words meant, except the last one and if he knew anything at all, he knew that he meant him.

Jonathan shifted his weight nervously but did not lower his gaze. "Well that's all fine and dandy, but I still don't see what any of this has to do with us."

Trask simply smiled, turning and putting his hands on Clark's

shoulders. Clark squirmed and pulled against him, but the army man's grip remained firm. "You know, you have a remarkable young boy here."

His voice was like the hiss of a snake. Clark snapped wild, frightened eyes up to his father's and was met with a barely restrained rage radiating towards the man holding him in a grip. He had never seen his father look so angry before. That scared him more than anything. If he had remained calm, reassuring, then maybe Clark would feel more comfortable, know that his dad would take care of it and all was well. He didn't know what to make of this.

"Get. Your hands. Off. My. Son."

Jonathan's voice was hard as steel. Jason laughed, but didn't release his hold. "Relax, Mr. Kent. Your son's just fine. We were just having a little chat out in your garden a few minutes ago, weren't we, Clark?"

Clark tried his best to keep from whimpering, but he was quite afraid. He looked frantically between his parent's worried and outraged expressions, hoping one of them could help him, would help him. He didn't like this man any longer—Jason, who had been so nice if not a little bit odd a few minutes ago was now menacing, threatening. It almost made Clark sick. He should have run, told his father right away. He should have believed him—no one was to be trusted implicitly, no one was to be let in so easily.

Clark was well aware that, given his speed and other gifts, he could easily overpower this man. That wasn't the fear.

The fear was of discovery. And as long as his parents remained in control of the situation, as long as they wanted him to stand down, he would. Even if it did frighten him beyond belief.

Trask knelt down to Clark's level. "He seems to have quite a few talents. Could be useful to our cause, you know. We've been looking for this one for years now. We have his ship even—found it a couple of months ago. We know he came here as a baby. We know he's not yours." There was that hiss sound again, making Clark's spine shiver. "And we need to know what his purpose is here."

Jonathan clenched his fists so tight that Clark could almost feel the nail marks digging in himself. "I swear to God, Trask, let the boy go before I make you."

He snorted. "I'm afraid you don't have much of a choice in the matter." Before anyone was aware of what exactly had happened, Trask pulled out his service weapon and aimed it at Jonathan. Martha gasped and tears were streaming down her face.

"Please," she begged. "Don't hurt my boy."

"I'm hoping I won't have to," Jason stated calmly, clearly unaffected by her display of emotion. "Besides, I know all about his abilities. We've been monitoring him for some time now. I know that a simple weapon"—he waved the gun through the air—"won't have any impact on him."

A cold chill ran down Clark's spine. They'd been watching him for some time? What was some time? What did they know about him? He fought the rising tide of panic and bit his lip trying to keep it from trembling.

"Oh! Don't get me wrong. There is one thing, though, that we think can do something..."

Jonathan and Martha looked on nervously as Trask pulled a small lead box out of his right breast pocket and flipped the latch off the lid, unlocking it and slowly thumbing it open. A small green crystal rested inside of the black velvet interior, glowing an almost sickly green. It was the most beautifully horrifying thing Clark had ever set eyes on.

Jonathan's voice rang out across the room, sounding far away in comparison to the sharp wheezes coming from his chest. "Clark!"

Clark found himself woozy and shaking as soon as the shiny box was opened. He couldn't explain it—he'd never felt this way before. It was... pain. So much pain washed over his body, causing

him to be unsteady on his feet and sway dangerously.

And then, just like that, the constant throbbing disappeared. Clark slumped to his knees on a soft groan, still feeling sick and in pain, but he wasn't getting hit with more of it. It was better this way.

"Clark!" Martha's scream echoed around the house as her nine-year-old boy fell to the floor, barely conscious. Her precious little boy who had never been sick or hurt a day in his life, now rendered nearly lifeless at their feet and all without this man even laying a finger on him.

"You son of a—"

Jason Trask cocked the hammer of his pistol and aimed it at the furious Jonathan Kent. "Uh-uh. You don't make a move. You two"—he gestured between them with the weapon as Martha wept even more bitterly—"are traitors to your country. You have been harboring a fugitive of the US Government. He is not yours to keep. Now, I can give you two options. Option A involves the two of you keeping your lives and your silence, and I walk out of here with this... alien of yours."

Clark raised his head heavily to look at his parents, tears clearly tracing the curves of his face. They wouldn't do that to him. They couldn't. He was their son, no matter where he came from. He couldn't stand the thought that this man would hurt either of his parents though. And above all that, there was the issue of the pain throbbing through his veins and the fact that he couldn't seem to muster up any of his powers at that moment. He should have acted sooner, done something to stop him while he could. Now it was too late.

"Please," Martha begged once more, barely able to fit words out of her mouth past all of her sobs. "What do you even want with him? He's just a boy—"

"Are you kidding me?! He's the proof I've needed all this time! I always knew there was an alien out there, waiting to attack us. No one believed me. I could tell something was off here in Smallville last time I was here, but no. It's just damn crazy Trask and why the hell is he still carrying on about aliens! But this—he is proof! He is what we've wanted all along!"

That sort of speech didn't sound like it came from someone stable, though that was obvious enough from his behavior and the fact that he had a gun trained on them.

"You said there was a second option," Jonathan gritted through his teeth. There was no way in hell he was going to let anyone just take his son away from him.

"I did, did I?" Jason seemed to think over it for a moment before grinning. "I guess your other option would be to press your luck, me kill you both, and still escape with the creature. Like I said, your choice."

"How dare you call my son a creature!" Jonathan snarled and lunged forward, reaching for the weapon.

Suddenly everything seemed to be moving in slow motion to Clark, and yet it felt like it all happened in a matter of seconds. The sharp retort of the gun being fired and missing its intended target. His mother's blood-curdling scream, his father's scuffle with the army man, the two of them grappling for the gun.

Then came the sound of the gun being fired again.

Trask fell back onto the floor a few scant feet away from Clark as Jonathan fired repeatedly into the man's chest, rapidly emptying the clip into him. Clark looked up at his father's determined expression with wide, frightened eyes.

Jonathan Kent had just killed a man.

Metropolis, 1993

Clark was startled out his dark thoughts as his cell phone rang and he pulled the bulky device out of the pocket of his overcoat. He answered immediately, knowing exactly who it was. "Yes, Nigel?"

"Sir, you'll be pleased to know that the *Daily Planet* is yours for the taking."

Clark grinned. "Excellent. When do I sign the paperwork?"

"It should be ready by six o'clock. If you go in and sign it as early as you can, you can beat anyone else to it and all of the paperwork and insurance information should be done within the week."

"Perfect. Thank you, Nigel." With that, he hung up the phone and enthusiastically began to walk faster back towards his home.

Chapter 6: Misery Business

When Nigel St. John made his way up to Lex Luthor's main office Monday morning, he was caught off guard by the state it was left in. Papers were strewn about the room, scattered across desks and tables in a seemingly chaotic manner, despite the fact that Nigel knew Lex always had some sort of system in place. In fact, normally the man was quite the neatnik. He wondered what was going on for him to break out such chaos. Casually, he leafed through some of the papers closest to him, skimming the documents to see what they were about. Something to do with the contracts between LNN and LuthorCorp.

Seeing the name there surprised Nigel. In the twenty-some-odd years since Lex had taken over his deceased father's company, he had done absolutely everything he could to distance himself from the name that haunted him. Even went so far as to rebrand the entire company to "LexCorp" instead, which frankly had a better ring to it. The reasons behind the change was never made apparent to Nigel, nor to many others he assumed. The one time he had asked, Lex had so quickly rebuffed him that he dared not ask again. His exact words were to this day clearly ingrained in his mind.

"Nigel, you're a good man. That's why I'll give you a pass on this one. But if you ever bring up my father again, you'll be out of a job and I'll make damn sure you won't find another. All you need to know is that I was orphaned at fourteen and that's that. Do we understand each other?"

Nigel had hastily agreed, surprised at the turn in character of his boss. Lex wasn't a scary man in general—which was why he did so well at business, he was quite charming—but in that moment Nigel had seen a different side to the man, and it wasn't something he wanted to see again. It was only a few months later that he was approached by Mr. Kent with his particular job offer. It had been a surprise, but his curiosity and—to be frank—greed got the better of him and he'd readily accepted. Nigel found he'd missed the spy's life, and here was Mr. Kent, offering it back to him with quite a cushy income to boot. His personal feelings and alliances didn't matter—he had a job to do.

Clark Kent himself was another matter entirely. He couldn't even begin to analyze that man—his motives were unclear, but there was always one goal in mind—destroy Lex Luthor in every capacity and with any means possible. He didn't dare ask. Whatever information he could glean was good enough for Nigel. Unlike Lex, Mr. Kent was a cold, ruthless, cut-throat shark in everything he did. He could put on the veneer of the suave, charming businessman, but even then something just felt a little off at times. There were cracks in his armor, to be sure, but they were not easy to find. Nigel had known the man for a little over five years now, and yet the most personal detail he knew about Clark Kent was that his father died when he was a younger man.

A fact that the two men had in common, Nigel mused.

Regardless of Mr. Kent's feelings on the matter, Lex had single-handedly turned the company around and made it the conglomerate it was today. If nothing else, Lex Luthor was a quite impressive businessman.

Speaking of which, where was that man? "Sir? Mr. Luthor?"

"Just a minute, Nigel!" Lex knocked his head against the file drawer he was rummaging through and bit back a mild curse at the pain. He rubbed his scalp soothingly for a moment before pulling out the paper he needed. He grinned broadly as he read over the

terms, and leapt to his feet to go share with Nigel the good news.

“Take a look at this!” He thrust the paper directly under his more-than-butler’s nose with a grin as he went to fetch another small stack of papers from his desk and place them into a folder.

Nigel frowned as he looked over the words on the page. “I don’t understand, sir. Why are you showing me the legal terms of your media contract with LNN?”

“Read the fourth paragraph from the bottom for me.”

Nigel’s quizzical expression only deepened as he read the words. “Something about the media outlet not being considered a conglomerate until it is evidenced that more than fifty percent of the competition is owned by the same company—”

“—Or that said one company owns the rights to multiple competitors in the same market. And, I checked with legal, and LNN is considered an entirely different market from the newspaper business.”

Nigel’s surprise showed easily on his face, a rare sight. “Newspaper, sir?”

Lex grinned as he walked up and took the paper from his hands and slipped it into the folder he held. “Nigel, I’m going to let you in on a little secret. The *Daily Planet* is going under. Advertisers have been dropping out left and right. So I’ve decided to purchase the establishment myself.”

Nigel felt his mouth go dry, but tried not to let any of his fear show on his face. Mr. Kent would not be pleased if he found out that Lex had beaten him to the punch. Not at all. He swallowed. “B-but, sir! If the paper’s doing so poorly, then why make the purchase? Surely you can see how much of a risk that kind of investment would be.”

Lex smiled patronizingly at the man. “Now, Nigel, I know you know how deep my pockets are. And I’m not doing it for a return on my investment—although, I must say I’m not against the idea.” He smirked before turning to walk to his desk once more. “No, I’m afraid my intentions are a bit more noble than that this time around.”

It clicked in Nigel’s brain what he was talking about. “Lois Lane.”

The look that occupied Lex’s face at the mention of her name could only be described as complete adoration. He really had it bad for that girl. “Yeah. Miss Lane. She told me at dinner on Friday that they’ve been worried about the *Planet* going under for a little while now, and I suggested to bail them out a bit. I’ve spent the whole weekend looking into my finances and the finer print of any contract that might get in my way. I think she’ll definitely appreciate the gesture.”

Nigel couldn’t help but roll his eyes at that one. How could the third-richest businessman in the world possibly be so naive as to believe Lois Lane had any feelings for him? Nigel had met her on many occasions, and while she was an excellent reporter, and a very beautiful woman, she was clearly not enamored with the illustrious Lex Luthor. He wouldn’t be surprised to learn if she was simply using the man this whole time, though they did seem to get along well. They were similar people, had similar interests and concerns.

But no way in hell would Lois Lane ever marry Lex Luthor.

It was just a pity that his boss couldn’t see that.

Lex turned back around with a smile and offered the file to Nigel. “Here. Would you mind making the appropriate phone calls to get started on this? I already filled out most of the legal paperwork, besides the actual purchasing agreement. If I could get a copy of that sooner than later, that’d be great.”

Nigel realized the ball was in his court and he smiled. “Of course. How soon would you like this done by?”

“Tonight, if possible.”

The look in Lex’s eyes was so eager and hopeful that it practically took ten years off his face. He almost hated having to do this to him, lying to his face. But he had a job to do, and he was

being generously paid to do it. So he smiled and nodded. “Of course. I’ll get right on that.”

Lex dismissed him happily, and Nigel walked briskly out of his office and towards the stairwell. Once inside and a few floors down, Nigel pulled out his cell and made a call to the real Boss.

Clark’s phone rang and he excused himself from the blonde secretary’s side with a charming grin. She giggled and waved him off. Clark managed to keep from rolling his eyes until after he had turned away. “Hello?”

“Sir, we have a problem.”

Clark sighed. There was always a problem. “What now?”

“It’s Mr. Luthor. Somehow, he knows the *Daily Planet* is going under and he wants to breathe new life into it. He’s already got me starting on the paperwork and wants me to call the owners to make them an offer.”

Clark clenched his jaw and ran a hand through his hair. “Let me guess—Lois?” Nigel’s lack of response confirmed the fact for him. He sighed. “All right. Do you know his number?”

“It says here that Lex is prepared to offer one point five million to Mr. Edge, but if he should demand to go higher, he made it clear he is willing to offer two point five million easily.”

Clark felt a muscle in his jaw twitch in irritation. Damn. He’d been hoping to offer two mil flat. He breathed in deeply, trying to calm himself. It was no problem. He could go higher—he’d anticipated that he might need to, but he didn’t think it would be because of Lex Luthor. Finally, he released his breath that he’d been holding and spoke in a quiet tone. “Just... hold off on your call for a little while. Stall. I’m going into this meeting with Mr. Edge in a few moments. Let me try for the contract, then you can do your thing. Tell *him* that it was simply too late and he had already been beaten to the punch for it. Then, even if he calls himself, he’ll know it’s true and you’re not at fault. Understand?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

“Good.”

Clark immediately hung up the phone and fixed a smile on to his face before returning to follow the secretary in. “Sorry for the interruption. Someone’s got to keep the company running.”

She giggled again, and the sound grated on his ears. “No problem, Mr. Kent. Mr. Edge will see you now.”

She led him through the mahogany double doors into the office of one Morgan Edge, who stood from his plush chair to greet him. He spoke through the cigar hanging out the side of his mouth. “The one and only Mr. Clark Kent! It’s quite an honor to meet you, sir!”

Clark kept up his smile in spite of the man’s somewhat greasy handshake. “The pleasure is all mine, I can assure you.”

The short man guffawed, and Clark could not keep from wrinkling his nose slightly in distaste, before ultimately returning to his smooth expression. Morgan Edge was about as skeevey as they came. He was a low man on the totem pole who thought he could play with the big dogs—with all his inherited money. He probably spent more on his small-time parties and drugs than he ever put into the *Planet*—a testament to the *Daily Planet*’s ability to stand on its own two feet. Hell, if it wasn’t for the fact that Clark himself had been messing with the *Planet*’s numbers and advertisers, he was certain the business would continue to do very well for itself. A good sign for his investment, if nothing else.

“Please, please—have a seat. Relax.” He pattered around to the other side of his desk as Clark sat and pulled out a second cigar to offer to his guest. “Cigar?”

Clark declined. “I never smoke before a contract is drawn up. I might take you up on your offer later, if all goes well.”

Edge laughed loudly again, before realizing the man before him was dead serious. He quickly clamped it down and swallowed, putting out his own smoke. “So, uh, Mr. Kent. Let’s get down to business, shall we? What exactly is it that you’re here for?”

Clark did not hesitate with his answer. “I’m not going to beat around the bush, Mr. Edge. I’m here to purchase the *Daily Planet* from you. I know it’s in trouble, I know your advertisers are dropping like flies. Circulation has been at a low—nothing’s been going right for you there. I have deep pockets, I’m looking to establish more of a public presence, and frankly, I think I could do a better job running it.”

The owner laughed nervously and tugged at his collar. “What makes you think all that?”

“Because I know business, Mr. Edge.” Clark leaned slightly forward, using his height and build to slightly intimidate the smaller man across the desk from him. “I may not know everything there is to know about newspapers, but I know enough about how to stay out of the media in order to figure out what ends up in it. I’m a businessman. I know that for everything to start slipping through the cracks like this with your hands on it is bad news. I respect the *Daily Planet*. Letting it fail is not an option, and in spite of your seeming incompetence, you know that if you don’t sell now, you won’t get a cent for it. You’ll lose money on it. And you have to be a smarter man than that.”

The look on Morgan Edge’s face was a mixture of offense and fear. He looked ready to speak when Clark jumped in again.

“Let me just finish. Now, I know that isn’t what you want. It’s not what I want either. All I want is to make a good, solid purchase that’s not undermined by the fact that it almost went under. And all you want is to get out of it with some money. I think I’m prepared to make an offer that would suit us both.”

The outrage on the man’s face was slowly replaced with curiosity and a sort of hesitance. “What sort of offer?”

“Three point five,” Clark spoke coolly, leaning back in his seat in a casual manner—or as casual as was possible when one was talking in millions.

He looked on as the number seemed to sink in with the current *Daily Planet* owner. It was quite a large chunk of change, but he knew it was still a lowball offer. He was prepared to go up, if he had to, but Clark knew he controlled the game here. He just needed the paperwork all done and ready to go.

He *refused* to lose out to Luthor on this.

Morgan suddenly felt weary and defeated. He looked up at Clark, who gave him a quick smile but seemed to be waiting patiently. “I can’t possibly accept less than four.”

Clark clicked his tongue. “You are aware that my offer is the best you are going to get? I have it on good authority that whatever offer might come your way after mine is not going to be as good.”

“Mr. Kent—I’m already taking on a loss. Four million is my number, and that’s final.”

Clark stonily stared Morgan down and the man squirmed in his seat. He knew he would break and take his offer as-is if he just held out long enough. But he wasn’t there to make an enemy today. So finally, deciding, Clark grinned and outstretched his hand. “Four it is then. Draw me up the paperwork and I’ll have it signed here and now. I’d like this deal over with as quickly as possible.”

Almost disbelieving, Morgan Edge shook the elusive Clark Kent’s hand loosely. “Thank you, sir. I’ll get Legal on it right away, if you wouldn’t mind waiting a little?”

Clark threw his hands up. “Don’t mind me. I’ve got to make a few phone calls myself. I’ll be back around one this afternoon?”

“Sounds perfect.” Edge smiled a fake smile, eyes growing wide at the prospect of a deadline upon him.

“Swell. I’ll see you then.”

Lex pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. It was a rare occasion when Nigel St. John got under his skin so badly, but today was definitely one of those days. He didn’t think he could handle another thing going wrong.

“Sir?” Nigel’s voice broke the silence that had descended upon

the room after he broke the news in the first place.

Lex sighed heavily before speaking. “How? How could someone have bought it already?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but as soon as I called the secretary informed me that the new owner was signing over the paperwork at that exact moment. I even asked to speak with Mr. Edge himself—but he was unavailable.”

“How could he be unavailable?” Lex cried out, launching from his seat to pace back and forth across the room. “He owns the place! When someone with a name like Lex Luthor calls, you don’t just let the secretary get it!”

“Apparently, he was doing, ah, paperwork as well.”

Lex bit his tongue to keep any further angry words from escaping his mouth. He hated himself when he got angry like this—like his father. Lex had done his best throughout his whole life to do the opposite of what Lionel Luthor would have done, but some things were just hereditary. Overreacting in stressful situations had to be one of them. Fortunately, he managed to control himself ninety percent of the time. Lex took a few calming breaths before asking another question. “Who bought it? For how much?”

Nigel hesitated to answer a moment to collect himself. “I don’t know what the total was, but I know when I offered our numbers up, they practically laughed me off the phone line.”

That irked him. Lex felt his right eye start to twitch and brought his fingers up to press gently against his lower eyelid. It was a quirk he’d had ever since he was a kid, probably from the trauma of his father’s drinking problems and abuse. He couldn’t remember quite when it started, but every time it started up again it was an irritating reminder of the past. He pressed his lips together in a tight line. “Who was it, Nigel?”

He hesitated again and Lex had to fight to keep his blood pressure down. “A Mr. Clark Kent, sir.”

Lex thought about that name long and hard for a while. He knew it, but he couldn’t for the life of him figure out how. “And who is this Mr. Kent?”

“You’ve heard of a company called CK Enterprises?”

Lex froze. They were LexCorp’s biggest competition—owned about a third of Metropolis real estate, running several large companies and subsidiaries, always seeming just a step or two behind.

Apparently they weren’t so behind anymore.

So that must have been where he knew the name Clark Kent. Huh. Strange. He hadn’t thought so, but then again—

“Wait a minute, Nigel. This, uh, CK guy. I thought he liked to stay out of the spotlight. Nobody’s ever even gotten a good glimpse of him besides his glasses. You’re sure *this* is the same guy?”

Nigel shrugged his shoulders slightly. “Who else could afford to pretend to be someone like Clark Kent?”

Lex bit his lip and returned to his earlier pacing. What did Clark Kent want with the *Daily Planet*? It did little for him—besides, if he wanted to stay out of the media so badly, buying a media outlet was not step number one. Perhaps he thought he could control it some? Personally, Lex didn’t understand the move.

Unless he was sick of the anonymity.

Lex considered it, before quickly disregarding it. No, if the recluse of a billionaire decided to come out of hiding, it was not just on a whim. There was something more he wanted to accomplish with this reveal. Men like them didn’t just do things without having some sort of motive.

“Sir, if I may, isn’t this still good news? I thought the goal was to keep the *Daily Planet* in business for Miss Lane?”

Nigel’s statement gave him pause. Was her happiness his only motive? No, he supposed not. He wanted the chance to impress her, come storming into the bullpen and announcing his newest

acquisition—like a knight in shining armor, coming to her rescue. Of course, he'd also get to spend more time with her in this period of transition. That was another plus.

But those were things he couldn't acknowledge, least of all to Nigel. So instead Lex smiled and nodded. "You're right. I'm just happy that they stay in business for her. She'd go crazy if she didn't have the *Planet*." He felt his eye start twitching again and quickly dismissed him. "That'll be all, Nigel, thank you for all your work on this one."

"Of course, sir," Nigel nodded and made his exit.

Once he left, Lex slumped down into his chair and pressed two fingers against his eye socket once again. He then pushed a button that called for Asabi. The man entered almost instantaneously. "Asabi, I think it's time for my tea. And maybe a banana too, for today."

Asabi inclined his head, and returned quickly with the requested items. "Stressful day today, sir?"

Lex nodded as he stirred his ginger honey tea gently. "Exceptionally so, Asabi. And I have a bad feeling that's not going to change any time soon."

Chapter 7: Collide

Smallville, 1975

Clark sat there numbly, staring at the rather large red puddle pooling on the floor before him. His dad was currently tending to his mother—who was having a nervous breakdown of some sort, and Clark would prefer not to watch her fall apart before him. Oddly, the dead man was a more reassuring figure.

Cautiously, tentatively, he reached out his arm, just to see—"Clark! Get away from there!"

His father's voice did little to break his reverie, until Jonathan stormed over and had to physically drag the boy away by his wrist. He shouted in pain at his father's strong grip, surprising himself as much as his father. He could feel pain, Clark marveled to himself. It was a mild pain, more of an irritation, but it was a new sensation regardless.

"Clark."

He wondered if he could bleed.

"Clark! I need you to listen very carefully to me. Go wash your hands, clean up, and then I want you to bring me a large, empty feed bag and a bucket and a mop. Can you do that for me?"

Clark finally was able to tear his eyes from the dead man long enough to look into his father's eyes. They were unlike anything Clark ever remembered seeing them as before. Fear, panic and an odd sense of calm resided in them. Jonathan was determined to stay in control. Clark mutely nodded his agreement before Jonathan pulled him in for a quick hug and kissed his head. "That's my boy."

He went off to do as asked, only to stop at the top of the stairs and turn back around to watch his father. His gaze drifted back to Jason—and to the blood, a lot of it—as Jonathan stood back up fully and went over to his mom, who was sobbing and shaking uncontrollably still. He wrapped his arms around her tightly, trying to still her convulsing form. "Martha. Martha. Please, Martha, you have to listen to me. You have to quit crying and be quiet, okay? Go on upstairs or something, I can handle this."

She looked up at her husband and looked blindly at the blood spatter on his clothes and the small amount he had on his hands. Clark looked down at his own hands to find them curiously clean, but somehow it didn't feel like it. His shirt was another matter entirely.

Jonathan exploded, drawing Clark's attention again as he threw his hands up in the air. "I don't know what you want from me, Martha! I didn't want to hurt him, but he—that bastard—he hurt our son! Would only keep hurting him! And what then, huh, Martha? We'd just let him walk away with our boy in his arms? No way on earth would I ever let anyone do that! He is the only

thing important to me in my life, more than my life. You do for family, Martha!"

Her sobs were getting worse. Jonathan knelt down and shook her shoulders. "Martha! Listen—"

"Don't touch me!" she finally broke through the sobs enough to scream at him and she swatted his hands away, leaning as far away from him as possible. "Don't you *dare* touch me, Jonathan Kent! You just *killed* a man! You—you're a—how are you not more upset about this?"

His father looked pained at her words and his shoulders slumped. "Martha—"

"Don't you realize what you've *done*?"

That riled him up again. "What I've done? Martha Clark Kent, that man would have killed us both to get what he wanted! It was self-defense!"

"By the tenth bullet, it's not self-defense anymore!"

Jonathan swore and wiped his face on his sleeve. "What do you want me to say?! I screwed up? Fine! I screwed up! But I'm not going to apologize for it! I did my job as a father and protected my son no matter the cost!"

Martha only wept bitterly in response. His father almost ran a hand through his rapidly thinning hair before he caught himself, staring at the blood on his own hands. Reeling, he took a few steps back and looked down at himself. He was a bloody mess. He quickly glanced up at his wife and saw her crying. "What have I done?" he whispered, clutching at his head desperately.

A loud creak sounded beneath Clark's feet and he held his breath, peering through the railing at his dad with fear in his eyes. Jonathan's gaze snapped over to the staircase and locked on his own wide, brown eyes. Clark held his breath nervously. Jonathan stood upright and squared his jaw. "Clark," he called out softly, and he flinched. A glance of pain struck across his father's face. "It's okay, son," he soothed, "It'll all be okay. There's nothing to be scared of. Come down here and let me look at you."

Somewhat reassured, Clark hesitantly and very quietly made his way back down the staircase to his father's side. Jonathan knelt to his level and looked into his eyes. "Are you okay, son? Are you hurt anywhere?"

Clark shook his head mutely. He hurt everywhere—it was a strange, tingling sensation—but the ache was fading fast and he was certain that if he said anything his dad would just make a bigger deal out of it. Clark didn't want or need his father to worry about him right now.

Jonathan let out a sigh of relief and closed his eyes for a brief moment. "Thank goodness," he whispered. His eyelids fluttered open and he still saw the pain and confusion in his son's eyes. "Listen to me, Clark. This is very important, and I need you to do exactly as I say, understand?"

Clark nodded vigorously, not wanting to disappoint.

"There's nothing I love more, nothing more important to me in the whole entire world, than you. Now I didn't mean to kill that man. But he was a very, very bad man and he was going to hurt you. And that's not okay. You're my son, and I'll never let anything bad happen to you. But I need you to promise me a few things, in case anything ever happens to me, okay?"

Clark looked between his father and the man lying dead on the floor for a few moments before conceding with a nod.

"Firstly, promise me, that if anything happens to me, you won't tell anyone about your powers. That is most important. And secondly, you need to remember that no matter what, you always do whatever you have to in order to protect yourself, got it?"

Clark flinched at his father's words, pulled back slightly. Jonathan gripped his shoulders firmly and stared at his son dead on. "Promise me," he reiterated in a firm tone.

Clark nodded his head vigorously, tears blinding his eyes. "I-I promise."

Jonathan sighed in relief and shut his eyes briefly. "Good.

Because if... if something does happen to me... you'll be the man of the house, okay? You're gonna be in charge. You need to tell me you'll take care of everything. You need to tell me that you will always, *always* do whatever you can to take care of yourself. Promise me?" Clark sniffed loudly and Jonathan firmly brushed the tears off of his son's face with the pads of his thumbs, only to wince with regret upon seeing the track of blood he left behind. "Promise me, Clark."

"Yes, Dad. I promise."

Jonathan pulled Clark in close to his chest and pressed a hard kiss to the top of his head. Clark shut his eyes and clutched at his father tightly for several long moments. He breathed him in, heard his father doing the same, relishing every second they had.

Slowly, Jonathan pulled back and looked his son straight in the eye, watching as Clark felt the scared tears stream down his cheeks. His dad cleared his throat before speaking. "Now go upstairs, just... clean up, try to get some rest. I'll take care of everything, okay? I don't want you to see any of this."

Clark nodded and turned toward the stairs, slower than normal still, and Jonathan turned back to the man lying on the floor with a sigh.

"What did I do?" he murmured softly, just barely reaching Clark's ears. Clark glanced back once more at his sobbing mess of a mother, and again to his father, watching as he steeled himself and all the remorse fled from his features. Clark shook his head as if to clear it, ignoring the pounding headache, and raced up the steps to his room.

Metropolis, 1993

"Lois!"

Lois sat up ramrod straight, a piece of paper stuck to her cheek from where it was pressed against the countertop. Confused, she looked around her surroundings, trying to sort out why she had seemingly fallen asleep on her kitchen countertop. Squinting with bleary eyes at the words on the pages in front of her, she remembered—CK Enterprises. Her night had been filled with research and reading after gathering as much information as she could from the *Daily Planet* Archives and—she glanced at the mostly empty carton of cigarettes—more than a little smoking. She supposed she was making up for lost time with her non-smoking stint. A brief wave of regret washed over her—she had almost made it another week. But feeling guilty only made her crave it more, and so the vicious cycle began. Peeling the paper from her face, Lois finally reached out for the pack of cigarettes, only to have her hand swatted away by some unknown source. She scowled bitterly and looked up to find her sister smiling down at her, all too cheerful for the morning.

"Morning, sis!" Lucy chirped happily, stealing away the pack and hiding it behind the spice rack once again. "Coffee?"

She grunted a response, which Lucy took as a yes and poured a second mug. A caffeinated Lois was always a happier Lois.

It took a few moments of warm silence, indulging in her beverage, before Lois was finally able to speak. "Why'd you take my cigs?"

Lucy raised an eyebrow at her older sister. "Uh, because it's already seven thirty and you need to get ready for work? It's Tuesday? You don't have time to—"

Lois' eyes widened dramatically as she looked at the digital clock on her stove and jumped out of her seat. "Crap! Lucy! Why didn't you—"

"I did wake you, if you remember!" Lucy called out after Lois with an all-too-mirthful tone, and Lois raced into her bedroom and slammed the door to get changed.

Lois rode the elevator down from the rooftop where she had taken her brief morning smoke break. She hoped she didn't smell like it. She knew that some people in the bullpen probably suspected that she smoked, but she liked to think she was more secretive and mysterious than that.

Smokers always think they don't smell like smoke, Lois.

She pursed her lips at the voice that sounded suspiciously like her little sister in her head, tossing a mental *Whatever, Luce* back at her.

When the elevator dinged, she strode briskly off, all confidence and attitude. No one could mess with Mad Dog Lane on the prowl. When she started going undercover at the Metro Club, everyone thought she was just crazy—until she learned that Johnny Taylor was involved with the up-and-coming Toasters gang just the other night. Mysteriously, after her investigation and bust, the Toasters all disappeared off the face of the earth. But, she figured, if she had just been outed for arson, she'd be in the wind too. It was the way of the criminal.

Her article went to print yesterday, was yet another major success. Toni Taylor even called and thanked her for getting her out from under her brother's thumb—a weird thing, considering she had just put the woman's brother in jail, but she supposed she was probably treated badly by him. It didn't hurt that it meant she got control of the Metro Club.

Unfortunately for Lois, though, that story did not transform her life. Neither did any of the others. So she sat down at her desk, spinning her wheels until her next story hit, waiting with baited breath for Perry to come and beg her to take on some story or another.

James slid past her desk and slipped a paper in front of her casually before continuing on his path. Lois frowned as she looked it over quickly. "Olsen! What the hell is this for?"

He turned on his heel and continued to walk backwards. "Chief wants you on it ASAP. Told me to drop it by your desk." He smoothly turned back around, not wanting to face the wrath of Lois Lane.

She read over the assignment once again and unconsciously began gritting her teeth. Suddenly taken over by her emotions, she crumpled the paper in her tight grip and shot to her feet, storming over to Perry White's office in a whirlwind force. Not even caring that the door was closed and her boss appeared to be in a meeting when she came storming through it.

She jumped straight in. "Chief, we need to talk. I just bagged a huge story that I spent weeks looking into, going deep undercover for, and you hand me this... this puff piece?! That's absurd!"

Perry glanced sideways at his guest, whose back had straightened considerably at the intrusion of the conversation. "Uh, Lois? Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?"

Lois suddenly realized that her boss was indeed in the middle of something as she noted the familiar man starting to stand up respectfully out of his chair. "Oh," she said as she racked her brain for how she might know this man. She frowned deeply, brow furrowed in thought as she still came up empty. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

The bespectacled man looked slightly amused. "I, uh, believe we met at that nightclub a few weeks ago. You're that hooker I turned down, right? Lola, wasn't it?" He outstretched his hand, a mischievous smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

Lois was flustered and could feel her embarrassment coloring her cheeks. She glanced at Perry furtively, wishing he hadn't heard that comment, but the color in his own face proved that he had. To cover for her blunder, she stepped up closer to the stranger and ignored his greeting, fuming inside and not doing a very good job covering it up. "Oh, I remember. First of all, for your information, I am not a hooker. I wasn't even pretending to be one. That was *your* misinterpretation. And second of all, just what brings you here to my real place of work? You some kind of creepy stalker or something? Why are you talking to my boss? Perry, I don't like this."

"Lois, I, uh, I don't think—"

"It's all right, Mr. White," the handsome stranger said smoothly. "I don't offend easily. I'll let you get back to your work

and I'll go make the announcement."

He made his exit from the room, giving a slight nod to Lois on the way out to the bullpen. Curious, Lois followed him, flanked by her boss. "What does he mean, make an announcement? Who does he think he is?"

Perry opened his mouth to respond, but was beaten to the punch.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, reporters of the *Daily Planet*," Clark said in a booming voice, gathering everyone's stares. "Can I have your attention, please? Thank you."

His smile was intoxicating, Lois couldn't help but think. She certainly remembered him from the bar now. She bit her tongue to keep from asking any more foolish questions and just waited for him to explain himself.

"First off, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Clark Kent. Many of you may recognize that name, some may not. Let me put your minds at ease: yes, I am the Clark Kent of CK Enterprises."

Murmuring suddenly erupted from the bullpen, and Lois felt herself going pale at his words. Clark Kent? The one whose company she had been looking into the last four days? Crap, what had she done?

"Now I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is, the *Daily Planet* has not been doing so well recently. Circulation has been down, advertisers dropping, the whole nine yards. The good news is, I have agreed to purchase the *Daily Planet*. Meaning I am the new owner, and I hope to help your newspaper thrive continuously the way it was meant to all along."

A series of cheers and claps sounded throughout the bullpen, and Lois couldn't help but be drawn into it. She cast a sidelong glance at Perry. They were saved. She hadn't seen him so happy in years.

Then Lois turned her attention back to their so-called savior, this time with new eyes. No longer the handsome, slightly awkward or creepy stranger. He had a name, he was a figurehead, and he just had a very real impact on her life.

And suddenly, she felt she was in a lot more danger having Clark Kent around than she was before he'd miraculously decided to save the *Daily Planet*.

Chapter 8: Dangerous

Lois stood off to the side, observing carefully as several people introduced themselves to him and expressed their gratitude for his preemptive actions. She bit her nail nervously as she examined him more closely. Despite all her efforts to find something wrong with him, something why she shouldn't be able to trust him, nothing obvious came up. He was certainly a good-looking man, that she knew from the beginning. But he seemed kind and genuine with everyone he spoke to. She wondered whether her sense of distrust was coming from the fact that she had met him previously and he hadn't told her who he was or whether it was simply because she hadn't figured it out earlier.

Exasperated, Lois finally decided to just confront the man and get it over with. She waited until the crowd around him had mostly dissipated and stalked right up to him without hesitation. He turned and smiled at her, extending his hand genially. "Miss Lane —"

Lois folded her arms across her chest and cast a withering glance at his outstretched hand. Awkwardly, he withdrew it, thrown off by her behavior. Everyone else seemed happy—ecstatic, even—to meet the man behind the name. Clark cleared his throat and attempted conversation once more. "I'm surprised by you. Your undercover work at the Metro Club was remarkable. I had no idea it was *the* Lois Lane I was talking to," he said warmly. He couldn't help but glance down at her body before raising his eyes back up to meet hers. Lois suppressed her shiver. "And that piece on Johnny Taylor working with the Toasters—"

thank you for that."

Lois felt slightly put off by his words, unsure as to whether she should be offended by his wandering gaze or flattered that he had read her piece. "Why thank you?"

He looked at her a bit quizzically. "Don't you know? I own the building for the Metro Club. The Taylors have always been in charge of running the place, but they pay me rent. Johnny has been trying to threaten me, get me out of his business. When you released your article? Couldn't have been any better timed."

Lois didn't know quite what to say. She hadn't known that tidbit of information, and it made her uneasy that she had been so clueless.

"Besides," Clark continued, an unreadable look in his eyes. "It's better off being run by Toni. She's always... had a much more level head on her shoulders than her brother."

They stood in a semi-awkward silence for a few moments. The newsroom buzz had returned to its usual low roar, and everyone had for the most part returned to their business. Lois shifted on her feet. "So. You're, what, some kind of millionaire, huh?"

Clark looked at his feet in false humility. "Yeah, something like that."

She frowned at him in confusion. "What do you mean, something like that? You just bought a major Metropolitan newspaper and you certainly don't seem any worse for the wear! You're one of the richest men in the country, you—"

"It's with a 'b,' Miss Lane," he corrected quickly before she could rant on any longer.

Lois looked abashed at that, all the wind taken from her sails. "Oh. Billionaire. Right." She visibly decompressed and seemed to shrink back for a moment, before something else struck her and she wound herself up again. "Hey! If you're so rich, then you owe me seven bucks for that drink, buster!"

Clark chuckled. "Don't worry. They didn't put it on your tab. I paid for it myself. Besides, I own the place, remember?"

She glared at him suspiciously. "I thought you just owned the building."

"And their liquor license."

She stared him down for a few moments more before finally turning away. "Well, you didn't have to lie to me about it all."

Something flashed in his eyes, something dark and dangerous that made Lois want to take two steps back. If she were anyone other than Mad Dog Lane, she might have even. But then it disappeared as he smirked. "I never lied to you."

"Lying by omission is still technically a lie," she pointed out stubbornly.

"Well, I wasn't about to bare all to some two-bit whore, you know?" he spat back.

Lois was slightly taken aback, but she bit down on her tongue to keep from lashing out at him. She knew how she had presented herself while undercover, she could hardly be offended. She spoke through tightly clenched teeth. "Was any of that even true?"

Ah. There it was. His face briefly looked as though she'd punched him in the gut. But as quickly as it had come, it passed again. With a polite upturn of the lips, he responded, "Of course it was true. I wouldn't lie about that."

Lois felt guilty now, remembering his admission about his parents, and she looked abashed to her toes. "Oh."

Clark shook his head with a condescending smile. "You know, if you're so worried about people lying to you, you might want to look a little closer to home."

That got Lois' attention. She snapped her gaze up only to find him already walking away from her. "Hey! Where do you think you're going? What's that supposed to mean?" She started to storm after him but Perry caught her arm.

"Woah there! Hold your horses, Lois. I'm sure Mr. Kent hasn't done anything to warrant such an outburst, right?"

Lois glared at her boss for a moment before turning her gaze

to follow the new owner of the *Daily Planet*. He stopped and smirked at her, hearing Perry White's reprimand, and turned on his heel to keep walking.

She made a snap decision and raised her voice loud enough to get his attention. "You know, Perry, just because he owns the *Planet* now doesn't mean I'm going to walk on eggshells around him. I'm going to keep doing my job the way I've always done it and I don't give a damn what Mr. Kent does or doesn't think!"

The newsroom quieted down at her outburst and Perry's mouth fell open in shock. "Lois!" he hissed. "You don't mean that!"

Sometimes Lois hated how nervous her boss was all the time. "I do too," she insisted petulantly.

"Miss Lane?"

Lois felt her heartbeat speed up at the sound of his voice calling her name. She turned back to face him as he casually leaned over the railing looking over the bullpen. She swallowed thickly but refused to back down, jutting out her chin stubbornly. "Yes?"

Suddenly, he grinned—this megawatt smile that made her knees almost weak. "I wouldn't expect anything less." And with that, Kent turned on his heel again and left.

Lois released a breath that she didn't know she was holding. Perry gave her a dubious glance that seemed to serve more as a warning than a reprimand. Ever since Jerry started serving his dime in prison he'd gone soft, concerned that his harshness had driven his son to his life of crime. Lois sighed. She loved him to death, and in many ways she thought of him as a surrogate father, but she did wish he would stand up for himself more.

Kent, though... he was interesting. She wasn't quite sure what to think about him yet. He had an edge to him—something a little more than just the usual I-need-my-morning-coffee kind of angry. It was something almost dangerous. And yet—he had a sense of humor. He seemed like a good enough person. And to top it off—he was achingly good-looking. That smile—oh—it did things to her. Made her think thoughts that a woman in a happily-committed relationship should not be thinking. He was going to be trouble, she knew that already. She wasn't quite sure why or how she knew it, but she did.

Clark Kent making this sudden appearance into her life changed the whole ball game. What did this mean about Lex's attempt to buy the *Planet*? What did it mean for her relationship with him? What about her work? Lois shivered. She felt as though they were just on the cusp of something—something big, something intangible. She didn't know what, or why—but it was her gut instinct, and Lois Lane always trusted her gut. Regardless of what trouble it brought her.

One thing was for sure, things were definitely about to change.

Chapter 9: Happy Together

Lex Luthor sat in his desk chair, bored of paperwork. He was supposed to be going over the finalized plans for this year's White Orchid annual ball. There were still so many things to do, details to be attended to, not to mention all of the additional planning that went into the upcoming *Prometheus* launch that he planned on announcing at the party. That was a whole other nightmare of paperwork and negotiations.

But instead, he found himself taking trips down memory lane.

Lex sighed. He always got this way, around this time of year. Once he got the ball rolling, he was fine. Relatively speaking. But planning for it—for some little party for the who's who of Metropolis—instead of doing anything else? He sighed. It was torture. He should be planning a trip for himself, a visit to the cemetery—heck, in a perfect world, he should've been planning a birthday party.

Lex let that fact wash over him as he ruminated some more. How old would he have been this year? Twenty-three, he decided

upon doing the calculations. Twenty-three years old. Unbelievable. It seemed like a lifetime ago—it *was* a lifetime ago, he realized with a shock. That his son could have grown up, gone through college, and be well-nigh on his own at this point—well, it made his head dizzy. Lex couldn't even picture it—in his mind, he was still and would forever be the same four-and-a-half-year-old boy he had once been, and not a day older.

His heart constricted with pain. Eighteen years ago almost since he'd lost his son. Little Jaxon.

Lex shook his head, trying to shake himself out of it. Maybe he wouldn't even be around for his birthday this year. After all, if he was turning twenty-three, perhaps his son would be off on his own, traveling the world, with his friends—maybe with a family of his own now. He had gotten Arianna pregnant when he was just twenty himself. And while he knew that was quite a young age, he also knew he wouldn't trade any of it—he had gotten a son for those precious few years, and it had been worth it. Despite all the pain and agony resulting from his loss.

He shook his head once again. He had to stop thinking about it and just power through. That always worked before. No more thoughts about what they had been about to do on their trip, whether they were enjoying their time in Australia or not. No more memories of what the car had looked like afterwards, having been crushed between a jackknifing semi and an SUV in what had to have been the most horrifying accident he'd ever seen. Not to mention the memories of *them*...

Instantly he recoiled and leaned back in his chair, the images flashing through his mind faster than a speeding bullet. *No*, he shook his head to clear his thoughts. *Now's not the time to think about that, Lex. The ball.*

He turned back to the papers on his desk. Right. Next Friday night. He had too much to do and not enough time to do it. Besides, this year wouldn't be any harder than any other. Especially not any harder than that first year. God, was that terrible. Traveling across the country, taking stock of all of his holdings and business nationwide, getting involved in a homicide case in the middle of nowhere and getting stuck testifying at the murder trial... It was a nightmare—a fuzzy nightmare that he could barely remember the details of because he was so underwater at the time. All he knew were the feelings he'd been drowning in over the loss of his only son.

No, the White Orchid Ball had been the perfect way to memorialize the weekend of his son's birthday. White orchids were Arianna's favorite flowers; she always kept them in the house. Jaxon would always tear off the petals and hide them in different places. Lex smiled and shook his head at the thought of finding the petals in his coat pocket one warm afternoon all those years ago. They were fresh even.

So every year, he'd dress up and play the nice host and stuff the place to the brim with orchids and hope that no one noticed how fake he was being. And every year, it seemed to go well. This year, he had Lois to attend with him. The thought alone lifted his spirits. She had that sort of effect on him. He smiled. He wished that she would see sense and marry him already. They were so good together, they just made sense. He knew she wasn't the lovey-dovey type, and in most circumstances, neither was he. But when it came to Lois Lane, Lex simply couldn't help himself.

She was different. She knew everything about him—his father's abusiveness, his son's death, his spiral into depression and the terrible years that followed... And yet, somehow, she still didn't care, wasn't bothered by any of it. Nor was she put off by his money or his fame. She was grounded in reality, and balanced him out incredibly well. Lois Lane was an incredible creature.

Which reminded him. Lex glanced back down at the papers sitting before him—primarily the guest list. He should throw some tickets to the Ball her way. The *Daily Planet* always had a presence at the event, but he was feeling generous and since Lois

would already be there, he supposed he could forward a few to spare to Perry White and the staff of his choice.

And Clark Kent.

Lex felt his teeth grind a little at seeing the name on the list. He had already made the list of pre-sold tickets. Which was fine—the man could spend a little of his own damn money for a charity event. He wasn't about to throw him a free ticket, not right after he stole the *Daily Planet* out from under him.

Still, Lex found himself exceedingly curious about Clark Kent. How did someone so wealthy and powerful remain out of sight for so long? If he wasn't so jealous of him, Lex would ask the man himself. This was a strange move for him. It didn't make sense that he would give up all of his anonymity for a simple newspaper. There had to be something bigger going on here.

The phone on his desk rang, jolting Lex from his thoughts as he smoothly picked it up. "Yes?"

"Hey."

Just the sound of Lois Lane's smooth voice drifting over the phone lines made the knot that had been in his shoulders loosen. "Lois, darling! How are you?"

She paused for a few moments. "Fine. A lot's been going on. I was just... I was calling to talk to you. About our little—you know."

Lex was just relieved to hear from her. It had been a couple of days since they'd spoken, so he hazarded a guess. "Our disagreement?"

"Lex." He could hear the exasperation in her voice already, and tension zipped through him in response. "I don't want to rehash it—"

"Say no more, my dear. It's forgotten. I'm just glad to hear from you."

"Yeah, well... I was hoping we could meet for dinner tonight."

"Sure. I can get us reservations somewhere. What do you feel like?"

"Italian might be nice," she said slowly. "And then we can come back to my place for dessert, maybe? Lucy's not going to be there tonight."

Lex grinned. "Now, Lois. You're not trying to poison me, are you? Because if so, I'll have you know that I wouldn't dare try anything you make for me anyways—"

"Lex! No!" She pretended to be outraged, but he could hear her grin even through the phone. "And I'll have you know that if there's one thing I *can* cook, it's chocolate desserts."

"In that case, I'm afraid I must try them after all. You know how tempting your chocolate soufflé is to me."

Lois' light laughter was a delight to his ears, and it bolstered his spirits. They were going to be okay still. It was just a fight, not an end to their relationship.

"Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of a different sort of dessert..."

Her suggestive tone made his blood go hot. "By all means, I'll make the dinner reservations. But fair warning, I'm going to want a lot of dessert."

"Lex! I'm at work still!"

He laughed, leaning back into his chair. "How has your day been going, by the way?"

"It's been... strange. I don't know what to think of it. You know how I told you about the *Planet* maybe going under? The new owner came in today."

Just as quickly as Lois had brought his spirits up, they crashed back down again. Lex straightened in his chair. "Oh, really? Who is it?"

"Clark Kent? From CK Enterprises."

"Well, that's good. That the *Planet* is saved, I mean," Lex spouted dutifully, keeping as much malice as he could out of his voice.

"Yeah... It's just weird. He came out of hiding, for this? A

newspaper? Don't you think that's strange?"

"It is strange," Lex agreed. He was happy to hear her mind wandering down the same path as his, but he didn't know how much longer he could stay on the topic. Thankfully, he didn't have to worry about it.

"Anyway, I've got to get back to work, and I'm sure you've got to get back to procrastinating about that Ball of yours—"

"I was not!"

Lois laughed. "I'll let you go. Bye."

"I'll pick you up at seven for dinner."

Lois agreed, then hung up. Lex smiled as he put down his own receiver. She was right; he was procrastinating. Taking a deep breath, Lex settled in his seat and got down to business, pushing all thoughts of the elusive Clark Kent out of his mind.

Chapter 10: Round and Round

It was the following Wednesday when Clark finally walked back into the *Daily Planet*. He'd managed to make himself wait a couple of days, in spite of how giddy it made him just to be there. It helped that the transition period was taking a bit of time, what with all the legal documents and agreements he had to sign. But still, a thrill of anticipation ran down his spine. His plan was finally going into action—every day meant he was one day closer to achieving success. To getting revenge.

As the elevator dinged and the doors parted before him, he took in the surroundings of the bullpen with an air of satisfaction. It was so vibrant and full of life, not really like anywhere he'd ever been before. Maybe in another life—one where his father hadn't killed an army man and hadn't been caught and sent to prison, or even killed there—maybe then he would have liked to work in a place like this. News was a fast-paced business, always chasing another story, finding evidence, going on stakeouts—the sort of things he liked to do anyways, in his spare time. But it was a double-edged sword, he knew—which was why he worked so hard to stay out of the news business. The media was his biggest obstacle to date, which made walking down the ramp of the bullpen even more of a thrill than anything else.

Clark bumped into a young man scurrying his way across the bullpen. "Oh! Mr. Kent! I-I am so sorry! I didn't mean to—"

Clark smiled and waved the kid off. "Don't worry about it. I should have been paying better attention. What's your name?"

He watched the kid's eyes go wide nervously. "Uh, James. James Olsen, sir."

Clark outstretched his hand with a grin, looking to set the kid at ease. He shook it nervously, with a bit of awe in his eyes.

"James, well, it's good to meet you. Mind if I call you Jim? Or Jimmy?"

"Uh— No, no. Not at all. Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Kent?"

"Oh, not much," Clark said as he turned and started walking, rightly assuming the boy would follow. "I was just going to inform Mr. White that I got some spare tickets for the White Orchid Ball on Friday, and was wondering if anyone on staff would like to go. Good press and all."

He threw a glance back at James, whose eyes seemed to grow impossibly wider. He paused just outside Perry's office, conveniently close to where Lois Lane was currently sitting at her desk, and Clark decided to have a little fun. "Say, what do you do around here? Would you like to go to this thing?"

The newly-dubbed Jimmy stuttered for several moments. "Photographer. I'm a photographer."

"Great! We'll need one of those, I'm sure! I'll make sure Mr. White saves a ticket for you."

Jimmy beamed at him, ecstatic to be finally getting some attention around here. Clark then heard a scoff coming from Lois' desk and turned to follow the sound. He smiled at her only a bit patronizingly as he walked towards her. "Miss Lane? Are you

hinting for a ticket, too? Because all you need to do is ask.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “No, I was not ‘hinting’ for anything. I just found it amusing, that’s all.”

“Wait a minute.” Clark frowned, trying to appear pensive. “You’re saying that you don’t want to go to one of the most newsworthy events in society this season? What about the whole importance of story and doing your job?”

Lois glared at him intensely, the expression on her face very clearly trying to convey her thoughts of murdering him.

“Miss Lane doesn’t need a ticket, she’s already going,” James jumped in quickly, ever so eager to get a few points in with the boss.

Clark arched an eyebrow, relying heavily on his acting skills to pull off the look of surprise. “Really? Reporter’s salary bought that ticket? It’s quite a pretty penny, you know.”

Lois sighed heavily and stood, grabbing her purse in the process. “Actually, I didn’t pay. I was invited. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

She spun on her heel and practically stormed over to the elevator. Clark could see her fingers twitching and watched in curiosity as she pushed the up button on the elevator. Frowning, he tilted his glasses slightly down his face to watch her rummage through her bag, fingers questing for an open pack of cigarettes. That was interesting, Clark noted. He hadn’t known that she’d smoked. Instead of pulling out the carton, though, she merely kept her fingers wrapped around it, as though its presence alone was reassuring. Like a security blanket, he thought.

“Now, how’d she get an invite?” Clark murmured wryly under his breath, knowing exactly how.

“Didn’t you know? She’s dating Lex Luthor.”

Clark gritted his teeth slightly just at hearing the name. He had forgotten that Jimmy was still standing there. He pasted a smile on his face as he turned around to face him. “Really? I had no idea,” he said. After a beat, he went on. “Well, then. Is there anyone else in particular I should be giving out a ticket to?”

James shrugged one shoulder and pointed way back behind a long row of cubicles. “You might want to invite Catherine Grant. She’s our editor for the society pages, and she also writes a column—Cat’s Corner.”

Clark followed his gesture and saw the woman in question, hovering over another writer’s desk, bearing down on him about some mistake or rather he had made. Clark evaluated her. She had a pretty face, and beautiful long, flowing, auburn locks—the kind he’d certainly want to run his fingers through. But aside from that, she wasn’t much to look at. At least, not in her frumpy gray sweater, chunky scarf and loose tan slacks. She looked like she had barely rolled out of bed this morning. But he could imagine her in a fancy dress, getting all dolled up for this event... maybe for him... Perhaps he’d tell Perry to invite her too.

No. She could come if she wanted, or if it was required, but he had to focus. Now wasn’t the time for playing games. Besides, if anything, he’d much rather be spending his time with Lois—convincing Lois, stealing Lois from her boyfriend, kissing Lois—

He shook himself. What was the matter with him? How did that cold, distant, beautiful woman get so far under his skin? Maybe a good solid *distraction* was exactly what he needed.

Clark didn’t realize how long he’d been standing there staring into the space where Catherine Grant once was until he heard Jimmy Olsen politely trying to clear his throat. Clark turned back to him, startled, but with a smile. “Thank you, Jimmy. I appreciate all your help.” With a dismissive pat on his shoulder, Clark moved past him and strode briskly right into Perry White’s office.

The older man nearly jumped out of his skin at the sudden intrusion into his office, and he was about ready to comment when he saw who it was. “Oh—uh, Mr. Kent! I didn’t realize you would be coming in today! H-how, er, what can I do for you?”

Clark smiled. “Please, Perry, I wish you’d just call me Clark.

Or at least just Kent. I’m not much one for formalities.”

Perry smiled back at him wryly. “Kent, then. What brings you here today?”

Clark took a seat with a small sigh of satisfaction. “Well, I happen to have some tickets to the White Orchid Ball this Friday. I heard that Miss Lane is already going, but Jimmy seemed eager to go and I told him he could have one. Also, he recommended Cat Grant.”

“Jimmy? Oh, you mean James. Uh, well, yeah, sure. How many tickets you got?”

Clark grinned. “Another two sets. Obviously, you and your wife would go, and then whoever else you would see fit.”

“Oh, Alice and I don’t need—”

“Nonsense, Perry. I won’t take no for an answer.”

Perry seemed to consider it for a minute before a slow smile spread across his features. “Well then, it’s a deal! Alice will be happier than Frank Sinatra with a bottle of Jack and a handful of Tootsie rolls.”

Clark laughed at the man’s strange expressions. Perry White was a genuinely nice guy. Clark didn’t come across too many of those any more, particularly in his business. He had a feeling they could grow to be good friends, provided he stayed in line and didn’t interfere with any of his... extracurriculars.

“Good man. I’ll see you then.” Clark patted the arms of his chair before rising to his feet once more and exiting Perry’s office.

Chapter 11: Fancy

Lois huffed another sigh as she slammed down the phone. She paced back and forth, nervously biting her nails. Why wasn’t he picking up? Okay, so she should have called him before about Clark Kent. Probably when she’d first heard the news on Wednesday. He was probably getting dressed and preparing for the Ball at this point. Which was what she should be doing.

She growled in frustration. She wanted a damn cigarette.

“Lois!” Lucy called out for her. “It’s six thirty! Are you ready?”

“No!” she shouted back at her sister irritably. She scrambled to grab her dress and barely managed to get her feet through the base before her sister came strolling into her room with a gasp.

“Lois Lane! You’re not even dressed yet?”

“Lucy Lane!” Lois mimicked. “You’re not out of school yet?”

Lucy glared at her sister. “Low blow, Lois. And I’m serious. Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Well, you just told me six thirty, so...”

She had the pleasure of watching her little sister’s eyes roll up. “You know the car’s coming by to pick you up in less than half an hour, right?”

“I know!” she cried out in frustration. She pulled the dress sleeves over her shoulders, but struggled to reach the zipper in the back. “Could you just—”

Lucy smiled and went to her sister’s aid. “Hold still.” She tugged the zipper up, securing it in place and adjusting the draping of the off-the-shoulder sleeves after. “Oh, Lois,” Lucy breathed as she looked at her sister in the mirror. The midnight blue satin fabric contrasted beautifully against her creamy skin. She looked like the brightest star in the night sky. “It’s breathtaking!”

Lois tilted her head sideways and examined herself, swaying gently from side to side, enjoying the slight rushing sound it produced. “You really think so, Luce?”

“Lo, every man there is going to want you.”

Lois frowned at her sister disapprovingly.

Her hands went up defensively. “Want to *dance* with you, I mean.”

Lois sighed contentedly, swishing the dress again, a small smile on her face. It did look pretty good.

“Now, to do something about that hair.”

A groan escaped her lips. “Lucy, you couldn’t just let me have

my moment?”

“I gave you a moment,” she retorted slyly. “And now it’s my turn again. Let me please do your hair, this once? Please? Pretty, pretty, pretty please with a cherry on top?”

Lois rolled her eyes. She never let Lucy do her hair. For one, she never felt like she did a good job of it. And secondly, she always made such a big deal about it. Lois liked how her hair looked. It was just now starting to reach her shoulders again. She curled it under a bit and that was all. She was looking forward to growing it out a bit longer though. It would make it look nicer at events like this, and the longer she hung on Lex Luthor’s arm, the more likely it was that these sorts of events would come up.

“Please?”

Lois finally gave in on a sigh. “Fine! But only because I have no clue what to do with it and I don’t have time to decide myself. But you better make it good!” she said, voice warm but low with warning, pointing at her firmly.

Lucy’s face broke out in a grin. “Yes! I know exactly how to do it!”

The laughter bubbled out of Lois without her consent as her sister excitedly dragged her by the arm into the bathroom to get started on her masterpiece.

Clark swirled his glass of scotch gently, waiting patiently for his date to arrive. He paced the walls in a leisurely manner. It didn’t matter if she was late or not. All he needed was to get there at some point and talk to the man of the hour.

His phone rang suddenly, startling him. Clark floated lazily down to pick up the receiver. “Yes?”

“Sir, I’ve taken care of the shipments. Is there anything else you need from me tonight?”

Clark grinned as an idea suddenly struck. “As a matter of fact, there is one other thing.”

“You are aware that I am supposed to be at Mr. Luthor’s side in just a few short minutes?”

“Yes, I’m aware. This will give you an excuse though.”

He heard a sigh come across the line. “Very well, sir. What is it?”

“Would you mind being the driver to pick up Lois Lane for the Ball? I know Luthor likely has someone already picking her up, right? So, drive to get her yourself, tell her the driver that was going to get her was running late and so you filled in. If Luthor asks, tell him the same thing.”

“I don’t understand, sir. Why?”

Clark shrugged. “What does it matter? I’m asking you, aren’t I?”

“And you want me to take her straight to the party still?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Clark furrowed his brow when Nigel failed to respond right away. “Do you have a problem with that, St. John? Or am I allowed to make my own plans without your input?”

He quickly backpedaled, reassuring him that there was no problem. Clark smiled facetiously. “Good. Oh, and Nigel? Fire the other driver. We’ll frame him up for some low-level crime of some kind.”

Nigel agreed hastily and got off the line. Clark sighed. Sometimes, Nigel got to thinking that they were on equal footing just because he knew more of the plan than anyone else. He needed to do things like tonight to keep him in his place.

There was a slight knock on the hotel room door. Clark righted himself quickly, planting both feet on the floor firmly before striding across the room. He ran his fingers through his slightly unruly locks and pasted a smile onto his face before he opened the door.

“Hey.” He greeted the woman warmly, gesturing for her to come in. “You must be Tiffani.”

She smiled and nodded, blonde locks swishing with the motion. “You’re Mr. Kent?”

“The one and only,” he replied cheekily. “I apologize for having you meet here, at this hotel instead of my place. It’s just a precautionary measure, you know.”

“Fine by me. It’s really beautiful.”

“You should see my place, then,” he said smoothly, his voice rumbling low in his chest.

She flushed attractively, and Clark couldn’t help but feel a spike of pride and lust. “So, Mr. Kent,” she started slowly. “I’ve heard a little about you. How come you didn’t have a date of your own to attend this ball of yours?”

“My date snubbed me.” He waved it off as if it were nothing.

“You?” Her eyebrow arched in surprise.

“Apparently, I wasn’t her ‘type’ or something.” Clark gestured with a shrug. “She has standards, and I can respect that. Plus, I guess she’s engaged to some nobody.”

“Well, all the better for me, I guess.”

Clark grinned at the model. She was right. Besides, he wasn’t really that interested in Cat Grant. He’d just asked her to see if he could. And the agency was always a good fallback in a pinch. Exhibit A was standing just before him, and she was quite the knockout.

He checked his watch and realized the time. “We’d better get going if we’re going to make an entrance. We can come back later if we want.”

She grinned at him as he put his hand on the small of her back and led her out the door.

“Coming!” Lois shouted to the knock on her door. She was just finishing putting on her mascara when the first knock came. She’d tried to call Lex three more times, trying to tell him that Clark Kent was going to come crashing his party. Well, okay, he wasn’t technically crashing, he had bought tickets. But still, she knew he didn’t take well to the news that he had bought the *Planet*. She didn’t want this celebration of life to be ruined by the presence of one bad egg.

Giving herself one last once-over, Lois finally ran to the door, grabbing her shoes on the way.

She was surprised by the face that greeted her when she opened it. “Nigel! What are you doing here?” She bent over and balanced on one foot as she slipped her shoes on.

“My apologies for the change up, Miss Lane. Your driver couldn’t be reached, so I came instead.”

“Oh. No worries. Just give me one more second.” She leaned back and reached for her clutch where it lay on the end table. “All right. Bye, Luce! Lock the door! I’ll be back late, so don’t wait up!”

“If you come back at all,” she called back to her.

Lois rolled her eyes and slammed the door behind her. She turned and smiled self-deprecatingly at St. John, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her bangs. “Sorry about that.”

He simply nodded. “Shall we?”

“Lead the way.”

Chapter 12: Under My Skin

Clark glided into the party with grace and ease, feeling on top of the world. Blonde model draped appreciatively over his arm, dressed in the latest fashion. The room was abuzz with murmurs as soon as he’d entered it—just the way he’d wanted. He spent a good part of his first twenty minutes there greeting people, making introductions. This was the first really public appearance he’d ever made, and in all honesty, it was going perfectly. All he needed here tonight was to be seen. That, and to be seen with Lex Luthor. But that was more for his own plans. Tonight was all about business and generating gossip.

Tiffani was loving it, working the crowd as much as he was, if that was possible. He knew as well as she did what this sort of publicity could do for her modeling career. Clark was fine with it—he was after all using her as much as she was using him. They

both sought attention, and were they certainly getting it. It may have been Luthor's event, but Clark Kent was fast becoming the man of the hour.

Clark was laughing and grinning and talking it up when he finally saw *her*. His eyes were immediately drawn to her and he felt all the breath leave his chest in a rush.

Lois practically floated into the room, her midnight gown sweeping her along and sweeping up the gazes of over half the men in the room as she went. If Clark didn't know better, he'd think she was the one who could fly. And the way that dark, silky fabric just barely skimmed the smooth, creamy skin of her breasts... His chest tightened with want. She was stunningly beautiful, more so than any other woman in the room—and that included his own date.

"Isn't that right, Clark?"

Clark blinked for several long moments, realizing that he'd been staring at Lois Lane for longer than he'd intended. That woman certainly could get under his skin, had ever since the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. He adjusted his glasses where they sat on his face, and turned back with a smile. "Yes, that is. I'm sorry. Will you excuse me for a moment, gentlemen? And ladies." He smiled with a little eyebrow waggle at Tiffani, who grinned and right back at him and brushed him away.

He grinned and turned away, eager to go find the woman he was most interested in. It took him several moments before he located her, but unfortunately, his progress was halted once again by another man blocking his path.

"Mr. Kent, I'd just like to say once again how thankful and honored I am that you thought of me to invite to this event—"

Clark nodded and smiled, keeping his frustration hidden just beneath the surface. He'd lost her again. "Don't mention it, Jimmy. Just get me some good pictures for the paper, all right? And hey, enjoy yourself." He clapped the kid genially on his shoulder.

"Thanks, Mr. Kent. Oh, and—"

"James! There you are. Did you see—"

Lois' voice and her steps ground to a sudden halt as she caught a glimpse of him. "Oh, uh... Mr. Kent. I, uh, I didn't see you there."

"Lois!" Clark allowed some of his genuine surprise and delight seep into his voice and ignored her obvious discomfort. "Good to see you too. You look absolutely beautiful this evening. It's no wonder so many men have been staring after you."

She appeared flustered, a flush rushing to her cheeks and delightfully spreading across her chest as she floundered for any sort of reply to that. "Uh, thank you, Mr. Kent."

He waved aside the formality, managing to do so without displaying the amount of discomfort the name caused him. "Please. How many times do I have to tell you guys to stop calling me Mr. Kent? Clark or Kent will work just fine."

"Kent, then." Lois corrected herself, barely masking her irritation with him. Clark smiled at that. She had such fire to her.

The three of them stood together in silence for a moment before ultimately Olsen broke the silence. "So, uh, what were you wanting to say earlier?"

That blush came back suddenly, and Lois' eyes darted over to Clark's face so subtly that he might have missed it if he hadn't been watching her carefully. He smiled at her, waiting for her to continue. "Oh, it was nothing really. I was just wondering if you had spotted Lex anywhere yet."

"No, not yet," Jimmy responded. "You'd be more likely to see him first."

Clark thought this would work as a nice segue. "By the by, how is that boyfriend of yours? I was hoping to speak with him at some point tonight."

Lois glared at him suspiciously and snapped, "Why? And secondly, how do you know he's my boyfriend? I never said that

to you."

"Oh, Jimmy told me on Wednesday," he said simply.

"Jimmy?" she asked quizzically, glancing at the young photographer with an arched brow. "James, you mean?"

"Jimmy is fine," he quickly said, and Clark chuckled politely. Obviously the young man didn't want Lois to cause any doubt about him in the mind of their boss. God, the man was a kiss-up. "Anyway, I better go get on those pictures." He turned quickly, ducking out of their company without another word.

And suddenly, in the center of a crowded room full to the brim with strangers, Clark and Lois were left alone together. She smiled tautly at him, the air thick between them for reasons Clark could still hardly wrap his mind around. He didn't know what it was that had him so focused when she was in the room, but it was exhilarating. He shot her a bright grin in an attempt at being friendly and hopefully not too overeager. "So, you and Lex Luthor, huh?"

Lois folded her arms stubbornly, unconsciously drawing his attention back down to her chest again. "And is there something wrong with that, *Kent*?"

Clark's gaze flitted back up to her face. "No. Not at all. He's a lucky man."

She turned away from him and ran her tongue over her teeth. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing. I'm just curious how an investigative reporter winds up dating a man like that."

She scoffed. "What, a billionaire? An older guy?"

"No. You could have whoever you wanted. I just meant someone so... carefully guarded." He let a little of his resentment color his words, and watched as a frown started to crease her brow at his word choice.

The music started to swell, and before they knew it, people were making their way out onto the ballroom floor. Clark offered his hand out to her with a smile. "Care to dance?"

"Not particularly," she shot back quicker than he'd expected, a little bite in her tone.

Clark tamped down his disappointment, trying not to take offense, and merely shrugged as he withdrew his hand. "Maybe later, then, Miss Lane."

Her eyes shot back up to his, and he could see her attraction to him. He willed her to give in for a few moments, just to see what would happen. He knew it would ruin his plans for the night, but it sure would be fun. Maybe he wouldn't have to play this game, maybe he could just skip to the good bits...

The moment was broken as Lois' gaze strayed to something behind him and a look of distaste crossed her features. Clark felt his brow furrow quizzically and he was about to turn to follow her gaze when a hand sidled over his shoulder and his question was answered.

"Clark." Tiffani's high-pitched voice spoke his name into his ear. Clark ground his teeth briefly before forcing a smile onto his lips. "Who's this?"

"Tiffani, this is Lois Lane. She works at the *Daily Planet*. Lois, this is Tiffani."

Lois shot the model a patronizing smile. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Want to dance, Clark?"

He nodded with a grin and wrapped his arm around her waist. "See you later, Miss Lane." And he smoothly turned away and guided his date to the dance floor.

Lois fumed. How dare he come up to her, criticize her choice in men, invite her to dance with him, and then gallivant off with some leggy blonde bimbo in the span of five minutes? It was outrageous! At least he didn't seem all that interested in that Tiffani girl—

She halted her train of thought. What did it matter if he was interested in some blonde model or not? It wasn't like she had any claim to him. Or that she wanted to. She shook her head and

wished for one of those tall servers with the wonderful trays of champagne to cross paths with her sooner rather than later. She had a feeling it was going to be one of those nights—she'd either need a lot more alcohol or several cigarettes, and Lex wouldn't let her smoke at his party of all places. Not when they'd just gotten through their last little spat. She could be good a little longer, for the sake of her sanity and perhaps their relationship. Why start a fight when there wasn't a point to be made?

At that moment, she finally spotted Lex on his way down the staircase, already talking it up with some suits. She couldn't help but roll her eyes at him and she stormed over to meet him there. She just had to tell him what that jerk had just done. And that said jerk was here making a scene. Then she could let it go and focus on enjoying the night.

Because Lois was not going to allow some low-life, snobby jerk get under her skin.

Chapter 13: Ballroom Blitz

"Lex Luthor, why haven't you returned my calls?"

Luthor took in her figure as he slowly walked up to her. The strapless, off-shoulder, midnight blue gown was absolutely stunning on her, and though he'd seen her in more lavish attire—and at times seen her in much less than the gown that hugged her curves in just the right way—he found his breath still taken away by her beauty. He took her hand and kissed it gently. "I can assure you, my darling, I'll never make that mistake again."

She rolled her eyes as he led her to the dance floor immediately, starting to sway gently with the soft waltz music. "Stop playing coy, Lex. I'm serious."

Luthor's face softened from the grin it previously held into a look of concern for his hopefully still-future-fiancée. "What's the matter, my dear?"

Lois kept her voice low but the urgency wasn't toned down any. "I've been trying to get a hold of you all day—"

"I'm sorry. I've been busy preparing for tonight. Nigel hadn't informed me that you'd made any sort of contact."

She waved a hand through the air, brushing away his concern. "It doesn't matter. I was calling to warn you—"

"Warn me?"

"Yes," she said through gritted teeth. "It's about—"

"Mind if I cut in?"

Lois and Lex's movements ground to a halt as Clark's smooth voice drifted over them. Lex fumed, and saw that Lois' reaction wasn't far behind his. The man didn't have the gall, did he? Lois' voice dripped with polite rancor when she spoke. "We're dancing here, *Clark*."

Clark broke out into a smile. "Yes, I know. That's why I asked to cut in."

Lex's brow furrowed slightly at the hostility Lois was showing to the interloper, and turned to calm things down. "I'm sorry, I don't believe we've been properly introduced yet. Lex Luthor." He held out a hand, which the man opposing took heartily.

"Clark Kent."

"Now why does that name sound so familiar to me?" he wondered aloud, a small smile on his face. Lex knew exactly who he was and seeing the reaction on the younger man's face was worth all the trouble.

Lois begrudgingly reminded him. "Lex, Mr. Kent is the man I was just about to tell you about. The one who bought the *Daily Planet*?"

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Ah! Clark Kent of CK Enterprises, of course! A pleasure to finally meet you." Clark nodded and smiled, and Lex could see that his request still stood. Clearing his throat, he placed a quick peck on Lois' cheek. "Later then?" he asked, and as she nodded in response, Lex went off to let them dance.

A jealous expression crossed Lex's face as soon as he had

departed from them. He went directly over to Nigel, standing in the shadows of the room, keeping a close watch over everyone. He nodded slightly as Luthor approached.

"Nigel," he said, voice low and jealous eyes glued on the man currently dipping his intended. "What else do you know about Mr. Clark Kent?"

An eyebrow quirked slightly upward, but that was all. "No one seems to know much about him, sir. His latest purchase of the *Daily Planet* is the first really public thing he's ever done. Up until that point, few people even knew his first name, or what he looked like."

"Well, he certainly looks different from what I expected," Lex murmured. "I thought he was some rich older man in his fifties, and those glasses?"

"Apparently, they're a part of his trademark."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that. I just think they make him look ridiculous."

Nigel almost smiled. Almost.

"You'd think he'd have a little decorum, at least. He's a guest at my home, my party, and he waltzes in and comes up to steal *my* girl away from me. How did a man like that ever get to own a third of Metropolis' real estate? How could anyone trust that lying face?"

Nigel nodded and answered the first part of his boss's question. "Through subsidiaries and puppet companies mostly. It's really hard to decipher the man, though, from his business practices. He's practically a recluse. This is entirely out of character for him to be in the spotlight so suddenly." His tone took on a more reflective quality, and Lex glanced at the butler with a slight frown. Nigel shook his head and shot him a forced smile. "Not sure why it bothers me so."

Lex had to agree, it was most definitely a bold switch. He watched as Lois suddenly pushed away from the billionaire and strode firmly out of the ballroom. Lex smiled slightly at the little triumph, when the younger man seemed to smile to himself and—shocking Lex—followed her path out of the room.

A flare of jealous rage sprang up inside him. With a taut smile to Nigel, he excused himself and followed the two of them.

"Kent, you idiot!" Lois' whispered voice was heated and harsh. "I said I didn't want to dance with you like two songs ago! Do you know how close I am to just wringing your neck right now?"

Clark, seemingly amused at her small threat, grinned and pulled her body flush against his as they began their dance. "This close?"

A flush of heat washed over Lois' cheeks and chest at the closeness. She could certainly feel everything... She swiftly pushed him back several inches, keeping their distance appropriate. Besides which, Lex was now looking back over at them from his perch with Nigel. "Cut it out. What do you want?"

Clark chuckled slightly. "Two billionaires want to dance with you within moments of each other and you're not flattered? Why, Ms. Lane, you're practically the belle of the ball!"

She was about to retort when suddenly he dipped her. She clutched desperately at his arms, then felt stupid for doing so. His dark chuckle came back and his hot breath washed over her skin as he leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

"Don't worry. I'll never drop you."

Her skin crawled with what she assumed was anything but arousal—because there was no way in hell that's what it was.

"Well, as much as I appreciate that, I'd rather stand on my own two feet, thank you very much."

He lifted her back upright with a lopsided grin. "No problem, Miss Lane."

They danced on in silence for a few moments longer before Lois finally blurted what had been on her mind. "I just don't understand what you want to do with me."

A frown crinkled his brow. The simplicity of his answer shocked her. “I like you. Nothing wrong with that.”

“And what about your date? Bambi, was it?” She stuck out her chin in defiance, challenging him.

He just shrugged and smiled. “Tiffani. And she’s still dancing somewhere.”

Lois snorted. “It doesn’t bother you that she ditched you?”

“First of all, no. I mean, it’s not like we’re in any way exclusive. And secondly, I left her to come dance with you, now that you’ve decided to dance. Is that a crime?”

Lois stared into his chocolatey brown eyes, drowning in them. They were so interesting, so full of so much that they were practically unreadable. She didn’t know how that made her feel...

Then her thoughts jolted her to a stop. How it made her feel? She was in a relationship, for Pete’s sakes! She shouldn’t be having any thoughts of the sort. Quickly she snatched her arms out of his grasp and stormed out of the ballroom, not caring what she looked like to anybody else.

She just had to get away and clear her head for a few seconds.

Clark stood there confused for a moment before taking off after her with a small smile.

He caught up to her quickly, thanks to some judicious use of x-ray vision, in what he assumed to be Lex Luthor’s study. When the door closed behind him with a click, Lois jumped. She scowled at him after collecting herself. “Kent, what are you doing in here?”

He grinned. “What are you doing in here? The party’s out there.”

“I’m getting away from *you*,” she retorted.

Clark pouted slightly. “Is that any way to treat your new boss?” He took a step closer, going for playful intimidation. He leaned casually against the wall with one arm, trying to stay outside her personal space bubble so as to not set off any major alarm bells. He wanted information, he didn’t want a lawsuit. Although what he wouldn’t give to have her.

Lois suppressed a shudder and huffed out of exasperation, pushing past him. “First of all,” she said, ticking off each of her fingers as she went on. “*You* are not my boss. My boss is Perry White. That has not changed just because you bought the newspaper. Secondly, this has gone well past the line of creepy, even bordering on sexual harassment. And finally, even if I were interested—which I am *not*—I already have a boyfriend, thank you very much. So, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll back off.”

Clark, who had been regarding her quite seriously while she said her piece, suddenly grinned. She took a step back, physically thrown off balance by his shift in demeanor. He saw himself through her eyes for a moment, and realized he might be coming off a little more predatory than he’d intended. Perhaps Lex’s personal office wasn’t the right place for this, wasn’t setting the right tone. Harassment wasn’t his plan, but she couldn’t know that. He took a step back himself and kept up his smile to put her more at ease.

“What?” she snapped harshly.

“My apologies, Miss Lane.” He continued to grin as he stepped away to peruse the room. “I did not intend for you to feel threatened or harassed in any way. You are a bright, beautiful young woman, to be sure. But it was never my intention to make you feel uncomfortable. I’m sorry if you thought I was... coming onto you at all. I can assure you that is not the case.”

She gave him a suspicious once-over, a hint of uncertainty and a flash of disappointment striking across her delicate features. Better. Her posture loosened suddenly, less on guard, and it seemed she’d decided to believe him. “Okay. Good. But what is your intent, then?”

He flashed her another quick grin. “That’s a question for your boyfriend, as you called him. I’ve actually been trying to talk with

him.” He let that statement hang in the air before considering a moment and turning away. “Anyway, I’ll leave you to it.”

He turned and walked into the next room, more of an outer area of Lex’s study, filled with a collection of rare artifacts and trinkets. Lois remained in place in the other room, standing as though torn about what just happened. Clark pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose and continued to stroll around the office, examining the quite impressive collection. He crushed the little tingle of excitement he felt at actually being inside Lex Luthor’s quarters. This was the closest he’d ever been to the man in the past seventeen years. If he lost focus now it wouldn’t have been worth all the trouble. He listened patiently as footsteps approached from the distance.

Suddenly the sound of metal scraping prompted him to turn around. Clark’s eyes went wide as he felt more than saw the cool metal of a sharp blade pressing against his chest. He swallowed down the brief chill that ran down his spine and met the eyes of his would-be aggressor.

Lex held his gaze firmly for a few moments, neither being the one who wanted to break the silence first and end whatever competition that had just been started. Finally, Clark spoke, letting Lex think he had won this round. He nodded down at the sword without taking his eyes off of the man before him. “Macedonian?”

Lex smiled politely, if not a tad bit menacingly, before pulling back and hefting the weapon in his hands. “It belonged to Alexander the Great. A brilliant tactician.” He looked at the blade almost lovingly before passing it over for Clark to examine. “Alexander’s strategy was simple—always control the high ground. It was with this sword that he—”

“—Defeated Darius the Third, and was proclaimed King of Asia.”

Lex looked at his opponent with a calculating eye, evaluating him. “You know, you surprise me, Mr. Kent. I’m not often surprised. Then again, I suppose it makes sense. One doesn’t always meet face-to-face with a man who was, until the last couple of weeks, practically a ghost.”

Clark smiled tightly, the expression never quite meeting his eyes, and he quickly moved to change the subject. “You have quite the impressive collection here. I hope you don’t mind my looking around.”

“Well, normally I don’t let just anybody go waltzing through my private study...”

“Of course, of course. I was just curious. It’s not every day that I get an invitation to another billionaire’s home.”

The flare of Luthor’s nostrils told Clark that he’d caught the insult hidden in the words “another billionaire,” and Clark’s bright, fake grin grew to be a little more genuine. Lex bristled at the sight and squinted his eyes at his opponent, sizing him up. “You know, I’m curious. For a man such as yourself, never coming out of hiding—this is a very different approach. Why the sudden change?”

“Why, Mr. Luthor, I think Lois was wrong. You’d be an excellent newsman. That’s a very solid question.” Clark took amusement in Lex’s glare, but didn’t answer the question. “You know, Lois is a very smart woman. You’re very lucky to have her. A man like yourself? Must not be easy.”

Anger flashed through Luthor’s eyes and he stepped closer to Clark. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing at all, I assure you,” he said smoothly, voice taking on a soothing tone.

“That’s not nothing,” Lex practically growled, leaning in menacingly and not buying a second of it. Clark backed towards the wall as Lex advanced on him. The sword was still in his hands, but the blade was no longer pointed at his body at least. “Do you have some sort of problem with me that I’m not aware of?”

Clark smirked. *Oh, how much you’re not aware of...* “Not yet.”

“Well, good. Because I’m warning you, Mr. Kent—I might

seem like a nice, harmless philanthropist on the outside, but I'm more than capable of handling myself. I've got lots of contacts in this town and I know you think you can just waltz right in and make a big show of everything you do and swoop everything out from under me, but I assure you, my business over the years has more than earned me a little loyalty. I will fight for everything I've got and more, and that extends to Lois. She's mine. As much as LexCorp is mine, and this building is mine—Lois Lane is *mine*. And while you may have been able to make your money incredibly fast overseas, you're on my turf now. So quit playing these little games with me, because you can't win."

Clark chose now to dart his eyes towards the door, where Lois stood there gaping at the scene before her. She must have heard that last bit of Lex's speech. Good. Lex followed his gaze and immediately the tough guy act he had been putting on melted off as he scrambled to recover. "Lois? What—uh, when—"

Clark clamped down on his initial reaction of grinning smugly at his opponent and instead pretended to be genuinely threatened by the man. He straightened up and moved away from Lex, dusting off the front of his jacket with a note of finality. "Well, I'd better be going. My date's going to start wondering what happened to me," he said loudly, slipping away and out of Lex Luthor's study with a sigh of relief.

He had no idea how long he'd been holding his breath. Tonight was the first time he'd come face-to-face with Lex Luthor since... he didn't know when. He couldn't really count the time when he walked past him and out of the Metro Club. He'd spoken to him in passing, followed from a distance, kept an eye out on him. But to actually speak to him? The thrill of it all made a shiver run down his spine. This was it. This was really happening now. He grinned to himself as he strode out into the ballroom.

He found his date relatively quick. "Hey," he greeted with a grin and a smooth arm slipping around her waist. The bubbly blonde turned to smile at him, glad to have someone by her side again.

"Hi, there. Where'd you go just now?"

He batted her question out of the air with a wave of his hand. "Just had to talk some business. You want to get out of here?"

Her brow furrowed slightly, as though that question took a lot of thought. Clark barely managed to keep himself from rolling his eyes at her. It would be nice if he could stop dating these ditzzy blondes and skinny models and actually have a conversation with someone. It would be even nicer if Lois were that person.

"But they just said they're going to be making the big announcement in a few minutes. Don't you want to stay for that?"

"Tiffani," he chided, rubbing slow circles on the small of her back. "I can always find out what happened here later. I just had to be seen. And models don't usually care about this sort of news." A brief hurt reflected in her eyes, but he kept talking to keep her attention. "Now, all I'm saying, is that we could go and do something more fun, somewhere else. What do you say?"

Tiffani ran her eyes up and down his body languidly, and Clark smiled devilishly. He had her, and he knew it.

"I say we should go, then."

Clark pressed a light kiss to her cheek before leading her out towards the elevator. He collected their coats, helped his date into hers, and together they headed out of Lex Luthor's penthouse.

He couldn't keep the grin off his face. Clark was satisfied with the amount of chaos he created tonight. He'd gotten Lois' attention, got the chance to face off with Lex, and now he was going home with a beautiful woman—not his first choice, but he was playing a long-term game here. He could bide his time. Besides, things were going to move fast from here on out. If there was any fun left to be had, now was the time.

The White Orchid Ball was a phenomenal success.

Chapter 14: Secrets

Clark inhaled deeply as he strode through the bullpen, taking in the smells and sounds. It was a beautiful Monday morning, and he could hardly wait to come back into the office—especially given all of the press the White Orchid Ball had gotten. Or more specifically, all the press he had gotten. It was everywhere—every paper, every news station, all the gossip rags, radio and talk shows—Clark Kent and his escort were plastered everywhere.

He was also secretly pleased by a sidebar in the *Metropolis Star* about how Lex Luthor and his girlfriend of a year seemed to be on the rocks, even after all of the celebration over the announcement of the new potential space shuttle. Which meant that his little tête-à-tête with Lex had exactly the impact he'd have hoped on Lois Lane.

Clark couldn't help but grin gleefully at that thought. The look on her face when she'd walked into the outer area of Lex's study and saw the sword in her boyfriend's hands, heard whispers of the words exchanged—it was so immeasurably valuable to Clark. She probably didn't even know the full extent of their conversation, which was good. He didn't really have anything else to say to Lex at the time—well, not that wouldn't have ended in something along the lines of an outburst of anger and profanity. But it was just the first step he needed.

An image from his nightmares, from his childhood suddenly streaked across his mind, halted his steps temporarily in his quest for Perry's office. An image of Lex Luthor's face the first time he ever met him—half drunk and grief-stricken, and pointing accusingly at the only man Clark had ever truly cared for in his life. That memory, among others, grounded him. Whenever he was starting to feel too confident, too loose, or just in general was forgetting himself, he called on one of those horrible moments, and it sobered him right up.

Clark shook himself, pushing past the memories that threatened to engulf him in pain and anguish as he pushed through the doors of Perry White's office and plastered his smile back on. "Perry, my friend! How was your weekend?"

Perry looked up at him with slightly diminished surprise—he wouldn't be surprised much longer if Clark kept popping back in "unexpectedly" like this. Clark settled himself into a seat in a relaxed manner, adjusting to get comfortable. Perry smiled in return. "Thanks to you, son, it was pretty fantastic. I had a great time at the Ball with Alice. And after," he said with a hint of humor, and Clark couldn't beat back his grin at that.

"Good! That's exactly what I was hoping to hear."

"How's about yourself? You seemed to leave a bit early..." Perry's voice rose with suggestion and a slow grin.

Briefly Clark's mind flicked back over that night, after the party, and he smiled. "Not half bad myself," he said. "Actually, I came by to ask about the rest of the night. I, uh, ducked out a little early with my date. What was the announcement about?"

Perry guffawed loudly, thumping his hand on the desk. "You dog." He chided Clark admiringly, before focusing more on the question asked. "Lex unveiled his latest attempt at conquering outer space. Space Station Lex."

Clark's brow furrowed at the older man's tone. "That doesn't exactly sound like you're too fond of Lex Luthor."

Perry shrugged. "I don't know what to tell ya. He seems like a fine guy and all, but he's a bit of a pompous rich kid sometimes. And I don't like him with Lois. I know he's serious about her, and he loves her, but he's just too old for her, and it just feels wrong. And I know it sounds stupid but—"

"No." Clark cut him off quickly, before clearing his throat. He averted his gaze a little, trying to come up with the right wording. "No, uh, I know exactly what you mean."

Perry's brow arched suspiciously at him, and Clark felt the sudden need to explain himself. Instead he shifted in his seat awkwardly, not meaning to have said anything of the sort. "And

how exactly do you know what I mean?"

It was Clark's turn to shrug. "I don't know, he just... gives off this vibe. Comes across as fake, like he's hiding something."

Perry turned thoughtful at this, considering his words and trying to put them into context with the man he knew. "I suppose... Don't tell Lois I said any of this, all right?"

Clark nodded. "Of course. I just dropped by to ask about the party, remember?"

Perry White smiled in relief, glad the young man could be trusted enough with this information. "Right. Well then, if there's nothing else?"

"Nope, that's all." Clark rose with a smile of his own, outstretching his hand to shake the editor-in-chief's. "See you soon, Perry."

With that, he departed, heading for the elevators. His conversation with Perry had opened up some interesting new avenues. It was definitely worth exploring.

His phone rang in his pocket, and Clark quickly detoured into the stairwell to answer it, speeding up several stories so he was near the roof before taking the call. "Hello?"

"Sir, there's something wrong with the *Messenger*."

Clark pulled a face at the sound of Nigel's voice. "What?"

"The *Messenger*. The space shuttle? There's been a small malfunction with one of the engines, and now they're talking about cancelling the launch altogether."

Clark felt the bottom fall out of his stomach. "But that would mean that Luthor's plans—"

"Yes, sir, it would."

"But his station—"

"How would you like me to handle this, sir?"

Clark ran a hand over his brow anxiously, walking up the final few flights of stairs contemplatively. This would be great news for Luthor. He would barely need to wait before getting the go ahead from NASA and the government, and his space station would be in the air. And after all of the work Clark had put into dwarfing Lex's publicity these last few weeks? Lex Luthor's name would skyrocket to the top of the headlines once again, and Clark Kent would fade into the background, a relic of last week's news. Not to mention, it would paint Lex as the hero, the savior, swooping in to save the day at the last possible—

Wait a minute.

Clark's steps suddenly halted and his hand hovered just over the door handle to the roof as genius struck. He grinned. "Nigel, isn't it just so convenient that something like this happened just two days after Luthor's big announcement?"

"Sir?"

"I mean, what if, say, it was leaked that Luthor's plans were initially going to be denied. And then, it came out that this... malfunction of sorts, was really sabotage?"

Clark could practically hear the moment it all clicked in Nigel's mind. "It would seem quite suspicious, sir."

"Do we have anyone working on the *Messenger* who might cooperate?"

"I'm sure we can find someone who might be persuaded."

Clark finally grinned and he opened the door to the roof, taking in the fresh air and sunshine. "Good. Then go with that. I'll take care of the logistics."

He turned, a satisfied grin on his face and phone pressed tightly against his ear—when he saw her. His smile dropped and a shiver of trepidation travelled up his spine at the idea of nearly being caught.

She turned around to see who it was that had just entered and he locked eyes with her. Instead of saying any parting words, Clark simply hung up on Nigel and smiled at Lois Lane. "Sorry. Didn't know anyone was up here, thought it would be fine to take a call."

She shrugged, but was unable to keep from fidgeting

nervously. "It's fine. You didn't need to hang up so quickly."

"Eh, we were done talking. It was just business stuff anyways."

She didn't seem to care what he was saying, twitching her fingers anxiously. It was then that he noticed the cigarette in her hand, and it made sense.

"Ah," he replied with a nod. Clark tucked his phone away into his pocket and retrieved a lighter from another. "Need a light?" He offered, flicking the lid off and the flame to life in one fluid movement.

Lois eyed the tiny fire with longing, glancing between the unlit cylinder in her hand and his face apprehensively. She didn't seem like she wanted to smoke, even as her expression filled with more want.

Clark fished out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket with a nonchalant shrug and lit himself one. He took a deep lungful of smoke in his mouth and briefly allowed his eyes to flutter shut. The tobacco had no effect on him whatsoever, but for some reason, the smoothness of the sensation was relaxing. It was like coffee—the caffeine really didn't have an impact, but simply the gesture of the action was reassuring and rejuvenating. The power of suggestion, he supposed. He puffed at it a little longer before removing it from his lips and exhaling slowly, enjoying the drift of the plumes as they floated up into the atmosphere, absorbing the pungent scent of it.

He caught a glimpse of Lois out of his peripheral vision, and saw her staring longingly at his smoke. He grinned and turned to face her more fully. "You're trying to quit, aren't you?"

She collected herself, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear distractedly, and walked away from him toward the ledge of the building. Clark stared at her warmly, her silhouette draped in sunlight as she looked out at the view of the city from their vantage point. His skin tingled, and not just from the warmth of the sun.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound so condescending about it. Good for you. You shouldn't give in just out of a moment of weakness." She didn't acknowledge that she'd even heard him. Clark stepped towards the edge with her, trying again. "How long has it been?"

She crossed her arms and stared at the cigarette in her hands once again. "Two days."

Clark barked out a short laugh, before coughing to cover it up. "Sorry." He grinned sheepishly. "That's good."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Oh, for God's sake! Give me the lighter!"

His eyebrows shot up in surprise as she snatched it from his hand and lit the drug in a flash. She'd moved at a speed that rivalled his own—and then conscious thought slowed for him as those ruby red lips wrapped eagerly around the end of the cigarette and began to suck the smoke down her lungs. Clark swallowed as he watched her, reminded of her striking beauty as she took a few breaths. Her sigh of relief was accompanied by a plume of smoke, and Clark couldn't keep the corners of his mouth from twitching up. "That bad, huh?"

Lois breathed heavily, lips curving in a smile around the butt as she spoke. "You have no idea. Just... It's been a long weekend."

Clark didn't respond to that, waiting for her to expound on her comments, but to no avail. Instead, she turned to him with a smile and asked a question of her own. "So. What important business brought you up here, Mr. Kent?"

Clark's eyes glittered mischievously even as the fear of getting found out chased another chill up his spine. "Business of the private variety, Miss Lane."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him and puffed some more. "Fine. Don't tell me."

He laughed heartily at her, something Clark didn't find himself doing all that often. It felt... good. It was like a breath of

fresh air. *She* was like a breath of fresh air.

It had taken close to twenty years, but finally, things were starting to go right in his life.

“You know, I didn’t take you to be a cigarette sort of guy.”

Her voice broke into his musings and he smiled at her. “Eh, I don’t know. I’ll smoke cigars and stuff too, but there’s just something about a good cigarette... It feels like home, you know?”

Lois nodded. “Yeah. I get it. My dad smoked for as long as I can remember. I hate myself for doing it, but...” She shrugged.

“Yeah. My mom smoked. My dad did too, I think. And everybody else in Kansas,” he joked.

She looked to him in surprise. “I didn’t know you were from Kansas.”

Clark felt his pulse jump unexpectedly—he hadn’t meant to reveal that little tidbit. How did that slip out of his mouth? He was always so careful... what was it about this woman that had him opening up so much? He wanted to just come straight out and ask her, see if she felt the same about him. But instead, Clark cleared his throat and tersely answered her. “Uh, yeah. I don’t like to talk about it much.”

Lois’ eyes glanced over him as he stood uncomfortably still beside her. He felt like somehow she was reading his soul, that every shadow and dark piece to his past could be puzzled together by her if only she looked long enough.

“You don’t really have any trace of an accent.”

“Thank you,” he replied a bit too quickly, dismissing her comment.

Lois decided to respect his wishes and drop the subject. For now. “Can I ask you something? On a totally unrelated topic.”

He glanced warily at her. “Shoot.”

She hesitated, and Clark was unsure he really wanted her to ask her question. “What exactly were you talking to Lex about at the ball?”

Clark shifted uncomfortably. “Nothing. Just... business.”

“Of the private variety, I suppose?”

Clark turned to see her jutting her chin out with an air of defiance and he smiled. “You see, Miss Lane? Now you’re getting the hang of it.”

She huffed a laugh. “Right. That seems like as straight an answer as I’ll ever get out of either of you.”

“Luthor didn’t tell you?”

A flash of anger passed over her face. “No. He just said it was business. And that he was showing you his collection.”

Clark couldn’t help but scoff at that. “I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

Lois eyed him curiously, but he made no other comment. He stood there, smoking once again, the wheels in his brain turning and leading him down a far away path. Taking a deep breath, Lois finally spoke. “I’m sorry for how he behaved. I caught the end of what he was saying and saw what was happening—he had no right to act that way.”

He shrugged loosely. “I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to come off the way I did towards you, I just wanted to get his attention.”

“Why?” Lois batted the question back at him, and his eyebrows arched in surprise. “I just mean... why did you want his attention? Do you know him or something? He’s never mentioned you.”

Clark’s jaw twitched as he shook his head vehemently. “Only by reputation.”

As he turned to her with a small smile, he caught her eye, saw the question on the tip of her tongue. He knew what was coming, what sort of buzz would stir up in that reporter’s brain of hers at his wording, and he had to cut it short. Clark took one last drag of his cigarette before putting it out, grinding the glowing embers on the concrete ledge with an air of dismissal. “I’m afraid I must be going, though. Business doesn’t run itself, isn’t that right, Miss Lane?”

She eyed him cautiously, trying to figure him out. “No, I guess it doesn’t.”

He smirked as he walked backwards towards the door. “We should do this again sometime.”

That prompted a scowl from her, just as he’d expected. “Maybe we should, *Kansas*,” she called out after him, hoping for a reaction. But all he did was shoot her a playful glare over his shoulder, a smirk toying with the corners of his lips. And with that he strode briskly back into the stairwell, allowing the door to slam shut behind him.

Chapter 15: Tesselate

Dr. Samuel Platt threw down his pen ferociously onto the desk. He groaned as he glanced at the clock, which was trying to tell him it was well past midnight. He rubbed at his eyes in a futile effort to refocus them. This just didn’t make sense. There were whispers of a malfunction coming down the line, of some sort of design flaw, but that just couldn’t be true. He’d worked on it himself—he hadn’t noticed a flaw at the time. But staring at the pages before him, there was clearly something there. He’d been so sure, so positive that his original designs were going to work. He hadn’t anticipated an engine blockage in the final stages of testing, so close to the scheduled launch too. He sighed. Oh well. That’s what science was, he supposed. Trial and error.

A loud clanging noise outside grabbed his attention suddenly, followed closely by some hushed whispers. Dr. Platt felt his heart skip a beat and he decided to cautiously investigate.

He poked his head out the door nervously. He didn’t see anything suspicious. But there was a noise again, and he followed the sounds of it along the wall.

It was two in the morning. No one was supposed to be here. Not even him.

His stomach fluttered when he finally saw the people responsible for the sounds. There were about five of them, dressed in black, moving around in the restricted area surrounding the spacecraft. Dr. Platt watched, riveted, as he edged forward toward the balcony overlooking the entire area.

“You think the Boss knows what he’s doing on this one? This is pretty above the radar for him.”

“Man, keep your mouth shut.”

“I’m just saying, there’s a big difference between pulling some low-level jobs and being asked to bomb government property—”

Dr. Platt’s heart skipped a beat. *A bomb! What?*

“You two would do yourselves a favor if you’d shut up about it. You should know better than to question anything the Boss says.”

The husky, strong female voice rang out loudly in the large space, and Samuel Platt felt his stomach drop. He *knew* that voice. He craned his neck around, leaning over the balcony to try and get a glimpse of the woman in question. So far all he could make out was a bit of her dyed blonde hair. But what would Dr. Baines be doing there? Instructing these strange men to put a bomb on board?

The railing creaked, giving him away. Platt felt his heart speed up as the woman’s head snapped around to find the source of the noise. He ducked for cover, but knew he’d been made. So he did the only thing he could think to do.

He ran to his office, grabbed as many files as he could and took off.

Lois chewed her thumbnail nervously, trying to keep focused on her assignment while simultaneously keeping an eye on Clark Kent out of her peripheral vision. He had been lurking around the office more and more often, drifting closer to her almost unknowingly ever since they had spoken on the roof a few weeks ago. She didn’t know why he was here today—sure, he’d given some BS reason about going over the books with Perry, increasing their ad sales and revenue and blah blah blah. That was all fine,

but there was still something off about him. He wasn't simply focused on generating more income for the company. Besides, if that was all there was to it, he didn't need to come into the office to get the okay. He could have done it from anywhere, without even consulting Perry. But instead, he was here. And his attention was doing weird things to her stomach.

His eyes cut over to hers randomly, and she quickly looked away. She didn't miss his grin at her, but she steadfastly ignored it, burying her nose into her notes instead. *Focus, Lane. Don't look up until you've read this entire page.*

Which was why, when the commotion started, she'd barely taken notice. That is, until she heard her name being called.

"Lois? Lois Lane? Can anybody point me towards Lois Lane?"

She frowned, noticing Perry and Clark entering the bullpen to watch the chaos, and turned to look around for the source of the voice herself. It wasn't someone she recognized. He was a crazy, wild-eyed sort of man, in a long, dirty trench coat, and he was being closely followed by security trying to detain him. Curiosity piqued, Lois stood and started to make her way over to him.

"Miss Lane!" he shouted upon seeing her, practically flying down the ramp into the bullpen to meet her. Security scrambled after him. "It's going to explode! Here—"

Those words were like a bomb themselves. People heard the word "explode" and ducked for cover, anxious that the unhinged man had something to do with it. He thrust a package into her hands and Lois found herself frozen with fear. The guards immediately came up and restrained the man, trying to drag him away fruitlessly.

"It's just my credentials!" he exclaimed out of frustration, pulling against his captors. "You don't understand—the space station has been sabotaged, the *Messenger* is going to explode! Miss Lane—you have to tell my story—"

"We're so sorry, Mr. White. Mr. Kent." The security guard nodded to them as his partner cuffed the man. "He ran right past reception. We've had trouble with this one before."

"Please!" the cuffed man begged. "You have to believe me! The space program is doomed!"

"Get him out of here," Kent said, his voice ringing out over all the others. "This guy's a box short of a variety pack."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Kent." The two security officers complied, dragging the deranged man off and into the elevator.

"Wait a minute," Lois lamented suddenly. "What did you do that for?"

He frowned at her. "What for? A maniac came into the office screaming about a bomb. You think he should be allowed to hang around for a pot of coffee?"

"I'm just saying, the man was in distress. This obviously isn't a bomb." She hefted the packet up and peered at it.

"Even so," Clark conceded with a frown. "You never know. Do you have no concern for safety?"

Lois shifted her weight and crossed her arms tightly across her chest in a defensive gesture. The package remained clutched tightly in her grip. "In spite of what you may or may not believe, Mr. Kent, I am capable of taking care of myself."

He tossed his hands up in the air in frustration, not bothering to respond. Instead, he simply turned and stalked back into Perry's office. Lois grinned, taking it as a small victory. Perry frowned at her though, and she deflated a bit. So it was a bit needlessly reckless. Even she had been put on edge when he'd started shouting about a bomb. But still. She had a point to make.

She collapsed into her desk chair and flopped the bundle of papers down on her desk to examine it. There was nothing spectacular about it, just a plain ol' manila envelope. Not even a signature or a drop of writing on it. It was quite crumpled—she guessed as much from herself as it was from the crazed man himself.

Completely unremarkable.

Lois sighed, opening it up to see what was inside that he had deemed so important. She frowned as she sifted through the pages, poring over each page in detail as the hours went by.

There were credentials all right. Loads of them. Passes to get him into laboratories, some of his pay stubs from his checks from EPRAD. And most of all, schematics. Loads of schematics and blueprints, each showing varying parts and equations. A lot of the math went straight over her head, but the results were clearly delineated. There seemed to be two different sets of information—one in which the launch of the *Messenger* went off smoothly, and the other where some sort of malfunction happened, causing the shuttle to indeed explode.

Her heart pounded at the realization. The *Messenger* was going to explode. Lois shot to her feet, chair rolling several feet away at the sudden action. Her heels clacked at a furious pace as she stormed over to Perry's office, nearly barreling over several people in the process.

"Hey!"

"Can it, Jimmy!"

She pressed a firm hand against her boss's office door and it swung open with a bang. "Chief, I think there's a story here and we should check this guy out. The crazy guy from this morning? His name is Samuel Platt and he was an engineer at EPRAD for ten years—"

"Lois, are you nuts? You want to chase down every crazy that storms into the bullpen? You ain't gonna live too long if you do that, darlin'."

"Perry, I'm serious. He has all of the paperwork on the *Messenger* plans, and it doesn't make any sense. They seem to all say the same thing, but in one set of plans it takes off effortlessly and the other it explodes. It seems suspicious. Plus then there was all that nonsense about a bomb..."

"Lois," he growled.

"I mean, Perry, what if it's not malfunction, but sabotage? What if someone deliberately wants the launch to fail?"

"Who would want that? It's a scientific expedition. You're not thinking very logically, Lois. Hard facts, Lois. That's what we need," he said slowly, but she was leaps and bounds ahead of him in her whirling mind.

Lois opened her mouth to speak again when a knock on Perry's door frame tore their attention away. Clark stood there with a smile on his face. "Sorry to bother you again, Perry. I forgot to give you these earlier. You mentioned you liked football the other day, so I thought I'd give 'em to you."

He waltzed in and placed two tickets on Perry White's desk. He picked them up with great interest, gasping when he realized what they were. "Metropolis Tigers tickets? On the fifty-yard line? No, that's too much."

He brushed his concern out of the air. "I have season tickets. Don't worry about it. Besides, they're playing the Chiefs this weekend, and I'd have been sitting on the wrong side."

"Chiefs fan, huh?"

"Born and bred."

"Speaking of *chiefs*..." Lois finally spoke up, giving her boss a pointed look.

"Lois, my answer is no. You're gonna get yourself hurt or worse."

"I'm sorry, was I interrupting something?" Clark glanced between the two, Lois staunchly refusing to make eye contact with him.

"Lois here was just telling me how she wants to pursue the crazy man's story."

Clark's eyebrows jumped to the ceiling. "The lunatic screaming about a bomb? I don't think so."

Lois turned up her nose at the words. "You don't get to have an opinion on the matter, you're not my boss, thank you very

much.”

“Uh, as a matter of fact, I do. I pay the insurance premiums on this company, its employees and the building. I say that gives me a right to weigh in when an employee decides to partake in reckless endangerment.”

Her eyes did a nearly complete three sixty in their sockets, rolling as they so often did. “Fine. I won’t investigate it. Whatever.”

“Lois darlin’, you aren’t just saying that are you? You won’t investigate?”

Instead of responding, she simply spun on her heel to leave, ignoring her boss’s nagging. It didn’t matter what Perry told her, and he knew that. Lois Lane did anything she damn well pleased.

Perry sighed, worrying a hand around the thinning hair at the top of his head. “I tell you, if that woman wasn’t one of the best damn investigative reporters I’ve ever seen, I’d... well, I don’t know what I’d do. But luckily I don’t think I’ll ever have to find out.”

Clark chuckled in response, eyes tracking her path across the bullpen with admiration. “I certainly hope you’re right.”

Chapter 16: Live and Let Die

When the *Messenger* exploded on live television the next morning, Lois felt a strange yet familiar mix of horror and pride. It happened to her a lot—sometimes, Lois hated being right all the time, particularly about the bad things. But she was a realist. The world was a bad place. If you didn’t expect the worst out of people, you would just be disappointed all the time.

And you’d never have a shot at happiness if you didn’t always expect to be let down.

But when Perry called her into his office and put her on the case, she pretty much felt completely terrible. She hurried out of his office, scrambling to find Samuel Platt as soon as she possibly could. She needed him to make sense of his notes, to be a source for her story, and mostly to make sure he was okay.

She had a terrible gnawing in her gut that he wouldn’t be.

Lois scrounged through her purse as she rushed down that street, the sound of her heels striking the pavement chasing her. It would be just her luck if she couldn’t find her pager. Not that it wasn’t already a bang-up day to begin with. She groaned. She didn’t remember having it at the office, and she sure as heck wasn’t about to try and call Lex to see if she’d left it there last night. Not after the fight they’d had. Again.

Suddenly she found herself having a head-on collision with a hard body and it knocked her back a few steps. Dazed and confused, she looked up to find herself face-to-face with her nemesis. She scowled. “What are you doing here? You stalking me now?”

Clark Kent’s brow arched in scathing disbelief. “Um, Lois? You ran into me. And if you didn’t notice...” he held up a steaming large cup of coffee and tapped the side pointedly.

Lois glanced between the cup and the coffee vendor he was standing in front of, who was shooting her a dirty look for holding up his line. “Oh,” she huffed out, visibly deflating. “Sorry. Um, can I have a small latte?”

“You can if you get in line, lady.”

Lois opened her mouth to retort but was cut off by a firm “She’s with me, Mike” coming from Clark Kent. She scowled at him, but seeing as it got the grumpy coffee vendor to prepare her coffee, she decided she’d let it slide this time. “Thanks,” she mumbled in his general direction, hoping he wouldn’t read into it.

“Don’t mention it. Besides, take it as my apology.”

“What do you have to apologize for,” she stated blandly as the man handed over her coffee and she watched as Kent reached across with a hundred-dollar bill.

“Keep the change, Mike.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Kent.”

He finally turned to face her full on and she realized his eyes looked stormy, like something was eating at him from the inside. “I was the one who told you not to investigate the story with Platt. I thought he was just a whack job and made it up so he could get to you. I thought he was dangerous... I never stopped to think he was right.”

Lois didn’t know what to say. She was floored. “Uh... thank you?”

He laughed briefly and started walking away from her. She tried to catch up with his long strides, having to take double the steps to match his pace. “Hey, Kansas, wait up!”

Clark sighed and slowed. “I’m not a fan of the nickname.”

“So I gathered. Where are you going, Kansas?”

His eyes rolled. “I was going to head to the Daily Planet to give this information to you—as a sort of penance—but since you’re here already, might as well do it now. I found Platt’s place.”

Lois felt her eyebrows rocket skyward. “You did?”

“Yeah. Lives in some seedy little apartment off Twenty-third and Monroe. I figured we could go check it out together.”

Lois choked slightly on her coffee at that qualifier. “Together? What makes you think I would be okay with that?”

“First of all, it’s my intel. I have a lot of sources and connections. Secondly, it could be dangerous. And thirdly, it will kind of help with my guilt. I hope anyways.”

She eyed him suspiciously over her paper cup, watching him take a sip of his own steaming drink. He did seem genuine, and he had valid reasons... “Fine. You can tag along. But this is my story —”

His hands flew up defensively. “I know, I won’t get in the way, promise.”

Lois rolled her eyes and walked ahead of him. She stopped short a few paces ahead of him and caught his eyes lingering on her bottom half a little more than she liked. She put a hand on her hip and glared at him. “You coming or not, Kansas?”

His eyes snapped up to meet hers, no remorse in them. “Yep. This way.”

“Well, you were right about one thing: this place is definitely seedy.”

Clark couldn’t help but agree. This was definitely a part of Metropolis he didn’t venture into often. And considering he ran half the crime in the city as it was, that was saying something. Nigel had to work hard to find this crackpot. Maybe he’d pay him a little extra for this job.

He hadn’t accounted for Dr. Baines to be seen planting explosives. Even Dr. Baines hadn’t expected it. All she had been told was that she’d be rewarded handsomely if she did this one last job for the Boss. Nigel as usual was his mouthpiece. Clark rarely did his own business face-to-face, and he wasn’t about to jeopardize that now, when things were finally coming together. Nigel was his best bet—the British butler being known as a member of Lex’s personal staff only helped his case.

Samuel Platt had thrown a major wrench into the situation. He was a crazed scientist, unwilling to believe that his calculations would have caused a malfunction to begin with, and therefore easily latched on to the idea of sabotage. It was unfortunate that he was to be another casualty of this situation, but there was little left to do. Now he could at least be a tool for them to use.

They approached the right apartment, and he gestured for Lois to knock. She wanted to lead after all. He could have spared her all this drama, but she had been so determined to get this way. He had wanted her on the sabotage story, but not in this way.

Lois knocked and the door swung open slightly. She glanced back at him, somewhat nervous. “Dr. Platt? Dr. Platt, are you in there?” She pressed her palm flat against the door and carefully pushed in, explorative.

“Lois,” he hissed. “I don’t think we should—”

“Oh hush. Something’s obviously wrong. Samuel Platt? Oh

—” Her hand flew to cover her nose as a putrid smell welcomed them in. Clark had to fight his gag reflex—enhanced smelling ability was not usually a gift he was thankful for. Today was no different.

“Dr—” Lois stopped abruptly as they rounded a corner and found him sitting in a chair facing away from them. His head was tilted at an unnatural angle and his feet rested in a pan of spilt water. But the most concerning aspect was the crackling of electricity in the air as he gripped severed electrical cables in his hand. Lois covered her mouth and slowly made her way around the man in the chair.

“Lois, maybe we shouldn’t—” Clark reached out a hand towards her to pull her back when she gasped in horror. He looked over to see her staring into the lifeless, open eyes of Dr. Samuel Platt. “My God, Lois.”

She seemed to snap out of it then, and spun around to bury her face into his chest. Clark’s arms came up around her automatically as he cradled her to him. And even as his heart hurt for her pain, it simultaneously soared at the chance to hold her like this.

A third, uncomfortable wave of emotion crested in his chest. He stared into the man’s glazed over eyes, and anger swelled up inside him. This was not what he’d told Nigel to do. He’d said to find the doctor, shake him down. Scare him into telling the right story. Killing him had not been the request.

Not yet, anyway.

He squared his jaw and closed his eyes as he felt them beginning to heat up. He was definitely going to have to have a talk with Nigel later on. Right now, he had to focus on the woman at hand.

“We should get out of here, Lois,” he said in a low voice.

She turned red-rimmed eyes up at him, incredulous. “We can’t just leave him here!”

Her outburst surprised him, and he held up his hands defensively, ignoring the pang in his chest at the sight of her glassy eyes. “I meant out of this room. We can call the police from outside just as easily as we could in here.”

Slightly mollified, Lois sagged against his chest and nodded. Clark rubbed a gentle circle against her back, guiding her ahead of him out of the room. His hand tingled where it made contact with her coat, as though he’d never felt anything so wonderful in all his life. He knew the woman inside the coat was responsible for that feeling, but it was slightly overwhelming still. Being this close to her was intoxicating. He had to fight to keep his head clear.

Once they were out on the curb, Clark pulled his cellular phone out of his breast pocket, dialing nine-one-one speedily. He kept his hand on Lois’ back, reassuring, as it rang.

“Clark?”

His eyes drifted over to hers in surprise at hearing her use his first name and he found her broken and staring back at him through those dark brown pools. She seemed to struggle with what she was trying to say for a moment before looking back at the ground in shame. “Am I responsible for all this?”

Clark felt his heart go out to her, but just as he opened his mouth to respond the line clicked on his phone.

“Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?”

He shot her an apologetic look and turned his attention back to the receiver. “Uh, yes. This is Clark Kent, and I’m at 1375 Monroe Avenue in downtown, and we’ve found a dead body—”

“Clark Kent. The billionaire. Really?”

The operator’s voice dripped with sarcasm. Clark grew irate. “Yes, that Clark Kent. And I would appreciate if you took this call more seriously. I’m reporting a homicide.”

“You do realize that wasting police resources is a violation of federal law, even if this is a prank call—”

“Gimme the phone.” Lois’ tone brokered no argument as she practically stole the device from him before he even had a chance to fight her off. “Hi, listen. This is Lois Lane, the reporter. I’m

here with Clark Kent—and yes, he is the *real* Clark Kent—and I can assure you that we did find a body, so if you could send a squad car out here, that’d be much appreciated. You can feel free to be skeptical all you want, but if so I want you to personally tell Inspector Bill Henderson that he knows what will happen if he crosses Lois Lane, and that he can expect a scathing article on the incompetencies of this city’s emergency services if it takes longer than ten minutes for someone to get over here. Got it?”

Clark stood in awe of her as she swiftly chopped the disbelieving operator down to size. He could have done something like that himself, but watching Lois do it was as much a treat as it was intriguing. She certainly took the bull by the horns. It was a good quality for an investigative reporter, but would be even better for a partner.

His thoughts came to a screeching halt so fast that he could almost smell the rubber burning. Partner? Where had that thought come from? What kind of partner was he thinking here? Relationship? Business? He tried to rationalize that he simply meant a romantic partner, but for the first time, Clark wondered how she would work into his other business. This was the first display he’d seen of hers that made him think she’d do well as a boss.

Perhaps as the Boss.

His eyes carefully tracked her movements as Lois hung up and handed the phone back to him, a smug grin pulling at the corners of her lips. “Here. They know better than to ignore a phone call from Lois Lane.”

Clark grinned himself as he pocketed the device once more. “Call in a lot of dead bodies, do you?”

She shrugged. “I pull my fair share. If it’s not a body, then it’s trouble of some kind. How many people do you know that are on their local precinct’s permanent witness list?”

“Not many.” He thought again of how useful Lois could turn out to be if used right. He shook his head to clear it a bit. No, not used. She was too valuable to simply be used.

“Let’s just say that Henderson owes me several times over.”

He smiled, then recalled what she’d asked him earlier and sobered. “Lois, you know this isn’t your fault, right? Just like the *Messenger* exploding wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known any of this was going to happen.”

Her shoulders slumped slightly again, and her air of self-confidence once again disappeared. “I know that, logically. But I can’t help feeling that if I had only listened to him sooner, or suspected more, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“If you wanna blame someone, Lois, blame me,” Clark stated honestly.

She elbowed him in the ribcage. “Try some of your own medicine, Kansas. You’re no more to blame than I am.”

If only you knew, Clark thought, wrapping an arm around her once again. “Thanks.”

“Besides, who’s really to blame is the son of a gun who caused all this.”

Clark carefully schooled his features in case she turned to look up at him, keeping watch on her out of the corner of his eye. “If someone went to all this trouble to get rid of Dr. Platt, that only makes me believe him more.”

“So it was sabotaged then,” Lois said, wheels in her head obviously turning. “But who on earth would want to sabotage this expedition? It was supposed to be a scientific experiment. Nothing but altruistic purposes.”

“Maybe someone had some less than altruistic reasoning.”

“Someone who wanted more credit perhaps?” Lois suggested. “Or maybe it was all just to target one particular person. No, that doesn’t explain why Platt would have to be killed.”

“Perhaps he was jealous,” Clark stated.

“Maybe,” Lois conceded, internalizing all the different avenues that presented themselves. “But who would have that sort

of motivation?”

Clark remained silent on that one. It was too early to present her with that theory. Maybe she'd come to her own conclusions. If not, he'd just carefully lead her to the correct answer.

Sirens wailed in the distance, closing in on them, and Clark nudged her gently. “Sounds like they're almost here. You okay to go back in there?”

Lois heaved a sigh and nodded, smiling up at him. “Yeah. Thanks, Kansas.”

“You're welcome, Metropolis.” She wrinkled her nose at him and Clark couldn't help but laugh. “What? It works for you but not for me?”

“It just doesn't sound right. Kansas has a nice ring to it.”

Clark sighed melodramatically, prompting another laugh from Lois. “I'll get you to come around on this.”

She smiled broadly at him, and he felt his heartbeat stutter for one involuntary moment. She leaned in close, licked her lips, and in a low tone of voice finally replied, “Not likely, Kansas.”

As she walked past him towards the flashing red and blue lights, Clark groaned. Damn that woman. She knew exactly what she was doing to him. And as he watched her hips sway in the distance as she called out to get a detective's attention, Clark found himself only more fascinated with the enigma that was Lois Lane.

Chapter 17: Black Parade

“Suicide? That's ridiculous!”

“He's tried it before, Lois. Look, there's no sign of forced entry, no sign of struggle, nobody saw anybody come in or out—”

Clark turned away from the argument between the detective and the reporter, getting an idea of just how often Lois and Henderson clashed. It seemed Nigel had been too clean about it, if nobody even saw him. Shame really. Would have been an easy way to frame Lex if someone had seen the old British man leaving a dead guy's apartment. He watched as they carefully loaded Platt's body onto a stretcher, a twinge of almost-remorse beating in his chest, a twinge that was gone in an instant. He had become well acquainted with death in his time, more so than he'd like. However, this specific one bothered him. He wasn't sure if it was because of his proximity to Lois, or that it hadn't been intended, or if it was simply the fact that the man was a father, leaving behind a child. Regardless, it was affecting him differently this time around.

“Man's gonna barbecue himself, he oughtta use sauce,” one of the cops joked.

“Man's gonna barbecue himself, he oughtta use sauce,” one of the cops joked.

A sudden fury engulfed him, and Clark found himself marching straight up to the cop and pushing him with a little more force than necessary. “You do realize that's a man's life you're joking about? His name was Samuel Platt. He was a brilliant scientist, and someone who cared about others. He had a family. Under the circumstances, I don't believe that kind of humor is appropriate. Got it?”

“Clark!” Lois called out to him, and instantly his nerves felt a little less on edge.

“Sorry, sir. Really, I'm sorry. Just cop humor, you know?”

Clark straightened up, ran a hand through his hair, and took several deep breaths to get his emotions back under control. “No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go off on you. We all have our coping mechanisms, I suppose.”

“I'll be more careful next time.”

Lois put her hand on his arm and pulled him aside. “Are *you* okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Fine. It's just... Nothing. Where were you with Henderson?”

“I was just explaining to Lane here that his ex-wife mentioned that he's attempted suicide before—although not in this way, I admit,” the detective conceded. “And I'd like to personally apologize for the way the nine-one-one operator treated you on the

line, Mr. Kent. They're not supposed to do that.”

Clark shook his head. “It's all right. I understand why it might sound like a prank.”

“Next time just mention Lane's name and you'll be put straight through.”

Lois narrowed her eyes at the man. “Ha-ha. Very funny.”

“But also true,” Henderson corrected, a small smile pulling at the corners of his lips. Clark cocked his head to the side, trying to gauge exactly what the relationship was here between Lois and the cop. It was teasing, volatile, and a little bit unguarded. It was almost... like siblings. He filed away the note for further investigation later and smiled tightly at the detective. “Anyway, this is the end of the line for me. What brought the two of you out here together, anyway? Not exactly a hotspot for high society.”

“Dr. Platt stormed into the *Daily Planet* yesterday telling us”—Lois elbowed him sharply in the ribs, and Clark quickly corrected himself—“something important. We didn't believe him, but after... something happened, I looked him up and Miss Lane and I came to investigate.” Clark glanced over at Lois to see her smile and nod at him in approval.

Henderson rolled his eyes. “And I suppose you don't want me to know exactly what that something important is because you're going to be trying something illegal later to prove it?”

A spike of fear jolted through him. “What? No!” Clark, affronted at the insinuation, glanced at Lois, who remained suspiciously quiet. “We aren't, right?”

“I don't talk shop with cops, Kansas.”

The detective sighed. “I hope you know what you're getting into,” he said, before turning his attention back toward Lois. “You still coming to the precinct's annual picnic next weekend, Lane?”

“Of course,” she replied.

“Good. I suspect I'll see you again before then, but thought I'd remind you just in case. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Kent.”

Clark reached out and shook the detective's outstretched hand. “Hopefully it'll be under better circumstances next time.”

“As long as you're hanging around Lane, I'd doubt it.”

Lois' eyes rolled and Clark grinned. She folded her arms before asking, “Is there anything else, Henderson? Or are we done?”

Bill smiled, always happy to get a rise out of her. “No, we're done here, Lane.”

Lois was dead on her feet by the time she finally made it to her doorstep that night. After the ordeal of finding Dr. Platt's body in the morning, the rest of her day had been effectively shot. She and Clark had made their way back to the *Daily Planet*, wherein they had to recount their story to Perry, and subsequently everyone who overheard it that wanted to know more. Kent had eventually said some words that kicked everyone back into gear and got them all working again. They had each taken a smoking break—one together, another just Lois on her own, contemplating on the roof.

It had been a very strange day.

It only got stranger when, not ten minutes later, Lex came knocking at her door.

She frowned curiously as she opened her front door. “Lex, hi. What are you doing here?”

“What, I can't stop by and see my girlfriend for a minute?” He smiled and swaggered past her into the apartment.

“No, I mean, it's a nice surprise. I just wish you would have called and let me know. I wasn't expecting you.”

He turned back around and faced her with a frown. “Do I need to make an appointment?”

Lois sighed out of exasperation. “Please, Lex. Not tonight. It's been a bad day.”

Concern filled his warm brown eyes as he crossed the room to place his hands gently on her arms. “What's the matter, darling? Is everything all right?”

Lois chewed her bottom lip nervously, thinking on what she

should tell him. “I found a dead man today.”

He gasped sharply, wrapping an arm around her almost instantly. “Lois, I’m so sorry, darling! What happened? Who was it? Have you caught the people responsible yet?”

The barrage of questions was exactly what Lois did not want to get into. “No. I don’t know, Lex. I’m tired.”

“I’m sorry.” He raised his hands in defense of himself. “I’m sorry. I just... I worry about you. You run off and do dangerous things every day and we had that fight last night and it just doesn’t sit well with me.”

She sighed in exasperation, turning away from him to rustle through her cabinets. The need for a cigarette, so close yet so far, struck at her quickly and fiercely, so she busied herself with pulling out ingredients to cook... something, and let her thoughts roam over Lex’s words. When was he going to understand that she didn’t need his permission? That she had her own life and he had his and they could still be together in spite of it, and that a fight didn’t mean the end of their relationship? But instead of attempting to explain it to him, she just shot him a weak smile and replied with a simple “I know.”

“And really, Lois, I don’t know why you keep refusing to get a partner. It’s dangerous to go running up every dangerous alleyway all by yourself—what if that man’s killer had still been there? What then?”

“Well, luckily I didn’t have to find out today. Besides, Kent was with me, so it wouldn’t have mattered anyway.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Lex stiffen and go silent. She frowned, turning to give him her full attention.

“What?”

“You were with Kent today? Why were you with him? Clark Kent?”

Lois eyed her boyfriend suspiciously, looking him up and down. “Yes...” she said slowly, dragging out the sound. “Is there a problem with that?”

He gave a little hum and crossed his arms, and in a moment Lois saw his emotions for exactly what they were. A flare of amusement sprang up in her chest at the realization. “Oh my God, you’re jealous.”

“Am not.”

“Are too!” she cried out with a smile, unable to restrain herself in the circumstances. “Lex Luthor is jealous. Is it a money thing?”

“I’m not jealous!” he protested once again, petulant as a child.

“Then tell me this: is there any logical reason you can tell me as to why you don’t like Clark Kent?”

“I have plenty of reasons.”

“Name one.”

Lex opened his mouth, eyes darting around the room as he gaped like a fish. “I just... he’s... I don’t like the man. He gives me a strange vibe and he’s very antagonizing toward me. And you’re going on and being all buddy buddy with him and if that makes me jealous, then so be it. I don’t like anyone who gets to spend time with you.”

Lois gave him a small sympathetic smile, and leaned in to put a hand gently on his shoulder. “Lex, that is the very *definition* of jealousy. There’s nothing to be jealous over. Kent is harmless. Besides, I like my billionaires a little less pompous.”

He grumbled a bit and crossed his arms, and Lois gave him a cheeky pat. “Now, not to seem like I’m kicking you out or anything, but I’m kicking you out. Lucy is coming home in an hour and I really need to spend that time winding down by myself. It was a long enough day.”

Lex sighed, and she braced herself for another quarrel. He’d say she should be able to wind down with him, and she’d say she liked her own space, and he’d say he didn’t understand why she always felt like excluding him. But instead, he surprised her for once, and took a step back with a nod. “I understand. We are okay though, right?”

Lois felt her shoulders tense up. They weren’t okay. He had to see that. They fought all the time, and he wanted to get too serious too fast, and even his jealous tendencies bothered her sometimes. He wanted to keep such a tight grip on her and she didn’t want to be limited like that... But she knew she couldn’t say any of that. Not tonight, when she was too exhausted to argue. So instead, she nodded, dropping her eyes away from his coincidentally as she loosed the words he wanted to hear. “Yeah. We’re fine, Lex.”

Chapter 18: Jealous

Lois huffed angrily, performing a practical interpretive dance to express her intense displeasure. She crossed her arms, flipped her hair over her shoulder, slammed the call button for the elevator several times and even started tapping her foot. All in an effort to ignore him.

“Could you stop?” she finally exploded, giving in to his antics.

Clark struggled to keep his smug grin under control. “What?”

“You’re fidgeting. It’s annoying. So stop it.”

His brow creased in amusement, and he nudged his glasses further up his nose. “I’m sorry. Did I do something wrong?”

He could practically feel the wave of inexplicable anger washing over her, and Lois didn’t do anything to contain it anymore. She whirled on him, displeasure radiating from every pore. “You know what? Yeah. You did. Why are you even here?”

“We found a dead body yesterday. Together. I’m in this as much as you are.”

“You could leave me alone, you know.”

“To face a potential killer? Yeah. Sure.”

Lois scowled darkly and turned back to face the elevator as it dinged. He didn’t expect her to agree with him, let alone say he was right, but she had to know he wasn’t wrong. It was reckless to go after this guy on her own. Not to say that she couldn’t handle it. No, Clark got the distinct impression that Lois Lane could handle anything.

“Well, I don’t want you getting in my way. You might be my boss here in the office, but out there on the street, you are low man, I am top banana. Got it?”

Her words flashed through his mind, striking him like a hot iron on a branded cow. He nodded, physically biting back a grin as he followed her into the elevator. “You like to be on top. Got it.”

She managed to simultaneously roll her eyes and glare at him, which only widened his smile. The elevator was quiet from then on out, uncomfortably so. Clark cleared his throat, fidgeted again, then froze as he remembered her earlier admonition. She still wasn’t talking to him. He sighed in defeat. “Look, Lois. I’m teasing. I don’t really understand what’s going on here. I thought we were finally coming to some sort of understanding yesterday. Why the sudden change?”

She didn’t respond quickly, instead taking her time to think over her reply. She hefted a sigh of her own at him, visibly deflating. “It’s nothing. It was just a long night, and I’d like to get this story over with before anything else happens.”

Clark stayed quiet as he took another sip of his coffee. That he could understand. This was getting to be a bit taxing, trying to balance working with Lois and his other involvements. He had to be honest with her, but not too honest. Sure, it was exciting, toeing the line so carefully, but that didn’t mean it was easy. He hoped it would get easier as time went on.

The doors opened and he followed her out and onto the street, watching with interest as she leaned out to call for a taxi. He had offered to call a car of his own earlier, but she’d insisted this would be the best way to not call attention to herself. And she was right, he was sure. Another point on the board for Lois Lane. She kept on proving her usefulness.

The ride over to EPRAD was not very thrilling. He was under the distinct impression that Lois was trying to stay as far away from him as possible—with her arms and legs crossed away from

him, huddled as close to the door as she could be. On one of the sharper turns, she slid across the slick pleather and rammed into his side briefly, causing his entire form to go rigid. She'd quickly pulled herself away, almost too quickly, and took up her post at her door again. He would have laughed if it wasn't so unbelievable.

Lois Lane was being very careful not to touch him. Or interact with him at all in any way, shape or form. Which got Clark wondering what made her think she couldn't control herself around him. Which, in turn, made him grin like a Cheshire cat, until he'd seen her glare at him again. If she wasn't careful, her face would freeze in that look of disdain and disapproval.

They walked into EPRAD through the front doors, which had him confused at first. He thought they were going to explore a little bit of the facility before jumping right in and questioning the lead scientists. Apparently, Lois wanted to do things in the reverse. Which was fine, he told himself. She's top banana.

The blonde scientist they'd met with had immediately flirted with him. Clark smiled charmingly, flirted right back. She was cute, no doubt, but he already knew who Dr. Antoinette Baines was, way before they'd decided to come in here. Nigel had explained to him the whole elaborate set-up last night, including how he'd been dealing strictly through Lex's people and himself. And it seemed Dr. Baines was running this little show for him. Something he'd be grateful for till the day she died.

"Can we take a look at it?" Lois' voice cut through his thoughts and turned his attention back to the conversation at hand.

"Sorry, no press allowed." But the smug grin the doctor wore gave the impression that she was anything but sorry.

"No exceptions?" he chimed in, relishing the way she blushed as he ran his gaze up and down her body.

"I'll see what I can do," she murmured, a bit husky.

Lois cleared her throat not so subtly. "Right. And on the subject of Samuel Platt..."

Dr. Baines brightened a bit and turned back to address Lois. "I have his file right here. Real waste of talent. Seems that the pressure of building the space station, along with his divorce, finally got to him. He started drinking and taking drugs. It went from bad to worse. We kept him on as long as we could. But, after he set fire to one of the laboratories, we had to let him go."

Her words seemed easy enough, not too rehearsed or forced or too blasé either. But Lois narrowed her eyes still and gazed at her—not too threateningly or anything, but it was enough to get the message of I-don't-trust-you across. "Dr. Platt didn't happen to submit any reports to you, did he? Something about coolants freezing ion particles?"

She frowned. "Coolants? No. But I could check my records."

It was amusing to Clark, in some small capacity. It was so easy to fake a cover-up when the thing you were covering up didn't exist in the first place. Nothing was where it "should" be, because there was nothing to begin with. But it didn't matter; create enough doubt, plant the idea, and suddenly everything looked suspicious.

That was the scent of the story Lois was catching onto here. She was just slightly and intentionally misguided in the direction of the deceit.

Which wasn't her fault, of course. But the way she caught on to the subtleties was fascinating nonetheless. Clark watched Lois watching Dr. Baines, virtually obsessed with learning how she operated. For future knowledge, he rationalized. So he knew what to look out for if she started questioning him. Not because she was beautiful and intelligent and captivated him completely. She was the key he'd been missing all along, the weapon he needed to bring down Luthor. It wasn't like he really had a crush or anything. Did he?

He weighed the option. He liked Lois, a lot. More than he should. And she didn't appear to feel anything towards him. Was

that a crush? He hadn't had one in such a long time, it was hard to know. Probably not since his brief time with Lana Lang when he was in foster care.

He sobered at the thought of her. That was a *long* time ago.

"Let me know if I can be of further assistance."

Dr. Baines' obvious attempt to catch his attention finally worked as Clark looked up to see the exchange coming to a close. He shot her a brief smile as Lois turned and walked past him. Clark picked up his pace in order to catch up with her. "So, what did you—"

"Shush."

He arched an eyebrow inquisitively. "Did you just shush me?"

"Shut up. Wait till we're outside." She hissed at him in a stage whisper, glancing over her shoulder surreptitiously.

Oddly enough, he found himself obeying, lips sealed until they were out in front of the building and he didn't see anyone else around. "Well, she seemed cooperative."

A sigh of exasperation slipped past her lips, and somehow her irritation amused him. "I don't trust her."

"Well, of course."

Lois' hair whipped around her chin as she spun her head to look at him. "Of course? What do you mean, of course? What did you notice?"

Clark kept his face very neutral. "Pretty, blonde, intelligent woman, standing right next to you and overtly flirting with me? Gotta get on your nerves."

"Ha!" She scoffed at him, shoving him away from her forcefully. "In your dreams, Kansas."

He grinned as he simply shuffled back to her side, nudging her with his elbow. "Oh, believe me, you are."

She huffed out of irritation and picked up her pace. "Well, it doesn't matter, 'cause you're wrong. I'll prove it."

Clark shook his head in amusement as she hailed for a taxi once again.

The elevator doors to the Daily Planet bullpen opened and out spilled Lois and Clark, laughing with each other. His eyes narrowed. They were entirely too jovial for his liking.

Lois' footsteps faltered and Clark's slowed beside her as she suddenly saw him and her eyes went wide. "Lex!"

Lex raised his arms in an exaggerated shrugging motion. Her surprise at his presence didn't sit right with him, but he tried to paste a smile on his face anyway. At the very least for Clark Kent's benefit, who was shooting a wary but calculating look his way. "Who else?"

She suddenly seemed to realize where and who she was, and finished walking over to embrace him. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't a guy surprise his girlfriend at her office?" Lex pressed a quick peck to her cheek and wrapped his arm around her waist possessively, only sparing himself a second to glance at the other man's face as he did so. He took a small amount of pleasure from the way a muscle in Kent's jaw seemed to twitch and jump at the PDA, and his chest filled a little with pride. Ha.

Lois quietly cleared her throat to get his attention again, and Lex turned back to her with a smile. "I was hoping I could steal you away for a bite to eat. That is, assuming you haven't had lunch already?"

His question was directed to Lois, but his gaze went straight back to Clark's, who smiled tightly and planted his hands in his pants pockets. "Nope. We were just out doing a little investigating, weren't we, Lois?" His eyes gleamed with something... something Lex couldn't quite name. But whatever it was burned him in his chest.

Lois spoke from his side, startling Lex as he remembered the reason he came here in the first place. "Yeah. But I am starved. You wouldn't mind if I head out a bit early for lunch, right?"

Clark gestured to the path behind him. "Be my guest."

Lois grabbed Lex's hand and led the way up to the elevators. "Thanks, Kansas. Come on, Lex. I've been craving some really good Thai food."

Lex smiled tightly at his opponent as he sauntered past, only dropping his grin when he and Lois had entered the elevator and the doors closed behind them. He sighed in relief, tired of keeping up pretenses. He shot a quick glance over at his girlfriend, the way she held herself so rigid and far away from him, and the pit in his stomach grew. Somehow, he was unable to beat away the feeling that he was standing on quicksand.

She was picking over her meal like a bird, pecking at little bites of chicken and moving the rice around her plate. Lex grew more irritated with each piece of onion she seemed to be setting aside.

He thought they were fine in the office. He knew she was surprised to see him, and irritated at his possessiveness, but altogether okay. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Lois?" He spoke softly, treading lightly. He didn't want to push her. Things had been on tentative ground with her of late, and there was no doubt in his mind that the reason for that was a certain billionaire who'd been spending more time with her than him.

The way she let her silverware clatter to her plate jolted him. His eyes snapped to hers, only to find her glaring at him as she finished chewing her food. "What?" he asked, genuinely confused.

She swallowed and took a long drink of her diet soda before responding. "Lex, can you honestly tell me that you came into work to see me at all?"

He frowned. "Of course I did. What do you mean?"

She sighed and picked up her fork again. "Nothing."

Lex felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickling. "Okay, fine. You want to hash this out right here, right now? Fine." He squared his position across her, more dominating. "You tell me last night that there's nothing there with Kent. Then I come and surprise you for lunch today as a sort of apology and I see you... cavorting with him?"

"Cavorting? Really?"

"Yes, cavorting. I don't like the way he looks at you—"

"It's not like I do anything to encourage that."

"Well you sure as hell don't discourage it!"

"Lex!" she cried out loudly. "The man's my boss. Not only is he my boss, but he's trying to be a friend. You've built him up in your head that he's out to get you or something, but Kans—Kent's been nothing but nice to me. We found poor Samuel Platt yesterday, and he seemed really affected—"

"Wait a minute. What did you just say?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "He's a human, Lex. Don't act so surprised."

He furrowed his brow and shook his head. "No, you called him something."

Lois looked uncomfortable for a flash, before adopting an air of nonchalance again. "What, Kansas?"

"Yeah, Kansas. You called him that earlier too. You have a nickname for him?"

"It's hardly a nickname," she said on an eye-roll, tracking the path of a nearby waiter and signaling for the check. "He's from Kansas. I just thought it was funny. There's nothing serious about it."

Lex wasn't paying attention anymore. Something about Clark Kent in connection with Kansas struck upon a synapse in the darkest recess of his mind. He couldn't quite reach it yet, what the significance was, but he could feel it right there—

"If you're not even gonna listen anymore, I'm gonna go back to work now. And I'm going on a stakeout tonight, so probably won't see you later either, so... bye, I guess."

He startled and looked up at his girlfriend as she grabbed her purse and walked away from the table. "Wait, Lois! I'm sorry—

don't—"

She turned the corner before he was able to even finish the sentence.

He sighed out of frustration, scrubbing a hand over his face. That was a disaster. He didn't know what was wrong with them lately. They'd spent the last year together peacefully, for the most part. Sure she'd turned down his marriage proposals, and they fought like any other couple, but not like this. Things had changed.

And as much as she would skin him for thinking it, it all began with Clark Kent's entry into their lives.

Chapter 19: We Must Be Killers

Clark paced back and forth across the floor of the conference room. It had been an hour since Lois had said she was going out for takeout, and she still hadn't returned. He was beginning to think she lied to him, because there's no way traffic was that bad at this hour, and because Jimmy Olsen was suspiciously missing as well.

The general consensus around here was that meant trouble.

He wanted to fly around the city and check things out, make sure she wasn't in any serious trouble, that she merely had a run in with an angry pedestrian or even Bill Henderson. Not that she went and did something stupid, like go back to check out the *Prometheus* without him.

Ten to one, that's what she did.

He sighed, beating the thought back into his subconscious where it belonged. Restlessness stirred inside his chest. He wanted to do *something*. Taking a break was a mistake. He was in the eye of the storm right now, stuck waiting for a lot of little somethings to happen. In the meantime, he was trapped, pacing the confines of his office-cage, clawing at the insides of his brain.

He ultimately chose to call Nigel and see how things were going on the project over slowly going insane. At the very least he could get some details out of him, maybe put his mind more at ease.

"Your final installment will be waiting for you in the helicopter. And I—" A ring emanated from Nigel's breast pocket, startling him mid-thought. "Excuse me," he said, smiling somewhat forcefully as he reached for the device and checking the identification of the caller. His eyes lit up in surprise. "I have to take this. Wouldn't want to keep the boss waiting."

"Of course," Antoinette responded, a slither of a smile slinking across her face at the mention of the boss, eager as ever.

It was all Nigel could take to keep his eyes from rolling as he picked up. "Yes, sir?"

"How are things going?"

"All quiet on the western front, sir."

"Excellent. Where are we with the shuttle plans?"

"It's all set to go in the—"

A clanging sound rang out and a flash of brown hair was all Nigel saw before gunfire rang out. He ducked down instantly, years of special forces training kicking in instinctually as he rolled and drew his own weapon in defense.

"What the hell was that?"

"It seems we have visitors. I'll call you back when it's been taken care of."

"Wait wait wait— Nigel—"

He hung up and jumped to his feet, leaving Clark Kent dumbfounded and uneasy on the other end.

Lois slowly blinked, her head feeling woozy and like it was filled with cotton. She moaned, tried to stretch, when like a shot of adrenaline she realized that she was tied up. Her spine straightened quickly as she tensed and struggled fruitlessly.

"Calm down, Miss Lane," a soft voice called out to her. Lois whipped her head around and her eyes settled on Dr. Baines. "There's nothing to fret about. Everything is in place. You just

have to sit back, relax, and enjoy the show.”

Quickly, Lois was able to clock Jimmy on the floor to her left, bound and gagged as well. So he would be no help. A tingling feeling ran up her spine at the potential that she wouldn't make it out of this one. She swallowed thickly, hearing Perry White's words of caution in her head, chiding her for diving in without checking the water level first. But now wasn't any time to panic. She looked around the space, evaluating her options. There was what looked to be a large door across the way, though it seemed heavy and was most likely locked. Plus there was the pesky problem of being chained to a chair. And her captors... who had guns.

All of the sudden, a loud crash filled the space, making her flinch even as she turned to see what the noise was. Her jaw dropped as she saw Clark Kent barreling through it, looking frantic.

Antoinette Baines seemed shocked herself, only a slight shakiness in her voice giving her away before she forced a sneer. She smoothed out her clothes as she said, “Good evening, Mr. Kent. I guess you don't know your own strength.”

Clark appeared to quickly realize the situation he had gotten himself into, and sheepishly looked to Lois. She scowled at him darkly—because of course he'd be so stupid as to follow her into danger without any more of a plan. Lois' gaze remained firmly on him, Baines' gun remained on Lois, and her henchman's gun suddenly found its mark on his chest as well. “Put down those guns,” he huffed, trying for menacing but not quite hitting the mark, what with all of the uncertainty swirling in the room. Lois rolled her eyes.

“Or you'll... what?”

Clark's mouth opened and closed for a minute, grasping for a plausible answer.

Nothing.

With a sigh, he stupidly raised his hands in defeat. The tattooed henchman was quick to wrestle him into a seat, back to back with her, and tied him down with the chains as well.

Before he could even raise a word in protest, their captors were out of the room with promises of more to come soon.

Clark sighed in relief, grateful for a little peace and the fact that Jimmy seemed to have stayed unconscious this whole time. It was much easier to explain something to just Lois. Although, there was no getting out of this one without a lot of explanations.

That is, if she would even give him a chance to speak. She was a seething, hot ball of anger against his back, he could sense it. He hesitated a split second before speaking. “Lois, are you all right?”

She growled—*growled!*—at him. He bit his tongue to hold back any remark that might make things worse between them and waited her out.

And waited. And *waited*.

He gave in finally, opening and closing the padlock on the chains that bound him nonchalantly. “Lois, what do you want me to say? I'm sorry? You know, I only came to help you.”

“I am not some damsel in distress, Kent.” She spat the words through tightly clenched teeth and in as low a tone as he'd heard from her. “I don't need a hero, and I definitely don't need *you*.”

“Now wait a second.” Clark turned, forgetting about his fetters. “Are you trying to tell me you wouldn't have gotten caught if I didn't come in here? Because you looked pretty tied down when I showed up.”

“Showed up? Try barreled in here like a five-hundred-pound gorilla! What were you thinking? Oh wait, you weren't thinking, like a typical man.”

“Lois, what is going on? Before lunch we were fine. I thought we were in this case together. But you were weird when you got back and then you bolted with Jimmy before I could even ask.”

“Let's just figure a way out of here already,” she snapped back at him.

Clark let her words sit in the air for a minute, contemplating. He could push it and make her angrier, or he could drop it and most likely never have the chance to get her to open up again. He didn't know which would be worse.

Unfortunately, the decision was taken from his hands when Dr. Baines' voice rang out shrilly throughout the facility, a startled “What!” that set Clark's senses on alert. If he tuned his hearing in, he could hear Nigel's low British accent murmuring reassurances to her. His jaw clenched with anger.

Nigel told her.

Oh, there would be hell to pay for this one. Time to get out of here.

Clark easily pulled apart the chains. “Lois, I think I've—”

“Managed to mess everything up? No kidding.”

“Lois—”

“Well!” Dr. Baines' voice sounded a little shaky underneath her false bravado as she walked back into the room. Her eyes glanced towards Clark repeatedly and he steeled his gaze. He was quick to cover up the broken chains when she turned to smile at Lois. “I'd love to stay and chat, but it looks like our time together is coming to a close. But accidents do happen.”

“Accidents?” Lois pestered, though Clark could pinpoint the spike of fear underneath her words as well.

“Well, we can't exactly go around letting some pesky reporters telling people all about this little project of ours. The Boss wouldn't like that.”

“The boss?”

Her gaze shifted to Clark's once again on the name, and quickly swiveled back to Lois with a saccharine smile. “That's of no concern for a dead reporter. And you—” Her heels clicked sharply as she walked towards Clark's side and bent down close to his face. “It's a shame you have to go this way though. You're just too pretty to die. Forgive me?” She pouted, but her blue eyes were clear with fright.

Clark's gaze narrowed, but without malice. He stacked all his anger behind his words. “I can take care of myself, thank you.”

She grinned impishly and pecked his cheek with a kiss. “Feisty. I like it.”

He could practically feel Lois' eyes rolling behind him. “What are you going to do with us?” he asked, forcing a little fear into his tone for the sake of the reporter.

“Oh, don't be silly! I'm not going to do anything! But I do feel I should warn you about some chemical leakage that just started in the plant. Staff is evacuating, but unfortunately trespassers don't get a warning.”

“Baines,” Lois growled, “you're gonna regret this.”

“Nope. See you all on the other side.”

She turned and fled out the exit with her two thugs following her. As soon as they were out of sight, Clark pushed his way out of his restraints and jumped to his feet.

“Kansas, how did you—”

“Missing link. Let's get out of here.” He knelt at her feet and started untying her until she was free enough to finish herself. He quickly turned and located the source of the spill, but too late. They were inches away from the dangerous chemicals mixing, and with no time to stop it—“Lois, let's get out of here!”

He grabbed her arm and started pulling when she slipped from his grip.

“Wait! Jimmy!”

Clark bit his tongue once more and with an eye-roll went back for the unconscious photographer. He lifted him over his shoulder with ease, grabbed Lois' wrist, and made a break for it.

The building exploded behind them just after they had gotten far enough away, Clark using the explosion as an excuse to propel them all a little bit farther forward.

Lois coughed, hanging onto his arm for dear life. She glanced up and saw a helicopter hovering above the wreckage of the

building. “Look! They’re getting away!”

Clark followed Lois’ gaze in time to see the helicopter explode into a fireball. Lois flinched at the sound, and leaned against his chest, completely deflated.

“You don’t... Do you think the explosion...”

“No,” Clark soothed, running a hand up and down her arm as he glanced back at the wreckage. “I think things went exactly as planned.” He couldn’t help the look of serenity that briefly flickered across his face. His secret was safe, as was Lois.

Good night, Antoinette. Sweet dreams.

Chapter 20: Drop the Game

Clark leaned against his desk, eyes scanning across the bullpen through the glass of his temporary office feeling as though he were ensconced in a bubble. Which, in many ways, he was. He swirled the little bit of cheap champagne he had left in his plastic flute from earlier, examining the trails of alcohol as they slid down the clear plastic. They had all celebrated the recovery of the colonist transport launch in the morning and the end of the threat to the future of the space program. Dr. Baines and any cronies of hers that might have known about his nefarious plans were all wrapped up nicely. Lois was safe and sound, and had talked with him both last night after the explosion and this morning, opening up about her fight with Lex even over a couple of cigarettes on the rooftop in the aftermath of it all.

Things were going swimmingly all around.

An uneasy feeling settled in his stomach. He liked things going according to plan. He didn’t like feeling unbeatable. When people got cocky, things fell apart. Hubris, he supposed.

He could stop here.

The thought came out of nowhere, but there it was, seared across his mind like some horrific tragedy he couldn’t erase. Clark looked out at Lois, typing furiously away at her desk, racing against the clock to finish her work before Perry sent her home for the night. He weighed the possibility in his mind. He was already on his way to getting the girl, he knew. Why invite more trouble? Lex would get out of his way eventually, and maybe he would be devastated enough...

No. It would never be enough. Not for ruining his entire life.

He would just have to remain vigilant.

The door opened a crack and Lois popped her head in. He couldn’t help smiling at her, simultaneously pushing down the weird bubble of feeling that surfaced in his chest at the sight of her face.

Get a grip, Kent.

“Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I sent my story out to Perry and I’m headed home for the night.”

Clark smiled. She didn’t have to check in with him before leaving, she did that willingly. She wanted to see him before heading home. He bit the corner of his cheek to keep his grin from getting any wider and drawing her suspicion. “Sounds great. See you tomorrow, Lois.”

She shifted a moment, glancing over her shoulder briefly and then back at him. A war spread across her delicate features, as debate waged as to whether she should come in and say something more or leave things as they were. Clark watched her with a curious eye, cocking his head slightly at her. “Was there something else?”

She opened her mouth, and that irresponsible part of him was struck with the desire to kiss her, like lightning strikes a rod. In the span of a second, his brain had already crossed the room, kissed her, spent a lifetime there and died on her lips, before she shut her mouth with an audible click. She smiled somewhat sheepishly, tucking a strand of her luscious dark locks behind her ear and simultaneously dismissing his daydream with the motion. “No. That’s all. See you tomorrow, Kent.”

Quickly, the door closed on her, and Clark continued watching

her through the door as she hastily picked up her stuff and left the bullpen. He shook his head, ignoring whatever pain flashed in his chest as she walked away from him. He went instead to his old standby of pacing, Lois’ words from the other night replaying over and over in his mind.

I’m not a damsel in distress. I don’t need a hero, and I definitely don’t need you.

He was going crazy. She was mad at him when she’d said those words. She didn’t mean them that way. She’d even apologized, taken them back. But he couldn’t deny one aspect of her words were true: he wanted to play the hero for her. He nearly laughed at himself. He hadn’t wanted to be a hero since he was fifteen, before his father had died and his mother had been in one of her rare sober moods. She’d even made him a costume, crafted from one of the baby blankets he’d been found in, a little big for him at the time, but the thought was nice. He still kept it—a relic of days past, hidden in the very back of his closet with the rest of his childhood memories for those times when he wanted to wallow, to remember, to recenter in his mission.

It was one of the few nice memories he had with his mother from after his dad had been sent to prison for murder.

He shook his head at himself. He was being ridiculous. Maybe in another lifetime, that could have been. He could have been this grand superhero, and his dad probably wouldn’t have been killed in prison—probably wouldn’t have been in prison at all—and his mom wouldn’t have been a disaster. Maybe Lois would have wanted a hero then, too.

But not in this lifetime.

It didn’t matter though. He had more pressing things to attend to than his attraction or obligation or whatever the hell he felt regarding Lois Lane. They were fine now, she’d told him good night, and now he had to move on to other issues.

Like Nigel St. John.

That galvanized Clark into action. He drew the blinds on the window of his office and locked the door, sitting behind his desk as his phone rang. The man’s voice picked up almost immediately.

“Yes, sir?”

“Nigel.” He ground out the noise from behind his teeth, and was met with a dead, frightened silence on the other side.

“Yes, sir,” he said hesitantly.

“Are you able to speak right now?” Clark asked, not wanting any slips even in his current state of anger.

“Yes, sir. Is... is everything all right?”

“Why don’t you tell me. What the hell was that last night? You told Baines who I was?”

The fear was pouring out of the phone’s speakers even as Nigel replied in a calm, collected manner. “I didn’t know what to do given the situation, sir. You had just come barreling in there, and she came to me for advice, knowing only that you were Clark Kent the billionaire, wondering how it would look in tomorrow’s news. And... I apologize. I shouldn’t have told her—”

“No. You shouldn’t have. That’s exactly the sort of thing we don’t do around here.”

“I was just trying to resolve a tricky situation. What should I have said instead?”

“Absolutely anything else would have been acceptable!” he shouted, letting his rage color his words. Clark glanced out through the closed blinds again and made sure nobody had heard him, and reigned it back in, resettling his horn-rims on his face in a habit of reassurance. “Besides which, you should have known that I’d have been able to get out of there with no problems, no matter what she tried.”

“I know that, but then Miss Lane would know that also.”

Clark clenched his jaw firmly. “Lois is no concern of yours. I was there to cover her.”

“I’m sorry, but is that really the safest choice? She’s a journalist, not to mention she’s too close to this whole business

with Luthor anyways.”

His eyes narrowed and his blood chilled in his veins. “Is there something you’re trying to say, Nigel? Because you should probably just come out and say it, so I don’t misunderstand you and, I don’t know, take offense in some way.”

The British spy on the other end hesitated again for a much longer time. Clark knew what he was trying to say. “I’m a little concerned that... you’re getting too attached to her. You seem to be losing focus. Remember what the goal is here.”

Rage flashed before his eyes, and Clark saw red. “Trust me, I remember the goal. I can’t forget the goal. It’s *my* goal,” he snarled, emphatically striking the desk. “And not that it’s any of your business, but Lois is a part of that goal.”

“I just don’t want to see you go too far for her and wind up regretting it.”

“And as long as we don’t have any more slip ups like last night, we should never run into that problem, are we clear?”

He could hear Nigel swallow on the other end. “Crystal, sir.”

“Good.” Clark paused, the wheels turning in his head, knowing his right hand man needed a little reassurance still, and that perhaps he needed a little self-defense of his own. “I’ll have you know I’m not going soft. We’re still planning on finishing off the colonist mission tomorrow, are we not? That’ll keep her busy, and things will go right back on schedule as planned.” Clark leaned back into his chair comfortably, dusting imaginary lint from his slacks. A twisted smile curved its way around his lips suddenly. “Oh, and Nigel? This is strike two. Lois Lane is none of your business. This is the last time I expect us to have this conversation.”

“Yes, sir.”

Smallville, 1975

“All rise. Judge Ross presiding.”

Feet shuffle throughout the courtroom, the sounds loud and harsh against Clark’s sensitive ears. He felt like his heart was going to beat right out of his chest. And he wasn’t even on the hot seat. He carefully tracked the judge’s movements as the man walked over to his seat and gestured in a rather harried manner for everyone to be seated. Nothing escaped Clark, not the nervous run of the judge’s hand over his brow, nor the slightly pinched look to his face. Judge Ross’ heart rate was elevated too.

Nobody was comfortable with this. So why couldn’t they just stop?

“The case of the State of Kansas versus Jonathan Kent is now in session. Before we get started into this, gentlemen, have we reached any sort of decisions yet?”

“No, Your Honor.”

“Great. Then the prosecution may proceed with opening remarks.”

The trial proceeded, and Clark absorbed it all, every shaky, sad voice, every charge leveled against his father. Assault and battery, murder of the first degree. The prosecutors laid out the case like a finely woven story, in spite of all the gaping plot holes. None of what they were saying was explaining the *why* of it all. And if they didn’t have that, then how could they really prove anything, right? They didn’t have motive. Evidence or not.

“This is ridiculous!”

The loud clap of sound suddenly too close to his ears startled Clark away from the trial going on behind closed doors. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to control his vision and hearing, bringing both back into the normal range. He blinked slowly a few times, and his surroundings came into proper view once more. He swung his legs from the end of the bench he sat on, trying to dispel some nervous energy. The solid oak doors and expansive blank wall in front of him wasn’t any more reassuring now than it had been when they had first informed him he wasn’t allowed in the hearing.

Clark swiveled his head down the long hallway to the source

of the noise that distracted him, and narrowed his gaze.

“Lex, you need to compose yourself. They’re going to call you in for your testimony any minute now.”

“Never have I heard of a murder trial this speedy. I have things to do with my life, you know. I’m barely recovered myself from that night.”

“Lex, the man’s guilty. He knows it. He’ll be going to jail for a long time. There’s no reason to even sweat testifying. Just say what you have to say to get the bastard put away, and you’ll be on the next flight back to Metropolis.”

Anger flared up in Clark’s chest, and before he could stop himself, he was up and crossing the hallway with long strides.

Lex was nearly knocked off his feet by the force that barreled into him. He stepped forward to regain his balance when a small hand grabbed his forearm and spun him around. Lex’s eyebrows rocketed up to his hairline at the sight of the boy who had run into him. He had never seen such anger on a child’s face before. He clicked his tongue but shot him a polite smile. “Excuse me, son. I don’t think you meant to run into me.”

The boy scowled but offered no hint of apology. Instead, he spit his words at him fiercely, dark brown eyes swirling with hatred. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Discomfort filled the pit in Lex’s stomach, wrenching and tightening the organ like he was gonna throw up. “I’m sorry?”

“If it wasn’t for you he wouldn’t be here!” The boy complained loudly.

The comment registered and it clicked into place suddenly who this boy was. When he’d seen him last three months ago, it had been dark and he had been slightly inebriated and fighting off Jonathan Kent. He’d almost forgotten about the young son who had tried to intervene before anything worse happened, the small cries to his father to stop as he swung a shovel around and nearly hit Lex himself. He couldn’t even remember his name. Lex felt his heart stutter in sympathy for the boy. To be ten and have your father sent to jail, and for something as horrific as murder... It almost put all the abuse he’d experienced from his own father into perspective. Lex knelt down to sit on his haunches before Jonathan Kent’s kid, eyes full of concern. He probably shouldn’t be speaking to him, but he couldn’t stand there and do nothing. The boy was hurting. “Listen, kid. I’ve been there. It can be traumatizing. I know what it’s like to have a dad that’s not a very good guy—”

The boy’s eyes flashed angrily and before Lex could realize his mistake, the kid was lunging at him. He tottered off his heels and fell backwards on the courthouse floors, and the room erupted into chaos. The boy grabbed at his tie, pulling him forward while simultaneously pushing him down with a hand to his chest. Lex gasped, pain spasming through his barely healed back. He was much stronger than he looked. Lex struggled to push the boy off his chest, even as he started screaming in his face.

“My dad isn’t a bad guy! He’s not a bad guy!”

The boy’s fist managed to strike a glancing but still painful blow to the cheekbone underneath his right eye before he was pulled away from Lex by his lawyer and another bystander. Lex felt like his head was spinning, voices clamoring around him and his attacker’s screams ringing in his ears.

“*Stop it!* Let go! He’s not a bad guy! He did it for me! He’s not a bad guy!”

Lex swallowed thickly, and forced himself to sit up in spite of the dizzying sensations in his brain. The two men were trying to settle the child down, even as others were asking if he was all right. Lex brushed them off with a wave, eyes focused in on the boy. His mop of dark brown, almost black hair unkempt and falling into his eyes, frantic with pain and needy with intent, his limbs flailing around haphazardly..

Suddenly his eyes locked onto Lex’s own, and he froze, caught in the emotions swirling in his pupils. They stared at each

other across the space of the hallway, as though there was a canyon between them. The boy's chest was heaving steadily, and in a chilling moment, Lex watched as something clicked in his eyes that made him calm down exponentially. A small smile curled up at the corners of his mouth, and that wrenching feeling returned to Lex's stomach. It was calculating and terrifying in equal measure, and never in his life would Lex have guessed that a child easily ten years his younger could haunt him like this.

"I'll remember you, Mr. Luthor," he whispered, voice almost hoarse.

The doors to the courtroom flew open suddenly, interrupting the moment and Lex's eyes tracked over to the exiting judge and bailiff. "What in blazes is going on out here?!"

The boy went rigid at the voice, and brought wide, frightened eyes up to face Judge Ross. He quickly extricated his arms from the men holding him back, and took off like a bullet, running clumsily down the hallway towards the front door of the courthouse.

"Hey! Kent!" the judge shouted after him, but the child was long gone. He sighed, and turned with a sad, apologetic smile to Lex, still sitting on the floor. "We'll recess for half an hour," he announced. "Be back by eleven fifteen."

Lex struggled up to his feet, swaying slightly. Dammit. This state was hell on earth. As soon as the trial was over, he swore to himself he would never return to Kansas. He thought back to the boy's expression, one that would stick with him for a lifetime, and shuddered.

Yeah. He had to get out of this state.

Chapter 21: And the Devil Makes Three

Clark strode through the Daily Planet lobby with a ball of anxiety sitting in his chest. Not over the launch—he'd squared that emotion away firmly last night. No, it was a sense of unrest, unease, that lurked around the peripherals of his senses. It made him feel like a caged lion, stalking through the office space with a growl trapped in his throat. His fingers twitched, aching for some sort of movement. He felt like taking off for a quick flight or run—expending some energy in some way or another. Instead, he balled up the feeling and shoved it deeper in his chest. He stepped onto the thankfully empty elevator, into a smaller cage, and pressed the button for the main floor of the Daily Planet.

"Hold the elevator!"

Clark glared irately, doing nothing to help his fellow man. He did *not* need the company this day of all days, and particularly not *his*.

To his chagrin, a hand shot through the crack in the elevator door at the last second, and Clark wrinkled his nose in displeasure. The doors slid right back open and in walked Lex Luthor.

His steps faltered, hesitant upon seeing who he would be sharing an elevator with, but ultimately Lex stepped forward with a tight smile on his face. "Kent." He nodded politely if not tersely at him.

"Luthor," Clark responded in kind, feeling the irritation rolling off him in droves.

The elevator doors sealed shut.

His cage just kept getting smaller.

Clark could feel the tension radiating from his shoulders and knew the other occupant could pick up on it as well. "So," Lex began, words stilted oddly. Clark simply waited him out, knowing it would get under his skin and taking some small pleasure from it. "How goes things with you? Anything happening?"

Clark shrugged half-heartedly. "Not particularly. You?"

Lex's eyes remained firmly on the numbers ticking past on the elevator dash as he considered his response. "Not particularly."

Silence engulfed the elevator for a few endless seconds as both men stood apart, watching the numbers slide past. Good Lord, this elevator was slow, and if Lex weren't here with him,

he'd have ditched it by now and simply flown to the appropriate floor.

"Oh! You know, that's actually not true. I do have plans for this evening."

"Enlighten me," Clark deadpanned, time dripping by slowly like molasses with every additional word that fell from Lex Luthor's mouth.

"Lois and I have reservations at Chez Henri tonight downtown. The chef is a personal friend of mine."

Clark tried to let the obvious brag roll off him like water off a duck's back, to little avail. Instead he checked his watch, noting the time of the early afternoon, and did nothing to conceal the snarkiness of his tone. "It's a bit early to be picking her up for dinner already, isn't it?"

"True, but it's a special occasion. Today is our one-year anniversary. I want to be around as much as I can throughout the day."

Clark rolled his eyes as the elevator finally chimed that they'd reached their floor. This was certainly going to make for a long day, then. "Well, I certainly hope she's going to get off in time. I get a feeling it's gonna be a big news day."

He stepped off the elevator, allowing Lex to stew for a few moments behind him as he grinned widely. He knew that'd get to him.

"Morning, Mr. Kent."

"James," Clark chided. "What did we talk about? You call me Clark, I'll call you Jimmy."

"Yes sir, Mister—Clark."

He clapped the young man on the shoulder, not missing the eye-roll from Lex in return just inside his peripheral vision. "You seen Perry?"

Jimmy tossed his head in the direction of the chief's office. "Fair warning, though. He is in a bit of a mood today."

Clark gave a quick nod and a smile as he moved past the gopher, in the direction he'd pointed to earlier, even as Lex's words followed after him like some sort of haunting echo.

"Excuse me, James, but have you seen Lois?"

Jimmy tossed his voice backwards as he blazed on through the office. "Hasn't come in yet, sorry."

That made Clark's steps falter for a split second. It seemed unusual... but he shook himself. He wasn't about to get involved in the Lois and Lex show, today—their anniversary—of all days. If Lex found himself dateless on his own anniversary, that would only make his day better. Clark strode confidently forward into Perry's office, barely taking the half a second to pause with a knock before entering. "Perry! What's going on today?"

The scowl on Perry's face spoke volumes. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing is going on. Yesterday, we had one of the biggest stories of the year come through here and today—nothing! You're only as good as your next story, you know. It's like what Frank always used to say—"

"Perry," Clark cut in, knowing he had to cut the man off at the pass before he spent the next thirty minutes on Frank Sinatra. "It'll pass. It always does. And besides, didn't Frank also say that the best is yet to come?"

The older man grumbled and pushed against the desk to heave himself up, prompting a small smile from Clark. "Don't you start using Frank against me. He's all I got left around here."

"Aw, Perry, you know you've always got me to fall back on."

Another grumble and then Mr. White was blowing past him in a huff. Clark grinned as he followed him across the chaos of the bullpen. The voices and sounds swirled all around him almost all at once—a level of chaos that bordered on the overwhelming when his focus was diverted. Clark took an extra half second to recenter himself before embracing the sounds and letting it all wash over him.

"Olsen! What are you working on?"

“In a minute, Chief!”

“Ah! Mr. White. If I could just have a moment—”

“Oh, hey, Lex. Just a second. Olsen!”

Lex tossed his hands up in the air exasperatedly, prompting Clark to bite back a smug little grin at his opponent’s obvious irritation. “I guess nobody listens to me anymore.”

“Don’t take it too personally. Not everyone can handle your winning personality,” Clark quipped, strolling past casually, hands buried deep in his jacket pockets.

Lex’s answering glare made Clark grin for real, and he quickened his pace to catch up to where Jimmy and Perry were in the middle of the bullpen. “James, you seen Lois anywhere? I need her digging through all her story notes—it’s gonna be a slow news day.”

“Chief, it’s like I told Mr. Luthor. I haven’t seen Lois yet today.”

Clark didn’t like the younger man’s tone and frowned. He hated the airs James Olsen tried to put on all the time, like he was better than anybody else. And Perry just let him and everybody else walk all over him. His shoulders bristled in defense of the man he’d started to think of in a paternal capacity. “Jimmy, the man’s still your boss. You shouldn’t speak to him like that.”

Perry’s hand waved in front of his face dismissively, and Clark rolled his eyes. “Clark, just—Jimmy, what do you mean you haven’t seen Lois today?”

Jimmy’s eyes darted at his face quickly before responding. “It’s just like I said. She hasn’t come in yet. I’m sorry; that’s all I know.”

“Perry—” Lex’s voice cut in as he caught up with the conversation. “That’s what I was trying to tell you. Lois left this morning saying she was going into work early. I thought I’d surprise her here—”

“Aw, hell,” Perry moaned, covering his eyes for a moment.

“You think she’s in some sort of trouble?” Lex inquired, fear evident on his face. Clark had to suppress a gag at Lex’s paralyzing clinginess.

“If she’s not in trouble yet, she will be,” Perry grumbled, turning around and stalking back towards his office. “What do you think the penalty is for trespassing on government property, never mind breaking and entering?”

Clark’s legs came to an immediate halt as the realization struck him hard across the face and left him reeling. “Y-you don’t think she’d go down to the colonist launch, do you? I mean, you did tell her not to go just yesterday.”

Jimmy scoffed at him. “That’s a sucker’s bet. Clearly you don’t know Lois as well as you think.”

Lex was quick to grin tauntingly back at him at that comment, in spite of the way Clark felt the color draining from his face. He tried to cover for his reaction. “Well, I’m sure she’s just going to get you a solid article for the evening. It’s not like she’s gonna try and join the mission or anything. I’m sure she’ll be back in time before we put the paper to bed.”

Perry’s dubious eyes said everything his mouth didn’t need to as he simply returned to his office. Jimmy and Lex also dissipated, Lex taking a seat at Lois’ desk to scribble some semblance of a note. Clark remained rooted to the spot, pulse skyrocketing as the fear started filling his gut with ice. He was grasping at straws, he knew. Of course Lois Lane was at the launch, probably on that damn shuttle. She’d acquiesced far too quickly to Perry’s request that she stay away yesterday. A flash of panic rose up with something akin to bile in his throat.

Lois was probably on the transport he’d just rigged to explode.

Belatedly, Clark became aware he was standing in the middle of the bullpen still, staring into nothingness and he was starting to attract stares of his own. One stare in particular was bugging him, tantamount to all the others.

He shook himself, turned on his heel, mentally calculating the

time left on the bomb to be about twenty-four minutes and counting. Trying to ignore the sound of Luthor’s footsteps following him to the elevator.

Once again, though, in spite of his best efforts, Clark somehow found himself stuck in an elevator with Lex Luthor. He shot him a grimace of a smile, not hiding his disinterest at all this time.

“What’s going on, Kent? Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

Clark willed the elevator to go faster, to absolutely no avail. He kept his eyes forward, staring into the elevator doors as though in a trance as he replied. “I just forgot to grab some important papers to show Perry about our latest advertising numbers.”

“That’s bull.” The words spat out of Luthor’s mouth with a venom and Clark’s shoulders tensed. He turned to look at him with a fire in his eyes. Was this really about to happen—now of all times? “Look, I don’t know what your ‘deal’ is with my girlfriend, but I don’t like it, and neither does Lois. And I especially don’t like watching you chasing her tail like some kind of lovesick puppy, understand?”

Clark’s eyes flashed dangerously, and he stepped a foot closer to Lex, drawing up his shoulders to look menacing. The anger and fear mixed hot in his blood like a bad drink, and he wasn’t about to let Lex Luthor steamroll him. “I don’t have any sort of ‘deal’ with your ‘girlfriend’ as you call her. We’re nothing more than friends.” He let the end of his sentence hang in the air for a moment, followed by an unspoken hint of “for now.” He checked his watch, twenty-one minutes. “Besides, I didn’t think you were the type of guy who would try and restrict his woman so much by telling her who she can and can’t hang around.”

“I don’t know what your problem is with me! But I don’t care. This petty vying for Lois’ attention ends now. It’s our anniversary. I’m not about to let you ruin it.”

Clark shrugged, turning away from the billionaire slightly. “Then you should have nothing to worry about, right? May the best man win.”

“He already has,” Lex growled menacingly, stepping close into Clark’s space.

The tension in the air was thick with hostility, not to be cut with a battle axe let alone a knife. Clark felt his anger rippling just below the surface as time dripped by even slower. Lex was here, threatening him, serving himself up on a silver platter, and he didn’t have time for any of it. Lois was on her way to becoming space debris. Once upon a time, that might not have mattered so much, but now... everything was wrong. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go, and Clark could tell himself that it would be a letdown, a major disappointment even, if he just took care of Lex right now. Anticlimactic. The man deserved far worse. He took in a deep, calming breath, counting to ten in his head even as the precious seconds were wasted.

Not to mention he was certain there were security cameras in this elevator, and he’d surely be caught. He was too close to success only to squander all his hard work in a moment like this.

The elevator chimed, and finally—for the love of God, finally—the doors slid open and Clark smirked. “Perhaps he has, Luthor.”

They stood staring off against each other for a few decidedly long moments, held frozen in some sort of age-old pissing contest and watching the seconds drip away. Lex’s fury was no match for Clark’s cool decisiveness though, not today. A passing stranger squeezed past them onto the elevator, effectively breaking the moment, and Clark smirked. With that, he stepped off the lift, adrenaline pulsing and thrumming through his veins as he left Lex behind and focused his mind on Lois ahead.

He checked his watch again—still twenty minutes to go somehow. That was... good and somehow still bad. He hurried into the alley behind the *Daily Planet* building, debating his options.

He couldn't exactly fly in and save her, not as himself. Why hadn't he thought of a contingency plan? Why hadn't he expected Lois to shirk orders, slip her way through the ranks to nab a seat on a potentially historic mission?

A flash of red and blue streaked through his brain, and the memory from last night and ten years before suddenly shook loose once more and *of course*. He would have laughed if he'd had the time: at irony, at fate, at the possibilities of his precognitive skills that so far hadn't manifested or even sheer blind luck. But time was a commodity he didn't have, so he streaked through the skies toward his apartment, full speed ahead.

Lois grinned at how easy it was to sneak past all the guards and checkpoints to get onboard the shuttle. It shouldn't have been—it was almost laughable. It seemed like anybody could just waltz on in. Lucky she wasn't the nefarious type.

The sound of approaching voices put her on high alert. Quickly, she secured herself in a maintenance room out of sight from the two passing shuttle technicians. She sighed in relief when they continued past without picking up on her presence, continuing to make small talk about the math of it all. She grinned again. Fate must have really wanted her on this flight. Maybe it would be just the break she needed from Lex and all his drama today.

She quickly and quietly closed the door, hearing a lock mechanism switch into place almost immediately. Her hands stilled over the door handle, suddenly awash with doubt. She shook herself. "Well, Lois. No turning back now."

She turned and found a seat almost randomly in the room and went over to sit. Oh, this was going to be so exciting! She probably should have told someone she was doing this, sure. Maybe Perry, although he would have tried to stop her. Probably Lex, though he'd object as well. Lucy definitely should have gotten a heads up—someone did need to feed the fish, after all. And Clark—

Clark had no business being in her thoughts whatsoever.

Right. She situated herself, slipping an arm through the shoulder restraint gleefully, excitement ratcheting up by the second. She turned to look for the other strap when she saw something flashing out of the corner of her eye.

Lois frowned, half strapped in and frozen in the moment. That was weird, but it was probably nothing. A display light or something. Probably. But her gut was telling her something was up, and Lois Lane always followed her gut. So investigate she did.

Rounding the corner, she caught sight of the corner of the light she'd glimpsed: it was a clock display, rapidly counting down. Three minutes and counting. Bile rose up in her throat, but she pushed it back down with the rising tide of panic, as she examined the rest of the object. It looked out of place, randomly thrown together, wires sticking out here and there, and a cold metal casing around a suspicious-looking box. "Oh my God. Oh my *God!* It's a bomb!"

There was no denying what it was. She'd rather be wrong than get blown to bits in the next two and a half minutes. She ran to the door and pulled on the handle, to no avail. "Help! There's a bomb! A bomb!! Help, somebody!"

Nothing. The door didn't give, the locks didn't unseal, and no discernable voices could be heard outside. She rattled the handle frantically, screamed at the top of her lungs. She didn't know who she was hoping to find at this point. The numbers on the timer kept taunting her, down to one minute and twenty seconds now. She pounded her fists repeatedly, screaming at the top of her lungs. She was going to lose her voice soon if no one came.

Well, she was going to lose her life soon, too.

Suddenly, the door gave way beneath her sore fists, and it was wrenched away from her entirely. Shock she couldn't quite process yet shot through her as she saw a figure in blue and red set the heavy metal door down across the hall and stride quickly past

her to where the bomb was. She bolted after him. "Hurry! It's less than a minute! It's going to explode—"

He grabbed the core of the bomb casing, split it in half with his bare hands. And as if that wasn't enough to shock her, he suddenly gave her a quick wink and ate the C-4 plastic explosive.

She blinked rapidly. He somehow swallowed the bomb down. Her eyes widened impossibly more as the muffled sound of an explosion sounded, and he just burped. Lois glanced at the stopped numbers on the clock, then back at the man, absolutely gobsmacked for possibly the first time in her life.

"What the hell are you?"

A smile twitched at the corners of his lips.

"I'm... a friend."

Chapter 22: Ain't No Rest for the Wicked

His fingers traced the edge of his steak knife methodically, running up and down the safe side of the blade almost absentmindedly as he zoned out.

This was not at all how he'd planned his night on going.

Lex squared his jaw with anger, a silent fury rattling in his chest. He supposed he should have expected it. Not once had things gone his way since Mister-Clark-call-me-Kansas-Kent came into their lives. As far as he was concerned, the man was his own personal demon, hell-bent on tearing his relationship with Lois apart. True, today had been extenuating circumstances, but that didn't change the facts. Lois wasn't here. It was their anniversary, and she wasn't here. She was *there*, with *him*, and that thought bred a level of hatred in his soul that he hadn't felt in... quite possibly ever. At least not since his father had driven his mother to suicide and taken a bullet to the brain as a follow up.

The trouble was, Lex was having a hard time discerning who his hate was for. Kent, of course, topped the list. But he had a growing resentment for Lois Lane as well, with a healthy helping for himself. He should have seen this coming. It was a big news day, as everyone seemed intent on reminding him. Lois had an article to write, her boss had papers to sell, and it just was a coincidence of course that Clark Kent owned the paper. He knew there was nothing Lois could do to help that. Besides maybe filing a sexual harassment lawsuit against the man, though she insisted he wasn't harassing.

Then of course, that freak-god who had saved his girlfriend showed up. And Lex was grateful, of course. But the way she'd gazed at the hero, swayed on her feet... The universe was playing one hell of a prank on Lex Luthor. He was somehow the last man on his girlfriend's list, and he hadn't even thought he was competing. He thought they were past that.

Stupid Clark Kent.

Lex traced his finger back around the knife, this time accidentally pricking himself with the sharp tip. He looked at it, startled from his thoughts for a long moment as he watched a small bead of blood rise and fall from the pad of his index finger. He shook his head, trying to regain his focus. It was just a huge news day. An historic launch, an attempted explosion, and the debut of some god-like hero? That was like the triple crown for journalism. He understood that. She'd promised him a rain check, and Lex would make sure she kept whatever arrangement they set up the next time.

A big news day.

Lex shot from his chair in a flash, jostling the table with the extra set of empty dinnerware accidentally. Lightning struck his brain, and suddenly he needed to be in action, expending some of this energy.

Clark Kent had predicted that it would be a big news day. Before anything happened.

"Mr. Luthor, is everything all right?"

He nodded rapidly, distraction glazing his eyes. "Yes, Andre. Fine. Would you please have someone come by and clear the

table?”

“Of course.”

Lex practically fled the room, hand coming up to rub the back of his neck. Maybe it was nothing. A sort of throwaway remark, or something snarky to shake his confidence. Wishful thinking, even. But there was no getting around the fact that he’d said it and then it came true, and that led him to only one foregone conclusion.

Who was Clark Kent to know something would go wrong?

Lex pushed through the doors of his office with more than the necessary amount of force. He grabbed the receiver from his desk and dialed the first number on his speed dial. “Nigel, I need you to look into something for me.”

Smallville, 1975

Lex stumbled unsteadily down the empty country road, his eyes blurred with tears and the sting of alcohol. He was considerably more sober now that he’d been walking through the cold night air for a while, but the headache that followed said buzz was enough to make any man trip over his own two feet.

It’s not like he didn’t have a good reason for it.

One year. It had been one goddamn forsaken year since he’d lost little Jaxon. One year, and nothing was better. He’d thought this trip would help—get his mind off the date, off the fact that he was childless for over three hundred sixty-five days now and help him focus on his work again. That was the only thing he had left anymore—his company. And even that had hardly seemed worth it to him over the past year.

But no. This was good for him—not only would it get him out of his current funk, but he might actually be able to fix up his business. So, he’d travel the world, personally examining all of his financial holdings and various branches where he could.

Which is how he found himself about forty minutes south of Topeka, Kansas and God knows where after that. He couldn’t hold it together any longer—he’d examined the Midwest branch of his recently redefined LexCorp and headed for the nearest bar. Glass after glass of drowned sorrows until the bartender at the club demanded he had to eat something or be removed from the premises, and he was out on his ass.

Perhaps he was lucky Kansas was a mostly dry state with such strict liquor laws—he had to travel to a county with a club that he had to join in order to drink. If he hadn’t, Lex truly believed that he could have drank himself into oblivion tonight.

But now, he just wandered through an out-of-the-way town and at nearly two o’clock in the morning he was getting a little new perspective on life. It was hard to be depressed under a sky like that. He marveled at the twinkling expanse of stars that stretched overhead, his mind filled with wonder. How could the world be both so beautiful and so cruel? How could anybody look up at that and give any sadness or anger or violence even a second thought?

How much had he had to drink again?

He tripped over his own two feet and leaned heavily against a supportive fence, swaying underneath the bulk of his form. He blinked his eyes furiously for a moment, trying to clear the brief fog that had somehow clouded them—couldn’t be tears, no. Nothing of the sort.

Man, he needed to sober up fast.

Lex closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, practicing his meditation techniques. His therapist would be proud. Sometimes, he could even feel it working. The rest of the time, he wondered if maybe he was paying a quack. Like breathing wouldn’t remind him of his son that wasn’t.

A clang echoed across the empty fields to his ears, startling him. He squinted out across the expansive space, not seeing anything to have caused the noise. Maybe it was in his head. He wished he could call a cab and go home.

But then another clang rang out, this time coupled with a few choice words. Lex straightened up and turned around to scan the

field behind his little fence post. The source became apparently obvious. Lex’s eyes widened as he saw a middle-aged man toss his shovel off to the side and wipe a hand across his brow. Ice filled the pit of his stomach. It couldn’t be what it looked like. He could be gardening. He could be burying the family pet...

But at two in the morning?

No. Didn’t matter how suspect it seemed. What were the odds of coming across something genuinely nefarious just by walking around after dark? Lex paused a moment, tried to convince himself to just keep walking...

But he couldn’t be sure.

Quietly, Lex took a few steps back, following the fence line as stealthily as was possible for a man who was completely hammered just five minutes before, trying to get a closer look. He squinted at the base of the tree where the man leaned heavily, trying to catch his breath. There was something there, he just couldn’t quite make it out—

The bespectacled man seemed to steel himself, and picked up the shovel once again. He hefted it in his hands for a few moments, as though it weighed more this time, before digging again. Lex watched in sickened fascination for a few minutes, until the man tripped over what Lex thought was a tree root. That is, until the lumpy form rolled.

The man bent over and dragged it back closer, and the shape and movement of the thing was eerily familiar. Lex’s heart started pounding through his ears, and he cried out louder than he’d intended. “Hey!”

The man froze. Lex ran his hands over his face, fear coursing through his veins as the man slowly turned his head and locked eyes on him. Lex tried to bolster himself. He couldn’t just stand by and watch complacently as some stranger buried a body in the country. Besides, maybe he would get spooked. Lex squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and lifted a leg as gracefully as he could over the wires of the downed fence. “What do you think you’re doing? Is that a—”

“You should mind your own business, son.”

Lex roiled at the patronizing term, and stomped closer defiantly. “Who do you think you are? You think you can get away with this?”

The man pushed off the tree and wiped his brow, stepping towards Lex. “You’re gonna want to get off my property.”

Lex turned and shouted at the top of his lungs. “Hey! This man has a dead body! Help! Fire! Anybody!”

“You drunk, son? You’re in the country. Now get off my property or I’ll—”

“What? You gonna call the police?” He scoffed. “Yeah, you do that.”

There was a flash of silver in the moonlight that Lex didn’t recognize until it was almost too late. He yelped and dove away as the sharp end of the spade came down over his head. A sharp sting streaked across his brow where it grazed him. His eyes went wide as he felt the gash and glanced back at the man. He was menacing over him, and Lex had to swallow down some bile.

What the hell had he gotten himself into?

He scrambled underneath the man’s large form as he swung the shovel again, slipping in the mud and landing on top of the feed bag. He gagged at the contact with the distinctly human form and pushed off. Mud squelched under his shoes as he stood. Lex spun and threw a punch at his attacker and caught his cheekbone, knocking off his glasses. He shook his hand to numb some of the pain, and went in for another swing.

“Dad!”

The young voice from the distance startled Lex. He felt his heart skip a beat at the moniker before realizing it wasn’t directed at him, and his split second of hesitation cost him. He caught a glimpse of a boy in the distance—

The shovel slammed into his back, square between his

shoulder blades.

Lex cried out in pain and crumpled to his knees. The cries of the boy were lost to the ringing in his ears, along with any recognition of where his opponent was. Dazed, Lex steeled himself and waited for the final blow.

“Go back in the house, son!”

A blow that didn’t seem would arrive.

“But—”

“Inside! Now!”

Lex winced as he pushed himself up partially, and kicked backwards. He landed the kick with a satisfying crack, and the man toppled down next to him. He rolled painfully away, grabbing the shovel as he went.

“Hey!”

Lex swung back blindly on his knees, taking advantage of his sudden upper hand. Hysteria zipped through his veins, the shovel feeling lighter than it should, his head feeling much the same, and the spasming in his back taking a backseat to the adrenaline. His attacker was vaguely in front of him, clearly thrown. Lex turned off his brain and went for it.

A scream was wrenched from his throat as his shoulder was wrenched back. Belatedly, Lex realized that something had stopped the shovel mid-swing. His eyes swam as he searched for the reason for his pain.

His eyes locked on the young boy, who stood at his back with the tool firmly in hand. How he’d materialized behind him, he hadn’t the faintest idea. The child took the shovel out of his hands and, with a surprisingly gentle shove, pushed Lex face down into the dirt.

“I said... to go inside!”

The wheezing sound of his attacker prompted Lex to try and rise to his feet again. Plant one hand, then two...

No dice. He collapsed in agony, back and shoulders throbbing in opposition to each other, clouding his brain.

“But Dad—”

“Get over here! Give me that shovel.”

“Dad, what are you gonna do?”

“I don’t want you to see anything more tonight! Now get back in the house now!”

The sound of gravel crunching in the distance didn’t alert any of them, not in time. Neither did the lights traveling along the road. But the car door slamming did get the boy’s attention quickly. His head snapped around quickly, wide-eyed. “Dad!”

The changed tone in his voice pricked Lex’s ears, barely cognizant of what was going on anymore. But the man hovering over him with the shovel menacingly above his head tensed, slowly lowered his weapon to a less aggressive position.

“Kent! Odd to see you up at this hour. Oh hey, kiddo. You’re up too?”

“Uh... Harris. Surprised to see you on patrol. I, uh, what are you doing out?”

The officer waved him off casually as he approached the property. Kent positioned himself between Lex and the other body casually, pretending to just move closer. “Irig called in with a complaint. Apparently saw some drunk and disorderly wandering down the road, and demanded that I search for him. You know Wayne. Figured it wouldn’t hurt to do a quick loop, give him some peace of mind. Haven’t seen anything, have ya?”

“Uh, can’t say I have—”

A police officer. Lex thanked whatever lucky star was suddenly looking out for him. He couldn’t get up. Damn. If he was this close to being rescued from whatever this crazy Kent guy had planned, and just missed it, he’d hate himself forever. Or just be dead. Lex groaned loudly, then froze. He tried again, as best he could with the wind knocked out of him, groaning louder, muttering for help.

“What was that?”

“What? I didn’t hear anything.”

Lex lifted his head up partially, trying to get a look at the officer.

Harris took half a step back, seeming to absorb the environment surreptitiously. He stayed poised like that, one foot forward, one foot back, and shot Kent half a smile. “Must have been nothing. Anyway. What are you doing out here so late?”

“Heh. Yeah. Uh, the dog died. Shelby. Just before midnight. Didn’t want to wait to bury her.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Yeah.”

“What kind of dog was she again?”

“Golden Retriever.”

“Uh-huh. You want to tell me what’s really going on here, Jonathan?”

He froze. “I-I don’t know—”

Harris held down the button on his three-way radio. “Hey, Darrell, want to come out and give me some backup?”

Jonathan wiped his brow, hand trembling. “Okay, okay. I did see your drunk. He tried to break into my house, y’see, and I got a little overzealous—”

“Help me!” Lex finally croaked out louder.

Harris drew his gun and indicated for Jonathan to step aside. He leaned out of the way, and the officer stepped towards him, keeping his weapon aimed at Kent but in a much looser manner. “Y’all right, sir?”

“M-my back...”

Harris leaned over Lex, surveying his injuries. He picked up his radio again. “This is Officer Harris, we’re gonna need an ambulance down here at the Kent farm as soon as possible. And requesting more backup please.”

“He’s lying,” Lex whispered.

“What was that?”

“Don’t listen to him, Harris. How long have you known me?”

“Body...”

His assailant’s face went ashen as he watched it all unravel at his feet. He ran a hand over his thinning hair, and a wave of pride washed over Lex. It was all so surreal that he could hardly believe it was all happening, but at least he’d caught the man.

Kent’s eyes alighted on the shovel once again. He darted a glance at Harris, who was trying to encourage Lex to get to his feet. Lex cried out in pain, collapsing once more. Out of the corner of his eye, while the officer was distracted, Lex watched in horror as the man spun and picked up the tool, and without hesitation, he swung towards Lex’s head. He did the only thing he could think of to defend himself.

“Kent! No!”

Jonathan squeezed his eyes shut.

“Dad!”

Kent stumbled back, and the sound of the gunshot echoed in Lex’s ears, ringing. The assailant dropped to his knees, hissing in agony.

Harris’ jaw dropped in disbelief and he shook Lex’s drunken grip off his gun. He rushed over to Jonathan’s side. “Kent? Lord. Hey, Kent? Listen to me. Looks like a clean shot, through and through. Just a bit of the leg. You’re gonna be okay.”

“Killer,” Lex called out breathily. “He’s a killer.”

“You kindly need to shut your mouth. You just shot a staple of this community.”

“He... shot first... Over there.”

Sirens wailed in the distance, and Harris finally got a look at what he was talking about. “Holy hell.”

Lex let his eyes drift shut, finally getting a little bit of peace. His head was dizzy with pain, but it was over. He could rest knowing he’d done something good today.

Red and blue lights washed over his face as the sound of several cars pulling up through the gravel met his ears, and Lex

Luthor felt himself go numb to the world.

Chapter 23: Up In The Air

Metropolis, 1993

“Shut up. You did not.”

“Hand to God. I saw him myself.”

“You’re a big fat liar.”

“No! It’s true! You wouldn’t believe how much food the guy could put away.”

Cue the eye-roll, as expected. “Whatever, Kansas.”

“Anyway, then Tommy got up, half in the bag, and said—”

“Lane!” Perry’s harsh voice made them both startle apart, then feel silly for doing so. It wasn’t like anything was going on between them. Or so Clark told himself. “What in the Sam Hill are you still doing in here when there’s thirty things out there I want to know about that tights-wearing miracle? Come on now, get!”

“I’m not a dog, Perry. You have to at least say please.”

He leaned down carefully beside her, speaking in a hushed tone with a shy, teasing smile on his lips. “Now darlin’, you know I love you. And you could never be replaced... but I’m only half-teasing when I say that whoever gets me the next scoop on Big Blue gets your desk, all right?”

“All right. Geez. I’m on it.”

Perry smiled softly and moseyed on past, scouting out his next target. Clark wryly smiled after Perry, happy to see him with some bite in his bark, and much less whimpering. He scooted aside a millisecond before Lois had to push him as she stood up and collected her things. Clark turned his focus back to the woman at hand. “Mind if I tag along? I haven’t had a chance to see the guy up close yet. It’d be pretty awesome.”

“You do know there’s no guarantee I’ll find him even, right?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You usually find some sort of danger any time you go somewhere. I like my odds.” He held out her coat for her and took a split second to luxuriate in her scent as she turned into him briefly.

“Fine, your loss. You can—thank you—follow if you want. Just—”

“Don’t get in the way. I know the drill by now, Lois. Top banana, right?”

She wagged a finger in his face smugly. “Always.”

Clark suppressed his full grin, trying to push down the weirdness that bubbled up inside him at the mention of an always with Lois Lane. She spun on her heel, barely giving him a second glance and completely oblivious to the maelstrom of emotions she sparked inside his chest.

Oh.

His stomach sank even as his heart fluttered. This was *feeling*. The realization struck him like a slap across the face. He was actually feeling something for this woman—this captivating, brilliant, sexy, confident woman with hair that smelled like cherries and—

Stop that.

That wouldn’t do at all.

A passing fascination was one thing. A flirtation, an affair, another way to get under Lex Luthor’s skin. But feelings? A relationship? A real one, where two people just did things with each other for no real rhyme or reason... That wasn’t something Clark had ever imagined for himself. Too risky to be in the cards for the boy with a chip on his shoulder and a plot for revenge. Maybe Nigel was right to warn him. He probably could use some distance. Maybe a business trip could come up, and he could take a week to clear his head, remind himself of his priorities.

“Hey, you coming or what, Kansas?”

He snapped his gaze up to her face and plastered on a fake smile—a smile which became real as soon as he met her eyes. His stomach somersaulted again and his brain tossed all thoughts of distance out the window as he hastened to catch up to her. “Yeah,

yeah. I’m coming.”

Nigel St. John was a man used to following orders. He’d served his way up through the ranks of the British army, worked for many years as a successful MI-6 operative. He was a good soldier. Up until his mentor had betrayed him in the field, and that was it for him. He’d gotten good at being on his own, in charge and doing jobs on his own terms. When things got too hot, he’d miraculously ended up working with a credible, well-reputed billionaire who let him lay low for a while. Luthor knew a little about Nigel’s past—perhaps not all the treason and an exact body count—but enough to not ask questions. And over the years, he’d really come to appreciate his boss.

Which was why Nigel found his current predicament so difficult.

He rifled through his desk drawers, trying to find something marginally offensive but not too incriminating on Clark Kent to hand over to Lex Luthor. He couldn’t go back empty-handed, or the man would know something was off. Nigel grimaced at the lack of options. He supposed he could give him something about his business dealings. He knew he couldn’t give him any actual, criminal evidence. But something about how he’d started out his company, maybe how he’d found a diamond mine in South Africa and sold it, or before that how he’d gotten a start by cheating his way through the ranks of a gambling ring over in Hong Kong.

Unscrupulous, but unimportant.

A twinge of guilt kept badgering Nigel’s mind, though. Clark Kent had given him the chance to get back in the game. He had been itching for something more to come across his plate for years when he’d met the young man. Kent had offered him sanity as opposed to Luthor’s sanctuary. He had need for both, at one time or another. It had started innocently enough. He always suspected there would be a time when the job would get difficult.

He hadn’t expected this. Spying on Lex for Kent. Spying on Clark for Luthor. It wasn’t sitting right. Eventually, he’d have to choose. It would become too hard to balance otherwise.

But then again, it could provide a bit of fun in the meantime. It had been ages since he’d last been a double agent. Triple agent? He smiled. That was the way to look at this. An adventure. A private mission of his own.

Plus, a little insurance probably wouldn’t hurt. Kent seemed to be going off-book more and more lately. He wouldn’t be cut out of any future plans if he could help it. Nigel St. John refused to be made expendable.

The gambling thing wasn’t half bad. He grabbed an article he’d found from way back when he was first researching Kent and went to see how much ground that would buy him.

Clark felt the adrenaline pumping through his veins like never before. What a rush! He ran a hand through his hair, mussing up his locks out of the gel-like hold that his alter ego wore. It was all he could do to keep from laughing aloud. Of course, that would draw attention to himself. And Lois was just turning and walking over to him. He injected a skip into his step almost unconsciously as he rushed to her side. “Lois! Are you okay? Oh my God, that was amazing!”

“Yeah, real amazing. Where the hell were you?”

Clark’s eyebrows jumped and he put on his best shocked face. “What? I turned my back for one second to call the police and you were gone! Are you seriously okay?”

She brushed past him with a vague wave of her hand. “I’m fine. Geesh. Clingy much.”

Clark rolled his eyes. He just wanted to make sure she hadn’t caught onto him yet. She didn’t need to be rude about it. “Okay, just making sure before I start bragging about how I finally saw *the Man of Steel*. You know. No big deal.”

Lois snorted derisively at him and walked past. “Yeah, not a big deal at all. I was flying through the air with the guy, but you got a glimpse. I’m so thrilled for you.”

“Whatever. I still think it’s cool.” Clark huffed and crossed his arms, trying to keep the smile from twitching at the corners of his lips while he pretended offense.

Lois finally cracked a grin at his reaction, and he let loose his smile too. “We should probably be getting back. We’ve got a story to write now.”

He shuffled a few steps to catch up to her again as she walked to the curb to hail a taxi. “Did you get a quote? Maybe he’ll swing back around.”

“Easy, cowboy. I doubt that’s the last you’ll see of him.”

“Ooh, cowboy”—his eyes darkened in a flash—“I like cowboy. Why can’t you call me cowboy more often?”

Her laugh was like a beautiful melody. “Oh, Kent. Pretend all you like, but you’re more farmboy than cowboy. And farmboy is from Kansas.” Clark groaned halfheartedly, darting his eyes to watch the amusement on her face as she laughed at him. “Come on, let’s go.”

He gestured for her to lead the way across the street as she flagged down another cab, providing him with ample opportunity to watch her skirt sway back and forth as she sashayed away from him. He had to bite his cheek as he slid into the cab behind her.

The drive went by in an amicable silence. Clark didn’t give their heading a second thought until he noticed them passing the turn for the Daily Planet and instead turning towards the bay. His forehead creased and he pushed his glasses up his nose. “Um, Lois? Where exactly are we going?”

“You think I’m stupid? I’m not going to blab about a story lead back there in front of all those TV reporters with their ridiculous cameras. I break the stories, I get the scoops. And I don’t do that by waiting around for the story to come to me.”

Clark’s frown deepened, genuinely confused. “I don’t understand. What happened? Did I say something wrong? Did… he… say something? Something suspect?”

She looked at him like he was an alien. “Yeah, Kansas, he told me he had Elvis’ love child. No, no one said anything to me, not outside the ordinary.”

She was certainly giving him whiplash, with all her sarcasm and smiles and conjectures. He had to keep his head from spinning, reminding himself that he did not, in fact, say such things. “Then why are we heading towards the docks?”

Lois paused, evaluating him with a very keen eye, and seemed to come to a satisfactory conclusion. “Because. I don’t know who or why, but somebody is trying to test Metropolis’ new hero.”

Central City, 1993

Ronnie leaned his head back on the couch with a sigh and a grin, resting his eyes for a minute. Man, it felt good to be home. He turned his head to take in the sight of his girlfriend hard at work, sitting cross-legged on the floor on the other side of the coffee table. He loved this woman. She was so beautiful, and smart, and quick, and—

“Ronnie, quit looking at me like I’m a steak and you haven’t had a decent meal in weeks.”

His grin widened. She didn’t even look up as she said the words—somehow, she just knew. Maybe she could feel his eyes on her as she took notes on a notepad and turned back to look at the layout of the seating chart. She was even more adorable when she was in planning mode like this. “I’m not looking at you like that. I’m looking at you like a lonely prisoner who hasn’t seen a woman in weeks.”

Her eyes cut to his with a playfully stern glare. “Quit it.”

“Hey, I ain’t doin’ nothin’, babe.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that. Were you planning on chiming in with an idea or two at some point?”

Ronnie shrugged. “Nope. I trust you. I’ll follow you into the great unknown.”

“I’m trying to not go there.”

His lips twisted into a sad sort of smile, and his heart tugged.

Now wasn’t the time for heavy conversations, but he still couldn’t keep his mind from wandering back to that fateful night. “I like your hair. It’s closer to your normal color again. Although not to say I didn’t like it blonde.”

She rolled her eyes and kept working. “You would.”

His head lolled back against the couch again, boredom overtaking him with a groan. “Come on. Can it be break time? Let’s take a break.”

She leveled him with a patronizing stare. “You can’t call it a break if you haven’t started working.”

“What about…” His lips twitched, the promise of raising her ire once again filling him with glee. “What about a quickie?”

Her eyes were smoky, lustful even, when she turned back to him, and he licked his lips. He was one clever line away from her mouth on his—

A flash of color on the muted screen pulled Ronnie’s attention away suddenly, and he sat up more fully, a pit forming in his stomach. “Holy mother of—”

“What?”

He didn’t respond right away, instead leaning forward to stare at the figure actually flying across the screen on their TV set. All previous thoughts were abandoned now. His heart pounded heavily, his mouth suddenly dry.

“Ronnie, what is it?”

His eyes were riveted to the crest emblazoned on his chest amongst the stains of debris from the explosion, a hint of confusion marring Ronnie’s brow. “I think I know that guy.”

She followed his gaze and looked at the screen, and a laugh escaped her chest. “You do not.”

He swallowed thickly. “I do. I really think I do.”

“Ronnie, this is a hoax.”

“No. It’s not. I-I’ve seen it before. Kinda.”

“Boy, you will do anything to get out of work, won’t you?”

Ronnie leapt to his feet and over the edge of the tattered corduroy couch. He ran over to the bookshelf, rifling through the odd mix of books and trinkets… largely trinkets. Neither of them was much for reading. “Where are you,” he murmured anxiously.

“Ronald, what’s going on? What’s so important about this guy?”

He flipped open a dusty wooden box and yelped with glee, reaching in to palm the item carefully. He turned back to his girlfriend with a grin. “There’s always gonna be another banquet to map, another heist to plan.”

She flipped a lock of her reddish-brown hair over her shoulder and looked on with interest. Ronnie tossed her the small glass sphere, which she was quick to catch and she ran her palm over it carefully. He quirked his lips into a grin.

“There’s only one Kent.”

Chapter 24: Smooth Criminals

Clark tapped his foot at a speed that was supposed to appear normal, if anybody was looking under their table anyway. Above the table, he was cool and collected, serene almost. Not nervously pulling apart at the seams. Lois didn’t seem to notice either way, setting up her impromptu workstation as they waited in an excruciating silence. Clark hated it. He was out of the loop, definitely out of his element, and a little too close to the docks for his tastes. It was a rare event when he’d shown his face around here, usually using Nigel or some other trusted underling as a proxy, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. Fact was anybody could waltz into this small restaurant and recognize him, out him, and then everything he’d worked so hard to accomplish would all be out the window.

“So now will you tell me—”

“I’ll do the talking, Kansas. You just sit there and look pretty.”

He gaped at her. “Why bring me along if I’m not allowed to say anything?”

She shrugged as she flipped to a clean page in her notebook. “You were in my taxi.”

Unbelievable. Clark sighed and tried to engross himself in the menu options, the plastic somewhat sticky. He frowned and tried not to think about it, focusing on the task at hand. He didn’t exactly feel like seafood, but it seemed he had little choice in the matter. He mused over whether or not he could stomach some clam chowder or if he should just go all in on some fish and chips when the harried-looking waiter approached the table. Clark wrinkled his nose. The kid couldn’t be fifteen, and he looked... greasy. It didn’t bode well for the quality of food at the restaurant.

“Sorry about the wait there. Have you guys decided what you want to order?”

“Yes, I think I’ll have—”

“Actually, Will, we’d like to speak with the owner about the chef’s special,” Lois cut in with a saccharine smile. She held out her menu to the waiter and waited for him to recognize her.

Will’s blue eyes lit up suddenly. “Of course! Sorry, Miss Lane. I’ll grab him for you.” The kid practically scrambled off on his new mission.

Clark frowned after the boy, lips turned out in a pout. “So I can’t get the clam chowder, then?”

“No. Bobby wouldn’t recommend it anyway. It’s made with yesterday’s leftovers.”

Clark felt his gut churn at that description. “How charming.”

“Hey now, you’re not talking bad about my restaurant are you? I don’t like undercover reporters much.”

Lois grinned at the man who had just approached their table. “Bobby! Took you long enough.”

“Yeah, yeah. I have a day job you know.”

Clark stiffened significantly as the man slid in next to him on his side of the booth without so much as a how do you do. He tried to express his near-panic to Lois via his eyes at the clear invasion of his personal space, but to no avail. “Come on, Bobby, I know I’m your favorite customer. The best part of your day, right?”

He grinned. “You know it. Don’t know about the stiff over here, though. They try to saddle you with a new partner again, Lo?”

Lois’ lips curled up at the twinge of discomfort on Clark’s face, and a wave of irritation rose up in him. She was laughing at him—he was very clearly uncomfortable with the lack of distance between himself and the stranger, and she was enjoying every minute of it. Sadist.

“Kansas, relax. He’s not a new partner, Bobby. This is Clark Kent, the new owner of the *Planet*.”

“Yeah, I know, Lois. You didn’t have to tell me that.” He thrust out his hand at Clark, and he found himself shaking it against his better judgement, suddenly very wary of how this stranger had figured him out. The fact that the man’s knee was touching his wasn’t easing that nervousness in the least. “Bobby Bigmouth’s the name.”

“Bigmouth?”

The man waved him off. “For my own good. Your friend seems a little curious, Lois. You sure he’s above board?”

“He’s with me, Bobby. You can both relax.”

Clark smiled politely, but it didn’t reach anywhere near his eyes. He wasn’t sure if it was even reaching his mouth. “So, are you one of Lois’ informants, then?”

“Sure. Only when she wants the best information. You gonna ask me what you really want to know?”

Clark was thrown by this squirrely man’s erratic manner. He didn’t exactly talk the way normal people did. Bouncing around, throwing people off guard. Probably why he made such a good snitch. Trick of the trade. “You got me. How’d you know who I was?”

Bobby shrugged. “The type of customers this place usually pulls ain’t in your league. Those threads are way too spiffy. And

that watch you’re wearing? Maybe five men in Metropolis got it. Richies-riches. I know the other guy is Lois’ boy toy, so I took an educated guess.” He grinned and Clark felt minorly shell-shocked. “Or, maybe I saw your face in the papers. I do read the *Daily Planet*, you know.”

Clark huffed a laugh at that, mostly at ease now that he knew the man didn’t recognize him from any other dealings, but still put off by the guy’s lack of personal space. “You are good.”

“Yeah, yeah. Enough with the flattery, buy me a drink already. What are we here for, Lo?”

Lois leaned forward over the table and lowered her voice. “I have a hunch. Nothing concrete yet. But it could be something. What do you know about the Man of Steel?”

“Honestly? You know more than me. You’re the one hanging off his arms every other day.”

“Okay, fine, let me rephrase.” She pursed her lips, tossed a glance over her shoulder nervously. “I’m not talking about captain tight-pants directly. Who would have something against him? Maybe an ax to grind?”

Clark tilted his head, suddenly much more interested in where this was going, but tried to play it casual. He looked down at a suspicious stain on the table and frowned. Bobby scratched his head as he thought about it. “I don’t know, Lois. Guy hasn’t been here that long. Hard to imagine anybody would already have a beef with the big blue Boy Scout. Why, is something up?”

Lois shook her head. “I don’t know yet. I don’t think it’s anything completely nefarious. But remember a couple of days ago, there was that robbery where the guy just straight up tried to shoot him, and then instantly gave up?” Bobby nodded eagerly, lips pursed. “Well today, there was a jumper on this building, and I went up there to help, and then the guy pushed me off instead. But get this—miles down the same road, there was a second jumper, who leapt off the building at the same time as me, and the Boy Scout, as you call him, had to save the both of us. That’s no coincidence.”

Clark froze, the little patch of table he’d been wearing at with his thumbnail getting a brief reprieve. He couldn’t believe that he hadn’t connected the dots himself. “You think someone is setting him up.”

“Either they’re trying to test his powers, find his limits, or they’re trying to prove he can’t do it all, wear him down.”

Clark leaned back into the booth, somewhat floored. It was ingenious of course. He wished he’d thought of it himself. If only he wasn’t the target.

“Sheesh, Lois. That’s some heavy stuff. You all right, hon?”

Lois rolled her eyes dramatically. “Bobby, you of all people know I’ve been in far worse scrapes.”

Bobby held his hands up in surrender and shrugged. “Had to check. But I honestly can’t think of anyone in particular that would be after him. Some criminal mastermind trying to get away with something. Maybe whoever tried to blow up that spaceship a couple weeks ago.”

Lois’ eyes met Clark’s across the table in a flash, both wrapping their heads around that statement in different ways.

“That would make sense. Whoever was responsible for that attack would certainly have a reason to hold a grudge.”

“Antoinette died, though,” Clark pointed out, trying to make sense of it all. He was the one responsible for the bombings, and clearly it wasn’t him causing all this. But that meant Lois and Bobby had the wrong motivation for his mysterious opponent, and then nothing made sense.

“Antoinette was working for someone, though,” Lois pointed out. “And she died before the second bombing, so there was clearly someone else involved.”

Yeah, me, Clark reminded himself.

“Could be the Boss. Most likely,” Bobby chimed in.

Clark’s veins filled with ice at the moniker. He tried to play it

off as confusion, but he wasn't sure if he was successful. "The Boss? Who's the boss?"

"Angela Bower," Bobby spouted off dismissively.

"Bobby," Lois chided. The two shared a look for an excruciating few seconds, before Lois turned to him and tried to explain. "There's always a lot of crime in a city like Metropolis, but we have a crazy amount of organized crime. Nobody knows who's running the thing, they just call him 'the Boss.' A few people have claimed to see him before, but nobody has a good description, and it's always changing."

"The guy's crazy good at what he does. I wouldn't put it past him to do all this. He'd want Big Blue out of the way for sure."

Clark's pulse rocketed again, mouth suddenly dry. God, this conversation was so close to home. He was very careful not to fidget nervously. "Sounds like our guy, then."

"Which basically puts us back where we started," Lois sighed, flipping her notebook closed.

"Sorry, Lo. I'll keep my eyes and ears alert. Head down to the soup kitchen and see if anybody's seen anything suspect."

"I appreciate that, Bobby."

"By the way, you still owe me a meal, Lane."

"Yeah, yeah, Bobby. I'll go help out at your soup kitchen soon enough. If you haven't noticed, things have been a little busy."

Clark stopped listening. It was good to know Bobby's mind on the subject, and where he'd be. Clark reminded himself to avoid the docks in particular for a while before cutting into their conversation by offering another solution. "What if we're thinking about this all wrong? Why aren't we looking at what prompted this all, and work backwards? Not who is the boss, who would want to blow up the *Prometheus*?"

Lois cocked her head, Clark nearly able to hear the way the wheels in her mind were grinding. "Probably get more out of that angle than just blindly looking for the boss."

"Worth a shot." And it would take some heat off of him and he could bounce it over to someone else, someone like Lex. Clark loved it when things started working out naturally. It was a beautiful thing.

Lois stood up quickly, packing up her things haphazardly. "Thanks for your time, Bobby."

"No problem. Sorry I couldn't be of any more help."

They ended up walking a ways down toward a more reputable part of town before hailing a cab, Lois suspiciously quiet the entire way over. Clark tried several times to draw her out of her head to little avail, asking her questions about how she met Bobby, how often she met with him, whether she came down to this side of town a lot. Each query was dismissed with a soft, vague reply, until she finally snapped at him.

"Can you stop with the third degree already?"

Clark raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Hey, sorry. Didn't mean to pry."

"It's not—" She cut herself off as she pinched the bridge of her nose, stopping short. "It's not you."

Clark found himself nodding, gut twisting at the sudden turn in Lois' mood. "I don't mean to annoy, Lois. You just... stopped talking, and that worries me a bit." He quirked his lips up in a quick grin, waiting for a smile or any kind of reaction he could read.

She sighed. "Look, I was almost killed today. Tossed off a building. And not even for anything I've done for once. Just as collateral damage."

Wow, was he a jerk. He could have punched himself for not thinking of that. He was quick to jump in, his hand hovering a fraction of an inch over her shoulder. "I'm sorry—"

"No, don't. I can handle that, mostly. But then you meeting Bobby—nobody meets Bobby—and all this talk about the Boss and the *Messenger* and the *Prometheus*—it's frustrating. It's too big."

Clark waited to be sure she was finished talking before trying again. He dug into his coat pocket and fetched out his shiny cigarette case, offering one to Lois silently. She accepted with a gracious smile, more than he'd seen in the last twenty minutes. He lit the drug for her, and one of his own, giving them each a moment to pause before speaking. "Firstly, you don't have to worry about Bobby, Lois. I don't have anyone to tell. I wouldn't do that to you." She rolled her eyes, huffed a quiet "I know that" under her breath and he smiled at the vote of confidence, the pit in his stomach easing slightly at her approval. "And secondly, we don't have to treat this like a big story. Treat it like a bunch of little ones. Take it one step at a time."

Lois seemed to weigh her response carefully, dragging some more nicotine into her lungs as she thought. "It's not so much that it's too big a story. My life goal is always to find the next big story."

He put his hand out and nudged her arm softly, a thrill running through his veins at the brief contact. "Then what is it?"

She took one last puff and dropped the cigarette, grinding it into the concrete under her heel with more harshness than he thought necessary. "We've been distracted. Chasing the wrong story. Someone new and bright and flashy showed up, saved the day, and everybody forgot about what almost happened. Why he showed up in the first place." Her eyes snapped to his, a fire burning inside her that he hadn't seen there before. It gave him chills that he never wanted to go away. "I don't like getting the wrong story."

Clark's smile was halfway mischievous, and he held out his arm for her gently. "Well then, let's go get you your story."

Lex was struggling to catch his breath when Asabi handed him the phone. He paused, trying his best to sound normal when he spoke. "Lex Luthor speaking."

"Lex! I'm glad I caught you. Are you all right? You sound out of breath."

His whole being perked up at the sound of her voice. "Lois, darling! I was, uh, just finishing up a quick workout. I was starting to wonder about you, though! Were we still on for dinner tonight?"

"I'm so sorry, Lex. That's what I'm calling about."

Lex winced. "Caught up on a big story then?"

"Yeah. Am I the worst girlfriend or what?"

Lex laughed a little loudly, putting a lot of confidence behind the sound to cover for the edges of any nervousness in his voice. His fingers danced in an impatient rhythm on his desk beside him. "Never, my darling! Those words can't be in the same sentence as your beautiful name."

"All right, all right. Somebody's feeling sappy."

"Any excuse I get." he grinned for her sake, but slid his eyes over to his company anxiously. "So, tomorrow night, then?"

"Yeah, tomorrow should work."

His smile felt waxy and fake. He knew very well what tomorrows meant for Lois Lane, and it was draining. "Well, then, until tomorrow."

"Night, Lex."

"Wait—you're all right, aren't you Lois?"

There was a pause that seemed to stretch on for longer than Lex liked. For a moment, he thought she might actually say something, but then the moment passed with her assurance that, yes, she was fine, just tired and had a lot of work to do. His fake smile returned, and he bid her goodnight as well before hanging up the phone and handing it back over to Asabi.

"You're in luck, you know." He turned to his guest, who sat on his knees in the middle of Lex's office with a rapidly bruising mark spreading across his right cheek. The man would have a glorious black eye in the morning, too. "That was Lois. She says she's fine."

The man swallowed harshly, scared to say a word. Lex grinned menacingly. "If one hair on her head had come to harm,

we'd be finishing out the rest of this conversation with our fists."

"P-puh-please, Mr. Luthor. I didn't know it was her, she was there, she was in the way, a-and I just—"

"You reacted rashly," he snapped at the man, shutting him down swiftly. "Like a criminal. We had a plan. You were to jump on my mark, exactly timed with the second jumper. I don't care who was up there, or what they said to you. You weren't in any real danger with that nuisance flying around."

"Yeah, unless he wasn't fast enough."

"No, then we'd both have been saved the pain of this conversation," Lex said with a sneer, and the man shut right back up. He struggled to bring his emotions back under control, reminding himself that Lois was fine, he'd heard her voice, that he wasn't his father. He stepped back, sinking heavily against his behemoth of a desk. "That phone call just saved your life. Now I'm only going to fire you."

The man nodded rapidly in response, not pushing his luck, and scrambled to his feet to go.

"Oh, and if I hear any of this get back to Lois, or anyone else, I will come after you. I know some people, you know."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir." He continued to back out of the room, stopping only as he ran into the tall, lumbering form of Nigel St. John entering the room. Nigel gave Lex a confused look and the man ran like a bat out of hell, not looking back.

Lex shrugged at his friend and associate casually. "He had an accident. Ran into my fist a couple of times."

Nigel mentally catalogued this behavior and smiled serenely. "Would you like me to bring you some ice for that fist, sir?"

He smiled. "That's why you're my favorite, Nigel."

Chapter 25: Poetic Justice

Lex bit his nails. It was a bad habit, he knew, but it was a small vice. He considered himself lucky he hadn't picked up any other habits or traits over his time on this earth, particularly given his genetic predisposition to some of them. He didn't have to wonder very hard why Lois smoked.

That said, the thrill of coordinating all these situations for the Man of Steel to get himself out of gave him a heady feeling. He could easily see why people became criminals—it was an addiction of sorts. Setting the pins up, knocking them down. Never getting caught. What a rush. And if he was going after Clark Kent instead? He could easily imagine his whole life changing.

"What about a bomb?"

Nigel's inquiry broke Lex out of his thoughts, and he mused on that possibility. "We already saw him swallow a bomb on the *Prometheus*. What would that prove?"

"It proves his strength, maybe he crushed it with his fists or teeth first. It doesn't prove his vulnerability."

"It's not bad." Lex dragged out the word, toying with the idea. It wasn't a bad idea at all. He darted a stern glance over at Nigel. "I wouldn't want there to be a chance that anyone gets hurt."

"Of course. We could always do it in an empty building, get the area to evacuate."

"Maybe. I don't know if he would show up if there wasn't any incentive, though." Lex pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on the table to keep himself from chewing his nails again. He sat upright in his seat when the solution came to him. "Oh! But maybe we get the area evacuated, and that's how we get his attention. Call in a bomb threat, and the big blue Boy Scout is the only one in there, and then—" He mimed an explosion with his hands, pulling a little smile out of Nigel.

"I like how you think, sir."

Lex grinned at the praise. He genuinely got along well with Nigel. They'd worked together for so long, he almost couldn't remember life before him. Almost. He shut down that train of thought before it had a chance to leave the station.

Nigel was the one to suggest this plan of action in the first

place. He'd discovered minimal information about Clark Kent, and though what he'd learned spoke volumes on the man's character, there was nothing to indicate anything more nefarious going on. Maybe he was really reading into things, being paranoid. Lois would kill him if she found out he was doing this, and then it turned out to be all for nothing.

But his gut screamed at him that something was wrong that day. He couldn't be that off. He couldn't be. Whether the culprit for that feeling was Clark Kent, or this new hero, or even Lois, he didn't know. So when Nigel mentioned investigating the newly designated "Man of Steel" first, he leapt in with both feet. He needed to find answers one way or another. Plus, if he did need to eventually do something about Kent, it'd be helpful to know what he could do to keep the resident superhero off his back.

He wasn't done with Clark Kent in the least.

"All right, then. Let's get to it, Nigel."

As things turned out, they didn't get a chance to start investigating the EPRAD launches just yet. Lois had been mad at first, but the crime in Metropolis didn't seem to be sleeping, and she wasn't one to say no to a good story. They were playing a long game here. Whoever was behind those attacks wasn't going away, and they were clearly content to take their time with it all. Slow and steady would win this race.

She found herself reminding Kent of that more and more often as the newer stories landed in her lap, and they were more often separated at work. He couldn't say she wasn't still working the original case. She was burning the candle at both ends, riding out the *Daily Planet's* operating hours like a pro. Lex wasn't too happy about it, but he seemed vaguely distracted as well. She tried not to think about what that could mean.

Lois frowned, looked around the office suddenly. Speaking of distant, Clark didn't seem to be around quite as often, either. That was bizarre. She'd started to think of him like her shadow: always there, a little darker than she was, but on her side.

She was probably too close to him. A little distance couldn't hurt. Besides. Disappearing at random intervals of the day? Probably had a new fling, enjoying some afternoon delights. She allowed herself the eye-roll, didn't allow herself the pang of jealousy that wanted to beat against her heart. She had a boyfriend, and it wasn't Clark.

She glanced at her watch, noting it was still early. It would be nice of her to surprise Lex, visit him for an early dinner. Maybe they should get out of town, just the two of them, reconnect.

The beck of an open investigation grounded her from that thought.

Okay, maybe they could get away somewhere in town. She could get them reservations at a hotel in town, take it from there. A grin took over her face. He would love that! She knew exactly the place too.

She started to pack up her things to get ready to go even as she dialed a number on her phone. "Hi, yes. Can you please connect me to the Lexor Hotel? I'd like to make a reservation."

Clark blinked rapidly in an effort to clear the smoke from his eyes. What the hell? The bomb had gone off literally as soon as he'd entered the building. He ran the logistics of that through his brain. It could have been pressure sensitive, but then the evacuation of the Carlin building would have compromised the explosive. He hadn't smelled any sort of accelerant, or noticed if there was something he'd triggered as he walked in.

It seemed like someone had their finger hovering over the button, waiting for him to arrive.

That pit in his stomach grew back. It was the same attacker as the one from two weeks ago, with the jumpers.

He knew it was a bad idea to lay off that case so much.

The nerves in his stomach were replaced with a seething anger. Clark told himself to calm down, reminding himself of who he was right now, and took a few deep breaths before stepping out

of the rubble and smoke and approaching his awaiting audience.

Cheers erupted around him, and Clark raised a hand in a gesture of thanks, following it up with a quick brush off of his insignia and taking off with a sonic boom.

He circled back around rather quickly, and changed back out of the uniform. He landed about a block away, watching the investigators begin to comb the blast site as he approached, not caring that he might still be a little soot-stained. He gestured to the first man he recognized as soon as he got to the edge of the barrier. “Henderson!”

The inspector took a second to register his voice, but smiled when he saw him and approached the barrier. “Kent. You gotta stop hanging around Lois. She’ll get you killed one of these days.”

Clark grinned crookedly. “Oh, she’ll be the death of me all right, but I’m actually here on my own today.”

Henderson’s eyebrows jumped in surprise. “Really? That’s curious. You two might be more alike than I thought. What brings you over here?”

He shrugged casually. “Coincidence, really. Hey, since I don’t see any of my own reporters here, mind if I ask a couple questions of my own? I gotta give them something to work with.”

The way Henderson weighed his answer made Clark nervous that maybe he was appearing too curious. The one time he wasn’t responsible for any crimes, and now he looks suspicious. Swell.

“Fine. But don’t tell Lane I’m doing you any favors.”

Clark’s answering grin was all he needed, and suddenly he was in. They walked over to the bomb squad van, where the investigators were slowly compiling the bomb components, and anything that could be important.

“All we have so far is that the bomb was remotely set off. Now, we’re not quite sure where that puts us, but we’ve narrowed it down to a five-mile radius so far. We’re still trying to determine the bomb’s components, but likely whoever set it off is up in smoke already, no pun intended.”

“Are there any indicators of who could have done this?”

“Not particularly. Although, there were video cameras installed in the lobby that were not part of the building’s security system, or any other system that the management company knew about. We think the two are connected.”

Clark nodded. It was as much as he expected. “So you’re telling me that someone waited for him to appear, watched him enter the building, and then detonated the explosives?”

“That’s our theory. Listen, I’ll catch up with you in a minute, Kent. I have to go talk to the explosives captain.”

Clark ran a hand through his hair. So all in all, it wasn’t much more information. The frustration was eating him alive. Someone was gunning for him—for the hero. If somebody was after Clark Kent, he’d understand. He had plenty of enemies. But his alter ego was another story.

If he was weaving a tale for Lois, he’d pin it on Lex. Probably would eventually anyway. But somebody had to answer to him first, regardless of what ended up in the papers. He had to know the truth.

A face in the crowd caught his eye, and he frowned as he stared after the man. He was shifty, trying a little too hard to be a part of the crowd, appear interested for the right reasons. But that wasn’t the reason Clark had noticed him.

This man worked for Lex Luthor.

His heart started pounding faster, things starting to click into place. No, it couldn’t be that easy. It was exactly what he was planning on telling Lois, and for practically the first time in his life, it would be the truth. Clark turned to look for Henderson, because he had to be sure first.

“Hey, Henderson, on an unrelated note...”

“Here we go. Lane really must be rubbing off on you.”

Clark smiled briefly at the mental image that wording provoked, before sobering his attitude. “Those jumpers from last

week. You get a psych profile on either of them?”

Henderson frowned, puzzled at the bizarre turn in questioning. “Uh, yeah. I couldn’t tell you anything off the top of my head, other than they seemed perfectly normal. Both claimed to be overstressed, overworked.”

“Did they happen to mention where they worked?”

“The woman said she worked in R&D for LexCorp, and the man refused to say much of anything, but considering he pushed Lane off the roof, he probably just didn’t want to incriminate himself anymore.”

Clark could have laughed, except the laughter that wanted to bubble up in his throat was being smothered by an urge to scream with rage, resulting in a weird bubble of discomfort lodged in his chest. He smiled tautly at the inspector, and made his thanks and left.

As soon as he was far enough out of sight, Clark darted into an alley and took off. He might not be able to truly face off with Lex yet, but his alter ego definitely had some words to share with the man.

Chapter 26: Know Your Enemy

Lex was admiring the view as the sun set over his balcony. Metropolis was a beautiful city. Sure, she had her dark corners, rough edges. But compared to her sister city in Gotham, she was pristine, a flawless diamond. Lex sighed as the sun dipped below the next tallest building.

Today had been quite the productive day. There hadn’t been any casualties, as he’d predicted, very few injuries even, and to top it off, he’d learned a little more about the apparently indestructible hero; namely, that the man was indestructible.

The word left a bad taste in his mouth. It was a bad feeling. That he could hardly retaliate if the Man of Steel somehow came after him, or that his powers were completely unchecked. He had to have a weakness somewhere. He just didn’t know what on God’s green earth that weakness could be.

A shadow crossed over his features, and it was as if thinking the hero’s name could summon him alone. Lex felt paralyzed for a moment. What if the alien could in fact do that? Read his mind somehow. He fought a shudder and put on his best gracious host grin as he looked up at the hero perched delicately on his balcony. “You startled me! What a lovely surprise! I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure: Lex Luthor.”

The expression on the hero’s face was not one Lex could match with any of the pictures he’d seen of the friendly neighborhood superhero. He took in the way the man’s suit was stained and his cape a bit tattered, and that concern about having checks for powers reared back in his mind again.

The hero ignored his introduction and jumped off the balcony to land besides him. “I know who you are, Luthor. Who you really are.”

“Do you now?” Lex stalled, turning his back on the hero and sweeping into his office with an air of confidence he couldn’t quite muster for real. He turned just in time to watch the Man of Steel come striding in after him, an angry determination sparking in his eyes.

“You want to know how strong I am, Luthor?”

The hero picked up the sword of Damocles he had perched in its display and bent it in half without any sort of exertion, and not a cut from the blade either. Lex swallowed. This was a bad sign.

“You want to know how fast I am?”

He grabbed the gun sitting in Lex’s middle desk drawer. Lex’s eyes shot wide. How the hell had he even known there was a gun in there? He cocked the gun, and aimed it square at his chest.

Surely he wouldn’t actually fire—

The sound of the gunshot had barely reached his ears, Lex bracing himself for his end, when the man sped to his side and plucked the bullet out of thin air, just before it hit his chest. Lex

felt his heart pounding faster than he'd ever remembered, and maybe it was a heart attack. Lex considered himself to be in peak physical shape, but that fear and panic just about did him in. He casually pressed the bullet into his palm, and it took a moment for Lex to register the searing heat of the thing before he dropped it to the ground, eyes wide.

He looked up in a mixture of horror and awe at the hero. The blood drumming in his ears made it hard to even hear himself speak, but he tried anyway, louder than he'd perhaps intended. "Does that conclude your demonstration?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "The tests stop now, Luthor."

A flash of fear ran through him at the fact that he'd been caught out, and he swallowed dryly. "Me? I admit nothing. I'm not sure what tests you're talking about. You know, I do hold a certain position in this city—"

His eyes flashed again, incensed that Lex refused to concede. "Yes," he interjected. "And there's nothing that would please me more than to see you dethroned and behind bars, like any common criminal. That day will come, Luthor. Mark my words."

Lex scoffed, his bravado taking him farther than he'd ever expected. He dared to step toward the hero once more, believing now that the man wouldn't actually do anything to hurt him. "I trust not. You have no proof. No one's been hurt. And besides all that, no one would believe you."

The hero smiled politely, suddenly calmer than he had been this whole time, more the picture of the hero he'd glimpsed on TV and in the papers. It was an eerie amount of control, but Lex let the brief submission bolster his spirits more, and he leaned forward menacingly, waiting for the hero to back down. Instead, he very placidly just nodded his head in the direction over his shoulder.

"She might."

Time froze.

Those two words socked Lex in the gut, and the wind left his sails in an instant as he followed the hero's gaze to the woman who stood behind him with a horrified look on her face.

Lex could hardly swallow as he choked out her name. "Lois."

He took a few steps backward before turning toward the balcony to take off. Lex gaped at his girlfriend like a fish, and turned back to the Man of Steel just as he was leaving. "Wait, no—you can't leave! You have to explain to her—"

A sonic boom cut him off mid-thought. Lex turned back to Lois. "You don't understand. You missed everything he—"

Lois' eyes drifted shut. "Lex."

He clammed up and for the love of all that was good and right and holy he begged the stars that she give him a chance to explain.

Lois stayed like that for a dreadfully long time. Her eyes opened and he couldn't bear it another second.

"He's deranged. You didn't see—I didn't try to—"

"I need some space."

"Lois," he pleaded, practically begging her. He almost grabbed her arm but remembered how she felt about that, and instead dropped to his knees, reaching gently for her hand. "Please, hear my side of it."

"You know, I came here to surprise you, and I had this nice gesture and everything, and here I'm the one surprised."

"Lois, Lois... please, Lois," he begged for absolution, feeling the hurt watering up in her eyes as it was in his own. "Don't leave me. I love you. I love you so much."

"I'm not saying... I just need time. Okay? Give me some time."

Lex swallowed past the lump that was a permanent resident in his throat now and nodded. "I can give you time. Whatever you need. I promise, my darling."

She pulled her hand from his grip when he leaned in to kiss it, mind racing a mile a minute, and she left him kneeling there all

alone.

Clark soared through the skies, giddy as a schoolgirl. Did that really just happen?

Just for kicks, he flew around Metropolis, looking for crime to stop. He helped an old lady cross the street, stopped a gang fight from breaking out, and rescued a cat from a tree.

This was the best he'd felt in ages. He could not have planned that to go better if he tried. He tried to get his facts in order, because it was that unbelievable.

One. Lex Luthor was actually the person behind the attacks on his alter ego. Mystery solved. No frame-up necessary. Hard evidence was present. Two. He, as his alter ego, had successfully confronted Luthor about it, and ended up antagonizing the man enough to nearly prompt an actual rivalry. And, Lois had walked in at the exact right moment to watch it all!

A disagreement seemed to be breaking out below him on the docks, so he swooped down once more to save the day again.

"Evening, gentlemen. Everything all right?"

Both groups swung their guns towards him. Clark merely smiled. "Go ahead. Not the first guy to try and do me in today. See this stain? That's from a bomb."

The men on the docks shared a look, and while they didn't put down their guns, Clark took it as a good sign that nobody had tried to shoot him yet. He walked toward the crate they were clearly trying to smuggle past customs. "What's in the box? Drugs? Heroin, maybe?" He tore the lid off the box with a quick flip of his wrist, and examined the bags of white powder inside. "Let's find out." He gave the packet a quick zap with his laser vision to slice it in half.

The criminals were dumbfounded as they watched the infallible hero lick his pinky finger, stick it into the white powder, and return the digit to his mouth carefully. "Mm. Cocaine. It seems I was wrong. Not half bad, either."

"Hey! What's going on down there?"

The guys froze at the sound of the security team coming after them. "Give me the money and you can have it all right now," the ringleader of one side said in an undertone, nervously glancing at the hero.

Clark laughed. "It's cute that you guys think you're getting away with this." In the blink of an eye, the Man of Steel disappeared, and reappeared with the customs guards in tow. "Officers, nice of you to join us. It seems these guys have some sort of drug ring going, and we've caught them in the act. You have a way to call nine-one-one?"

"The boss isn't gonna like this," one of the guys muttered, and Clark suddenly felt like he'd had a bucket of ice water dumped over him.

The other kid tossed his hands in the air. "Take me in! I'd rather go to prison."

Clark watched on as the officers made their arrests and called in their superiors, masking his face to remain as neutral as possible while it all went down.

"Thank you so much. We've been trying to put a stop to these guys for a while now."

He smiled politely and nodded, remarking rather coolly that it was what he did, before flying away in a more somber mood.

Chapter 27: Hang Me Up to Dry

A crunch of glass underfoot made Nigel cringe and his steps falter. He glanced down and stepped back nervously to see what he'd stepped on as he walked in the room. Broken glass shards bounced back in the plush carpeting, and he frowned. It seemed one of his boss's crystal tumblers had been obliterated. He glanced up in confusion only to find Lex's office in chaos, and Luthor at the center of it all. There was a mostly empty bottle of scotch, broken on the floor; half the things had been pushed off his desk haphazardly; his prized sword from Alexander the third or

whoever warped and kicked onto the floor. Nigel eyed the man carefully. The bottle of scotch hadn't been opened before, he knew, as it was one Lex had been hoping to save for a special occasion. Drunk or not, though, Nigel couldn't help but marvel at how Luthor could have ever become the third richest man in the world when he was easily skirting the line of insanity. He approached calmly, careful to make some noise so as to not completely startle the man. "Sir? Everything all right?"

"He's a lunatic! I didn't do it. I'll show him. I'll show him."

Confusion bit him fiercely. "Sir—"

"And she! She'll see. I didn't do this. I didn't do anything! I set off a bomb. One thing. But I didn't *do* anything!"

A glint of something flashed back at him from Lex's loose grip, and Nigel staggered his footing, suddenly on alert. "Mr. Luthor."

"And my gun!" he shouted, lifting the weapon into the air, the sway to his step making him lose his balance briefly. "My gun. My father's gun. He knew. How did he know? I didn't show him my drawers. Open them. Lunatic. He knew. And he's out saving the city?!"

Nigel tried to piece together the few coherent words he was picking up from Luthor's deranged and erratic speech. Who was he talking about? Kent? Had his boss been here in his other guise?

Lex gestured broadly through the air above him, gun still in hand, as though displaying the name in lights. "What would it be like to live with a name like that? Women swooning every time you flew past, everyone welcoming you with open arms, wanting to get within an arm's length of you—"

He approached cautiously, hands clearly out in front of him. "Sir, I think you need some rest."

"I'll never rest!" he shouted on a wobbly spin, stumbling towards the balcony and shouting outside. "You hear that? I'll *never* rest!" He trailed off with a maniacal laugh that sent a chill down Nigel's spine. Lex Luthor was at all times in control. Borderline control freak. He'd never seen Lex Luthor this unhinged.

Nigel hastily pulled him back inside from the balcony just as Lex started leaning too far over the ledge. Lex didn't resist, just continued to laugh as Nigel pulled him inside and plopped him down in his desk chair. He proceeded to close the door to the balcony as Lex spun circles in his seat, and wondered what the bloody hell his other boss had done to the man.

When he turned back, he saw the man twirling the gun around and around on one finger. Nigel ducked instinctually, but Lex just laughed. "No bullets," he murmured, fondly cradling the gun to his chest. "He used it. Wasted it. Needs a reload. Only ever needs one bullet."

Nigel could hardly fathom what had to have happened for his boss to have this level of a mental breakdown. He'd seen Lex Luthor at his highest heights, with a near-manic energy and chasing after everything his heart desired with a passion. He hadn't imagined the lows would be equally as manic.

The man was unstable. Maybe always had been.

It was very nearly terrifying.

"And it wasn't even his fault!" Lex exclaimed suddenly, face furrowed in a frown. "Lois. And Blue. And me. But not even him!" This spawned another string of oddly stilted laughter.

"What happened to Lois?" Nigel hazarded to ask, knowing that information would be crucial to both the men involved in his career.

Lex shook his head. "She needs *time*. Like she's hadn't had... hadn't... it's been a lot of time."

Nigel raised an eyebrow. "She left you?"

"No!" Lex shouted uproariously, as though the very concept was unfathomable. He slumped back into his chair as though all the air had been drained out of him. "She just left. It's all his fault. I know I said it wasn't but it is. Not my fault."

Nigel just sighed and started trying to clean up the room. It was the only bit of sanity he had. Clearly he wasn't getting anything else out of the man tonight.

"Clark. What kind of a name is that. It's a stupid name."

He smothered a smile as he gathered up the scattered sheets of LexCorp's military research and development contract strewn about the room, collating it back into its original file folder. If nothing else, the rivalry between the two men was entertaining.

"Clark Kent. Clark Goddam Kent from Clark Goddam Kansas. No wonder. Kansas really is a godforsaken state. Ken... Kansas..."

Nigel finally looked over to check on the man when he trailed off into silence, only to see him frowning and pensive. "Sir? Luthor, are you all right?"

Lex didn't respond immediately, his eyes darting back and forth rapidly, as though trying to pull together the pieces of a puzzle while... well, while completely inebriated.

His gaze anchored on Nigel again, much less clouded now and far more frightened. "We need to go on a little trip, Nigel. Call ahead to the jet and make sure it's ready to go."

The three sixty left Nigel with his head spinning. He checked his watch pointedly and arched his brow at the intoxicated man. "Now, sir?"

Lex was on his feet and grabbing his briefcase already, not even acknowledging the unsteady sway to his steps. "Not a moment to lose."

Clark had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach that had no business being there. He should be on an all-time high right now. Last night went better than he could have dreamed. And he wouldn't be bothered in the least if he could get in contact with anybody.

"Pick up the phone," he muttered as the voicemail message played once again. Nigel was never unreachable. If he had company he couldn't talk business in front of, or was in the middle of something, he picked up the phone and said so. Clark tapped his fingers against the desk impatiently, waiting for the voice to stop so he could finally speak. The beep sounded and Clark leaned forward in his seat. "Nigel, I don't know what's going on, but I need you here yesterday. We have a lot to talk about."

He hung up the phone, concerned that maybe something had happened to his right hand man. He shook himself. He'd be fine without him. Maybe this was a sign he'd grown too reliant on the British spy.

He certainly knew too much about him to be up and walking.

Clark sighed and decided to go into the Planet. Lois could probably do to see him today. Maybe he could drop a hint about Luthor for their investigation—finally. Lois knew Lex wasn't quite so perfect now, and she knew his alter ego knew, but Clark could play dumb for a little while. "Unknowingly" be there as a shoulder to lean on.

He hoped she wasn't too broken up about it.

A demure voice spoke up behind him. "Surprised to see you in today. Lois called out."

Clark's steps faltered as he turned back to face the drab and judgmental Cat Grant with a defensive frown. "I don't only come in for Lois."

"Oh, Clark," she cooed, patting his arm condescendingly. "Keep working on that line. You've almost got it down."

He wanted to defend himself, but Cat had already sauntered off, and she wasn't wrong. If Lois wasn't here, he genuinely didn't have anything to do. He supposed he could do... actual paperwork. He nearly shuddered. That's what assistants were for.

Well. He could always check on the other side of his business. Without Nigel, he'd have to get his hands dirty. He made a good show of sticking around for a while, talking with Perry and Jimmy, hiding away in the conference room for a few minutes, if only for Cat's benefit.

He couldn't say why he cared.

Nobody knew anything about Lois' whereabouts. He did find out from Perry that she'd asked for the day off last night, before everything had fallen out with Luthor. He weighed the option of cruising past Luthor's place, just to check in and make sure Lois wasn't there, or locked in some bunker somewhere, but he chalked that up to a bad idea as well, realizing that he couldn't do anything even if she was there.

He ran a hand through his hair. He hoped she wasn't.

No matter. He'd find out where she was eventually. And he really had work to do.

It took him longer than he'd have liked to figure out who Nigel was planning on meeting with this afternoon. Clark waited in the shadows of the abandoned parking garage casually, picking a piece of lint off the lapel of his overcoat, adjusting his gloves. Boredom threatened to overtake him. He'd forgotten how dull this part could be. There was a lot of waiting involved in starting a major crime syndicate. It wasn't at all as glamorous as he'd imagined it early on, but it had its moments.

Two men turned the corner, hesitated when they didn't see the white-haired man. Clark took a few steps towards them, trying to gain their confidence. "Gentlemen. Fine day for a stroll in the shadows."

They shared a look of apprehension. "Where's the old man?" the shorter of the two spoke first.

"Mr. St. John has been temporarily incapacitated," Clark replied coolly, purposefully dropping his name. "I'm here in his stead."

"Yeah? And just who the hell do you think you are?"

Clark flashed his teeth on a grin. "I'm his boss."

The tension grew thick between them and their faces paled, and Clark took a small measure of glee from the ways he could hear their pulses rocket. Clearly they knew there weren't many people above Nigel in the chain of command, and that could only mean one thing. The two stood motionless waiting for him to make some sort of move. Clark reveled in the fact that he could still strike the fear of God into them without even making a threat. "Now," Clark continued. "I believe I'm here to address the issue of the confiscated cocaine?"

"H-He came out of nowhere, Boss!" the taller man exclaimed, defensive and irate. "That-that guy with the cape just swooped down out of the sky and took our guys! We didn't even have a chance to get down there to do anything in time."

"Victor, relax." The shorter man put a hand out in front of Victor's chest, seemingly knowing how to calm him. "It's all been taken care of, sir. We had to spend a little dough, but we were able to score some off of a street gang. Not as much, but enough for us to scrape by until the next shipment."

Clark remained impassive, waiting until they reached a natural lull in conversation to interject. "You have any of it with you?"

The shorter man nodded and nudged his partner. Victor jumped and fumbled for the packet in his breast pocket, and passed over a small plastic bag with a dose of powder inside. "Here you are, Mr. Kent."

Clark removed a glove to take a quick taste and hummed noncommittally. He ran his tongue over his teeth, processing. "What did you say your name was again?"

The man glanced at his partner, nervously. "Uh. Victor?"

"Right. Victor. And..."

The smaller man squirmed uncomfortably. "Kyle."

"Very clever. Thinking on your feet."

Kyle put his hands in his back pockets and rocked on the balls of his feet. "Thanks. Um, thank you."

"You're welcome." Clark turned, starting to pace as he examined the little bag of powder, voice coming out as a low growl. "You want to know a little-known fact? Guys like me—and by that I mean rich guys—they know the difference between high-

quality cocaine and generic coke off the street."

They blinked up at him, confused by the predatory turn he had taken as he suddenly loomed over them. "Do you have any idea what your little switch did? Because of this, somebody's not going to get the fix they need. This one shipment greases a lot of wheels. Maybe somebody decides our organization doesn't have the pull we used to, turns somewhere else for their supply. Maybe someone decides to stop cooperating. Maybe that cooperation was a necessity for the next shipment to come through, or for another plan in the larger scheme of things."

Victor, ever defensive, shook his head rapidly and spouted out words without second thought. "Sir, we didn't—"

"Oh, I'm not done." Clark was roiling now, and just getting started. He could feel the tightness in the cords of his neck, and he told himself to calm down to little avail. "Do you know whose drugs those were? A congressman's. Do you know what he was doing for me in return? No, you don't. Because you're peons. And instead of consulting with anyone, you tried to cover your own ass, push the problem down the line."

"No!" Victor took a few steps back, Clark a few steps forward, caging him in against the hard concrete of the garage. "I-I didn't. We just wanted to help—"

"Do you think we'll ever be able to use that port again for any shipments? No. And then, to top it all off, you have the audacity to call me by my name?"

Clark watched as the fear spread in Victor's eyes, realizing his slip up. "I-I don't—"

His words were clipped, crisp and clear and almost sickeningly sweet as they fell from his lips. "How do you know my name, Victor?"

"Y-you were on the news! I recognized you! I put two and two together. I just said it—"

Clark lifted the man up by the collar with both hands and physically pinned him against the wall, barely exerting any effort. "Do you have any idea how many people have seen my face, known what I did, and lived to tell the tale? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't snap your neck right now."

His eyes were frantic, squirming to get out of Clark's grasp, legs kicking blindly for solid ground. "I can fix it! We can fix it! Kyle has a contact at the police station, he'll get the coke out of evidence!"

"Then it sounds like Kyle can fix it."

There was a loud bang that echoed throughout the empty halls of the garage. Victor's body slumped over in his arms, and Clark let the man slide to the ground listlessly. He wiped his hand on his pants to get the blood spatter off and ran the gloved hand across his face before turning to face Kyle with a raised eyebrow.

Kyle shrugged loosely and slipped his gun back into the shoulder holster underneath his coat, a little too casual for a man that had just killed a friend. Clark made a note of that behavior. It could be useful down the line. "Man with a mouth like that? Can't bring him around a police station, or any other criminals neither."

Clark smirked as he watched the smaller man put his gun away, carding a hand through his hair to dislodge what felt like blood there as well. He'd have to speed home and clean himself up. "I like you, Kyle. I'm gonna give you a pass this time."

Kyle nodded eagerly, happy to have death pass by his door once more. "I didn't see anything or anyone. Who's this Kent?"

Clark tapped his nose and pointed at the man, before quietly backing away. If things didn't work out, he could always have Nigel remove Kyle from the equation as well.

Lois sunk into the red, heart-shaped bathtub with a sigh of relief, trying to let the scalding hot water and the play of the bubbles against her skin decompress her. She should do this more often. Her life should not be so stressful that the only break she ever got was a smoke break.

She tried to clear her head without allowing for anything

upsetting to drift into her mind.

Too late.

The image of Lex's charcoal gray suit standing toe to toe in contrast with the bright, primary-colored one struck behind her eyelids, and she slipped under the water to try and shock the image away. Unfortunately it didn't work. She couldn't wrap her mind around it. Lex had been the one behind all the recent attacks. Why, she had no idea. It wasn't something she'd ever pictured coming from Lex Luthor, and they'd known each other for a year. The man proposed to her three times, and she didn't know about this side of him?

Stop it, Lane. You need a break from work.

That's what this visit was all about. Or at least, what it was now. Originally it had been a romantic adventure to get Lex and herself back to basics. Hence the honeymoon suite of the Lexor Hotel.

So much for the relaxing bath. She heaved a sigh and tried to pull herself out of the tub, slipping several times in the bubbles.

A glimpse of motion outside the bathroom window caught her eyes, and she slid back down to cover herself in the relative security of cherry-scented bubbles with a squeak. She peeked over the edge of the tub, a frown creasing the lines of her forehead.

She knew that face, the silver head of hair seemingly shining back at her. That was Congressman Ian Harrington. She watched with curiosity as he was flanked by two other men who set up in the room across the way. Something was off about this. She scrambled out of the tub, not taking a second to cover herself with a towel, and rummaged through her purse for her camera.

Through the lens she had a little bit of a better view, and she watched and clicked as the men appeared to exchange large envelopes and investigate the contents.

Maybe this could be a new story. Something to distract her from her problems with Lex in the meantime.

One last picture for the road, and she watched as they each packed up their things and left.

Oh yeah. This would be exactly the right kind of distraction.

Chapter 28: Lightning Strike

Clark was too jovial to see Lois at all to notice the pictures Jimmy was pinning up. "Lois! You're back. Where were you yesterday?"

Cat Grant raised an eyebrow at him, one that he studiously ignored as he turned to face Lois more fully.

"I took a day off and treated myself to a night out. What's the harm in that?"

"Right. Tell Luthor I said hello."

"I wasn't with—" She stopped short as she realized just what she was saying. "I mean... I don't have to be with Lex twenty-four seven. I had myself a nice girl's night out, for your information. With just me."

Well, he was glad to hear that at least Luthor hadn't been with her. Jimmy chimed in with a comment about being more work than play, when Clark finally looked up and noticed the photographs. His stomach flipped briefly. "Is that—"

"Congressman Ian Harrington. Chairman of the House Defense Committee."

He stepped closer to the pictures and examined them.

Fortunately it didn't appear anyone who knew him personally was at play here. "And who are these two?"

"No matches so far," Jimmy shouted across the bullpen from behind a computer.

"The only thing we know so far is that building is leased to a company called Apocalypse Consulting. Fishy sounding, I know."

Clark mentally tried to place where that shell corporation was located, and the only other thing he could come up with in the vicinity was the Lexor Hotel. She'd stayed at the Lexor?

"Oh! Hey, Chief—I was wondering..."

Perry breezed past with his hands shading him like blinders. "I don't want to hear it, Lois."

"But it's a big story and—"

"Let me take a wild guess. You want the *Daily Planet* to put you up in the Honeymoon Suite until we figure out exactly what's going on at Apocalypse Consulting."

Lois smiled at her boss with an extra bat of the lashes.

"Thanks, Perry. You're the best."

"I didn't say yes. We are seriously over budget this month already, thanks to some of the overtime I've gotten overzealous with." He glanced at Clark and made an aim to defend himself with his hands spread innocently. "To be fair, it's been a busy month."

Clark waved him off. "Don't sweat it. It's been doing wonders for our advertisers, and circulation is up." That was an understatement. He was making his money back in spades on this investment.

"Thanks, but we've still gotta tighten our belts around here. You want to stay in the Honeymoon Suite? Talk to Kent."

Clark's face lit up with excitement at that turn in phrasing, and he caught the pointed stare of Cat Grant from the other side of Lois' desk. He took a petty moment to stick his tongue out at the woman before turning to look for Lois' reaction... which looked less than ideal. She seemed uncomfortable. He brushed her arm gently. "Hey, it's yours if you want it. No problem."

She smiled tightly at him, but there was a faraway look in her chocolate eyes, one he wished he could kiss away. Maybe she was worried about Lex. Maybe she missed him. Blech.

"All right! You guys get three days then before I'm pulling you out and putting you on a new case. You missed all the action, Lois. Somebody tried to blow up our friend in blue two days ago." Perry seemed incredulous about this information, unaware that this wasn't news to either party present.

Lois' forehead crease came back when she furrowed her brow. "Wait, did you say 'you guys'?"

Perry nodded. "Well, yeah. You and Kent."

"I'm sorry, Kent?"

"I heard him say Kent," Clark teased, almost bouncing on his toes with excitement.

Perry turned away, trying to escape the impending argument, but Lois weaved behind him on his path to his office. "Perry, I can't stay with Kent! How would that look?"

"In the Honeymoon Suite? Natural."

"But..."

"Lois, think it through. No hotel is going to sit still for us using it as a base for spy operations. You need a cover. What better than honeymooners in the Honeymoon Suite?"

Lois closed the door to Perry's office behind her, just before Clark could follow them in. He blinked, half-surprised that she hadn't hit him with it. He took a step back and decided patience was a virtue in this case.

Eavesdropping had to be okay, though.

"Perry, that's not fair."

"Lois, darlin', you need backup, and a cover, and someone to help you manage round-the-clock surveillance. If the problem's with Kent, then you can take your beau if you want. Although I'd be a little concerned about someone recognizing him. Doesn't he own that hotel?"

"Perry, I don't want to bring Lex anyway."

His tone took on a note of concern. "Everything all right?"

She batted his question away curtly. "Doesn't matter. Can I take James? Or even Cat."

"Hah. Good luck. She'd never go along with that. Besides, I think that'd draw too much attention to you. And James would be fine... if he didn't look too young for you."

Lois practically growled and threw the door to Perry's office open rapidly. Clark took a guilty step back as she blazed past him

angrily. “So am I packing a swimsuit or not?” he called after her. She flipped him the bird before storming into the elevator, presumably for a smoke break on the roof. Clark chuckled. This was going to be so much fun, and hopefully, just the distraction he needed.

Lois had nearly torn his ear off as he fumbled around lifting her over the threshold of the suite, mumbling darkly about the comments of the bellhop the entire time. She lunged for the guy as soon as he put her down, and he found himself banding an arm around her front and pulling her back into him for the sake of the poor man. Her squirming against him was quickly becoming a problem, so he let her go only to remark that she should give the man a tip so he’d be on his way.

She fumed at him before passing over several bills. The bellhop winked at him before he finally left and the two were alone at last.

“You couldn’t have chipped in, Mister Richer-Than-God?”

He mimed clutching at pearls. “And blow my cover? I don’t know the appropriate amount of money to tip someone. I just hand over the first bill I find.”

Lois’ eye-roll was quite satisfying, but before Clark could comment any more, the door had a knock on it and he went to let Jimmy in with his oversized bag of surveillance equipment. The man set up and was out of their hair quicker than he’d expected, leaving the two of them in this awkward bubble. The tension was thick, and Clark couldn’t pinpoint exactly why. She stood across the room from him, investigating her cuticles with an intensity no one ever had before. Clark tried to break the ice.

“Hey, is this a smoking room? I forgot to ask.”

Her ensuing glare made sure the room stayed frosty as ever, and Clark backed away with his hands up in surrender.

The air was crisp and clean, fresher than anything in the city. You could get a good lungful of oxygen out here. And the views... you didn’t need to have x-ray vision to see for miles without anything blocking your way. It was glorious, sunny, clear.

And chock-full of bad memories. Memories he couldn’t believe he’d blocked up till this point.

“So this is Kansas,” Nigel mused behind him, grating on his last nerve. The entire flight, the entire day before the flight, he’d been peppering him with questions, pushing him almost to the other side of madness. Lex was liable to shoot the man if he interrogated him anymore, but figured he’d eventually prove useful on this trip, so along came Nigel.

Lex looked out across the fields of yellow, painted with sunflowers for at least another week, and slid his sunglasses on his face. “Let’s get this over with. I’ll drive.”

“Sir? I arranged for a car to take us wherever you needed to go —”

Lex spun the keys around on his fingers. “And I made other arrangements.”

He barely waited for Nigel to duck into the passenger side rather uncomfortably before peeling out across the tarmac of the private airport.

Nigel’s questions seemed to stop, though Lex could tell it wasn’t because he didn’t have any. The British spy’s mind was working overdrive, he could sense it. He kept a quiet eye on the man the whole drive, carefully keeping track, just in case. The last thing he needed was another incident in Kansas.

The drive was a long one. Lex was fidgety, tapping the cracked leather of the steering wheel, taking corners on dirt roads too fast for comfort... Not that there were many corners, being the flat square land that Kansas was. It was a forty-five minute drive that he managed in thirty-two minutes, and yet somehow it seemed to stretch on like it was thirty-two hours.

When they pulled up, Lex’s stomach flipped.

He didn’t know exactly what he’d expected to find. A decrepit, barely-standing farmhouse, maybe housing some pictures of a

young Clark Kent for reference. A big For Sale sign, perhaps even a new family living there that had never heard of the Kents. Definitely where the bodies were (nearly) buried.

Not this.

The gravel of the old, familiar dirt road crunched under his feet as Lex stepped out of the black car, memories striking him like a branding iron with every crunch. The humidity of the warm Kansas sun beat down on his brow with a vengeance, and between the two sensations he nearly broke out into a cold sweat.

Nothing but sunflowers.

What the hell was wrong with this state?

No fence line, no buildings or houses of any capacity. He would question his memory if it weren’t for the one familiarity: that lone tree. The big one just on the edge of the property, the one underneath which his life flashed before his eyes. It had grown quite a bit, although it seemed to have seen some damage of its own, charred carvings on one side of the oak beast, twisting in on itself.

“Sir? Are we looking for something?”

Lex pursed his lips, considering if there was any plausible way to phrase his response. Unable to come up with any, Lex just smiled and shook his head. “Nope. Let’s head into town. See if there’s anything good to eat.”

Chapter 29: Only the Good Die Young

Nigel shoveled another forkful of the somewhat bland comfort food into his mouth and grimaced. He wasn’t one for anything particularly fancy or over-seasoned, but this was hard to bear. He wouldn’t have even ordered it if it wasn’t the only thing on the menu that didn’t appear to be slathered in barbeque sauce. He glanced up to find the man sitting across from him was hardly doing any better with his fare. Lex appeared to just be pushing his food around his plate with a fork. But he couldn’t pinpoint if it was the food causing his emotional distance.

He remembered hearing, quite vaguely and on very few occasions, that Clark Kent was from Kansas. But it had taken years of research and observation and conversation with the man to learn such a minor detail, and even that was vague. He said mayo instead of mayonnaise, to hide the way he couldn’t say that word without a twang, along with a few other words he worked around in conversation. He was ruthlessly brutal when Nigel had pointed out that he’d accidentally used “y’all” on one occasion. For ninety-nine percent of the time, he was painstakingly careful. And yet Lex Luthor appeared to have learned this detail overnight.

Nigel was growing uncomfortable with being the odd man out. “Y’all still doing all right?”

Nigel was about to brush the waitress away with a quick line when Lex perked up in his seat and spoke for him. “Excellent, actually, thank you. It’s a wonderful little diner.”

“Why, bless your heart. Thank you. It’s a small achievement maybe, but it’s mine.”

Lex turned to face her more fully. “You’re the owner of this establishment?”

“That’s right. Maisie’s the name.”

“Very nice to meet you, Maisie.”

Maisie darted her smiling eyes over at Nigel, and he gave her a small polite smile in return. She brushed a wisp of thinning, platinum hair behind her ear. “You two ain’t from around here, are you?”

“Decidedly not,” Nigel muttered, wiping the corners of his mouth with the roughest cloth napkin known to man.

Lex shot a glare at him while Maisie wasn’t looking, and he shut up. Whatever his boss had planned, he was hell-bent on getting it done. Apparently it included talking to this waitress. Owner. Cook? No matter.

“No, we’re not. I have a friend that lives here though—or used to. I’m not so sure anymore. In fact, perhaps you could help me

out.”

She didn't even hesitate, pulling a up a chair and taking a brief seat. “Sure! It's a small town. I know everybody.”

Lex grinned all his pearly whites at her, clearly overcompensating. “I'm looking for a Clark Kent?”

Her eyes flashed with recognition for a split second, filled with fear, and suddenly she was guarded, the look settling into something akin to suspicion. Nigel felt his gut churn, and he distractedly shoveled up a forkful of food into his mouth with one eye remaining watchful on her. Maisie's posture straightened, and she physically pulled back as she spoke. “I'm not sure who you mean.”

Lex put a hand over Maisie's where it rested on the table, with more of a grip than Nigel had expected. His boss was not keeping things cool and reserved. “Oh, I'm sure you do, Maisie. His parents used to be friends with my parents, we even went to school together. Go Jayhawks!” He had himself a chuckle. Nigel schooled his features very carefully, observing the woman before him. Maisie wasn't laughing. Lex cleared his throat. “I hadn't heard from him in a while, and thought I'd check in while I was in the area.”

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, shooting a pleading look at Nigel, but if it was sympathy she was looking for she was looking in the wrong places. Maisie took a look around herself and pursed her lips tightly when she verified there were no eavesdroppers.

“If you really knew Clark Kent then you'd know that story couldn't be true.”

Chills ran down Nigel's spine. Was it really this simple? Would he really learn about Kent's dark history from this woman? Lex leaned forward enthusiastically, still not releasing her hand from his grasp. “Then tell me the real story, Maisie. What ever happened to poor Clark Kent?”

Her eyes flashed again, this time with a rage burning inside them. “Poor Clark Kent? That brat was never poor anything in my books. I knew Jonathan and Martha long before they adopted that... that sociopath. He was a fine child, sure. But that all changed when the murder trial happened.”

Nigel's brow furrowed, interest piqued. “Murder trial?”

Maisie leaned forward over the table. “You know, there were some people who thought it wasn't Jonathan who killed that man at all,” she whispered, eyes stone cold and dead serious. Nigel shuddered, even without the context. “That boy was never the same after that night. He damn near terrorized the town, drove his poor mother to hell and back, bounced in and out of several foster homes. People always took kindly to him though, up until the incident with the Langs. Poor Lana, God rest her soul. Rumor has it he still haunts this town occasionally, although I've never personally come across him or anything, but it's possible he just stays away from me, and rightly so. Martha Kent was one of my best friends.”

He pushed his plate out of the way, suddenly aware he was nearly leaning over into his potato salad as he accrued interest in this tale. Nigel glanced across at Lex and was surprised to find the sick, stricken look written across his features. They were not at all having the same reaction.

“And then?”

She appeared startled out of her thoughts at the sound of Lex's gravelly tone. “Then what?”

Lex's grip got tighter, knuckles blanching, as his hands travelled up her arm and a tone of panic crept into his voice. “Where did he go from there? Where is he now?”

Something clicked behind the good woman's eyes, and she gave Lex a soft, sad smile, patting his hand gently. “He isn't anywhere. Clark Kent killed himself in 1983.”

Lois Lane was very plainly not talking to him. The past day had been uneventful at best and downright boring at worst. They'd

spent a few hours with room service and mediocre dinner conversation, and had a stilted but somewhat flirty conversation about who got the bed, but besides that had little idle chatter. And to top it all off nicely, he'd had to sleep on the most uncomfortable couch in the world. He hadn't had to sleep on something so rough, scratchy and unevenly cushioned in years. He ran a hand through his hair, trying to expel some nervous energy.

Idly, he wondered if Lois' silence was because she and Lex were on the rocks and she was more uncomfortable around him than before, or if she was simply trapped in her own mind, trying to figure out the puzzles before her.

Probably a little of both.

Then of course she'd been on first shift when Harrington and the other two goons had met up again, and while Clark determined that nothing incriminating had been said, it was still enough for his heart to jump into his throat. But here they were again: night two. A quick popover by the Daily Planet and then it was back to the grind. Lois showed no signs of caving any time soon, and after several watchful hours later, Clark finally felt his patience had worn thin enough.

“Oh my God,” he said with a moan, tossing an arm over his face. “I can't take it anymore! Why won't you talk to me?”

She turned to look at him with a quizzical expression. “What?”

He gestured around him broadly. “You've barely spoken to me this whole time! We've been here for almost two days already. I'm sorry if I've made you uncomfortable by being here, but can we at least be civil?”

She snorted, and Clark felt his irritation grow exponentially. “Wow. You're the most dramatic person on the planet.”

“I've never been dramatic a day in my life!”

Lois bit back her grin at that, and quickly dissolved into laughter. It clicked what he just said, and suddenly all the tension seemed to lift out of the room. Clark couldn't help but chuckle at himself in a self-deprecating manner. “Okay, maybe that was dramatic.”

“Gee, you think?”

“We can't all be perfect like Lex Luthor.”

He watched as her shoulders tensed back up, but no biting comment came back at him, which he considered to be progress. He was about to apologize if he'd offended her when her soft response beat him to the punch.

“Lex isn't perfect.”

He felt his jaw slacken a bit. “I'm sorry?”

“I never claimed he was perfect. Not once.”

That shut him up. He was floored at such an admission. Could one overheard conversation really drive such a wedge between them? He gaped at her like a fish for an indeterminate amount of time, while she stared out her binoculars self-consciously, shoulders squared and hunched over. “Lois... he hasn't... hurt you, or anything? Right?” She shot him a scathing glare over one shoulder, and he nodded. “Sorry. None of my business, I know.”

“No, he'd never do that. It's just—”

A click sounded on the tape recorder, and both of them snapped their gazes over to the room they were observing to catch the congressman and the same two ruffians from before returning to the scene of the crime. “Turn that dial up,” Lois demanded, and oddly Clark found himself complying.

“...no possible way the test will be postponed?”

“Weather's clear. Naval monitoring ships are en route. Dawn, day after tomorrow. It's set.”

“Good. And after the test fails, we'll proceed with getting Shockwave out of the way. You'll be free to return to your life of parties and girls before you know it, Mr. Congressman.”

Clark was all too happy when their conversation turned and the two left the building together uncomfortably.

“What the hell is Shockwave?”

Clark's response was cut short by the sound of footsteps and humming coming down the hallway. When the steps turned, and approached their door, he had little time to think. They had to hide the tripod, and good grief did they have a lot of surveillance equipment. In a flash, he turned and tossed the tripod onto the bed, met with some cries of outrage from Lois at the rough treatment of their technology. Much to his chagrin, the thing was still visible.

The door handle to the bedroom jiggled, and Clark realized it wasn't going to be enough to keep them out of the hot seat. He locked eyes on Lois for a split second as she turned to look back at him in complete confusion.

He made a decision.

In one smooth motion, Clark pulled her into his arms, tossed her onto the bed, and climbed on top of her. His body began to react instinctively to hers, and he let his eyes fall shut gently at the press of her body against his. The thought *not how I wanted to do this* passed through his mind fleetingly, before he leaned over and smothered her loud protests with his lips.

Fireworks ignited behind his eyelids.

The sparks flying between them immediately clouded his mind's eye as he quickly forgot what had landed them in this predicament in the first place. Her lips tasted like heaven. Or some odd mix of chocolate and cigarettes. Most likely cigarettes. He smoothed his tongue over her bottom lip, and his heart leapt when he felt her lips part beneath his ministrations. He slid a hand up her body languidly, taking his time to appreciate every curve, and pinned one arm gently above her head as he maneuvered himself over her—

"Housekeeping! More—oh! So sorry!"

The door quickly slammed shut behind the maid, the sound shattering the moment between them harshly. Clark screwed his eyes shut tightly, not wanting to see the look on Lois' face and trying make the moment of bliss last one moment longer. His fingers splayed against the fabric at her waist, appreciating the silkiness of her blouse and the chance to touch her like this for as long as he could. Regret coiled tight in his stomach the instant he pulled away from Lois' lips to check and make sure the coast was clear, already wanting more of the addiction that was kissing Lois Lane. But he had to pull away before everything came unraveled, or she tried to kill him. He chanced a look behind him, to see if the maid had left the suite entirely—

A hand snaked around his neck and fisted in the hair at the nape of his neck, literally grabbing his attention. Before he realized what was happening, she pulled him back down to her siren lips.

He moaned into her mouth. This was better, so much better.

Lois Lane was *actually* kissing him.

Her teeth nipped at his bottom lip, their mouths meeting sloppily in the chaos of tongues and teeth and—dear *Lord* her lips were trailing along his jawline now and he was losing his mind. "Lois," he groaned against the soft flesh of her neck, running his hands down her body again, settling against her hips carefully. His fingers skirted the hem of her pants, brushing the silk of her blouse up and bunching it up under the red vest, just enough so that he could graze the smooth contours of her skin. She bucked against him, and he gasped sharply, eyes slamming shut as he pinned her to the bed with the weight of his body.

Her fingers tapped deliciously against his chest, finding some purchase underneath his dress shirt, grazing his chest brazenly as she worked loose some more buttons, going dangerously lower. Clark shuddered. "Mm, Lois," he hummed, taking her mouth once again, the thrill of it all winding him tight, and she tossed one long, glorious leg around his hip—

His purpose. Jonathan Kent's face popped into his head, his admonition to take care of himself, coupled with Nigel's words of warning about being too close to Miss Lane.

He was definitely close to her now.

Dammit.

He punished himself with one last, bruising kiss, before stilling against her and pulling back. He kept his eyes shut, burning this moment into his memory for eternity. It was likely never to happen again, not after this.

She squirmed, trying to get him to move, finally realizing he was in his own head. "Clark?"

His eyes fluttered open, and he instantly fell into the pools of molten chocolate that were Lois Lane's eyes, and he couldn't find a way out. Oh, he had it bad. He was in way too deep.

Her eyebrow arched at him inquisitively, and he struggled to find the words that would appease her somehow, even if they cut him at his core. "Lois, we can't do this."

Those brows jumped impossibly higher. "What? Suddenly you're not interested?"

"No!" He exclaimed, perhaps too emphatically. Clark cleared his throat, and tried to get himself under control. "No, that's not it at all. I just... Hear me out, Lois. I'm..." He paused, searching for his expansive vocabulary that seemed to have gone up in smoke the second their lips touched. For a brief moment of pure exhibitionism, he wanted to end that sentence so many different ways. *Lois, I run half the crime in Metropolis. Lois, I'm the guy you've been investigating. I'm both guys you've been investigating. Lois, I love—*

He shook his head to clear it of such thoughts, return to his previous train of thought. No slip ups. "I'm in this. You... this thing between us... you probably won't believe me, but I don't want it to be just a one-time thing. I like you, Lois. I want what we have to turn into something real, to have an actual shot. So if you're not in this for any reason—if this is just a twisted fantasy or fetish, or a way to get back at Lex—I don't want any part of it. If I wanted cheap and meaningless, I could get that anywhere. That's not what I'm looking for. I want *you*."

Her eyes were saucers, and he scanned them for any sort of reaction. She blinked once, twice, and then he watched as she pulled the pieces together in her mind and the wide-open intensity of her gaze switched to confusion, and settled on outrage. He braced himself for what was surely going to be his final reckoning.

"What... How *dare* you? How *dare* you insult me like that! You—get off of me!"

He rolled over to her side and Lois leapt off the bed like a bullet, smoothing her clothes down into a more appropriate position, mindlessly rebuttoning the few buttons on her red vest as she stalked across the room, before returning to wave a finger in his face. "You think I could just use you—use anyone like that!"

She was pure rage, lithe and gorgeous rage, pacing around the confines of their room like a caged cheetah, and Clark had to remind himself to keep his focus on her words, not her body, and scooted to a seated position on the edge of the king-sized bed. "That's not exactly how I meant it."

"I'm not *you*, Kent. Cheap and meaningless... you know, screw you, pal! Where do you get off—"

He reached a hand out for her, just barely grazing her arm, and she whirled on him, delivering a swift smack across his face.

Clark was genuinely shocked, but had enough wits about him to turn his face to soften the blow. He blinked as he turned back to face her, hurt in his eyes even if it didn't physically hurt him. He covered his cheek where her hand had made contact—the same hand that moments before had been confidently undressing him.

The flare of her nostrils and her heavy breathing started to settle, but the anger still simmered just below her surface. Lois brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear, trying to return to some semblance of normalcy. "I have never been so offended in my life."

"Lois—"

She stormed out of the room, swooping up her purse on the way out, and not brokering any argument. A sour taste entered his

mouth at the thought that he'd really done it this time, pushed too far.

The door to the honeymoon suite slammed hard, reverberating through the walls. And with that, Clark was left alone to his thoughts, shirt half undone with her lipstick on his collar.

Chapter 30: Ship to Wreck

Lois slammed the door of her apartment with as much ferocity as she had the door of the hotel, and the door of her cab, and the door of her building even though it meant she'd slammed the door in her neighbor's face. She told herself she didn't care, but her body was betraying her. She was shaking. Why was she shaking? How could she let this get to her so badly? She had a bad taste in her mouth, and it wasn't just the taste of Clark Kent's tongue, although good grief his *tongue*. It was betrayal, filling up her soul and rising like bile in her mouth. She couldn't stop shaking.

Not from guilt, or frustration. Anger. She was shaking with anger. Or so she told herself.

She needed a smoke. She dropped her purse on the counter and fished for her cigarettes and lighter. The cigarette was in her hand faster than ever before, but she couldn't hold her hands steady enough to get the lighter to go. She huffed in frustration, eyes welling up but refusing to let a tear fall as she frantically flicked at the little lever. Finally it lit up long enough for her to actually ignite the drug, but she choked on her first puff and smashed it almost immediately.

It tasted like *him*.

The last thing she wanted was to see his smiling face in her head, holding out his lighter for her chivalrously.

"Lois? Geez Louise, you scared me half to death! I thought you were staying—" Her sister's voice stopped mid-sentence as Lois turned to look at her while extinguishing her cigarette. "Lois? Are you okay? What's going on?"

Lois opened her mouth to reply that she was just fine, never better, but nothing but a hoarse croak came out, and it all came washing over her again. Holy crap, she'd kissed Clark Kent. Of her own volition. Sure, he'd started it, but he'd clearly intended it as a cover for the maid. She was the one who kissed him back, dragged him down to her, scrabbled for every piece of his flesh she could get to. She almost went further.

She'd cheated on Lex.

The floodgates opened, and Lois fell to her knees on a wail as the tears started streaming down her face. Lucy rushed to her side, trying to console her, get something out of her, but she wasn't in any mood for it. Right now, she just needed a good long cry, maybe a tub of chocolate ice cream, and never to see Clark Kent's stupid face again.

"Kent's a common name, sir."

Lex shot his butler-slash-right hand man a deadpan stare. "*Clark Kent*."

"Still, not uncommon, I'm sure."

"From Kansas."

Nigel shrugged, knowing it was hard to defend that one. Lex shook his head. This tale was getting more and more twisted the more they chased it. Lois would be proud of his investigative instincts, though. If she wasn't still beyond livid with him. *Not now, Lex. One problem at a time.*

"Okay. So Clark Kent is from Kansas, but the Clark Kent from Kansas is dead. The farm he lived on was completely demolished due to a freak lightning strike that set the property ablaze, so nothing there. The county courthouse suffered from a robbery, then three years later, another fire. So no case files, and nothing was digitized from back then. But Clark Kent was dead before all that."

"Sir, what if it's a case of identity theft? Perhaps the real Clark Kent is dead after all, and the one we know just took the name. People do it quite frequently."

Lex shook his head again. "It's a theory," he said with a note of concession, if only to get Nigel to shut up for a second. He adjusted his back in his seat, the crack of pleather underneath him underscoring his discomfort. He knew the theory wasn't true, though. His gut was telling him the truth—that the boy who had saved his life some twenty years ago as his father tried to kill him was the same as the man that was dogging him in every aspect of his life now. He just couldn't confirm any of that, least of all to Nigel. Not yet, anyway. He needed evidence, hard facts, if he was going to convince Lois Lane he was right.

The car pulled up to the Smallville police station, and Lex silently begged for this not to be a dead end as well. Nigel followed him in, although Lex was starting to begrudge the older man's presence. He smiled kindly at the girl behind the desk sergeant's station, who greeted him politely. Everybody in Kansas appeared to be excessively friendly, barring the Kent family of course. It almost made him rethink his initial judgement of the state. "Hello," he said calmly. "I was wondering if I could have a moment to speak with Sheriff Harris?"

"Of course! It's been a slow day, not that we usually have a whole lot going on out here. 'Round the corner, third office on the left side. Mind if I ask what this is about?"

"Just some catching up. It's been a long time."

"Oh, that's swell! Go right on ahead, hon."

Bizarrely friendly, Lex adjusted in his mind, but he was grateful for it in this circumstance. He walked in the direction she'd pointed, only to be filled with confusion when he rounded the corner and saw a young, strawberry-blonde-haired woman sitting behind the desk. "Oh, pardon me, miss. I was looking for Sheriff Harris' office."

She grinned at him crookedly, and stood with an outstretched hand. Lex shook it, somewhat dazed. "That's my name, don't wear it out. Deputy Sheriff, anyway. Sheriff Harris was my father."

His mouth went dry. "You're Sheriff Harris' daughter?"

"That I am. What can I do you for?"

Lex felt his head spinning. Everything was different, and yet nothing had changed in this small little town. How was it possible for something so life-changing to happen in this place, so catastrophic to so many people, and yet the town lived on, largely unaffected. He supposed it spoke to the nature of life: it goes on. "I, uh, I'm sorry. I was actually just looking for your father. He... he was an old friend of mine, in a way. Saved my life, in fact."

"Aw. That's sweet of you to stop by, but I'm sorry to tell you my father passed away a few years back. Heart attack."

Lex's stomach dropped, the trail going cold once more. He glanced over his shoulder at his tall shadow, the man trying really hard to look like he wasn't paying attention. "I'm so sorry to hear that. He was a good man, Miss Harris."

She gave him a sad smile. "Thank you. And it's Rachel. What's your name?"

"Le... You know what, don't worry about it. I'll just head out. It was very nice to meet you, Rachel, and thank you for your time." He moved to leave, Nigel leading the way down the hallway ahead of him.

"Wait!"

He turned back, letting Nigel get a bit of a head start while he awaited her words. "Yes?"

She glanced around, noting the open door, and got up to close it behind him, sealing them off. "You're him, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry?"

Rachel moved to close the blinds to her office as well, and the pit in his stomach started to fill with nervous anticipation. "The man. From the Kent case."

Lex felt his pulse skyrocket. She knew. Finally, someone who knew. He didn't stop to wonder if she was on his side or not, eagerly nodding his head up and down. "Yes. Yes, I am."

"Thought so. I recognized you from the pictures." She eyed

him warily, and seemed to conclude he was all right to talk to. “Look, I don’t want to ruffle any feathers. But there’s been a whole lot of talk going on about you around town. We don’t get many out-of-towners ‘round here. And you snooping around this case definitely attracts attention.”

Lex took a step back, suddenly wary. The office was small, and feeling smaller by the second. “My apologies if I’ve stepped on any toes. I’ll be leaving town soon here, I just wanted to look into something minor. You know, insurance stuff. I was injured pretty badly.” His words flew out of his mouth quicker than he’d meant, trying to cover for himself. What had he gotten himself into? And he was in a police station! How could anything go wrong here?

Rachel’s hand landed softly on his arm, and she stared into his eyes calmly. “Hey, breathe. I’m not out to getcha. I wanna help.”

He blinked, soothed by her charming accent and calm, hazel eyes. “Y-you do?”

A knock sounded on her office door behind him, coupled with Nigel’s inquisitive voice coming through. “Sir?”

“In-in a minute, Nigel!”

Rachel scribbled some numbers on a piece of paper rapidly. “Look. My pop, he was a suspicious guy. That case made his entire career. He was incredibly cautious, kept copies of everything he could, records of evidence for himself. He went a little cuckoo towards the end, but I can tell you this much—he didn’t think Clark Kent was dead, and he wasn’t the only one.”

Lex swallowed thickly. “H-he wasn’t?”

“Nope. One person could be crazy, and two could be a coincidence. But three, now four with you?” She shook her head and crossed the small space to his side. “Not much of a coincidence in my books.”

His heart was pounding so hard he thought it would beat right out of his chest. A dissenter. Finally. It felt better than if the skies had opened up and a light shined down on him, illuminating the way. Rachel pressed the scrap of paper into his hand firmly. He looked down at it, trying to make sense of the arrows and the miniature map she’d drawn. “It’s an address, but it’s hard to find on your own. You’re gonna wanna turn right at the big boulder—you’ll know it when you see it, trust me. I can meet you there tomorrow morning and give you his notebook and files. I could never make much sense of it myself, but maybe his paranoia will have paid off for you.”

Lex felt his heart soar. The odds were finally in his favor. He had something credible, substantial he could offer up as evidence. “Thank you, Rachel. I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell him hi for me, if you ever do find him. He may have only ever had eyes for Lana, but a girl could dream, right? I always had a thing for the bad boys, back then.”

He couldn’t imagine a scenario where he’d straight up confront Clark Kent about his past, and give up his high ground, but he smiled and nodded anyway, agreeing to her request. He moved for the door, when she put her hand over his on the doorknob. He waited expectantly, starting to get impatient now that he had this new lead.

“And maybe quit bringing the subject up to everybody. You’re never gonna convince the people of Smallville that Clark Kent is anything other than dead. And there’s some people who would do anything to keep it that way. Some in this office, even.”

Lex swallowed, trying to remain unfazed by the less than subtle warning. Maybe it was time they got out of town anyway. He really shouldn’t have left on such short notice in the first place, and they’d been gone several days now. People would surely notice—Lois, surely, had noticed.

After he got the files. Then they could leave.

He opened the door again behind him, expressing his thanks once more. Rachel winked at him before giving him an exaggerated frown. “Now I don’t want you two snooping around

my town any longer, ya hear? Go back to whatever fancy, high-end town you came from. City Slickers.”

Lex was rattled for a moment, but caught her drift as he noticed the curious stares and frowns from the other officers in the building. He glanced at Nigel, barely able to contain his excitement, but did so for Deputy Harris’ sake. “Yes, ma’am. Very sorry to barge in like this. We’ll be out of your hair.”

He turned and hightailed it out of there, not even stopping to see if Nigel was keeping up. He slammed the car door shut behind him and gripped the steering wheel tight, knuckles blanching. He wanted to shout and jump for joy. He laughed, unable to contain himself.

Nigel ducked into the passenger seat of the car and shot him a puzzled look. “What was that all about? What did she say?”

His answering grin was blinding as he turned the ignition in the car. “She said I’m not crazy.”

Clark shouted in frustration as he did another loop through the Arctic Circle.

How could he have been so stupid? He was slipping up, left and right. He didn’t know where the hell Nigel was, hadn’t been in contact with him for five days now. Lex Luthor had also appeared to drop off the face of the planet, which was not suspicious timing at all. The plan to sabotage Luthor’s Shockwave system was unraveling at the seams with their investigation into Roarke and Harrington, and quickly. Not to mention that he’d unintentionally screwed up his own operations twice now with his interference. How did one balance catching criminals and using them? It certainly wasn’t an easy line to walk.

And to cap it all off, he might genuinely be in love with Lois Lane, and he very well might have blown it.

He couldn’t get the taste of her out of his head.

It wasn’t fair. He was so close, so *close* to everything going off without a hitch. The wheels were spinning perfectly, almost reaching the perfect culmination—and he had to go and screw everything up. Maybe it was a fear of success. Maybe it was Lois Lane. Maybe it was self-sabotage.

Maybe it was definitely Lois Lane.

He wanted her so badly, he wanted her to care about him too, he wanted something real and lasting, and those were not things he’d thought about at all until the moment he’d set eyes on this woman. Every moment since had only exacerbated that want, turned it into a need.

It scared him, but he was starting to think he might need Lois more than he needed revenge on Lex.

That was not an okay thought.

No. He didn’t *need* her. He wanted her. There was a world of a difference in those two statements. The only thing he truly needed from Lois Lane was one damning article, and screwing her over now was not going to help him get that result.

But he also couldn’t leave her hurting. He had to make things right, at least for the sake of their work relationship. Then he could be done with that, and keep his distance, but still keep her close for the sake of framing Lex. He kicked at a patch of snow and launched into the sky. He knew what he had to do.

He found himself at her door an hour later, running a hand through his still wet hair and adjusting his glasses on his face.

The door opened halfway, and a defensive brunette who was not Lois Lane but had the same angry aura shoved herself into the space with a scowl. “What do you want?”

Clark swallowed, looking at the apartment number to double-check he had the right address. “Um, I was looking for Lois Lane, is this the right place?”

“What’s it to you?” The younger woman jutted out her chin defiantly, and he saw the family resemblance in that instant. He nodded awkwardly, making some leaps in logic.

“You must be Lucy, her sister, right? I’m—”

“I know who you are.”

He sighed. “Look, I know she’s mad at me, but I’d just really like to talk to her, and apologize. Would you please let me in, just for a moment?”

“Don’t you dare let him in, Lucy!”

He sighed, the sound of hearing her voice for the first time in a couple of days doing something to his insides, even if the tone was an angry one. “I come bearing gifts.” He raised his voice a little so she could hear him through the door. He brought his arms out from behind his back with a flourish, showing Lucy the excessively large bouquet of flowers and the equally oversized box of chocolates. The sister gave him that patented Lane eye-roll, although he could see the little crease of a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. Gotcha.

“No, thank you. I don’t need any gifts.”

Lucy held out her arms to take the gifts off his hands, to which he smiled appreciatively. She shook her head at him with a condescending smile. “You know there’s no way I’m letting you in here still, right?”

He sighed, touching his glasses distractedly. “I know. Look, will you just tell her how sorry I am? I really just want to return to our working relationship. Honestly, she’s become one of my best friends, and I don’t have many friends. I can’t afford to lose the few I have,” he quipped, smiling at her warmly.

“Plus—” he added, a little louder for Lois’ benefit, who he was positive was listening just inside, even if he couldn’t check with his x-ray vision in front of Lucy. “I think I have a new lead on the Shockwave case.” He dangled that in front of her like a treat, waiting to see if she’d take the bait.

She didn’t.

His heart somersaulted downhill at her taciturnity. If he was blowing up this project of his for her, she should at least be interested. Project Shockwave, if successful, could potentially be harmful to him and alter ego. The cape-wearing one.

“Well,” he said softly, the wind rushing out of his sails at her resounding silence. He’d really thought this plan would go better. “I hope to see you at the office. I’m really sorry, again. Oh, and there’s a special present in the chocolate box for her, too.” He addressed Lucy at the end with a sly wink, even though he really didn’t feel it. She smiled sadly at him in return and nodded, giving him back a quiet thank you before closing the door on him.

Clark stared at the closed door for a long moment, debating where to go from here. He considered eavesdropping, or even doing a quick scan of the apartment—just to do a wellness check... but that thought fizzled away before he could take action. If she was really mad at him, truly inconsolable, then he didn’t want to see it. His heart ached, but he didn’t need to wallow in it. He turned and ambled slowly down the hallway. Actions spoke louder than words, and he didn’t want to stand by idly waiting for her to come around. He had to do something for her, make a grand gesture of sorts.

His steps faltered, the realization hitting him. He had to blow up his Shockwave plans. Clark scowled bitterly, and slammed open the door to the stairwell. Nigel wouldn’t like it. Hell, he didn’t like it. But it wasn’t for either of them. It was for her.

And he’d do just about anything to make her happy.

“Wow, Lois. You didn’t say he had it *that* bad for you.”

Lois poked her head out from under her blanket cocoon to glare at her younger sister. “He does not.”

“Uh, hate to break it to you, sis, but a guy doesn’t usually bring you chocolates *and* flowers after one non-committal kiss and a fight. Not in my experience, anyway.”

“Yeah, well... he’s rich, so it’s not like he’s out the money for it.”

Lucy rolled her eyes, and set the items down on the kitchen counter while she rummaged around for a vase. “He seemed nice enough, though. I’m sure he really meant it. And I doubt he’ll bother you again knowing how upset you are. So just enjoy some

chocolate candies.” She turned on the faucet and let the vase fill halfway as she turned and shot her sister a smirk. “And some eye candy.”

Lucy watched with amusement as her sister’s face went bright red. “Lucy!!!”

“What? You neglected to mention the fact that he’s the best-looking man on the planet.”

“He is not.”

“Are you seriously going to deny that?”

Lois bit her lip, and Lucy squared her with her best don’t-lie-to-me look. “Okay, he’s handsome,” she admitted, eyes turned away shyly.

She scoffed. “Lo, he’s not just handsome, he’s *devastatingly* handsome. Weak at the knees handsome. Good grief, I don’t know how you hadn’t kissed the guy already.”

“Oh my God, Lucy!!!”

She grinned, picking up the chocolate box on her way to the couch. “All right, all right. I’ll drop it. For now.”

Lois snatched the box out of her sister’s hands grouchy and tore off the lid. “Here, eat some chocolate. Maybe that’ll shut you up.”

Lucy laughed, already feeling a bit better about her sister’s state of mind. She wasn’t about to say it, not on her life, but just that brief exchange with Clark Kent had lifted her spirits. It was unlike how she’d seen her sister with anybody else, Lex included.

“Well? Give me one.”

Lois had frozen, staring down at whatever was in the box lid. Lucy grabbed it from her hands, and almost snorted. Inside was taped a pack of her sister’s favorite brand of cigarettes and a note.

If you ever need to talk, you know where to find me. —CK

Aww. It was so sweet, really. Or it would be. If her sister wasn’t already in a relationship with another man.

A man Lucy knew she didn’t care for half as much.

She could see the war in her big sister’s eyes. “You’re allowed to have friends, Lois. I honestly don’t think he’d try anything with you again.”

“I’m not worried about that,” she snapped, and Lucy raised her eyebrows. Lois hunched over, curling her arms around her knees like a child. “Sorry. I just... I know he wouldn’t do anything if I asked him not to. I just... I don’t know if I want to tell him no.”

Lucy absorbed her sister’s words silently. The power of that statement almost made her shudder. She knew her sister, and any acknowledgment of feeling at all was equivalent to another person declaring their love from the rooftops. It also lent to a darker, more twisted side to her.

She shifted, tucking one leg underneath her, debating her approach on this subject. “Lois... you’re not a cheater.”

A beat passed, and her sister seemed to consider her words carefully. Her stomach twisted anxiously, because she had to think about it, and that wasn’t a good sign. “Lois...”

Her sister groaned, burying her face in the blanket once more. “I know that, Luce. You don’t think I know that? I’m not Dad. The idea that I might be makes me want to jump off a bridge.”

“You’re *not* Dad, Lois. You aren’t anything like him. Do you think he would ever have cried over a little mistake like this for two days? You know he wouldn’t. He didn’t.”

Lois shot her a watery smile before lunging for her and smothering her in a blanket-covered hug. Lucy mimed choking, receiving a playful swat to the arm. She conceded, hugged her sister back. “Seriously, Lo. You’re not a bad person. If there’s anything making you think that... then maybe you just need to reevaluate your current situation.”

Lois sighed, leaned off her baby sister. “I need to talk to Lex.”

“Yeah.”

“But on a positive note, I shouldn’t have to pay for a therapist any time soon. I’ve got a pretty good one right here.”

Lucy laughed. “Yeah, right. I’m here in a pinch, but no way

am I diving into your crazy on a regular basis.”

That earned her a pillow to the face.

Chapter 31: Liar Liar

“I need to run by the store, maybe take a drive and clear my head,” he said to Nigel as he pulled on his coat. “Don’t wait up. I’ll be back shortly. Anything you need?”

“I could go for anything that wasn’t drowned in barbeque,” Nigel drawled in irritation. Lex smirked and made no promises as he headed out. He couldn’t help the sigh of relief that escaped him once the man was gone. The feigned need to go on an errand was nothing short of a lie, but Nigel needed some space of his own. Whatever the man felt he needed to attend to without him, he couldn’t care less.

Nigel flicked aside the musty curtain gently, peeking out to make sure Luthor got into his car and put the vehicle in drive before turning back to face the rather paltry motel room. He made a beeline for the yellowed handset on the nightstand by his bed, and dialed the number he knew by heart.

“Yes?”

Nigel squashed the nerves that suddenly settled in his stomach. He’d picked up on the first ring. That couldn’t be a good sign. He swallowed thickly, convincing himself this was a good idea. “Sir.”

He could hear the creak of the chair as the man on the other line snapped to attention. “Nigel? Where the hell have you been? It’s been seven days—”

“I’m with Luthor. He wanted to take this trip on a whim—”

“Nothing to do with Lois walking in on our little fight, I’m sure. Speaking of which, why didn’t I get a heads-up about that?” “About what?”

“Lex trying to blow him up.” The statement came across on a growl, and Nigel felt the pit in his stomach growing.

“I was merely trying to switch him onto a different track. His first instinct was to investigate you.”

“Watch yourself, Nigel. Don’t think for a second that you’re doing me any favors by protecting me from him in any way, shape, or form. I can handle myself. Now, that said, you’ve missed a hell of a lot here. When can we meet?”

Nigel pursed his lips. “We’re not back yet.”

“Back from where?”

He wanted to say the words. He opened his mouth to say the words, but the words that came out were entirely different. “Texas. Apparently the Lexcorp office down here in Dallas had some crisis, lost a few managers. Luthor felt it would be prudent to make an appearance at some board meetings.”

Silence met his answer on the other end of the line. Nigel held his breath, waiting for a response that would be the end of him, or at least another line of questioning.

“Fine. Let me know immediately when you’re back in town.”

He heard the click of the line going dead before he could even reply in the affirmative.

The story about Thaddeus Roarke trying to sabotage the Project Shockwave results went wide just yesterday, and already Lois was done with it. She had made a tentative sort of peace with Kent—for the sake of work, nothing else—but the constant reminder of working on this case was not at all helpful. Not when every page she turned, every piece of evidence collected, had her reliving the weight of his body over hers; her name whispered roughly in her ear; his lips, soft but unyielding; hands that seemed to touch just about everything except where she wanted...

Focus, Lane.

Yeah. She would be glad to be on to the next case, and she assumed that, provided she kept some distance, she’d be back on normal terms with Kent in no time.

She rode the wave of guilt that crashed over her like a pro. She needed to talk things through with Lex still. As much as he was in

the wrong—committing crimes and atrocities, going after the most beloved man in Metropolis like that—he was still her boyfriend, and that should still mean something, until their relationship became otherwise. She appreciated how much time and space he seemed to be giving her, but it was time to talk to the man. She slid her papers back into the desk drawer and collected her things. Assuming a story didn’t fall directly in her lap on the way over to Lexcorp tower, she would go talk to him now.

But hey. There was always hope for the small miracles. Maybe she’d get hit by a bus first.

No such luck.

She was about to step on the elevator when the desk manager caught up to her, flagging her down like he was trying to land a plane. She rolled her eyes heavenward and turned back to the man with a smile. “Yes, Roger?”

He was winded, having tried to grab her attention for so long and running after her that he could hardly get words out. She gave him a minute to catch his breath, patience wearing thin. “I... Mr. Luthor asked me to give you this when I saw you next. I thought you’d be in sooner, but—”

Her eyes alighted on the thin white envelope and she snatched it out of his hands before he could even say any more. She ripped it open and pulled out the single sheet and skimmed the document quickly, nostrils flaring. “How long ago did he give this to you?”

“About a week ago. He left on a business trip.”

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“He... he didn’t say.”

She crumpled the paper and gave the man a saccharine smile. “Thanks, Roger. I’ll see you next time,” she said and spun on her heel, storming out of the lobby with more vigor than she had coming in. She weaved around a few touristy-looking bystanders on the sidewalk, trying her best to not scream at them to get out of the way. She ground her teeth together tightly, the need once again for a cigarette flaring up and she had her way in a flash, taking her first drag with her eyes closed and begging for the relaxing sensation to kick in quicker—

A hard thunk knocked her back a few steps and knocked her cigarette onto the dirty sidewalk. She swore emphatically. “You godda—Kent?”

There he stood, looking as surprised as she was to see him. He gaped at her for a few moments before apologizing profusely for running into her, and even lit her another cigarette and handed it back. The glowing red end was a good enough icebreaker for her, and she accepted the olive branch, as it were, with a quiet murmur of thanks.

“Is everything all right, Lois? No offense, but you were careening down the road like a bat out of hell.”

She opened her mouth to say something offhand that would cover for her reaction, defend her choices, but then she shut it again. Why should she constantly defend him? It was exhausting, and it was high time they got to the bottom of things anyways.

“You know what? Everything isn’t all right, Kansas. Come on. We’ve got a story to look into.”

Clark eyed the way Lois was stalking across the conference room with a sense of nervous anticipation coiling in his stomach. She hadn’t even asked what he was doing there, so close to Luthor’s place, luckily. He didn’t have an answer for that question, other than he thought it might be prudent to make sure Luthor really was gone and Nigel wasn’t tied up in the basement or something.

Because if he knew one thing for sure, it was that Nigel had lied to him.

Nigel never lied to him. Omitted the truth, pled the Fifth, provided him with plausible deniability. Never lied. And this was a plain-as-day lie. A last-minute business trip. The timing of that was way too coincidental. He’d have believed it more if the man had said Luthor went off to go sulk, or treat himself to a nice spa

day. Heck, he'd have bought it if he said the man had jumped out of an airplane, trying to shake away the remains of the day with an adrenaline boost. But no. He'd told him they were in Texas, taking care of some business things.

It was too vague, and yet including the detail about Texas had been too specific. Something was definitely up.

Lois secured his attention once again when she turned to write on the whiteboard she'd confiscated from who knows where. He smiled. She did everything with a passion. He knew he wanted to try getting some distance from her, but she was like a tractor beam, pulling him back in with every glance, every word, even the way she underlined the name on the board with a flourish.

Oh. Oh-ho-ho.

This was going to be wonderful.

She capped the pen with a sense of finality and looked him square in the eyes. "What do you know about Lex Luthor?"

Chapter 32: Do I Wanna Know

"I don't know what you mean." Clark hedged carefully, trying to find the words he needed.

"You're the one always saying that there's more to Lex than meets the eye. You talk about his reputation and vague business deals, and you make it very clear that you don't like the guy. Honestly, I thought you were just jealous, but now I'm thinking you might be onto something."

"I don't think—"

She leaned over the table, hands planted firmly on the desk. "Clark. I never gave you a chance before. I'm handing you the mic, open forum. Why don't you like Lex Luthor?"

Clark ran a hand through his hair, buying time seeing as she didn't waste any. The gloves were off and it was off to the races. Fine. He could handle that. "Look, honestly, it probably did start out as a jealous rivalry sort of thing. When I was first building my brand, I had a hard time figuring out where to start. I didn't really know what I was doing, and Lexcorp was a good example, in a way. I compared a lot of what I did to how Lex manages his company. I thought it was a healthy competition, a way to measure up. If Lex Luthor did it in six months, I did it in three." He paused, transitioning from the truth to something a little less honest but still not entirely untrue. "But there were all these little things he did that didn't add up. Businesses he'd purchased and liquidated, money that floated across hands without leaving a paper trail. As time went on, I learned there was much more to it than that, or so I heard."

She waited impatiently for him to go on, and he let her wriggle like a worm on a hook for a minute before giving her a taste of what she wanted.

"You know the crazy amount of organized crime you mentioned when we were talking with Bobby?"

Lois froze, rooted to the spot. A pin could have dropped and people across the office could have heard it. He watched the shock that spread across her beautiful features, and he wondered if maybe he misjudged how much she had wanted to know.

Oh well. They would have to have had this conversation at some point for his plan to work. So what if he was skipping over some of the slower parts of the plan.

"Are you trying to tell me that you think Lex Luthor is the Boss?"

He held his hands up defensively. "I don't have the evidence to back me up. But yeah, I do."

She blinked at him several times, and Clark waited as the pendulum swung above his head, waiting for it all to come crashing down. She could snap, yell at him, tell him he was being ridiculous and she knew the man better than he did. She could see right through his lies, turn it all around on him. She could leave altogether.

But the pendulum kept swinging as Lois sunk into her chair,

deflated. "Lex is the boss," she repeated, more resolutely.

His heart started beating again. Clark nodded slowly, hardly daring to breathe.

"Oh my God." She leaned her face into her palms, distraught and shaking. "Lex is the Boss. I can't believe it. Oh my God..."

"Hey." He got up and moved to her side of the conference room table, placing a soothing hand on her back. "I'm sorry. I could be wrong."

She snorted derisively. "Thanks. That's real helpful, Kansas." "I'm serious. Don't just take my word for it. Even if I'm right, we're gonna need proof."

She nodded slowly, finally looking up at him. "Thanks, really."

Clark smiled gently, his heart stirring. How he wanted to comfort her with his lips in that moment, but he kept his distance, kept things professional. "Don't mention it."

"It's not like it's such a surprise, really," she continued, as he pulled up another chair, this one closer to her side. Just so he could torture himself a little more by being within an arm's length of her touch. "He's always been a nice guy, but maybe a little too nice. Like he was being fake. And there's been more things recently, like how he treats you, and even the good guys, the superheroes —"

Clark cocked his head to the side innocently. "What?"

A flash of recognition spread across her face. "Oh, that's right. I didn't tell you. All those tests on the Man of Steel? Lex was behind them. I caught them fighting about a week or two ago."

He pulled a face, doing his best to look the part. "You mean even the bombing? And—" He stopped abruptly as an even more horrifying revelation crossed his mind, and he felt his blood go ice cold. He'd been so caught up in the moment, he hadn't thought it through all the way... but how could he think that Lex would be so bold? "Not the... Even the jumpers?"

Lois wouldn't meet his eyes, and that sealed it for him.

"I'll kill the son of a bitch."

Lois looked up at his venomous tone, eyes widening at his dark, angry expression. "Don't say—I'm sure it was an accident."

He snapped his gaze up at hers, horrified, stomach dropping to unfathomable depths. "You're not actually defending him, are you?"

"I'm not—"

Clark smacked his hand heavily against the desk, the anger and the nausea mixing in his blood. "If he's the one who was behind all those tests, then that means the man had you thrown off a building!"

"That was the jumper who did that. I spooked him, and he panicked."

"Lois," he chided with disgust and jumped to his feet, no longer content to just sit by her side. Her defense of the man made bile rise up in his throat.

She crossed her arms over her chest, and he didn't even glance in her direction at the peripheral motion. "Lex would never do anything to hurt me. He loves me."

He scoffed at that, nearly trudging a hole in the floor with his enraged pacing. "Yeah, but I love you, and I wouldn't throw you off a building, that's for damn sure."

Silence met his outrage, and he took a second to wonder why before his brain caught up to where his mouth was. His eyes went wide. He spun to look at Lois with a deer-in-the-headlights expression, hoping she hadn't heard that. The gutted look on her face informed him that she clearly had. He shut his jaw with an audible click.

"What did you just say?"

Clark had never backpedaled so hard in his life. "Lois, no. I didn't mean—I mean, I did mean—but I didn't think—"

She didn't even stop at her desk to grab her things this time. She just left.

Clark balled his hands into tight fists, wishing he could punch something right now without drawing the attention of the whole office. Lois storming out already drew enough attention his way, and now was not the time to reveal his secret identity to the world just because he had a temper and he broke down a wall or something. He closed his eyes and talked himself down, counting backwards from ten as he struggled to get his emotions back under control, managing it in the slightest. Even that felt like a win right now.

“Everything okay in here, Kent?”

He plastered on a fake smile for Perry White, shoving his fists in his pockets. “Just swell, Perry. Nothing to worry about in here.”

The editor-in-chief’s eyes slid past him, to the largely blank white board with Lex Luthor’s name emblazoned at the top. “Uh-huh. Okay. Let me know if you guys will be needing anything.”

“Actually, I’m gonna head out, Perry. Tell Lois if she comes back and wants to talk I’ll be here on Monday.”

Perry’s eyes tracked his movements as he picked up his coat and briefcase, and made his way across the bullpen to the elevators, but once the man disappeared from view, his gaze was right back on that whiteboard.

What the hell did Luthor do?

Chapter 33: Hey Big Spender

Lucy hadn’t thought twice about it when her sister came home from work and insisted they go have a girl’s night out. She’d cited that it had been a long time since they last went out together, and she could use a drink, and the perky insistence probably should have been a red flag. But instead she went along with it, and they got all dolled up in their best party dresses, and made their way over to some dive bar with a heavy jazz overtone that Lucy actually hadn’t been to before. Lois insisted the place was great, though, and it was in its own way. The place was completely slammed with customers, probably showing up for swing night, and the music had been more lively than she suspected it usually was. Personally, Lucy preferred places where the music was so loud it shook you to the core, but the Metro Club was a nice change of pace.

Now she wasn’t so sure this was a good idea.

“Wooh! Fill ‘er up, Joey! Mama’s thirsty.”

“I think Mama’s had enough,” Lucy muttered, loosely holding back her sister’s arm.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Her words came out slurred, and the way she pulled her arm back almost had her toppling off her bar stool. “I’m the big sister. I’ll tell you when you’ve had enough. When I’ve had enough.”

The bartender—Joey, apparently—had an amused grin on his face, and gave her a wink as he filled her tumbler with gin once more. She’d requested that he hold the tonic a few rounds ago, but Lucy suspected she would have to reverse that order pretty quick here.

“See? Joey knows me. I can hold my liquor.” She took a slurping sip of her drink, and then leaned forward across the bar to pat the man’s cheek. “You’re the best, Joey!”

He had a twinkle of laughter in his eyes as Lucy pulled her sister back. “Okay, Lois, okay. Don’t harass the poor man.”

“I am not! Joey loves me!”

“I don’t know that Joey does.”

The young bartender laughed jovially. “I definitely find you entertaining, Miss Lane. Love might be a strong way to put it.”

She sighed contentedly, cradling her gin warmly to her chest. “It’s okay. Clark loves me.”

Lucy raised her eyebrow at that. “Does he now?”

Lois giggled, a blatant sign that she was well past inebriated, and nodded. “Yep. He told me today.”

Lucy set down her own drink on the counter and frowned. “Wait, what?”

Her sister gasped and clutched at her arm suddenly. “Oh! I love this song! Let’s go dance!”

“Wait, Lo—”

She’d slipped away and into the throngs of people before her protests could be heard. Lucy huffed and downed the last of her vodka rocks before chasing her out there. She couldn’t just blurt something like that and walk away.

She caught up to her sister just as she was belting out a few lines of the song playing overhead. She stomped her foot twice on the beat. “—good time! Let me show you a—”

“Lois, stop for a second.”

“You’re a real buzzkill, Luce.”

“What did you mean, earlier?”

“I mean I really love this song!”

“No—about Clark.”

Her eye-roll was phenomenally exaggerated, whole head rolling, and she tottered back half a step in her stilettos. “I don’t wanna talk about him.”

Lucy sized up her older sister, crossed her arms sternly. “Lois, we don’t drink in response to our problems. You know the rule.”

“Oh. My. God. Lucy. Chill.”

“Do I have to take you home right now?”

“You’re ruining my so-ong!” Lois’ petulant expression would have been funny if Lucy wasn’t feeling so serious. The whining wasn’t gaining her any points.

“Lois Joanne Lane.”

“Freaking—he just said it, okay? Clark—he didn’t seem like he meant to say it, he just did. Now lay off and let me dance!”

Lucy sighed and returned to the bar, where Joey stood watching with a smirk. “Your sister seems to be enjoying herself.”

She scoffed, pushed her own glass back across at the man for a refill. “Yeah, a little too much. Want to cut her off for me?”

He smiled, and shook his head. “I’m not going to risk my neck over this. She likes me,” he joked and Lucy rolled her eyes. “I called her boyfriend, though. Figured you guys would need a ride at the very least.”

“Thanks. That’s sweet actually. How do you know her so well?”

Joey gave her a funny look. “She did a story on this place a couple of months ago. She’s been back a couple of times since.”

“I don’t have the time or the energy to read every story written by my sister.”

A loud curse screeched in her ear, and Lucy almost choked on her vodka at the sound as her sister gave her whiplash. “Dammit! Luce, you said his name too many times!”

She wiped her mouth on her arm gracefully, hoping no dribbles got on her dress. “What the hell, Lois? What are you talking about?”

“Beetlejuice!”

She looked at her sister like she’d grown a second head. She tried to follow her train of thought in some logical manner... but she drew a complete blank. “What?”

“Hey.” A presence at her back drew her attention, and it clicked what Lois was trying to say. She turned around to find Clark Kent standing there with his fists balled up deep in his pockets. His smile was tight, guarded, and it made her stomach knot.

“What are *yooou* doin’ here?” Lois slurred with a poke to his chest.

Clark appeared marginally amused, but he was quick to contain it, eyes carefully hiding his reactions. “I’m here as shuttle service. I heard you were terrorizing the joint.”

Lois’ eyes flashed with the shock of betrayal, and she whirled around to face the bartender. “Joey! How could you? And for your infirmation, I’m not terring—terroring—ter-ror-rise-ing nothing,” she sounded out, proud as a peacock when she finally got the word.

Clark bit his lip, unable to contain the smile dancing in his eyes. “You’re cute when you’re drunk.”

“I’m always cute, han’some!”

Lucy turned back to face Joey as they dissolved into a back-and-forth on which one of them was cuter, figuring the man had the situation under control for now. “I thought you said you were calling her boyfriend?”

He shrugged. “We aren’t that close. I don’t know her boyfriend. All I know is she said Clark Kent loves her and he owns the joint. So I did some math.”

Lucy pinched the bridge of her nose and turned back to face the two of them. Why did she have to be the adult in this relationship? “Look, thank you, Mr. Kent, for coming out here, but —Lois, get off him!”

Clark was stiff as a board as her sister draped herself over his arms, trying to get him to dance. “Oh, come on! If he won’t dance to ‘Big Spender’ then what’s he supposed to do?”

He cleared his throat and righted Lois’ position, not objecting to having her lean on him heavily. “I’m supposed to take you guys home, Lois.”

“But Kansas, I don’t wanna.”

“You don’t have to,” Lucy chimed in. “I mean, we’ll probably be fine. I’m feeling all right still.”

He shook his head firmly. “Nonsense. I’m not letting either of you drive in this state, plus my car’s right out front. And, I can help you bring her into the apartment.”

She sighed, and downed the rest of her drink. Clearly she wasn’t gonna sway the man. He’d come all the way down here just to save her sister some embarrassment, and he’d just told her he loved her. Nothing she could do about it right now, and honestly, she probably was going to have a hard time dragging Lois home. “Fine. Let’s go.”

The drive over was almost fun, partially due to the fact that Lucy didn’t spend as much time in limos as her sister did; the other part was more fun for watching Lois humiliate herself in front of Clark Kent. He seemed to be enjoying it, indulging in her vices. It was a spacious vehicle, yet Lois was glued to Kent’s side. Lois ran her hands over his chest, reaching into his jacket and into his pocket, but Clark luckily stopped her hands from traveling any further. She pouted. “I was just looking for a light,” she said innocently, and Lucy rolled her eyes.

“I don’t think you should smoke right now, Lois. You’ve had so much gin you might catch fire.”

She gasped and swatted at his shoulder. “I will not!”

Clark chuckled, just patted his shoulder so she would lay her head on it and maybe calm down a little. It wasn’t more than a minute until she fell asleep.

In a flash, the lighthearted atmosphere of the limousine cab evaporated. They sat across from each other in a tense sort of silence. Lucy eyed her sister’s features, trying to ensure she was in fact asleep, before broaching the topic. “So. You love my sister.”

She didn’t miss the way he straightened in his seat, eyes widening and shoving his hands under his thighs so he wouldn’t start fidgeting and wake Lois. Good. She caught him off guard. He opened his mouth like he was about to respond, but a glance at her face and he seemed to think otherwise. Lucy smiled. “You try any funny business and I swear—”

“No! I would never.”

“Let me finish. My sister...” She cocked her head, considering how to phrase this. “She doesn’t have the best taste in men. Generally goes after the wrong guy.”

“I can promise you, I’m not the wrong guy.”

“She has a boyfriend.”

The words hung in the air like smoke, and Clark’s nose scrunched up in response to the stale smell. “I’m aware,” he hedged, not masking his bitterness very well.

Lucy smiled sadly. She liked Clark Kent, really she did. If the

two of them had met at another time, or in any other circumstances, she could very well picture them together. But as things were... it wasn’t good timing. “I don’t want to see my sister in a compromising position.”

Clark took his time with his words, although whether he was looking for the words to describe his emotions or simply for a line to get her off his back, she couldn’t tell. The lights of the city reflected dimly off his glasses as he gazed out the window. “Lucy, I appreciate where you’re coming from. I wish I had someone like you in my life to come to bat for me. You’re a good sister.” He took a beat, licked his lips. “My family... my home wasn’t great growing up. I know I’ve got my own damage. Everybody does. But honestly? I’ve only ever loved one other person in my life, and until I met Lois, I thought it was a one-off. Puppy love. Never to occur again. But now... I feel like a kid again. And I don’t want anything or anyone else. If she doesn’t feel the same, that’s her prerogative.”

She felt a bit shell-shocked at his words. It was almost brutally honest. She couldn’t imagine being so brave herself. Maybe one day she could learn a thing or two from the man. Lucy smiled tightly, unable to express her thoughts just yet. Lois loosed a light snore, startling them out of the moment, and Clark turned to grin at the woman on his shoulder.

“Okay, don’t take this as a vote of approval or anything, but would you mind carrying her upstairs for me?”

He laughed softly through his nose and nodded.

Chapter 34: Careful of the Curse That Falls on Young Lovers

Rachel hadn’t been kidding. Sheriff Harris was Lex’s saving grace. The man had been obsessive about this case. Thank God someone was, because literally nobody else in the world had been.

Lex leafed through the first file with a growing sense of trepidation. What if what he was looking for wasn’t in there? What if he’d wasted all this time on a wild goose chase, some trick of the memory? And how much time had it been exactly? A week? He wasn’t even sure anymore.

The first few pages were pure legalese, which he skimmed right through. He knew how the trial had ended, he took a little pride in that fact. He’d been the key to putting a murderer behind bars.

He might also have subsequently ruined his whole life by doing so.

His stomach flipped as he turned over the next page and was confronted with the sight of the victim’s mottled face. He shuddered, reading the name off the label at the bottom of the page. Jason Trask, twenty-nine. So young. At the time, he himself had only been twenty-five. It was sickening.

He felt worse about not remembering the dead man’s name.

He jotted the name down on a yellow legal pad next to him, trying to keep track of all the facts. Surprisingly, Trask hadn’t been a big feature in the actual trial. Of course, as the victim, he had been mentioned. But Lex knew very little about the man himself. He scoured the next few pages, looking for anything on the guy. All he could come up with was that he was a part of the military—although even the branch he’d served in wasn’t mentioned—and that he had been dishonorably discharged a few years before. Nothing about why he had been out here in Podunk Kansas, or anything resembling a connection to the Kents. He frowned. That was a glaring plot hole in the story Jonathan’s defense had weaved. All they’d tried for was the self-defense line, claiming the man was going to harm his son.

It didn’t stick, of course.

Lex licked his finger as he turned over another page. The boy wasn’t mentioned much either. Never by Jonathan, except for that one statement. The boy hadn’t been allowed in the courtroom, though, and it seemed, from the paperwork, that was actually due

to a request from Jonathan himself. Curious. A sad, grieving child sitting on his side of the courtroom would only have strengthened his argument, if nothing else.

Maybe Maisie was right. Maybe Jonathan was just being a good father, protecting his son.

He was definitely protecting him from something.

“The car is being taken care of, and the captain said we’ll be in the air in about fifteen minutes, and home again in no time.”

Nigel’s entrance made him jump in his seat, and he flipped the file closed rapidly, tucking it under the crook of his arm.

“Excellent, Nigel! Happy to hear it.”

He knew the butler’s eyes tracked his actions carefully, but the man was wise enough to not say anything about it other than a casual remark or two. “Anything interesting?”

Lex grimaced. “Not so far, no.”

Nigel nodded and gestured to the back of the plane. “Then if you don’t mind, I’m going to retire for a while. Wake me if you need anything.”

“Of course, thank you, Nigel.”

It was an excruciating few seconds of waiting as Nigel left his side and got settled in, but Lex managed it. He’d inform Nigel of what he learned afterwards. Right now, he just needed to process things on his own. He wasn’t sure what he’d learn from all this.

It was only a few file folders and a notebook. All that remained of the case of *State of Kansas v. Jonathan Kent*. Hard to believe, but he’d have to make do. He didn’t know what exactly he’d been expecting from Rachel Harris, but he was grateful that he was able to scrounge up anything after this waste of a trip. Lex sighed when he reached the end of the first file. That was little to no help. He’d been present for all that. He didn’t need to reread his own testimony about being nearly crippled, spending six weeks in a back brace. He lived it, and once was enough.

The trail of blood dragged across wood floors shocked him back into focus. What a cover photo. The whole next file was all crime scene photos, ones he hadn’t seen when he’d sat in that courtroom all those years ago. These were of the Kent residence, the house, the property, the half-dug grave underneath the old oak tree. Lex squinted at one photo in particular. An object in the corner of the image was circled repeatedly in pencil. He couldn’t quite make out what it was, though. It was small, in the background. It looked like the corner of a briefcase, perhaps, just a sliver of silver peeking round the edge of the camera’s view.

He flipped to the next page, found a similar picture, with the same space circled. Except there was nothing in the circle.

He frowned, flipping back. That was weird. Clearly Harris thought so too, or he wouldn’t have circled it so many times.

In the next photograph, the object was back, circled again. It was more clear from this angle that it was some sort of lead box, smaller than a briefcase in size. Lex didn’t remember anything of the sort being entered into evidence at the hearings. He didn’t know that it should have been, but it being missing surely meant something.

The photo on the next page had a sticky note attached, and Lex plucked it off gently, trying to decipher the officer’s cramped handwriting. *Box recovered from Clark, who had somehow taken it in the middle of our investigation. Was just staring at the contents miserably. Contents were sent to two different labs for testing, neither came back.*

They never came back? What did that mean? What were the contents? Lex read and reread the note, trying to find a way where it made more sense, but to little avail. He stuck the note back down, copying the information onto his own pad. At least he had confirmation that the boy’s name was in fact Clark Kent.

It was slow going, and Lex felt like he had more questions than answers the further in he got. One file had all the arrest records for Martha Kent, including her two trips to the hospital for an apparent overdose. Another file had all of Clark Kent’s

adoption records, or lack thereof. It surprised him to learn that the boy was in fact originally adopted by the Kents. Maisie had mentioned as much, but it didn’t quite fit with his character. Sure enough, there was a thin paper trail, describing him as some distant cousin’s abandoned child they’d taken in. Lex rubbed his temples. It was all rather sketchy. There was a statement by a family doctor, affirming their story and that the child was a perfectly healthy baby, but little else. Shouldn’t the state have been involved in some capacity? He supposed a family scandal would be something to keep quiet, but it still raised some red flags. There was more paperwork for every foster home transfer than for his original adoption, and it was a lot of transfers. Twelve different homes in the course of four years, intermixed with brief stays at the county group home and even several interspersed returns to stay with his mother in a “reunification” process.

Ooh. Juvenile Hall records.

Lex studied the document with interest, chewing on his pen cap absentmindedly. The first incident had been for a petty theft of some kind, clearly a cry for attention. In another, he’d been caught with drugs, although he hadn’t been marked as under the influence, just possession. Probably his mother’s, Lex thought, nose shriveling in distaste. He could hardly believe the crying woman who sat in the back of the courtroom would have lost her senses so, but then again she’d hardly gotten more than a sentence out the whole trial. She was already half a vegetable. Why not go the distance.

He stole a car and drove it through the bowling alley in the middle of the night. Miraculously walked away unscathed. Kid was probably high as a kite, he mused.

Lex flipped through the signatures at the bottom of all the papers, clicking his tongue. All signed by Judge Ross. Poor man couldn’t get away from this family.

Lex sighed and shut the thick file with a snap. This was all well and good, but it didn’t help much with his problems now. All this proved was the young Clark Kent’s life definitely hadn’t improved after his father went to jail. Shocker.

His stomach took a dive again at the next file, goosebumps travelling up his arms. It was impossible. It was uncanny. It was definitely the same man as the one he’d met in Metropolis, but at the same time, it couldn’t be.

A young Clark Kent, hanging from a tree.

Oh, God. He gagged, turned the page rapidly. He couldn’t look at it anymore. He’d thought twenty-nine was young. The boy could hardly be more than sixteen. Examination of the following pages proved he was in fact seventeen—declared dead on March 15, 1983. He shuddered. The Ides of March. Of course he would.

This didn’t make any sense. Lex took in a lungful of air and braved another look at the picture. The photo wasn’t the clearest, and it was taken from behind, at an angle, but even still, Lex knew. This was the very same Clark Kent of CK Enterprises. His mind whirled with the implications. Was it possible that he had a twin? A biological sibling, out for revenge perhaps? No, no. That would be too twisted. Even *General Hospital* wouldn’t use such an insane plot.

A phrase jumped out at him from the report, and his heart leapt into his throat. The body mysteriously vanished. *Vanished!*

Lex laughed. He actually laughed, out loud. The body vanished? Then he wasn’t dead after all! Sure, he looked pretty damn dead, but now it made sense. He didn’t know how it was possible, how he’d pulled it off, but that had to be the solution.

Clark Kent’s corpse actually disappeared from the face of the planet. It was chalked up to an error in the system, that he was mistakenly cremated, taken to the wrong mortuary, what have you. No one could pinpoint exactly when it happened, either. Not the ambulance drivers, or the cops, nobody. Inexplicably, no one appeared to be responsible.

Lex almost couldn’t stop laughing, the giddiness of discovery

rapidly spiraling into a sort of mania that was refusing to be tamed. He pushed away the papers before him as he collapsed out of his chair, scattering them across the floor. A cramp spasmed across his abdomen, and he winced as he clutched his side, the laughter not subsiding in the least.

“Mr. Luthor? Sir! Are you all right?”

He held out a hand, and Nigel helped him up to a seated position. Lex wiped at his eyes with his free hand. “I’m sorry, Nigel. Thank you. Not sure what, ha, came over me there.” He chuckled and reached out to collect the first paper within reach.

Immediately the laughter stopped.

He brought the picture in close, examined it. There stood that same tree, the one that Clark had hanged himself from, and a beautiful young girl underneath it. Lex ran his fingers over her face in the photo gently; face so young, features so delicate, her hair as golden as the sunshine peeking through the leaves, her blue lips painting a stark contrast to the blood-red pool she was lying in, the red tendrils grabbing her by the wrists and pulling her under.

His stomach twisted. This was what everyone had been talking about. Why they all hated Clark Kent and resented any reminders. Why Maisie had called the boy a holy terror and Rachel had urged him to skip town. He reached for the next few pages on the ground, trying to sort through them and find something related. There was another photograph of her, closer up, and of the scene. One was of her suicide note, clutched tight in her bloodied hand.

I’m not crazy.

“Good grief. Who is that?”

Lex swallowed thickly, processing. What did she mean by those words? Who thought she was crazy? Why did they have to leave so quickly? He had so many more questions, more he wanted to investigate. Questions that could only be answered in Smallville. He flipped the next page right side up, and scanned the police report. “That is Lana Lang. Committed suicide April 1, 1983.”

Nigel’s response was all background noise to him. Lex slumped back into his seat, stunned beyond all thoughts but one.

Clark Kent really was coming after him.

Lois ambled into the kitchen slowly, every step striking her prefrontal cortex with searing pain. She groaned. How much did she drink last night? She could hardly remember, the few scenes she was picturing couldn’t possibly have been right. No way was she ever in Clark Kent’s arms last night. Clearly that was a fever dream of some sort.

“Morning.”

She stopped short, turning to face the source of the deep, rumbling voice with a sense of dread balled up in her gut. No, no, no. That was a dream. That didn’t really happen.

Sure enough, Clark Kent was standing there in her apartment, making himself right at home with some scrambled eggs on one burner and pancakes on the other in some feat of cooking wizardry. She eyed him warily, looking him up and down. He was in a white t-shirt, clearly an undershirt of some kind, and he had his slacks on from yesterday. Amusement shone out at her from behind his horn-rims at her lack of response, and he nodded over to the bubbling pot of caffeine. “Coffee?”

“Lucy!” she shouted, startling the man in her kitchen and making him jump.

“What? What? God, Lois, what’s wrong?” Lucy rounded the corner from the hallway and slid in her fluffy socks.

She thrust out a finger at him accusingly and frowned. “What is he doing here?”

Lucy barked out a short laugh. “Lois, you don’t remember? He picked us up last night and drove us home. When he brought you upstairs, you woke up and wouldn’t let go of him. It was already like two a.m. so I offered him the couch, since you weren’t intent on returning his arm anytime soon.”

Her cheeks flamed at the recounting. “Oh God. So it wasn’t a dream?”

“Not for me. You know you snore?”

She shot him a withering glare, even though it only seemed to give him more pleasure. Her ire was quickly overpowered by mortification when another thought crossed her mind. “Oh my—we didn’t sleep together, did we?” His eyes went wide at the question, the suggestion fading some of his good humor and lighting something else in his eyes, and she was quick to correct herself. “I mean—not together, together. Like, actually sleep, I mean.”

“Not at all. I just waited until you fell asleep, carried you to your room, and came back out here and slept on the couch. Scout’s honor.”

She rolled her eyes, then winced at the pain of the motion and made her way over to the coffee pot. “Why do I doubt you were ever a Boy Scout?”

“He was a real gentleman, Lois. I swear. I made sure.”

The sound of the coveted black liquid hitting the bottom of her empty mug soothed her more than her sister’s words even, the aroma drifting up and cradling her gently. She sighed and let her eyes drift shut at her first sip.

“Better?”

She gave her sister a glare of her own over the rim of her mug.

“Anyway, I just figured I’d make you breakfast, as a thank you of sorts. Plus I thought you might have a pretty wicked hangover after all those gin-and-gins.”

Lois opened her mouth to protest, but her headache decided to rear its ugly head at that moment, and she scrunched her nose up. “Thanks, then. I appreciate it.”

“Why don’t you go sit down? I’ll bring you your food.”

She found herself complying, for whatever odd reason, and took her coffee over to the couch. She sat down, enjoying the scent of food cooking and the sounds of people shuffling around. The signs of life. Even if it was her kid sister cussing as she cut herself shaving again or a man she wasn’t entirely comfortable with cooking her breakfast. Her eyes alighted on his dress shirt, casually draped over the end of her chair and his tie on the floor. It wasn’t pretty, but it was… nice. She could get used to this.

She hated to admit it, even to herself, but she never once felt this comfortable with Lex.

“Eggs for the lady.” He swooped in with a plate from behind her place on the sofa. She smiled brightly at him, pleasantly surprised, and he shot her a quick wink. “Pancakes will be done in a few. Go ahead, eat up.”

“I’m honestly surprised you know how to cook, you know, instead of paying a chef to follow you around everywhere.”

His eyebrows jumped up and he put a hand over his heart.

“Are you kidding me? I grew up in the Midwest. All we do is eat.”

“The terms ‘eat’ and ‘cook’ are not synonymous, trust me.”

He shrugged, and turned back to flip the pancakes. Lois openly admired the way he filled out that too-tight t-shirt as he moved, watching the flex of his muscles. She almost caught herself wishing he’d lose the pants too before she tuned back in to what he was saying. “It’s a good skill to know. People value it. Particularly in Kansas. If you can cook somebody a nice breakfast, they’ll be less likely to kick you to the curb.”

She clicked her tongue and frowned playfully. “Hey now, I don’t care how good your pancakes are, you’re going to have to leave at some point. Don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.”

Clark laughed jovially, and turned back to deliver a couple of pancakes her way before correcting her. “No, I didn’t mean here. I know that. I just meant…” He trailed off, the expression behind his eyes unreadable, wrought with sudden conflict. He quirked his lips up quickly and smacked his leg in a definitive, dismissive gesture. “People like breakfast.”

Lois did the math and figured what he was talking about. “Oh. Sorry, I uh—”

He waved her apologies out of the air as he settled into the seat across from her with his own plate. “Never mind that. Eat. I don’t know if you’re off today or if you have to be in at work, but I really have to do some work today.”

Her face fell rapidly at the reminder of the reasons she’d ended up at the Metro Club last night. Clark said he loved her. Lex is the Boss. Her life was a disaster. She cut up her pancakes absentmindedly, trying to find her voice. “I’m off today, actually. Might pop by the office to grab some of my stuff, though.”

Clark nodded, and they ate in a relative silence until Lucy came back out to greet them, dressed and ready for her day. Lois was grateful for the interruption of her own inner monologue. She had to get going anyway. She didn’t lie; she was actually off today. But journalists didn’t really get a day off when there was a story the likes of this under their nose.

She readied herself quickly, and was putting on her jacket when she spotted him in the kitchen once again. “You’re still here?”

He gestured to the last dish in his hand as he put it away in the cabinet. “Had to clean up.”

He did clean up, she noted with a hint of disappointment at finding him fully dressed and ready to leave. She brushed aside the thoughts quickly and grabbed him by the coat sleeve. “Thanks, but I really gotta go. Which means you have to go, because I have to lock up.”

His chuckle at her enthusiasm warmed her from her inside out. “All right, all right. I’m going.”

They left together, the day greeting them outside too bright and sunny for Lois’ headache. He needled her a bit about it, and she ribbed him right back. She’d be hard pressed to admit it, but mornings like this were something she could get used to.

Chapter 35: Left Hand Free

Lex leafed through the pages of the notebook on his lap, trying to make sense of it all. Of all the things that Rachel had given him, this was the conundrum. It was a chaotic mix of information, with phrases scrawled haphazardly in the margins, little sketches here and there. He was beginning to understand what she had meant when she said her father had started losing it towards the end. Most of what he wrote didn’t add up. His handwriting gradually worsened, with some borderline form of dysgraphia. And he was completely obsessed with one phrase above all else.

Green rocks.

It was everywhere. Circled, highlighted, repeated, underlined. Lex flipped another page over at seeing the words, frustration manifesting itself with a twitch under his eye. He had no idea what the words meant, no context clues whatsoever, but somehow it was of utmost importance to Sheriff Harris.

It felt like an intrusion reading it all. Like this was something too personal.

The words *I’m not crazy* stared back at him on the next page, hearkening him back to Lana Lang’s suicide note. Something like that stuck with a person, of that Lex was certain. A flash of a memory sliced through his brain—his mother’s body on the pavement, his father’s gun on the floor. He shuddered. Suicide was not painless.

He snapped the journal shut with a sigh and glanced out the window of the car nervously. Still nothing. He should probably just jump out, get this over with. Waiting wouldn’t make anything easier. He wiped his palms on his slacks. It was a simple enough plan: get out of the car, talk to his girlfriend. Two steps. He shouldn’t be so nervous to talk to his girlfriend. She had to know.

He banished the vision of emerald stones from his mind as they popped up. He had to focus. Lex didn’t know why Harris’ fixation had turned from the case to green rocks, but he knew it

wasn’t helpful, and right now it didn’t matter. What he had should be proof enough that Clark Kent wasn’t the altruistic hero he pretended to be.

“On the count of three,” he muttered under his breath, fixing his shirt collar. It was going to be a long drive to the Daily Planet, but she had to see. She had to know she was being duped. He stepped out of the town car and around the back, when a movement in his periphery caught his attention. Lois’ form emerging from the doorway to her apartment had his heart fluttering. Nine days was far too long to spend without her.

Then she pivoted, held the door open behind her, and out walked Clark Kent.

Lex froze, rooted to the spot as ice filled up his stomach and spread through his limbs. He stared blatantly, unable to look away as the two ambled casually down the street. His eyes clocked every movement they made—Kent leaning into her with a smile and some unheard line of wittiness. Lois nudged him with her elbow good-naturedly. He responded with a booming laugh and offered up his arm. Lois took it gracefully.

What the hell?

His throat was closing up and breathing was getting harder. Lex rationalized. Lois wouldn’t cheat on him. She wouldn’t. But he couldn’t refute the evidence. There they were, leaving her apartment together in the morning hours, collecting casual touches and they were well within each other’s personal space—and this line of thought was getting him nowhere.

The pair rounded the corner of the block, and ice that had him frozen suddenly melted as Lex made a dive back for the confines of his car. His head was spinning, his mouth was dry and his tongue tasted like pennies and left him gagging. Oh God. It couldn’t be true. His eyes were tricking him, or he was reading into things... right now, Lex couldn’t fathom any situation that would end with the two of them walking down the street together, beyond the obvious. But there was bound to be an explanation. Lois wouldn’t cheat on him. Not Lois. Not with *him*.

Their body language was telling him otherwise.

He buried his face in his hands, pulling at his hair anxiously. This was a nightmare. It was a living, lucid nightmare and he was just sitting there, watching it all happen to him, as if he was a bystander in his own life. A footnote.

“Everything all right, Mr. Luthor? Anything I can help you with?”

Lex scrunched his eyes shut for one moment more to compose himself, and sat up to instruct the driver. “Yes, fine. Will you please take me back home?”

“Already? We just got—”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

The man shrugged and put the partition back up as he started the car. Lex planted his face in his hands once more, unable to hold up the weight of his head on his own. How could this have happened? His life was finally perfect, he had just about everything he ever could have wanted, and then Clark Kent had to come into their lives.

No more.

He refused to be passive. He wouldn’t allow this... this *kid* to walk all over him. It was time for Kent to learn who he was really dealing with. Lex ran a hand through his hair once more, brushed the few stray hairs that came with it away, and settled back into his seat. “Let the games begin.”

Clark stood nervously in the conference room, the very spot where he’d accidentally declared his love for Lois just two days ago. What a whirlwind. He couldn’t believe it still. She was handling it pretty well, all things considered. Miniature meltdown and binge drinking excluded, they were closer than ever before.

His heart skipped a beat. He hadn’t intended to say the words ever, let alone so early. He could hardly wrap his head around the fact that he actually loved Lois Lane. The last thing he expected

out of his life was to fall in love. It wasn't something he'd ever imagined for himself, what with how focused he was on avenging his father. But it made every victory with Lex that much sweeter.

His cell phone rang in his pocket, and he picked up the device with no small measure of glee. "Kent."

"We're back in town, sir. When can we meet?"

Clark stilled, glancing out at the bullpen surreptitiously. He almost forgot about Nigel in all the chaos. He rubbed his jawline, trying to come up with an answer. "I'm not going to be available today. Tomorrow morning, perhaps?"

"Whatever suits you. The usual spot?"

Clark winced. Right. Another thing he forgot to check back in on. "Better steer clear of the docks for a while. How about you just meet me at my place?"

"Of course. Is there any reason in particular why?"

"I'll tell you when we meet." A couple of voices in the bullpen drew his attention away from his phone call, and he watched as a group started gathering around the television. He frowned, curiosity getting the better of him. "I'll let you go now, Nigel. Something's going on."

He hung up without any other notice, and made his way over to the group, stopping short just behind Lois. He casually rested a hand on her shoulder as he leaned forward with interest. "What's going on?"

"There's a big fire downtown." Lois didn't bother to look back at him, only recognition of his presence being the brief flinch that ran through her at his touch and the instant relaxation that followed.

Clark bit his lip as she leaned into him unconsciously. What this woman did to him, with even the slightest of motions. God, he loved her. "That's awful."

"Tell me about it. Where the hell is our resident superhero in all this?"

He blinked, spine straightening suddenly as he released her shoulder and leaned away. "What?"

She rolled her eyes dramatically, sarcasm dripping from her tongue. "You know, that one guy, in the cape, flies around? What's his name..."

Clark rolled his eyes in return. "Ha, ha. Very amusing. What about him?"

"He hasn't done any rescues in a few days!" She gestured broadly at the television screen, not hiding her disdain in the least. "This is a big one, and still nothing. So much for having a superhero around town."

Clark feigned distractedly, brushing his hands across his pants, his sleeves, through the air. "I'm sure he has a good reason. Maybe he's doing rescues somewhere else. Or maybe he has a personal life. We don't know."

Lois rolled her eyes and looked back at him with a disparaging stare. "Yeah, well, this situation warrants a superhero. And we got one. And he's nowhere to be found." She turned back to watch the blaze on the television. "Figures he'd disappoint."

"All right, then, Lois. You're right, of course. You look into it." She shot a toothy grin at him, and he took a step back. "I gotta get going, though. Just got a call from one of my business associates—there's a deal that might be falling through I have to go supervise. So, if you need me, give me a call."

"I think I'll manage on my own, thanks."

Clark grinned and spun on his heel. His grin fell away almost as soon as he was out of sight. Lois' words bothered him. She was right of course. If he was going to play at superhero, he had to make it look convincing. It wasn't right that he just stopped crimes when he felt like it, when he had free time, or when Lois was in danger. He had to be around a little bit more than that.

That was the hard part.

He ducked into the alley outside the Daily Planet and spun into the suit.

Chapter 36: Two Princes

Lois glanced over the man who claimed to love her as he stepped onto the elevator and left. He was an odd bird, that was for sure. He got shifty as soon as she mentioned the blaze. Why, she hadn't a clue. She sighed. Might as well head down to the scene of the fire, see if she could find out anything about it. "Chief?"

"You want it, Lois?"

"Absolutely. Was just about to ask."

"Go on, then. Take Olsen."

She grabbed her purse and her pager from off her desk.

"Jimmy! You coming or not?"

"Miss Lane?"

She turned around to find herself face-to-face with a huge bouquet of flowers. "Oh—uh... What is—"

"Delivery for you. I just need a signature and some place to set this."

She quickly turned and cleared some space off her desk, cheeks flaming with heat in the process. She didn't need to look at the card to know who the flowers were from. Red roses, white orchids, no fillers. Lois grabbed the clipboard from the delivery man's hands and gave a barely legible signature, glaring at anyone who dared to whistle and catcall at her.

She waved Jimmy off as he pestered her to get going. "Give me a minute, Olsen. Geez." She plucked the card out of the outrageous display and flicked it open. Her throat closed up when she read the words, not ones she'd expected to see.

We need to talk. —LL

Her heart started pounding. What did that mean? What was there to talk about? He skipped out on her. He was gone for over a week. His note, his absence... she should have words for him!

She did have things to say to him.

Her stomach twisted, and she shoved the card deep into her purse. He couldn't... know anything, could he? That would be ridiculous. There was nothing to know, even. She shifted her weight on her feet, eyeing the flowers as if they would reveal all the answers she was looking for. She knew she was lying to herself.

"Lois? Are we going or not? The *Metropolis Star* already has a crew at the scene of the fire. It'll be out before we get there."

She shook her head and steeled her nerves. She'd deal with Lex later. Maybe much later. "Right. Let's go."

Clark reveled in the cheers as he put out the blaze, waving at the crowd, smile crinkling around his eyes. He knew it was stupid—ridiculously stupid—but something about flying around in the cape and the boots was thrilling. The way they all looked up to him, hope reflected in their eyes, smiles on their faces. He felt like a kid again, exhilaration pumping through his veins and ratcheting his mood way above his normal pitch.

He was a hero. A god.

He ate it up.

He landed and made the rounds. Shook hands with the fire chief, the arson inspector, even a couple of other firefighters and officers that seemed interested in meeting a real-life superhero. He asked questions about the way the fire started, took an interest, made suggestions.

There was a high that accompanied it all.

So far they didn't have much of a lead. It was initially attributed to a gas leak, but some of the materials on site appeared to have burned too fast, so arson wasn't out of the mix just yet.

He clocked Lois' arrival instantaneously, turning his head ever so slightly as she and Jimmy slid out of a taxi and stormed up to the scene—Lois with a little less gusto than he'd anticipated, given her reaction in the newsroom. He dragged his eye over her form quickly—marking her shuffling gait, her lowered eyes, her stern expression. Not at all how he'd left her.

Clark frowned, and thanked the fire inspector, before casually

making his way towards the reporters in the crowd.

“Hey! Big Blue! Over here!”

He nodded at the young photographer. “James. Good to see you.”

Olsen seemed starstruck for a few moments, glancing at Lois proudly, before shaking his head and turning back to the Man of Steel. “Anything you can tell us on the fire?”

“Still inconclusive,” he hedged, trying his best to keep an eye on Lois without appearing to. “Arson is still on the table, but it could just as easily be an accident.”

James snapped a photograph of the black plumes of smoke, and Clark took the moment to casually check on Lois. “Everything all right, Miss Lane?”

“Hmm? Oh, fine.”

She pulled away gently from where his hand rested on her arm, and he remembered who he was in that moment. He glanced about himself, reining in his impulses and returning to the impassive mask of the hero. This was the downside of heroics. All eyes on him, constrained by the suit and social convention. He couldn’t act like a human, act like himself. Every motion he made was captured, every word he said written down for eternity.

The double-edged sword of heroism.

He cocked his head to the side, as though he were listening to something in the distance, and made his excuses to leave.

He darted high above the clouds, bathing in the sunlight that energized him down to his bones. That was the stuff. He stretched out languidly, reclining in the air comfortably. Better than any drug known to man. Better than the thrill of performing high-octane rescues, saving people’s lives and knowing they’d be indebted to him for the rest of their lives and never be able to tip the scale. He allowed the rest of the world to drift away from him—all his troubles, concerns, plotting, day-to-day tasks—and just *be*.

He sighed in a brief moment of contentment.

It still wasn’t better than kissing Lois Lane.

He sighed again, this time out of disappointment. He supposed there wasn’t much use in wasting any more time up here. He cracked his knuckles, took a few more tingling moments in the sun, and allowed himself to fall.

Clark smiled as his cape drifted up around him, cradling his body in his rapid descent. He outstretched his arms and closed his eyes, peace smoothing away the worry lines in his face. Wind whipped at his ears, shadows of the clouds crossing his face.

At the last possible second, he fought gravity’s control, and swooped up at a speed that left a boom in his wake and rattled the windows of Lex Luthor’s penthouse. Clark grinned at hearing the man cursing after him, and decided it was time enough for him to get back to business.

“And she got the delivery? You’re positive?”

The voice on the other end of the line replied in the affirmative, and Lex pursed his lips. She was at work. She was probably busy working. It had only been an hour since she’d received his gift. He thanked the woman on the line and hung up the phone.

The entire building shook, windows rattling loudly, and Lex grabbed at his desk edge frantically as some paperwork flew off. “What the—”

A sonic boom rocketed past in his ears, and a flash of color outside his windows identified the source. He let his shoulders drop, his breathing even. Well, it was better than an earthquake. Lex muttered a few choice words after the hero that streaked by and bent over to collect the papers that had drifted off his desk in his wake. The alien knew what he was doing, clearly was not going to be friendly with him after their last run in. Which was just fine by him. He had no need for a superhero lurking around.

The thought that maybe he should keep the hero on a backburner crossed his mind. Lex clicked his tongue. Kent had to

be his main focus, he knew, but this so-called superhero was a threat in his own right. No way would Lex be able to pull off anything he was planning if the caped wonder wanted to stop him. The man was indestructible—fast, strong, able to fly. Nothing would escape his notice.

His intercom buzzed, and Lex hit the button irascibly at the interruption. “Yes?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Fane is here to speak with you, sir.”

Surprise flooded him. “Send him in, please.”

The man entered not a moment later, and Lex smiled at the man and outstretched his arms broadly. “Colonel! What a wonderful surprise.”

The man shook his hand warmly. “Good to see you, Mr. Luthor.”

“Please, you know better than to call me that. Call me Lex. To what do I owe the pleasure?” He gestured for the man to sit before his desk, and took his own seat on the other side. Lex finished stacking his loose papers and slid them into his top drawer as the army man spoke.

“Unfortunately, I’m here on business, not pleasure. We had some difficulty getting in contact with you last week, your assistant mentioned you were out of town?”

“Yes, I had a... personal commitment to attend to.”

The man nodded, didn’t press for any more information.

“Well, I’m here to apologize on behalf of the military for all of the complications behind Project Shockwave. We do appreciate everything Luthor Technologies has invested into this project, and it is one hundred percent back on track, now that Roarke and Harrington are out of the picture.”

Lex blinked at the man in confusion. He was completely in the dark on this one. “I’m sorry, what happened?”

Fane shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “I’m sorry. I thought you’d have heard.”

He was still trying to play catch up in his head, get off the subject of Kent and Lois and think back on his actual work.

“Something went wrong with Project Shockwave? I invested half a billion dollars of research and development into that. What do you mean there were complications?”

“Not anymore. Everything is back on track, and Congress passed the measure to implement it. But as it turns out, an arms dealer named Thaddeus Roarke was trying to sabotage your device. He even blackmailed Congressman Harrington to gain access to the project. Luckily Miss Lane and the folks at the *Daily Planet* caught wind of it and stepped in when they did.”

Lex ran a hand through his hair, loosening some of his curls. “Lois did that?”

The nod he got was hesitant. “She and a Mr. Kent. Actually it was Kent who made the final call, detailing everything they’d found. If it wasn’t for the fact that I know you and Lois were together, they’d probably have been looking at some very different results. Treasonous ones. You know this project was labeled with some of the highest security clearances.”

Lex breezed right past that warning, ignoring it and the spike of fear at the possibility of Lois getting in serious trouble with these people. She didn’t have the best track record for keeping out of trouble, of that he was certain. He tapped his foot under the desk, expending some nervous energy. Kent was involved. Again. He didn’t know why Kent would even bother sticking his nose in to rescue one of his projects. It seemed contrary to everything he’d learned about the man this past week. He shook his head, focusing again. “Roarke, though... He’s an arms dealer. What did he want with Shockwave?”

Fane shrugged. “Not sure still. We thought initially he maybe wanted to compete with a bid for his own security system, but he didn’t seem to have anything similar on the horizon. Our best guess was that he was in it for the money.”

“You didn’t ask him?”

“He’s in the wind. We think we tracked him down to Morocco, but they’re a non-extradition country. Not much we can do at this point.”

His head was reeling. There was a problem; there wasn’t a problem. There was a person behind it; that person was gone. He was getting whiplash just trying to wrap his mind around it all. “But... in all?”

“All’s well that ends well, sir. Shockwave was successful and we’re looking to implement it on a wider scale.”

He let out a long sigh of relief. “You really had me on the edge of my seat there for a moment, Colonel.”

Colonel Fane grinned ear-to-ear. “Sorry about that, Lex. Had to disclose everything.”

Lex combed his fingers back through his curls to loosen them up and shook his head with a matching grin. “I appreciate it. Sorry I wasn’t able to respond sooner.”

“Not a problem at all. It was good to chat in person. Don’t get to catch up very often anymore.”

“Would you stay for a drink?”

Fane seemed to weigh the option for a moment, but shook his head, and Lex felt his heart sink. He could actually use a friend right now, even if that friend was just a business acquaintance that he’d gotten to know over the past several years. “No, I’m on duty. Plus I’ve got to get back to base. I have a meeting with General Marshall in a couple of hours. But, rain check?”

Lex gave him a crooked smile. “Of course. Any time.”

“Maybe I’ll get to meet this infamous Lois Lane next time, huh?”

He smiled brighter, falsely, and brought his hand up to brush at the corners of his mouth. His mind wandered back down the path with Lois and Kent and everything that went with it. “Hopefully.”

“All right. Good talking to you. If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Lex clapped the man on the shoulder enthusiastically as he walked him out of his office and into the elevator. “Trust me, I won’t.”

Chapter 37: Run This Town

“Why is it that am I just hearing about Shockwave going live? From Luthor, of all people?”

Nigel’s entrance had Clark gritting his teeth already. He tossed his pen down onto his desk with more force than he’d intended and winced. He picked up the pen again and ran his hand over the surface to make sure there were no chips or cracks in the smoky-colored glass, releasing a small sigh at the smooth feel. “So you’re back. How was Austin?”

“Dallas,” Nigel corrected smoothly, and Clark couldn’t entirely mask his disappointment at not catching him out so easily. “Dull and hot. Surprisingly humid, actually.”

Clark snorted and rounded his desk again, plopping into his chair and spinning casually. “That’s Texas for you. Not the jewel of the south everyone pretends it is. San Antonio, maybe, but not Dallas.”

“I wholeheartedly agree on that point.”

Clark narrowed his eyes at the man and laced his fingers together behind his head. “And what don’t you agree with me on?”

“What happened with Shockwave? It was all so intricately planned—”

“That was before you up and disappeared on me,” Clark growled, shoulders tightening briefly.

“I had things perfectly in hand before I left.”

Clark blinked at the man a couple of times before jumping to his feet and crossing his office space to go to the kitchen. “Well it wasn’t my fault.”

Nigel muttered something under his breath about nothing ever being his fault, and followed after him. Clark chose to ignore the

comment as he padded across his glossy, dark, hardwood floors lightly, just barely touching the ground. Nigel’s heavy, even footsteps egged him forward faster, though he knew it wasn’t a competition. Clark took the corner almost too quickly and skidded to a stop in front of his stainless steel refrigerator.

“I just don’t know how it could have gone wrong. I thought we needed Shockwave to be stopped. It’s going to make shipments harder, it’s going to make things harder for, you know...”

“I’m aware of why I wanted Shockwave gone, thank you.” He leaned his head inside the fridge door in a show of looking for food, not finding much appealing anyways. Clark clenched his jaw tight at all that Nigel was insinuating. The worst part was he couldn’t find much fault with the man’s logic. He didn’t know how to explain it in a way that wouldn’t make it sound like he actually lost control of the situation. His eyes alighted on a carton of almost expired Chinese food in the back and he grabbed it hastily. “Lois caught wind of it a couple of days after you left. Found out about Harrington when she caught him meeting with his... impromptu dealer.”

“Impromptu... why was he meeting with anyone? His supply should have come through days before.”

Clark grabbed a pair of chopsticks out of the silverware drawer, and started picking at his snack in an effort to avoid eye contact. “Yeah, well, the shipment didn’t come through right. Some of our guys at the docks got caught, and then they tried to cover it up with some low-grade cocaine they bought off the street... Point is, I dealt with it. And I sent Kyle to go take Roarke over to meet Harrington with something of a little more quality. Oh, which reminds me, I might need you to take care of Kyle for me. He knows who I am, but it’s fine for now.”

“What about Victor? Thick as thieves, those two.”

“Victor’s been dealt with already.”

Clark enjoyed the glimmer of surprise that slid across Nigel’s face, and decided to let the man think he was responsible. Keep him on his toes. Nothing wrong with putting the fear of God into him every once in a while.

“And Miss Lane somehow saw this.”

“Yeah.”

“And you let that kill the whole plan?”

Clark’s eyes flashed darkly at the man standing across from him, leaning over the island countertop. “I didn’t just let it happen. I got involved. I even stayed with her to help her stake it out, hoping to distract her enough. But you know how Lois is. She’s like a dog with a bone.”

Nigel was silent a beat before quietly interjecting, “You could have killed the story.”

He snorted, shoveling some lo mein noodles to his mouth sloppily before replying. “Yeah. That would have gone over well. Not suspect at all.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, sir, but isn’t that why you purchased the *Daily Planet*?”

Clark paused halfway through chewing, and evaluated the slight pinch to Nigel’s face, the way his mouth turned down slightly at the corners, but the rest of his expression stayed neutral. He swallowed. “What are you getting at?”

Nigel picked at some imaginary lint on his sleeve and took his time collecting his thoughts. “Toni Taylor or Antoinette Baines never would have caused us so many problems. And don’t think I don’t know our friend in blue had a hand in all this as well.”

Clark felt his jaw twitch. He set down the carton heavily on the countertop and smoothed a hand over the muscle. “Yeah, well, this is different.”

“Lois Lane couldn’t have changed the plan that much—”

“Lois changed everything.”

The room fell silent. The seconds ticked by, and Clark didn’t know how to rephrase the words. It was the truth, but he didn’t have a good enough reason to justify it to Nigel. He kept his eyes

lowered, not wanting to read his expression just yet, and face the scathing yet impassive judgement the man was sure to be exuding. “And what about Luthor?”

The question took him off guard, and Clark glanced at him long enough to see the stoic mask was back in place. “Nothing’s changed on that front, trust me. We’ve come too far. I’ve just been making some... minor adjustments.”

Nigel nodded, and Clark felt his nerves ease a little bit at the acquiescence. “So, there’s a boundary around Miss Lane, then.”

“In a manner of speaking, sure.”

“What about your alter ego?”

The mention of his alter ego put his defenses back up. Clark hedged, picking up his Chinese food once more. “What about him?”

“Sir, with all due respect, you’re telling me things have changed. I understand that’s your prerogative, but I need to know where the lines are drawn so I know whether or not to step in. And this character of yours is as much a new threshold as Lois Lane.”

He stabbed at a shriveled looking zucchini and wrinkled his nose as he considered Nigel’s point. “All true. How would Lex have you treat him?”

“To be perfectly frank, I think he’d have me gun you down out of the sky at this point.”

Clark nearly choked on his laughter, and he slurped up a noodle he’d almost lost in the process. “That’s good. Let’s go with that, or maybe one step less than that. You should know by now that I can protect myself.”

Nigel’s surprise was less masked this time, and Clark grinned at the way the older man’s entire forehead creased with the jump of his eyebrows. He chucked the half-empty carton in the trash and straightened. “That was disgusting. I want some real food. How about some ribs?”

The immediate reaction of terrified disgust on Nigel’s face made him laugh again. “No, thank you. I have work to do anyway, and I don’t think I’ll be eating any more barbecue for a while.”

Clark’s laugh boomed all the way through the halls as he led Nigel through the outside hallway and to the elevator. “That’s right. Texas. Try any good barbecue at least?”

Nigel wrinkled his nose. “Food wasn’t exactly to my tastes. It was a lot of mustard and ranch dressing and what was left was slathered in barbecue sauce, and it was all too sweet in my opinion. Nothing to write home about.”

Clark stilled with his hand over the elevator button, the little orange light toggling on a second behind his touch. Nigel’s presence at his back remained relaxed, a little on edge, but mostly jovial. It was probably nothing. Nigel was British; he probably didn’t care for anything sweet. The words meant nothing. He scrambled to find the smile that had evaporated and paste it back onto his face. “It’s not for everyone. Maybe you had to grow up with it.”

Nigel’s answering words were lost to the pounding sound of his heartbeat in his ears, and he beat back the panic that crept in around him. The doors opened in front of him, and the old spy stepped around him and onto the lift, seemingly unaware of what he said.

He swallowed thickly, leaned a little too casually against the frame of the elevator. “You definitely wouldn’t like the barbecue in Kansas then. Way sweeter. We usually stick to St. Louis style. Texas tends to be more dry rubs and spices. Smokier.”

Clark flicked his eyes up to the older man’s face and watched as something clicked behind his eyes. Clark smiled genuinely, pretending he didn’t pick up on it. They stood there poised at the ready, each waiting for the other to call them on it.

“I’ll be sure to remember that.”

The elevator doors slid closed on Nigel’s words and his grimace of a smile, and Clark shot back a taut grimace of his own. He was right; Nigel had been lying to him. How much of what he

said was a lie? How exactly had he ended up in Kansas? He supposed it was possible that he hadn’t actually been in Kansas; a lot of places cooked in that style. He could even have been in Texas... and just walked into the wrong restaurant every day he was there. Clark smoothed a hand over his hair, knowing there was only one reasonable answer.

They’d been in Kansas, or even Missouri. Which realistically meant they were in Smallville.

Did Luthor know too, then?

Clark wandered into his bedroom and looked around, barely registering the environment around him beyond the familiar elements—the stripe of red on the walls, the angle of his bed, the dark tones of his bedspread. He needed to get his mind off things. He walked into his closet space and headed to the back compartment where he kept his suits now—one Saturday of renovation and he had a whole new wardrobe.

He ran his fingers over the stretchy blue material, reverently stroking the crest in an effort to try to ground himself. Things weren’t out of control just yet. Even if Nigel or Lex found out all his deepest darkest secrets, that wouldn’t change the plan any. Just speed things up. Clark spun into the suit and blazed off his balcony looking for a distraction.

Either way, he was going to have to watch St. John more closely.

Lois ran her fingers along the tattered edge of the paper, well worn now after several nights spent repeating the same motion. She should really stop before it fell apart in her hands. What if they needed it for the investigation?

She kicked the blanket off her toes restlessly and brought her cigarette to her lips. The words were written hastily, frantically—she could practically see him writing it, half hunched over his desk, standing awkwardly, ready to go. The way his lines were short and cramped, slanted across the paper. Nothing like his usual, flowy style of long strokes and embellished language. The man was nothing if not melodramatic.

Lois—

No “my dear.” No “love of my life” or “beautiful” or any of the nicknames or adjectives he liked to pepper her with. Just Lois.

All I can say is it’s not what it looks like. We really need to do this in person, but you don’t know what you walked into. He is deranged. He’s a liar. He tried to kill me—he didn’t, but he proved he could at any time he wanted. You missed it. You missed everything. But of course you did. That’s how things are going for me right now.

And yes, fine. I tried to kill him too. But that was for investigative purposes. You should understand that.

Her blood boiled every time she read that sentence. Like hell she’d understand. She was a reporter, not a criminal. Minimizing what she did for a living like that, trying to get her to understand his behavior... She slapped the paper down on the coffee table and got up to go rummage through the fridge again, even though she knew there was really nothing in there.

After everything she’d worked so hard for. Graduating high school early so she could leave home earlier, four years of college that she’d accomplished in three and a half thanks to summer classes and zero social life. Clawing her way through the ranks at the *Daily Planet*, stealing Claude’s story and outing him as a scumbag who’d tried to use her—and Lex assumed she cheated her way through it all. Sure, she broke some of the rules sometimes. She had to get the story first, and she didn’t mind much how she went about getting it. But even she had a line.

You don’t make news to write news.

It was a simple rule to follow, and pretty much the only one she had. Anything else was game. Go undercover, fine. Skirt around the law, perfect. Somebody else on the track of your same story, beat them to the punch by whatever means necessary. But you can’t commit a murder for the purpose of a story, or do

something completely irreparable. You don't become a story in pursuit of a story.

The cool air of the fridge did a lot of good for her temperament. Her eyes drifted shut as she breathed in the cold for a few seconds, and she closed the door again. She had to get some control back. Things were spinning well beyond her reach and she didn't like it.

She plopped back onto the couch with a sigh, staring at the two notes, side by side now. The note from yesterday was far shorter, and much more controlled. It was like looking at two versions of the same person—unmedicated Lex and on-the-lithium Lex. The way he rambled on in the first about *proving he was right* and that she should *watch out while he's gone* because he wouldn't be there to protect her... it set her shivering and enraged her at the same time. Because he still wasn't explaining anything, he was still leaving things out like he was hiding something.

You'll see.

The ominous last words of his note, written with a heavier hand and underlined repeatedly. For the first time in the entirety of her relationship with the man, she felt like she actually would see the real Lex Luthor. She just wasn't sure if she wanted to see it.

The other note was such a one eighty from the first that she wondered if he'd genuinely gone off his rocker. And those words. Those four, stupid little words that struck fear into her heart for no good reason.

They needed to talk. Problem was she didn't know what she could talk to him about. If Clark was right, and Lex was the Boss, then there wasn't much left on the table to discuss. Besides Clark. And Clark was off the table for reasons of her own.

She grabbed a notepad and pen. She could figure this out. And until then, she'd just avoid Lex.

Chapter 38: Into the Jungle

"I don't know, Chief, he sounded legit to me."

"James."

"I know it sounds like a conspiracy theory, but the guy at the docks seemed real adamant that he saw something. He said there was a British guy and a rich-looking dude—"

"Look, I can appreciate your..." Perry clocked Kent's entrance into the room and wordlessly passed him a file off his desk.

"Enthusiasm, that's for sure. But enthusiasm doesn't sell papers. Facts. Quotes. Sources. Scandals. Sex. You know these things, Jimmy."

"But, Chief—"

"Until you get me something concrete, you know the drill."

Jimmy sighed and scuffed his feet against the floorboards.

"Yes, Chief. Two creams?"

"And don't forget the sugar. Now get."

Clark smirked as the young man shuffled out of the room.

"You didn't have to be so harsh on him."

Perry guffawed loudly. "You call that harsh? Boy needs a little knocking around, something to fight against. Good for a growing kid."

Clark's grin widened. "I wish I'd had someone like you around when I was his age."

Perry eyed him curiously. "What about your pop?"

His blinks took a half second too long, and for a moment Perry thought he saw something unfiltered flicker between the flutters, something painful and angry. Clark crossed one leg over the other guardedly and clasped his hands around a knee. "Hasn't been around for a long time."

Perry chose not to acknowledge that statement, and instead gestured to the file that he handed him earlier. "Third quarter numbers. Sales are up, advertisers are happy, we've been doing a lot of good since you got here."

Clark finally looked down at the file in his lap and took a moment to flip through it, a slow, crooked smile stretching across

his face. "Swell. I mean, I wanted to save the paper, but I honestly never expected to have this good a return on my investment."

Perry grinned back and slapped his desk enthusiastically. "Good to hear. I gotta say, it's been great having you working so closely with us throughout this whole transition. The team's really gotten to know you well, gotten to respect you. You've become an honorary reporter of sorts. I appreciate everything you've done here."

Clark snapped the file shut and assumed the same guarded pose he had moments before. The crinkles around his eyes disappeared even though his smile grew brighter. "I appreciate the praise, Perry. So, why do I get the feeling that the other shoe's about to drop?"

Perry took his time with his words. He straightened some pens on his desk, collated some paperwork and stacked it twice sharply against the wood. Somehow Kent's gaze made him feel like he was a small animal that had wandered into the cage of a fierce tiger, and he was very soon to be lunch. Even though, technically speaking, he was the one trying to corner Kent.

"Perry."

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Kent, there's no easy way to say this, but look. As much good as you've done here, I think it might be time to take a step back." He didn't risk looking the man in the eye, instead keeping his gaze low and roaming. He knew what he'd see there.

"Step back?"

The words somehow echoed in the space of the office, louder than he'd probably intended. Perry tossed his hands up. "Don't get me wrong, I could always use the help, and it's not anything personal. I just think... You might be becoming a distraction for some of my team. And I can't have that."

"You just said how much of a help I was to your team." Kent spoke in crisp, clear tones.

Perry conceded with a slight nod of his head. "When you're interested."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he snapped back.

He huffed an exasperated sigh and finally looked up to see the shocked and hurt look on Clark Kent's face. "Kent... Let's not beat around the bush. I think it's pretty obvious to everyone what's going on here. And it's not just reporting."

Clark's expression darkened as it clicked for him all of a sudden. "This is about Lois."

"I didn't become the editor-in-chief of the *Daily Planet* just because I can whistle. I know there's something going on between you two."

"Perry, you're being ridiculous. There's nothing going on between—"

"How many times you think I'm gonna watch while you drive her out of my bullpen in tears?"

The man crossed his legs the other direction, squirming nervously, adjusting his glasses. Perry absorbed every gesture, soaking it up like he was sitting across the poker table from Kent. "It's not what it looks like, I swear."

"Yeah," he drawled incredulously, "it never is."

"And even if it was," Clark said defensively, glancing at the open doorway nervously, "which it's not—you said yourself that you don't like Luthor. So what's the big deal?"

"The big..." Perry gaped at him. He could hardly believe what the young man was saying. He shook his head and barked out a sharp laugh. "Look, I'll admit there's no love lost between Lex and me, but that don't justify any action on your part. Lois is—I love the girl like my own daughter, but she doesn't know what's good for her sometimes."

Clark straightened his jacket as he stood at attention rapidly. "There's nothing going on between me and Lois regardless."

"Yeah, and Frank Sinatra couldn't pull off a fedora."

The glare he got in return gave Perry goosebumps. "I know

you think it's one thing, but trust me when I say it's something else. I can't tell you anything more right now, but when you do find out, you're going to eat some humble pie. Otherwise, I might not be so lenient as to come running back at your first call."

Perry shook his head. "Now, Kent, I didn't mean—"

"No. I know where I'm not welcome."

Perry scrambled to his feet behind the man, who already had one foot out the door. He pulled a corner of his jacket sleeve to stop him. "Hey, I'm not asking you to leave forever. I couldn't possibly—you own the place! I'm just saying..." Perry searched for a phrase to bring down Kent's ire, to show he was still amenable. He swallowed nervously. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right? Give my girl some breathing room."

Kent's mouth and brow furrowed into an expression of disgust, and he yanked his arm out of his grasp. Perry's mouth gaped for more words, anything to convince him that he was right, but he had to be careful. He just didn't want to see Lois hurting again. But Kent strode across the bullpen and entered the elevator in seconds, and the moment was lost. Perry sighed, scratched the back of his head uncomfortably. This fell apart quicker than he'd anticipated. He ambled slowly back behind his desk, looked around the room at his Frank Sinatra signed print, and sank into his chair with a sigh. He wondered what the old crooner would say about his stance. Was he too harsh? Not harsh enough? He had a hard time gauging things like this. Worse yet, Kent hadn't taken it as lightly as he'd intended.

James poked his head around the corner of the door jamb. "Chief! Got your coffee for you. Everything all right in here?"

"Goddammit, Jimmy. You couldn't have brought me this two minutes ago?"

Lois felt like she was floating on air and not in a good way as she stepped off the elevator and walked into the *Planet's* bullpen. Part of it she attributed to her groggy state—it had been a long couple of nights poring over those notes, coming up with a laundry list of crimes and possible connections to Lex. Her head felt too heavy for her neck, and her blinks were taking a second longer than they usually did—a fact she'd been made aware of by a very unpleasant New Troy driver that she'd apparently cut off, mid-blink. She twisted her back to stretch before she set her purse down on her desk, and used it as a covert way to scan the office.

Clark wasn't here yet.

Odd. He'd been beating her into the office more often than not, lately. And here, the one time she actually had something to share with him.

"James," she exclaimed as she grabbed his arm and ground him to a halt. "You seen Kansas today?"

"Who, Clark? Yeah. He came in and talked with Perry for a few minutes, then left in a real hurry. Maybe an hour ago?"

Oddity number two. Lois shooed the gopher off and made her way over to Perry's office and barged in without knocking. "Hey, Perry. You seen Kent around?"

Perry squirmed in his seat before answering her, scratching the back of his neck distractedly. "Uh, yeah, just for a minute or two. He had to run out to some business meeting. I gave him the third quarter numbers this morning."

Lois took a half step out of the office before pausing and turning back. She knew every one of Perry's tells, after many a late night trying to cheat her way around him at poker. And he was definitely lying about something. "Okay. Well, let me know if he comes in later today. I have a lead I want to follow up on and it's not going to chase itself."

"Sure thing, hon. No problem."

She squinted at him curiously, but decided to let it go for now. She could get as much if not more work done without Kent shadowing her around all day. He was sometimes a little unfocused, as the trip to the honeymoon suite had proven... She promptly shut down that train of thought before it had time to

leave the station.

"James!" she shouted across the bullpen, grabbing a lot of stares in return. She strode across the bullpen and smacked the guy at the closest desk as she walked past. "What are you looking at, Ralph? Don't you have a wife? Eyes on the computer, buddy. James!"

The young man's shoulders slumped as he turned around with a patronizing smile. "Yes, Miss Lane?"

"Shove it, Jimmy. I've got a scent of a story, and mama's hungry. Wanna tag along?" He shifted his weight on his feet, hesitation weighing heavily on his brow. "I could always use someone handy with a camera," she pitched in a sing-song tone.

He rolled his eyes and gave in with a finger wagged in her face. "All right. But if there's another dead body this time will be the last."

She threw an arm around his shoulder and grinned like the cat that ate the canary. "Oh, Jimmy. The best stories always have a dead body. You're in the wrong field if you don't know that."

He groused about it most of the way to the harbor, how it wasn't journalism that was dangerous, it was just her luck. She humored him, mostly trying to keep her focus on the road. She really wished Clark was here instead. Not that she minded Jimmy's presence—sure, he was a bit pretentious and didn't know when to shut up, but he was still a friendly face and a good man in a fight. But she had genuine thoughts she needed to bounce off of Clark, in spite of how awkward things sometimes got between them.

Maybe it was best to keep some distance for a bit, see what she could learn on her own without Kansas' input.

She slammed into a parking space before another car could beat her to it, and grinned. "We're here." She glanced at her temporary cohort and rolled her eyes, snatching her purse up almost violently. "You can pry your fingers off my armrests now. And if I find a single dent or puncture mark in the leather, I'll steal your wallet to have it fixed."

She slammed the door behind her and fished around her bag for her cigarettes. It was too early in the day for Jimmy to be on her bad side. She wasn't that reckless a driver. The spark that lit her cigarette also lit her interest in this case again, and she felt her shoulders ease a bit. She couldn't be expected to put up with the young photographer without nicotine.

James led the way into the restaurant and held the door open for her, redeeming himself by one point as she followed him inside. They weren't waiting long. The boy at the host's lectern tried to tell her smoking wasn't allowed in there, but she just shook her head. "I'm here for Bobby. The sooner you bring him to me, the sooner I'm out of your hair."

The pimply faced teen griped and went to go look for his boss. Lois sneered and shouted after him. "Hey, where's Batson? He's got a much better attitude than you!"

Bobby stormed out from the kitchen and popped the rest of his handful of fries in his mouth. "Jesus H. Christ, Lois! How many times I gotta tell ya, you can't smoke in my restaurant."

She smiled around the drug and waited till he got close enough before she puffed a cloud of smoke in his face. "Gets your attention faster, Bobby."

He coughed and waved his hands through the air to dissipate her fumes. "You gonna put that death stick out or are we gonna have to talk outside today?"

Lois wrinkled her nose. "But it's cold outside!"

"Your choice."

She sized up the small restaurant owner, and noted he wasn't inclined to step down, so she sighed. "Fine." He looked relieved for a second, and Lois smiled sweetly. "Outside it is."

He groaned and gestured for her to lead the way. Lois couldn't help the swell of pride at her little victory, and put a skip into her step.

The trio rounded the corner to the alley behind his restaurant. “Where is Will anyway?”

Bobby pulled out a milk crate and gently lowered himself onto it. “Called out sick. Kid never calls out sick, so I cut him a break.” She hummed noncommittally, hoping he was all right in the back of her mind. The sixteen-year-old was a good, hard worker, and sometimes snuck her extra dessert. She suspected he probably had a little crush. “All right, Lois. Let’s make this quick, I’ve got things to do today.”

She shook her thoughts away, turning back to the matter at hand. “I need you to keep your eyes and ears out for me. Anything remotely related to the Boss, no matter how stupid or irrelevant or ridiculous it may be.”

Bobby nodded responsively, but his eyes were fixed on some faraway point. “You’re really sure you want to dive into this thing, Lo? It might be bigger than you think.”

Lois practically growled. “I don’t need you to tell me what I can and can’t do. I’m perfectly capable of making my own decisions, Bobby.”

Jimmy spun on his heel slack-jawed and eyebrows arched. “Wait—you’re going after the Boss? As in, runs most the crime in Metropolis, scared the cartels straight, suspected gunrunner with a rap sheet longer than all the Gotham City criminals combined—that Boss?”

“Shut up, Jimmy.”

“Dammit, Lois! You said no more dead bodies!”

She waved his complaint out of the air dismissively and focused her attention back on Bobby. “You in or you out, Bobby?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “In, of course. I’m just saying. You might not like what comes out of this thing, you know?”

Lois froze at his phrasing. Something about it sounded off, like he knew more than he let on. She smashed the butt of her cigarette against the concrete building and turned back to face her favorite snitch with her arms folded. “There something you’re not telling me, Bobby?”

The smallish man shook his head adamantly. “Nothing yet. Nothing concrete, anyway.”

She took a step closer, hands on her hips. “But you have an idea.”

“It’s hardly worth mentioning.”

“Robert.”

He sighed in exasperation and drummed his fingers haphazardly on the milk crate. “All I know is that there’s been some movement, away from the docks. No clue why that’s happened all of a sudden.”

“And?”

“And”—he dragged the word out, giving Lois a pointed glare that seemed to infer she lacked patience—“there’s been some whispers going around. About an older British guy wandering around down here looking kind of out of place.”

Lois’ heart stopped and stuttered back into motion. She looked down at her hands, tried to stop them from shaking, wishing she hadn’t put out her cigarette quite yet. That was simultaneously vague and suspicious. Because it could still be a variety of people, and yet there was only one person Lois had in mind for the job, and it stacked up well against the theory she was already building. She stared Bobby down, and could see that his mind was on the same track as hers.

That wasn’t comforting.

“That’s exactly the story I was trying to pitch to Chief this morning!” Jimmy’s voice came across shrilly, and Lois rubbed her ear soothingly. “Some bum left a tip about an old British man and another guy in fancy clothes talking down here a couple of weeks back. Said they were discussing some sort of shipments. But the tipper also started rambling on about aliens and the government reading his thoughts, so Perry said it was a no go.”

Lois absorbed all this information like a sponge, and tried to

place things in a logical order. She darted a glance between the two men. “This has to stay between us. Not a word to anyone else, and I’m looking at you, Jimmy. Not before we can figure out what’s going on here.”

“What about Mr. White?” James questioned.

Lois shook her head fiercely, once. “No. Not even Perry. This has to stay off of everyone’s radar for now. We’ll work on other things too, in the meantime, to keep him off our backs, and work on this case undercover. We’ll loop him in when he needs to know.”

“What about your boy toy? Dreamy-Mc-Paranoid?”

She turned to Bobby with a glare. “He’s not my boy toy. He’s a friend. And... I don’t know. I’ll try and get ahold of him and see if he knows anything. He’s more in the loop than Jimmy here.”

“Hey!”

“You sure about that, Lois?” Bobby’s words were soft with warning. “Guy owns the paper. If you’re not telling Perry yet, what makes you think you should tell him?”

Lois bit her lip. She wasn’t sure, not really. Except she did know he wouldn’t betray her. He’d probably do anything for her, if she asked. It was an empowering and frightening feeling. She adjusted her bag higher up on her shoulder and met Bobby’s inquisitive gaze confidently. “I think he’ll be a good asset on this case.”

Chapter 39: If You’re Looking for Trouble

Clark hit the wall of the building as he walked past, chipping some of the brickwork away. He brushed his hand on his pants with a growl. He didn’t care anymore. Where did Perry White get off, telling him that he should step back? Perry was the one who needed to step back. Step back before he found himself on the wrong side of his temper.

Overprotective son of a bitch.

Perry wasn’t on his side. Nigel wasn’t on his side anymore. Everything was falling apart at the seams and he could hardly piece it back together. He ran his hand back through his hair and stepped off the sidewalk without checking the street.

A car nearly knocked into him, stopping just shy of his knee. The driver laid on his horn and flipped him off. Clark returned the gesture, scowling darkly, pushing forward even as people and cars continued to swarm around him.

He had to get some space to breathe. Metropolis was feeling too small, too many people around and buildings and not enough sunlight or space. He turned sharply into the next alley and spun into the suit, and took off into the skies high above.

Lois. Lois was his only saving grace anymore. He needed her on his side. He needed to destroy Lex, now more than ever. Before anything else came crashing down. Nigel alone could—

He skidded to a halt, high above the Metropolis skyline, and froze. He glanced back down at the city, so shiny and bright. From up here, it didn’t look like the dingy, dark, crime-ridden den of scum and villainy that it most definitely was.

He was a fool for trusting Nigel. Nigel knew everything. He could walk right into Luthor’s penthouse and lay out every inch of the plan for him. He could go to the police, he could provide documentation. The only thing possibly holding him back was the fact that they seemed to be in a deadlock—trapped by each other in this spiral of mutually-assured destruction.

“Help! Please, somebody! Help!”

The cries were young, and Clark felt his heart stir. He wasn’t particularly in the heroic mood, but if there was a child in danger he couldn’t exactly stand idly by. He swooped down through the clouds and landed with a thud.

A young girl with wide eyes looked up at him in awe. She grasped for words for a minute, seemingly stunned by his sudden appearance. Clark soothed her in a reassuring tone. “It’s all right. I’m here to help. What’s wrong?”

Her voice was quiet and awe filled. “You actually came!”
The note of surprise in her voice cut at his heart, and he knelt down on one knee to her level. “Is everything all right, young lady?”

“My sister. She’s gone missing. Nobody can find her, and nobody will believe me.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. “What about your family? Surely they believe you? Where are your parents?”

She shook her head, big, round, crocodile tears streaming down her face. “We don’t got any parents. We live at the Beckworth orphanage.”

His stomach clenched, and a ball of hot rage ate away at him. Who would dare... How could anyone have the gall to go after someone so helpless? He tried to inject some lightness into the mood, not let the dark cloud he was feeling inside overtake his expression. “Orphans, huh? You know, I’m an orphan too.”

Her damp eyes went impossibly wider. “Really?”

“Oh yeah. Twice actually. I can’t speak for any of your personal experiences, but I know it’s tough. How can I help, sweetie?”

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “She usually comes back. She goes to see the doctor, and then she comes back. But she didn’t come back this time. I’m scared.”

The wheels in Clark’s brain were spinning out of control. There were so many possibilities with that one statement. Was her sister sick? Did she die? Was it possible it was as simple as that, and this was just a grieving child who couldn’t process these feelings?

His gut told him no. But the alternative was too horrible to contemplate.

Clark leaned forward and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Listen... what’s your name?”

The girl wiped her arm across her face to brush away her tears. “Ines. My sister’s name is Aymee.”

“Ines. How about this. I have some friends, they’re good people, and they’re really great at figuring out things like this. They work at the *Daily Planet*. They can come visit you and figure out what’s going on with your sister, and make sure things are all right for you at the Beckworth orphanage. I can’t be seen investigating on the outside, but if they do it for me, I can find your sister, whatever’s going on. And until then I’ll be searching the whole city for her. Okay?”

She eyed him warily, clearly unsure if she could trust him, or these new people he mentioned. He waited patiently for her response with his hands folded over one knee, not pressuring her, exuding as much calmness and confidence for her as he possibly could.

Slowly, she nodded, and a wave of relief washed over him.

“You promise you’ll find my sister?”

He met the young girl’s eyes steadily, never more determined to keep a promise in his life. “I promise.”

The skies were clear today. Lex smiled up at the sun, absorbing as much vitamin D as he could get, letting it warm him from the inside out. Today was going to be a good day. For the first time in a long time, probably since Clark Kent came to town, he felt good. He had a plan. No more would he be a rudderless vessel, trying to fight the current against all odds. He was a man on a mission, and he was confident he would be a success.

So what that Lois hadn’t called or contacted him in days, in spite of all his efforts. She would see. He would make her see.

He would make her love him again.

Taking one last deep breath, Lex opened his eyes and opened the door.

The jingling bells greeted him warmly, and he smiled. The shop was quaint, small but cozy. He took in the array of tables and displays around him. It felt charmingly antiquated, like he could stumble upon a rare treasure under the cover of a lace doily or in a

dusty corner. Maybe there’d be some long-lost love letters in the bottom of an antique trunk, sending him back to another time, another life. The aura of the place was almost mystical. Lex smiled fondly as he picked up an intricate glass vial and examined it, the colors of the glass mixed and blown out beautifully. Some craftsman must have been very proud to make a piece like that.

“Can I help—”

He spun around at the voice and saw the woman’s stunned expression before anything else. He put down the glass vial carefully, and opened his arms wide in greeting. “Miranda! What a coincidence!”

She scowled at him bitterly, her smudged dark eyeliner underlining the effect. “Lex. What are you doing here?”

He let his arms fall back to his sides, trying not to let his grin fall as well. “You’re looking beautiful as always.”

And she did. Her blonde luscious locks feathered quite remarkably around her face. A rare gypsy woman. In another life, perhaps, he could see himself with her. Any man would. But not so long as he had Lois in his life, in whatever capacity.

She turned away with a sigh and stalked back behind the counter. “If you’re not here for business, then you’re not welcome.”

“It is business, I swear.”

She leaned over the cluttered countertop and evaluated him with an unsettling eye. “Maybe you’re not welcome anyway.”

He tsked at her. “Miranda, you haven’t even heard my proposition yet. What if I said it was a good one? I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I don’t think you could afford it.”

He pulled at his hair in frustration, all charm and suavity gone, eye twitch returning. “Just! Listen to me. All right? I need your help. You’re the best damn chemist in the city and I need a potion of sorts.”

She laughed in his face, and Lex flinched. “Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me. After you fired me for exactly that?”

He’d prepared for this part. His fingers wandered out to fiddle with a little mechanical figurine on the countertop, jiggling the trigger up and down to make it dance across the platform and he built his argument. “That was different. It looked bad on the company. There were... ethical issues with your experiments.”

“And yet”—she snatched the toy from his hands harshly—“here you are. Bet you wished I was still under the Lexcorp umbrella now.”

Lex scowled and folded his hands together calmly. “It’s irrelevant now. Are you saying you don’t want to work on a side project for me?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“How about ‘Love Potion Number Nine’?”

His quip fell on deaf ears. Miranda went completely motionless at the words. “Absolutely not.”

“Miranda—”

“No. Why now?”

“It’s none of your business,” Lex spluttered.

She threw her hands up out of exasperation and spun to grab a book off the shelf behind her. “You shortsighted, idiotic... I haven’t worked on that project in almost two years.”

“Please.” He was no longer above outright begging. “What do I have to give you, what more do you want from me? I’ve apologized and I’ll pay you whatever you want, and—”

“I want my old job back,” she said, eyeing him predatorily.

Lex nodded rapidly, hands in the air beseechingly. “Done.”

“And a pay bump. And free reign to work on my projects as I see fit.”

He winced at that last one, but he needed her services now. He couldn’t very well nitpick. “Fine. On the condition that you consent to some oversight and monthly reports for the shareholders meetings.”

“Only if I get all this in writing in a five-year contract.”

He soothed at the bags under his eye gently, easing the spasms away. “Fine. Do we have a deal?”

There was a beat of silence where Lex’s stomach flipped nervously. She was still examining him carefully, and it was unsettling him to his core.

“Still getting those stress twitches, I see?”

“Miranda.” His voice cut harshly, done playing games. Finally she smiled, tongue peeking out through her teeth coyly, and Lex got the distinct impression that he’d just been played. Like a cat with a mouse.

“We have a deal.”

He rolled his eyes at her dramatics. She was being ridiculous about all this. He was giving her all she had before and more. She could have just asked and he’d have gladly given it to her. He gestured his thanks with a hand in her direction and just a hint of sarcasm coloring his tone. “Thank you, finally. You start immediately. I’ll have a lab ready for you in a couple of days, if you could just get started here.” He spun on his heel and headed for the door, the mystery of the place somehow lost as he walked past everything a second time, now just appearing grim and old and dirty.

“Whoever she is, it won’t make her love you.”

Lex froze, not daring to breathe let alone turn to face her. He could feel her smug smirk burning a hole in his skull. He swallowed thickly, trying to play it off cool. “Well, that’s what I’m paying you for.”

She clicked her tongue at him. “I’m a doctor, Lex, not a miracle worker.”

“Well then, good, because I don’t believe in miracles,” he snapped.

He glanced back at her to find her shaking her head at him, eyes closed. “Even if I do get this to work, you’ll know it’s not real. She’ll never really love you.”

“She loves me,” he said with a snarl. Because that stung. He had to blink back the pain that tried to escape from his eyes. “This is just... insurance.”

“You’re okay living your life like that?”

His stomach knotted, and he was forced to acknowledge that he really didn’t know. It was hard to know anything anymore, what with where his life was at. The only two things he did know was that Clark Kent was sabotaging him, and that he loved Lois Lane. Lois was the only thing left in his life that made a bit of sense, and he was losing her. He couldn’t afford to lose her, especially not to Kent, of all people.

He met her gaze firmly. “Yes.”

The way his word seemed to echo through the space felt unnatural, but it was enough for Miranda to back down. She started stacking some books on her counter, sorting them by some order of importance. “Fine. But don’t come crying to me when it turns out sleeping next to a blow-up doll isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

Lex felt his eye twitch again, and he watched Miranda gather up her notebooks and textbooks for a few seconds more with a fire in his belly. He shoved the door open, and the bells rattled violently on his way out.

Chapter 40: Off to the Races

“Never in my life have I been so insulted! You know, I know the owner, and I’ll have your job for this!”

The man didn’t even flinch, barely engaged, and Lois whirled off with a snarl. Great. Now she felt stupid and ridiculous and she was no closer to finding the man. Five straight minutes the doorman had taken her abuse, not giving an inch for any of her arguing, bartering, bribing or yelling. He’d still refused her entry. She even waved her press badge in his face, but that only seemed to resolve him more.

She sulked as she rounded the corner to bide her time with a cigarette. Surely someone would show up that the doorman would let in, and maybe she could sneak in. She fumbled as she lit the barrel, trying to breathe slowly even as her ire had her breath caught tight in her chest.

Waiting was the worst.

Waiting for stories to pan out, waiting to meet up with a contact, waiting for another idea to strike. Come to think of it, it was probably when she smoked the most, as a way to ease her nerves and take away the edge of impatience.

She coughed a little, throat dry. Maybe she should get something to drink instead. A coffee cart across the street looked promising. Lois kicked off the exposed brick of the building and flicked her cigarette butt away, making her way across the intersection with the confidence that no one would hit her.

She hadn’t slept well the past few days. She hadn’t slept well in a long time actually. But the only thing keeping her eyes open this past week was her jittery nerves and an ungodly amount of caffeine.

“One large vanilla latte with skim milk and an extra shot of espresso. Please.”

The man groused at her order, but accepted the cash she passed over to him and went about preparing her drink. And then she was waiting again, trying not to think about anything other than the mysticism of the cart owner pulling all sorts of levers in a perfectly-timed order.

She hadn’t seen or heard from Kent in three days.

The thought came and went quickly, and before she was able to think any more on the matter the man handed her drink to her with a smile. She tipped him generously, and smiled as the memory of Kansas playing cheap with the Lexor bellhop entered her mind. He was ridiculous. Lois shook her head with a smirk, and took a sip of the scalding hot liquid as she crossed the street again.

Maybe she should just head out. He could be out of town, on business. He could have had something else come up. He could have been lying when he said he loved her and really it was just a passing infatuation or crush that he’d already moved on to the next girl and damn this was why she needed a cigarette, to keep her thoughts from spiraling like this and spinning her emotions out of —

A gasp tore from her throat as her entire coffee dumped over her shirt, the hot liquid searing her chest. She froze in the middle of the intersection, temper boiling almost to the same temperature as the drink she was wearing and growled at the figure that caused all this. “Hey! Watch it, asshole!”

“Up yours... Lois?”

And there he was. The object of her quest, sputtering frantically as he realized what he’d done and who he’d ran into. She blinked at the incongruity of it all, the odds of running into him like this when she’d spent all this time searching and wondering. She shook her head sharply. She needed to snap out of it. “It’s all right, Kent, don’t worry about it. It’s just—”

“Hot.”

She darted her eyes up to find his gaze zeroed in on her chest, and a flush spread across her cheeks. She shifted uncomfortably and folded her arms over her chest.

“Coffee! Hot coffee! I’m—I can’t believe—I’m so sorry!”

The way he fumbled with his words and his frantic hand gestures was downright adorable. Lois bit her cheek to keep from laughing, all the irritation at his run-in slipping away from her in that moment. “It’s fine, Kansas. Really.”

“We gotta quit running into each other like this... and we need to get you changed,” he muttered, spinning away from her. “Come on, you’re in luck. I live just ahead.”

“Oh, no, really?”—she blanched a little, suddenly remembering how awful she’d been to his doorman—“It’s fine...”

“No buts.”

She rolled her eyes and followed him. It was sweet, but a little ridiculous. She had a change of clothes in her car. And yet the appeal of finally getting into the building and spending a little more time with Clark Kent outweighed the practicalities of dress, so follow she did.

“Mr. Kent! Good to see you, sir, as always.”

“Thanks, Mo. This is Lois Lane, she’s a friend of mine.”

Mo’s weary eyes traveled over her suspiciously. “I believe we’ve already made an acquaintance. Miss Lane was trying to get into the building earlier.”

Lois gaped at him, shocked how quickly he ratted her out. “I was not! I mean, I was, but—”

“Regardless, she’s with me, so don’t worry about it, Mo.”

Kent’s smile was way too amused for his own good, but the doorman conceded his defeat, and let them through. She grinned smugly at the man, but he didn’t give an inch again, returning to the stoic mask he’d worn earlier.

She stuck her tongue out at the doorman petulantly before darting in after Kent.

The lobby was unassuming enough. They crossed the space to the elevators without so much as a passerby. It struck her as odd, but considering how long it took her to get into this building, she supposed it made sense that there weren’t many people that came through. It was just weird, going from a busy crowded street to an empty lobby.

She caught a glimpse of his smug grin as he stood there beside her, and she grumbled fiercely. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Kent.”

His eyes slid over to hers and they twinkled back at her with humor. “So how long were you accosting poor Maurice to get in here?”

A flush spread across her cheeks. “I did not accost him.”

Clark laughed—actually laughed at her! “Lois, I know you. It must have come close to accosting if he mentioned it at all.”

“Well, he’s not any ‘poor Maurice’ anyway,” she said with a slight pout. “He held his ground just fine.”

His grin widened. “Yeah. He’s the first line of defense for this place. He’d defend it to the death if he had to. Most days I don’t even need to have a receptionist around in the lobby.”

“Why?”

“Hmm?”

“Why are you so worried about anyone getting in here?” she asked, examining his features. His face tightened a little at the question, before smiling at her gently.

“I like having my own space.”

She opened her mouth to ask a follow-up question but the doors to the elevator swiftly opened behind them, and left Lois with a loss for words. She turned around in confusion, ignoring Clark’s small smile as he brushed past her and walked down the long narrow hallway.

Lois rounded the corner after him, and stopped short. If she thought the lobby was unremarkable, then this was why. It was to contrast with this space. She looked about herself full of awe, all her smug attitude disappeared by the wayside.

“I’m sure I can find you something to wear. I’ll be right back. Make yourself at home.”

Lois hardly heard the words as she explored the space. The ceilings were huge, vaulted things, probably reaching three stories tall. Most everything in the room was glossy and dark—the floors, the tables, the decorative accents. It was all quite impressive, rich and dark but not looking gaudy or expensive. She slowly stepped down into the living room area, dragged a finger along the length of the smoky glass coffee table, and found not even a speck of dust.

She sank into the most comfortable couch she’d ever sat on,

cushions enveloping her body warmly. A small smile pulled at her lips, one she tried to quash before he came out and saw. It was not at all what she’d expected of his place, but at the same time, it was so very him.

“You’re so small! I mean, I can give you an old t-shirt, but I think most of my things would just... hang off you.”

The idea of lounging around his place in nothing but one of his oversized button-downs sent a tingle through her body. “T-shirt will be fine,” she said hastily, banishing that thought from her head. Although one look at his dazed face and she saw his mind was likely wandering down a similar path.

He shook his head to deviate from that track and crossed the space to hand her a couple of shirts. “Comfortable?”

“Yeah. I can’t believe you slept on my lumpy couch knowing you got this guy at home.”

He grinned at her. “The company was worthwhile. Besides, if you think that’s nice, you should see my bed.” Lois flushed again, and Clark stiffened as he seemed to realize what he just said and turned back to her with wide eyes. “Not like that! I meant... you can if you want, I just... bad non sequitur, I guess.”

He was being dorky and adorable again, and Lois bit her cheek again to keep her face from showing anything. If he kept this up her cheek would be bruised by the end of the day. “Sure it was.”

Clark dropped the shirts over her face in a huff, and she grinned into the fabric in spite of the temporary blindness. Somehow, she flustered him, and that fact made her own stomach flutter. Lois stood up and collected the shirts. “I’m going to go change real quick. Where’s your bathroom?”

“There’s one around the next corner, halfway down, door to the left.”

Maybe in the bathroom she could pull herself together. Running into him like this was unexpected, and it left her without any of the words she’d been planning on saying upon entry of his building. Long before that doorman had gotten in her way. She pulled off her blouse and set it on the rim of the sink, and frowned at her reflection in the mirror. Her bra had coffee stains on it too, but no way in hell was she walking around Kent’s place braless. He had a hard enough time keeping his eyes where they belonged without adding fuel to the fire. She sighed and slipped his shirt on over her head, still too big for her. The words “University of Kansas” were emblazoned across the top of the blue material, the crimson letters of “K-U” and an odd little bird front and center. She smiled softly, and padded out of the bathroom.

“Your old alma mater?”

He looked up at her in surprise, as if he’d already forgotten she was there. One look at the shirt she’d chosen and his eyes sparked sharply, before settling into a waxy smile that never reached his eyes. “No. More like wishful thinking. I didn’t go to college, actually.”

“Really?” Lois crossed the room to take up her perch on the couch again before he beat her to it. It was *so* comfy. “You always seemed like you did. I never would have guessed.”

“I’m a fast learner.”

“Would you have gone to KU if you did, though?”

He shrugged, glancing down at the letters casually and not even lingering on her chest. “Probably. I don’t know. I couldn’t exactly afford it.”

Lois’ eyebrows jumped in surprise. She supposed it made sense, but somehow she hadn’t put two and two together. Lex hadn’t had a good childhood, sure, but he still had his money. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “When did you make all your money? If you didn’t have it growing up.”

“What is this, an interview?”

His scoff caught her off guard. He was getting defensive, and she wasn’t quite sure why. She shrugged with one shoulder and kept a close eye on his reaction. “Just making conversation.”

His lips twitched, almost a smile, but it faded away quickly. “Is that why you were trying to track me down? Because you didn’t have to. I don’t give interviews.”

“For the love of... no!” Her eyes rolled magnificently, pulling an actual smile from the man. “I came because you disappeared. I thought you were going to help me investigate this case.”

Clark blinked, smile dropping completely, and stood up to cross the room. “I’m sorry, I’ve been a bad host. You want something to drink? Another coffee maybe?”

“Clark.”

He was already gone, and Lois scrambled off the couch, nearly giving herself whiplash with how fast her words sent him running. She followed him through another hallway to a gorgeous kitchen, everything shiny metal and dark counters and bright lighting in here. She shook her head to find him poking around in the refrigerator. “Why all the narrow hallways? Your place is amazing, by the way.”

“I like the reveal. And thanks.”

He pulled out a bottle of soda and passed it to her, which she accepted with a murmur of thanks. She unscrewed the cap and took a long sip, eyes never leaving his face as he ran a hand through his hair and fidgeted with the label on his own soda bottle. She would make him talk. She just had to wait him out.

“You ever hear anything about the Beckworth orphanage?”

She shot him a look at the rapid change in subjects. Lois wiped at the corners of her mouth before replying. “No, can’t say I have. Should I have?”

He shook his head once. “It’s here in Metropolis. Privately funded, mostly by Lexcorp, one of those charitable tax write-offs. It’s a home for the bad kids. There’s a girl missing.”

Her mouth went dry. “What?”

“I ran into a little girl—I was just taking a walk around the city. And this little girl was crying, I asked her what was wrong, she said her sister was missing, that they’re both from Beckworth. I’ve spent the last couple of days looking for her, but nothing. The only thing left is to go to the orphanage and check that out, because I have no idea where she could be. I’ve tried to get in contact with Henderson even, to little avail.”

This was not at all where she was expecting this to go. She racked her brain frantically. “I haven’t heard about any missing children, not this week.”

“Not a lot of people around to stand up for orphans. They probably assumed she just ran away and didn’t bother to find her.”

Her throat tightened, and worry mixed with curiosity in her veins, sending goosebumps down her arms. “That’s awful.”

“That’s life. I ran away from plenty of foster homes and nobody gave a damn.”

His words were sharp, biting. Lois swallowed thickly, letting him cool down for a moment. She stayed quiet for fear of getting bit. He glanced at her sheepishly after taking a swig of soda. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap. It’s been a rough couple of days.”

Lois grimaced in return, fighting the wave of nausea that swept her up for a moment. She hadn’t seen him angry like that before, but maybe it was just a sore subject. “It’s okay. Why didn’t you come to me with this story? We could have started investigating.”

Clark huffed a laugh. “Perry told me not to.”

That stunned Lois out of speech again for a minute. She had to swallow back her urge to vomit again. “Perry told you what? He said not to investigate this?!”

His eyes darted away and back again, and he licked his lips hesitantly. “No. He said not to keep hanging around you.”

She blinked. “What?”

“He said—”

“*What?*”

“Lois, he’s not wrong. I’m a distraction, I’m aware of that. Maybe we are too close.”

Lois slammed down her bottle on the counter and started pacing across his kitchen, fury radiating from every pore. “He has no right. No right to say anything like that! I’m an adult. I can make my own decisions.”

“But if Luthor really is—”

“What about Luthor? You think I give a damn about Lex Luthor? They all think they can go around and control me, tell me what to do... I’ll do whatever I damn well please.”

“Of course, but there is a danger—”

She spun on her heel and wagged a finger at him. “Don’t you start too. I can get into enough trouble without any of your help. Next person that tries to corner me like this is going to lose an appendage.”

Clark raised his hands in surrender. “Not me. I like my appendages where they’re at. And I’m not trying to do anything.”

She saw herself in his glasses, and saw the genuine fear mixed with what she suspected was a hint of humor in his eyes, and she swallowed her outrage. She could do to tone it down a notch. Lois drummed her nails on the counter impatiently, thoughts racing as she searched for her words. She stopped the patter of her nails abruptly to point at him sharply. “Don’t listen to Perry White.”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Okay.”

“And don’t try and hide things from me.”

A shiver of something ran through his form, and Lois looked up at the motion, narrowing her gaze slightly. He kept her eye contact securely, put on a smile—but his form was tense, guarded. There was a nerve there. Something raw, tender. She’d have to get to the bottom of that one. “I’ll try,” he said wryly.

She eyed him cautiously for another long moment before looking around the space and continuing again. “And you’re going to help me figure out what’s going on with Lex. No matter where it leads.”

The words hung heavy in the air, and she knew the magnitude of what she’d just said. Something was wrong with Lex. He was maybe the Boss. And Clark... There was something between them that she wanted to explore. All of it and more in the space between her words. She didn’t care what Perry thought or didn’t think; a lot of things swirled around Lex that were less than altruistic. And if she needed to work with Clark Kent to get some answers, then there was no other option. Even if he was a dangerous person to keep around, emotionally and physically and good Lord, what was she getting herself into.

His kisses were so nice.

When he spoke, he spoke slowly, thinking. “I don’t want to tread on anybody’s toes.”

“You won’t.”

“I will. I know I will.”

She gave him a blatant stare and watched as he gave in. She smiled. “Maybe I don’t care. Do we have a deal?”

Clark nodded slowly. “Deal. But honestly, we really do have to look into this orphanage thing first, Lois. Please. And maybe it’ll lead back to Luthor or maybe it won’t, but these kids, Lois...”

His eyes were wide, frightened, heartbroken, and her heart stirred for him. He had so much pain he carried around with him. “Of course. We’ll take it all one story at a time, and this is absolutely top priority. It’s gonna be a long game, looking into Luthor. And maybe that’ll ease Perry into it.”

He nodded absently, then smiled at her. “I tell you what, maybe we shouldn’t do all our investigating at the Planet anyway. I’ll tell Maurice that you’re welcome here anytime you want, and that way we have a secondary workspace in case anybody gets suspicious.”

A heat flooded through Lois at the thought of having an all-access pass to Clark Kent’s apartment. Oh, this was such a bad idea. One of her best ones yet. She smiled broadly at him and prayed he didn’t notice her legs wobbling.

“Sounds perfect.”

Chapter 41: I Will Possess Your Heart

Lex pulled at his hair. This was getting to be a bad habit. He swallowed back the feeling that the walls were closing in around him. This was not going as planned. He smoothed his locks back, trying to calm himself with the motion, and pulled his lips taut. “Okay. So what you’re telling me is that we’re basically at square one.”

“Not square one. Maybe square three. I do still have my original notes and formulas to work off of. It’s just a matter of timing, finding the right combination, finding some minor test subjects, maybe mice or even rabbits—”

“It’s not going to be ready for human testing yet?”

Miranda rolled her eyes. “What do you think square one means, Lex?”

“You said you have the formulas,” he accused, jutting out his chin stubbornly.

“Yes, ones that weren’t quite right last time I worked on the project even. It’s not ready. You’re gonna have to wait.”

Lex muttered some choice words under his breath. Of course this was how it would be. He picked up a vial of something blue and viscous and examined it disinterestedly. “Where was this caution last time around? As I recall, you were basically handing it out like aspirin and making note of the results.”

“Things have changed, Lex. I’m reformed now, no thanks to you.”

“Well that’s all fine and dandy for you, but I need results, and I need them now. So you can shove your newfound morals and run some damn tests.”

She snatched the bottle out of his hands and carefully nestled it back into its slot with an expression of disdain. “Pheromones are a tricky business. One percent too much and, well, you saw what happened to poor Bucky. I could give you a pill, make this all go much quicker, but you’re still gonna have to wait.”

His lips turned down again. Bucky. Yeah, he wanted Lois’ affections, but not at that cost. Months of rehabilitation still hadn’t completely corrected the issue. Lexcorp’s insurance policy would be covering his expenses for the rest of his days. “I’m not looking to roofie my girlfriend, I just want the pheromones to trigger her. To remind her how she feels for me.”

“Then, you’re gonna have to wait.”

He thumped the table angrily. “I swear to God, if you say that one more time, I’m going to lose it.”

A throat cleared from behind him, prompting Lex to turn around. Nigel stood there, stoic as ever, mouth turned down. Lex felt his shoulders slump down with a sigh.

“New project, sir?”

Lex ignored the barb and crossed the room to him. “What is it, Nigel?”

His eyes didn’t stay with him, instead flitting over to the blonde in the corner. “Surprised to see you back, Miranda.”

“Surprised to see you still here, Nigel,” she sing-songed at him from across the room.

“Stop it, both of you.” Lex grabbed the corner of Nigel’s sleeve and turned him around so he wasn’t facing the woman. A tick of irritation flashed across the old man’s face. “What is it?”

“What is she doing back? You fired her years ago.”

“It’s not relevant. Now tell me.”

Nigel craned his neck around only to see the chemist engrossed in her lab equipment yet again, and he sighed as he turned back to face Lex. “I’m afraid we have a bit of a problem. Our friend in blue has been snooping around one of our facilities downtown.”

Lex frowned. “That’s a bit bizarre behavior from the Man of Steel.”

“I concur. So...”

“So what?”

Nigel shoved his hands in his pockets deep, rocked on the balls of his feet. “Shouldn’t we be doing something about him meddling around on our property?”

Lex’s eyes shot over to Nigel’s, and he found something different about his expression. He couldn’t quite put a finger on it. It almost looked like fear... but it couldn’t be fear, could it? He’d never imagined Nigel St. John afraid of anything in all his life. “No.”

There it was again. That little flinch that ran through his system. Interesting.

“May I ask why not?”

Lex pursed his lips and picked up his jacket from where it lay over the stainless steel countertop. He draped the fabric over his arm, keeping the folds perfectly aligned in the pressed creases of the fabric so as not to wrinkle it unnecessarily. “Several reasons come to mind. First of all, it’s not ‘our’ property as much as ‘my’ property. Second, I have no quarrel with that devil right now. We’ve come to an impasse, of sorts. He stays out of my way, I’ll stay out of his.”

“He’s not staying out of your way.”

He looked to the ceiling as though praying for strength. Nigel had been getting on his last nerve lately, constantly pestering him about Lois Lane or Clark Kent and if he’d learned anything more yet. Overly concerned about what was going on, and it definitely didn’t inspire Lex to share anything more with the man. “He’s not giving me any grief right now. And I’d prefer it if things stayed that way for the time being.”

“Long enough for you to finish up whatever project you have going on with Miranda?”

Lex gave him a dead-eyed stare. “Yes. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting to go to. Let me know if there’s any more progress, Miranda.”

“Will do,” she shouted across at him.

Nigel stared after his boss as he left the laboratory, heart pounding in his chest. He toyed with the crisp white cuffs of his sleeves anxiously. He didn’t know how he could convince him to go after Kent’s alter ego any more than he’d tried. Instead he was focused on Kent so much he was ignoring the bigger picture.

Clark Kent had superpowers, inexplicable gifts from above that could harm them all with a single foul mood. But worse than that, he was pretending to be a good guy. Therefore, there was no backup plan if he decided on a whim to go after them, and there would be no one to stop him. He would always get in the way of any revenge plot they cooked up. But he couldn’t just come out and say it. Not yet, anyway. He needed insurance. A surefire way to get the hero out of the picture, so he could deal with the man behind the cape retroactively.

He had to have a weakness. Somehow, someday.

“Did I hear you two talking about a certain man in tights?”

The woman’s melodic voice made him turn with a sigh. “What of it, Miranda?” He did not like this woman. She was bad news.

“Oh, nothing. Just looking for guinea pigs, you know. For the latest and greatest project of mine.”

His interest was piqued suddenly. “Guinea pigs, you say?”

She smiled at him with that way she had, tongue poking out between her teeth, and she slid her goggles up to the top of her head. “I hear they call him the Man of Steel. Is that a euphemism, or is he really that indestructible?”

Nigel gave her a facetious smile, but his mind started to spin already. Physically, Clark had proven so far his strength, speed, and durability. And of course, he was nearly impossible to pin down, what with the flying and all. But his mind and his emotions... that was another thing altogether. He leaned back against the countertop and folded his arms. “What did you have in mind?”

“The Beckworth State School, founded in 1953, is dedicated to fulfilling the educational needs of orphaned children who

require the individual attention and specialized instruction available in a controlled environment.”

“Translation: brats.”

Lois turned away from the pamphlet to look at the man pressed snugly against her right shoulder. “Really?”

“What?”

“You of all people.”

Clark shrugged, mirth shining back at her. “I guess it takes one to know one.”

She smacked his arm with the pamphlet, and he laughed. His laugh loosened a knot in her stomach. She hadn’t heard very many of his laughs—huffs of amusement, smirks, small chuckles. But the way his face split into this megawatt grin, how his voice filled the space of the cab but wasn’t too loud... it made her laugh in return, almost a giggle. It was a heady feeling.

“Can we focus, please?”

Lois scowled, all the laughter suddenly subsiding. “Why you gotta be a buzzkill, Jimmy?”

The kid rolled his eyes and crossed his arms on the other side of her. Lois rolled her eyes back at him in turn and turned back towards the supportive partner in the cab. “Touchy, much? Anyway, we have a lot of work to do. What do you think is the situation?”

Kent didn’t meet her eyes as he shook his head, somber once again. “I don’t want to speculate. It’s too bad a story if I do.”

Lois understood immediately his fear. “You think there was kidnapping involved?”

Clark grimaced. “Or worse. Sadly, these sorts of stories are more common than you’d think. I knew of three back in Kansas alone. Estranged parents who wanted their kids back without the state’s approval, kids who got themselves into more trouble than they realized, people who took advantage...”

Lois’ hand hovered over his thigh, wanting to provide comfort in the form of a touch, before she was made acutely aware of her surroundings. She let the hand float there gently a moment, so that he caught the motion, and returned it to her own leg.

Wow. This cab was entirely too small and cramped for the heat of his gaze. She crossed her legs and leaned over the cracked leather of the cabbie’s seat. “Can’t you get around this guy? We’re kind of on a time crunch.”

“Yeah, you and everybody else. Welcome to Metropolis.”

“You know, you could lose the attitude.”

“Lady, there’s an accident ahead. Not much I can do about the flow of traffic.”

She huffed and sank back into her seat disdainfully. Clark’s dark chuckle did not help the situation. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out his wallet, rifling through it and passing a few bills the cabbie’s way. “We can walk from here. Thanks for your time.”

“Walk? Really?”

He was already out of the car, and she hefted her purse over her shoulder with a grumble. “Come on, Jimmy. He’s on the move. Kansas! Wait up!”

Clark stopped in his tracks at the name, glancing around himself nervously before turning back to face them with a saccharine smile. “Sorry. Just a little impatient about this one.”

Lois couldn’t tell if it was the nickname or the case that was giving him the jitters, eyeing him carefully. She glanced at the photographer behind her, finally catching up with his camera bag in tow, and decided to obsess over that question later. “It’s fine. Let’s check it out.”

The Beckworth School was essentially how she’d imagined it. Lots of children milling about, wearing mostly miserable expressions. It was sad, but as Kent had pointed out earlier, it was a reality of life. Just because it wasn’t an issue she’d dealt with a lot didn’t mean it wasn’t worth acknowledging.

She took a moment to be thankful she’d never had to deal with

this. She’d been nearly eighteen when she left home, old enough to strike out on her own. She got a scholarship, and a job, and made her way through the tough times slowly but surely, fighting tooth and nail for every inch she could gain in this world. Lucy had been lucky in a different way. When their father was hauled off, Lucy was able to stay with her mother’s sister, escaping the fate that so many of these children were now facing. It was an unsettling reminder that things could always be worse. She dragged a careful eye over Clark’s form, tense and fidgety, anxiety keeping his posture rigid, and was reminded that not everyone got so lucky.

A young girl tugged on her skirt, stopping her short. Lois tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and knelt down to the girl’s level. “Hello. What’s your name?”

The girl looked about herself shyly, unsure of herself suddenly. “Ines.”

“Ines!” Clark’s voice boomed loudly behind her, startling Lois a bit. “Uh, Lois, this is the girl I was telling you about.”

Ines looked at him quizzically before turning to face Lois more fully. “Are you her? Lois Lane? From the *Daily Planet*?”

Lois turned back to catch the tail end of Clark’s wink at the girl, and smiled at him. “Uh, yeah. Yes, I am. Clark says your sister is missing?”

She nodded vigorously. “Aymee. She came back the other night, but she left again yesterday. I don’t understand what’s wrong with her.”

Goosebumps traveled up her arm. She was starting to see why Clark was feeling haunted by this case. The little girl could have been straight out of a horror movie, and it was hard to keep her mind from writing a dark narrative for young Aymee. “What’s going on with Aymee, Ines? Has she been acting any differently lately?”

“Yeah. Weird. She keeps talking about escaping, and she promised she’d take me with her. And she’s smart. Like grown-up smart. And she thinks I don’t hear her, but she’s been crying herself to sleep at night.”

“Ines?” Their unenthusiastic tour guide interrupted, and the girl went silent. “What are you doing bugging our guests? Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“It’s not a bother, Mrs. Powell,” Clark cut in, his voice tight as he tried to hold back his obvious rage. “Ines was just telling us a story. I love kids. Ines is a perfect sweetheart.”

The heavyset woman’s eyes ran over his form distastefully, and she grunted. “Irregardless, she needs to be in her class now. So run along.”

“Yes, Mrs. Powell.”

Ines turned tail and ran, scurrying off at a frightened clip. Lois felt her heart pound faster. What kind of a school was this place? She looked at their guide with her mouth slightly ajar.

The woman only shrugged. “These kids have great imaginations. Shall we continue?”

Lois watched Ines take off down the hallway, craning her neck to keep the girl within eyesight. She felt Clark’s hand press into the small of her back, making small, soothing motions. Her shoulders slumped, and she turned to look at her partner. He leaned in close, pretending to press a kiss to her temple as he whispered in her ear and even miming the action sent a shiver down her spine. “We’ll get her back. Let’s see what else there is to find.”

He was right, so she smiled at their “gracious” host and continued on their tour.

Chapter 42: Don’t Stand So Close to Me

“Well, we know that it’s not Mrs. Powell. That’s something.”

“Great,” Clark muttered, slamming his own file folder shut.

“That’s one person down, and the rest of Metropolis to go.”

Lois clicked her tongue at him. “What about this therapist?”

Dr.... Carlson?"

"Carlton," he corrected, closing his eyes for a brief moment.

"Dr. Carlton seemed suspiciously absent for a guy who's been working so closely with these kids."

Clark shook his head again. "I don't know. There's gotta be something else going on. It's more than just a straightforward case of a runaway orphan." Lois sighed loudly across from him and tossed her pen on the coffee table. He couldn't help the slight slump to his shoulders. He knew he was trying her patience with this, but he couldn't stop himself. He had to find this girl before anything worse happened. He wouldn't let her slip through the cracks like so many others. Like himself. Like Lana.

"Okay, let's take a break. Lord knows we're not getting anything accomplished going in circles like this."

"Voice of reason at last." He smirked at her, and she rolled her eyes as she launched to her feet. Clark smiled after her retreating figure. She looked so at home here, in his home. It put a bubbly feeling in his chest that made him want to vomit over how sickeningly sweet the reflux tasted.

"I'm hungry. How come you don't have a cook or something on hand?"

"I know how to cook," he offered, leaning forward to engross himself in his files once again.

"No, I mean, like a staff. You don't have anybody that's working for you that can whip up something? Or clean even? How do you manage this space by yourself?"

"Gotten used to living large over at LexCorp, huh?"

She rounded the corner once more to shoot him a patent glare, and he raised his hands in surrender. "No, I have not. And for the record, I am insulted. I was just asking for the sake of ease—I didn't want to have to stop working for too long to cook a meal."

Clark grinned in amusement at her reply. "You're always insulted."

"I am not!"

"Oh, no?" He teased, dragging his eyes over her with a wry smile. "Last week you said that to the barista who questioned if you wanted full milk in your latte."

"Well, she didn't have to look at my hips like that!"

"They have to ask that." She scowled pettishly and he tossed his hands in the air in defeat with an innocent grin. "And—so long as we're on the record—I actually do have a staff a couple of floors down that manages the building, and that includes a kitchen staff. I just don't have anybody up here often. If you want I can buzz down and have them whip something up. Sound fair?"

She groused about it another minute before agreeing. Clark's grin widened as he crossed the room to use the intercom. She was hilarious. He didn't even know if she knew how amusing she was being. "Hey, Johnson, you there?"

The man took a few moments to reply, but Clark didn't mind spending some time watching Lois move around his apartment. "Yes, what can I do for you, sir?"

"We need dinner for two—" He broke off and turned back around. "Hey, Lois, what do you want?"

"I don't really care. Ooh, wait. Maybe some Thai?"

"Thai it is. Johnson, could you bring up a couple of dishes? I'm thinking drunken noodles, pad thai, maybe some panang curry? You know better than I do." His heart pulled as he glanced back at her again and traced the long lines of her body. She was stretching, trying to work out a kink in her back after so many hours spent poring over their paperwork. He swallowed hard. She folded forward smoothly, body caving in on itself almost entirely and perfectly showcasing her rear. Limber. His mouth was suddenly too dry. The chef's affirmative reply went unheard to Clark's ears, and he crossed the space quickly to reach her side. His fingers itched to reach out and touch her in some small way, to help her work out some kinks... in whatever capacity that may be. "Need some assistance there?"

"Shut up. I'm just trying to stretch this one spot but it's in the middle of my back."

"I'd like to repeat my question," he teased.

An eye-roll. She straightened into an upright position. "Asked and answered. I'll be fine."

The thought of giving Lois a nice back massage was doing things to him, so he dropped it for now and went to take his seat with his paperwork again. There was a child missing. He had to focus. He picked up another file and flipped through it casually. Finances, mostly. He sighed heavily.

"Hey, we'll find her. If anybody can, it's us, right?"

"She's way too young to be out on her own like this. And in a city this size?" He shuddered, flipped another page, refusing to make eye contact. "At least I grew up in Nowheresville, Kansas. All it took was one person walking past and everybody knew where I was."

A hand dropped onto his shoulder soothingly as she crouched in front of him. He glanced up at her finally and searched her eyes rapidly, looking for anything that might suggest she was lying to him, or humoring him, but only came up with warmth and support. His heart beat faster waiting for her to speak. "It's going to be okay."

Clark shook his head sharply. "You can't promise that."

"I can promise that I'll find the truth. Even if something unspeakable happens, we'll get to the bottom of it. For Aymee, and for Ines, and for every one of those kids that deserves to have somebody looking out for them. I always get the truth."

Her warm brown eyes were reassuring, but her words set him back on edge. She did always get the truth. His experience with Lois Lane had never proven otherwise. She was like a dog with a bone when she was on the tail of something, and if he were a smarter man, he wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole. He knew why Nigel was so reticent to associate with her. She was a very dangerous woman.

He liked a little danger. He lived on that knife's edge between getting caught and getting away with something.

Clark cupped her cheek with one broad palm in a gesture of thanks that quickly turned into more. The surprise in her features was quickly replaced by something a little more sultry as her eyes locked onto his own, and in an instant they were trapped. His thumb slowly ran along the plump edge of her bottom lip, almost of its own volition, and her eyes fluttered. His heart kept time with the bat of her lashes, and somehow the world narrowed to just the two of them. He felt the blood rushing in his ears. His breath got shallow. He couldn't recall a time when he'd reacted to anyone like this.

"You're magnificent," he murmured almost under his breath. The flash of her eyes told him she heard, and he pursed his lips, waiting for her to rebuff him.

She never did.

Lois surged forward and smeared her lips over his. It took him all of two seconds to process her action, before he threaded his fingers through her hair and deepened the kiss himself. He moaned into her mouth, and she snuck her tongue past his lips. God, she could kill him with her kisses and he would go voluntarily. He leaned back as she climbed up to reach him better, hiking her skirt up to just below virtue, their lips fused together. She straddled his lap, trapping him between the chair and the cage of her body, and Clark let his hands drift down to her hips to steady her.

That was a mistake. The moment his hands landed on her hips, a breathy gasp flew from her lips to his, and the taste of cigarettes and coffee passed across his lips. He devoured her mouth, swiftly taking control of the kiss in spite of their reversed positions.

She would definitely be the death of him.

Lois pulled up for a breath, and for a moment they stayed like that, sharing air, breathing so close that the heat of their panting brushed over each other's lips. Her eyes were dark and smoky,

pupils blown wide as she stared at him, drinking him in. He whispered her name reverently, running a hand through her silky dark locks.

And the bubble that they'd shared suddenly popped.

Lois pulled back from his touch, out of breath. She managed to untangle herself from him all without looking him in the eye, and Clark felt his heart sink. "Lois—"

She shook her head wordlessly, standing up and crossing the living room to grab her belongings. Clark's mind raced for a reason to make her stay, or to get her to keep kissing him. He adjusted his position in his seat and raked his hand through his own mussed locks. "Lois, I'm sorry."

"Just—" She stopped herself before saying anything else, brushing her hand through the air.

"There's food coming. Let's just take a beat and we can keep working like—"

"Clark! Stop. It's not— It can't be like this. Not like this." She swallowed thickly and hoisted her bag onto her shoulder. "I'm sorry, it's my fault. But I gotta go."

He let his mouth click shut. She was right, but it didn't feel good knowing that. He wanted her now. She turned on her heel and marched out of his living room, around the corner and he lowered his glasses so he could watch her descent in the elevator, just to torture himself.

Every time he thought they were getting closer, she pulled back. He flipped his glasses up to the top of his head and rubbed his eyes. If her kisses didn't kill him, then frustration damn near would.

He sighed and sank back into the chair they'd been tangled together in only a few short moments ago. He couldn't think about it anymore. Maybe he could go patrol the city... or maybe he should cool down first. He grimaced at himself. "What have you gotten yourself into, Clark?"

His eyes drifted back to the papers strewn across his coffee table, and a twinge of guilt tugged at him. He'd said he'd do everything he could to find this little girl, and he kept getting distracted. It wasn't fair to Aymee Valdez. It wasn't fair to Lois— although, *she* had started it this time. He smirked a little. She was coming around. Slowly but surely.

A name jumped out at him from the top paper, and he frowned. He leaned forward and picked up the page.

Deadshot Research Facilities.

Clark shivered. He knew that name. It was one of the fronts he'd had Nigel set up under LexCorp, as a way to channel money and sponsor some less-than-civilized endeavors without drawing suspicion himself. He knew LexCorp was a major part of the funding for the Beckworth School, but no way would the man provide that funding through a shell corporation like this one, even if he did know about it.

Red tinged his field of vision, and he quickly slammed his eyes shut. Clark instructed himself to take a deep breath in.

This was the final straw.

He got his emotions under control for the time being, even though his hands still shook. He heaved a sigh and picked up the paperwork again. Apparently, Deadshot Research Facilities was supplying the grant money for Dr. Carlton—dammit, Lois was right on the money again—to run experimental tests on a select group of children. He flipped through the next few pages at superspeed, but there wasn't anything more on the tests or Dr. Carlton. Not even another mention of Deadshot Research. He murmured some strong words under his breath.

"What the hell are you up to, Nigel?"

Before he could settle into a long night of research though, a cry for help grabbed his attention and for some reason, he couldn't just shake it off. He gritted his teeth and spun into the suit, taking a moment to relax his posture and relieve his anger before taking off into the night sky.

Nigel was at peace here. In the driver's seat of an inconspicuous car, hidden halfway down the block in the dark, glove on one hand, potato crisps in the other. This was where he thrived. Reconnaissance. Research. The setup. Sure, the torture could be fun too, but it wasn't as purely peaceful as this. He could sit back, watch the show, and get a paycheck to boot, and the mark would never even know a thing.

He popped another crisp into his mouth and kept a watchful eye on the door. Any minute now, she would leave. She'd been there for hours already, discussing who knows what and figuring out however many secrets. Nigel pushed up the sleeve of his jacket and checked his watch. Quarter past midnight. He brushed the sleeve back down distractedly as he returned his gaze to the entrance once again.

Maybe she wasn't going to leave.

That would be complicated. Good, on the one hand, because he'd finally have definitive proof for Luthor that Lois was bad news, that she was a cheater, a liar, sleeping with the enemy. He could probably even go home and return in the morning to find her leaving, get some sleep.

On the other hand, it meant he was losing favor with Kent sooner than he'd anticipated. He was further and further out of the loop. Which was fine with him. He fully expected their next conversation to be his last, unless he found something to even the playing field. He was almost stretched too thin, without Luthor's full support and barely hobbling along on Kent's. He was lucky he still knew all the right account numbers. Nigel fished for another crisp at the bottom of the bag. He refused to be underestimated.

Kent had been right about one thing for sure: Lois Lane had changed everything.

A ring distracted him from his thoughts and his hand veered away from his snack to pick up the car phone curiously. "Yes?"

"I've got it. I think I really got it this time."

He pursed his lips firmly. "Do you really mean that this time or are you trying to get me fired?"

"You tell me, handsome."

Startled, Nigel frowned at the phone. "Miranda, are you all right? Did you ingest any of it?"

"Sorry. I think the effects are still wearing off. Because I meant to call you stupid."

Nigel chuffed at her reply, and went for another crisp. "And?"

"This batch is potent. Extremely. I only tested the one percent solution, and it took me a day or so to come out of this fog."

"What do you think the one hundred percent solution would do?"

"I think it could kill."

Nigel opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment the door to the building was flung open, and out stormed Lois Lane. He swore and fumbled for his camera in the seat next to him, adjusting the phone so that it was crooked awkwardly between his neck and chin.

"What's going on over there? You sound a little out of breath, old man."

"Bloody... give me a minute." He found her through the viewfinder of the camera, and snapped several images in a row rapid-fire. She looked perfect. Her hair was a mess, her lips kiss-swollen and red, and a general vibe of irritation was coming off her in droves. He snapped a few more as she hailed for a cab, smoothed a hand over her hair, and adjusted her skirt before sliding in the taxi.

"Nigel. As much as I enjoy our little talks, I've got things to do..."

The cab drove away, and for a moment Nigel fooled around with the idea of following her, but no. It wouldn't be worth the risk. Everything Lois Lane knew was likely about him. "I found her." He finally addressed the phone, shuffling the camera back to the passenger seat.

“Found who?”

“Miss Lane. She was leaving Kent’s apartment.”

“Miss Lane, as in Lex’s designated love doll?”

“The one and only.” He snorted at her description.

“Where is she?”

He shook his head, knowing the path her mind was wandering. “No. Now isn’t the time to move. Tomorrow. You know the drill. You still have the correct address, yes? I need you to pick me up something while you’re there.”

An exasperated sigh accosted his ears. “I have a meeting with Lex in the morning, to tell him about my progress. It’ll have to be after that.”

“Fine by me as long as you bring the one hundred percent solution.” She gasped and griped, trying to work him down to a less potent version, but Nigel had had enough. It was time to step up their game, and if they were going to shoot a king... “Good night, Miranda.” He hung up the phone firmly, and took a beat to process everything in silence. This was his only chance to make a move, but it was risky. Odds were, he wouldn’t make it out alive, but he had to try. Resolved, Nigel turned over the engine and headed away from his former boss’s building.

Chapter 43: Rumble and Sway

“I don’t want to hear it, Miranda.”

“I have proof,” she whined.

Lex turned to roll his eyes at her before crossing the space to a cabinet. “Oh, you have proof? Then why didn’t you say so? Show it to me.”

He heard the crack of hesitation in her voice and knew he was right to harp on it. “I... I don’t have it with me. But I can get it for you. I’m running my first test in an hour.”

“Your first test?”

“First public test, let’s say. I’ve conducted some other experiments already, in lab.”

He didn’t like that he felt the need to ask this, but Miranda could be unpredictable at times. “No animals, or humans, were harmed in the making of this project, I’m assuming?”

“Absolutely not.” She shook her head affirmatively. “No humans, anyway.”

Lex stopped in his tracks to frown at her.

“I’m kidding! You don’t have to look so concerned.” He raised an eyebrow scorchingly. “I mean, there were pheromones involved, and one has to go about getting them some way... but yeah. No animals were harmed.”

His eyes drifted shut lightly and he shook his head. He pulled out a folder and turned back to his desk to grab some more papers. “Why am I suddenly regretting bringing you back onboard?”

“Aw, Lexy, you don’t mean that,” she crooned, bounding forward to perch on the edge of his desk. “I’m helping you with your little problem, remember? Better keep me on your good side.”

“You”—he pointed at her with a piece of paper sharply—“do not get to threaten me. I have no need for unnecessary opponents right now. My roster is full.”

She pushed the paper aside and craned her neck to look at it. “Who’s the stiff?”

Lex snatched the paper back and gave her a simpering smile. “He’s for my eleven o’clock. Now, are we about done here? Go off and run whatever ‘experiment’ you’re working on and come back when you have some actual results to share.” Miranda daintily lifted the corner of the folder on his desk, but he slammed his hand down atop it before she could get a good look. He pointed back across the room with his pen. “There’s the door.”

She scowled, flipped her blonde locks over her shoulder and turned sharply. “Fine. You’ll see.” She flung the doors to his office open and paused midstep. “Looks like your eleven o’clock is early. Hello, sir, your uniform is impeccable. Say, are you looking

—”

“Miranda.”

She shot him a dirty look and ran into the officer’s shoulder as she brushed past him and out of his office. Lex couldn’t contain the sigh of relief at her leaving. *She’s but a means to an end*, he reminded himself, trying to keep it all in perspective. Soon enough, he’d have his Lois back, he’d have leverage on Kent, and this would all be just a bad dream. He smiled at the man who walked in. “Colonel Fane! So glad you could make it on such short notice.”

The officer closed the office doors behind him, and Lex noted the stern look on his face. He frowned. “Is everything all right?”

“What have you gotten me involved with?”

Lex tilted his head in question and sat back down behind his desk. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know where you heard the name Jason Trask, but you need to stop repeating it around.”

His mouth went dry. His eyes darted back and forth across the room, trying to come up with an explanation. “I didn’t even give you all the information yet; I have his file right here—”

“Look, I know I said I’d help if you ever needed anything, but all I did was run a search on the name you gave me, and suddenly I have superior officers I haven’t even met before coming out of the woodwork to talk to me. Not even talk, more like interrogate me.”

“What do they—” Lex licked his lips, mind racing. What had he literally stumbled into, almost twenty years ago? “What do they want to know?”

The man refused to sit down, and it was starting to make Lex uncomfortable. “Where I heard that name, if I knew anything else about him, if I knew where to find him, if I knew anything about his branch of service.”

“I can answer some of those—”

The man cut him off with a raised hand. “I don’t think I want to know. I just want to know how you know the name. That’s it.”

Lex ran a hand across his face and debated how much he should tell him. Clearly there was something more to this Trask character than the dishonorable discharge story that he and the rest of the courthouse had been fed. He toyed with how much he should really reveal to the man... No. He refused to not have the whole story for one more second. Nothing made sense without it. “That’s easy. I testified at the man’s murder trial.”

A little of the anger drained out of Fane’s face, as his words sunk in. Fane plopped himself gracelessly into one of his chairs opposite his desk and Lex let him think things through for a moment.

“I’m pretty sure he was cremated at the end of the day, so there’s nowhere really to find him. I’d hazard that was a trick question from one of your superiors.”

The officer’s eyes closed gently. Lex gave him a moment to collect himself before continuing on. He leaned forward over his desk anxiously and pinned his finger on the file folder. “This case is old. Maybe eighteen years old? I’m not asking about any current government projects. It has nothing to do with that. I just want to know a little more information about the dead body I found.”

Fane shook his head and shot him a patronizing glare. “And it took you eighteen years to decide to look into this?”

Luthor squared his jaw. “There have been... exigent circumstances. It’s imperative that I find out who Jason Trask was. If I don’t... let’s just say this case has come back to haunt me.”

“Look, I’m as curious about this guy as you are”—the man sighed and slumped over slightly—“but this is my job you’re talking about. I’ve worked really hard to get where I am in my career, and I’m just not sure it’s worth jeopardizing all that.”

“Charlie, I’m begging you. You don’t understand what will happen to me if I don’t figure this out.”

The man shot him a skeptical glance, but Lex maintained eye

contact—intent on swaying his opinion. Fane scratched the back of his head nervously. Lex didn't understand why he was hesitating still. The colonel tore his gaze away guiltily, and his eyes swiveled about the room in a blatant effort to look anywhere except at Lex himself.

Lex nearly flinched. The realization took less than a second.

He ran his hand through his hair nervously, trying not to pull. The good colonel was holding out for something more. He pursed his lips before trying another tack. "I can compensate you for your efforts, of course."

And there it was. The glint of green in his eyes, the stiffening of his posture. Lex swallowed past the queasy feeling in his gut. Fane slowly made a show of protesting, leaning back in his seat, gesturing broadly, trailing his sentences off without ever quite finishing one. He smiled to mask the fact that his eyes were stinging. So much for cultivating friendships. "It's fine, trust me. I wouldn't want to jeopardize your job and not give you anything to fall back on."

The colonel accepted his offer quickly, offering only his thanks in return. Lex barely noticed. The telltale pull under his right eye began and Lex smiled sadly. He had to snap out of it. "How soon do you think you could get me this information?"

Fane held out his hand with a questioning expression, and Lex passed the file over to him. He studied the man carefully as Fane in turn studied the file. The thought flitted through his mind that perhaps nobody really liked him for him, only his money. Lois wasn't like that, he knew, but just because she claimed she wasn't interested in him for his money didn't mean she had any interest in him. The more he thought about her, the more he felt she really didn't care at all. And this from the woman he proposed to nearly three times.

Clark Kent might be the only person that really cared, and that thought scared him stiff.

"Ten gunshot wounds? That seems excessive."

Lex soothed a hand over his tic again and nodded.

"Extremely."

"Usually a man who took that amount of bullets earned that amount of bullets." He looked across at Lex with an arched eyebrow. Lex swallowed thickly, pushing down the small panic that ran up his spine at that thought. "You sure you want to know where this road goes? You could be in the wrong. Just sayin'. What if he was a molester or something?"

He shook his head firmly. "In for a penny, in for a pound. I need answers, Colonel."

Fane shut the file with a satisfying snap and jumped to his feet. "It won't be easy, but I can do some digging. I'll call you in a few days, let you know what I've found."

He grimaced what he thought to be a passable smile at the man and stood up to go escort his colleague to the door.

He couldn't get the feel of her lips on his out of his mind. She was an amazing kisser. The fact that it was all of her own volition only tortured him more—no pretense of a cover-up, no drunken sloppy kisses peppered over his face, like the ones he wasn't about to tell her she gave him after he brought her home that night from the Metro Club. He didn't mind either of those scenarios, and those drunk pecks were the most downright adorable thing he'd ever experienced. But to share another, real moment of passion with Lois Lane, in his apartment this time?

"Earth to Kent! Were you even listening?"

Clark blinked and uncrossed his eyes from their hazy focus to land on Cat Grant's face. "Hmm?"

"I hate to ruin a perfectly good daydream," she drawled sarcastically. Clark rolled his eyes. "But some of us have day jobs to get to. Now, were you interested in my pitch or not?"

He craned his neck around to see if Perry was back to bail him out of this, but he knew it was wishful thinking. Perry's board meetings couldn't have had worse timing, and having to make all

these mundane decisions was starting to get to him. Cat's dramatically timed scarf toss over her shoulder grabbed his attention and he realized she was still waiting for an answer. "Uh, yeah. Yes. Run with it."

Her eye-roll wasn't quite as dramatic as Lois' but it nearly lived up. "Gee, thanks for the advice. Tell Dream Lois I said to get back to work."

His jaw dropped open to protest, but once again Cat was on point with her logic. He let her saunter off proudly, not ready to deal with yet another rebuttal—

Oh—there she was. He sat up ramrod straight in his seat as he finally clocked her entrance. She was late, but he didn't care about that beyond the fact that it kept him apart from her for a few moments longer than he wanted. She was in a bit of a mood already, he could tell. She stubbed her toe on the corner of her desk and cursed. Clark jumped to his feet, only to force himself to sit back down. He couldn't be at her side every time she stubbed a toe or broke a nail—people were talking about them enough as it was, and it wasn't just Cat.

Clark drilled his fingers against the desk before him slowly, trying to focus on the noise of that and not the voices of office gossip floating around the room. Mad as Perry had made him, he was right about the fact that his feelings for Lois were obvious. He was sure the whole office knew of his little crush before even she did.

"Help! Oh, help me!"

He shook his head firmly and shut his eyes. He didn't feel much like playing hero today. He wanted to follow Lois around, he wanted to investigate his own cases, he wanted to fish around in Lex Luthor's finances for any sign of this new angle of Deadshot Research Facilities and possibly manipulate the situation so it ended up as more evidence planted on the man—

"Help! Fire! Please, oh!"

Clark ran his tongue over his teeth and glared at the clock stubbornly. Dammit, Perry wouldn't be back for another hour. But what if it had something to do with Aymee and he chose to ignore it...

"Help—"

Casually, with a small sigh, he made his way over to the window in Perry's office and leaned against it. He cast his gaze around the bullpen, ensuring that nobody had their eyes on the office. Ralph slammed his palm against the copy machine, Cat glaring at him as though she was ready to slam a palm across his face as she waited behind him impatiently. Jimmy fiddled with the aperture of his camera, accidentally setting it off right in Lombard's face and in turn getting berated for it. Lois still hadn't had enough coffee to look away from her own computer screen yet.

In a flash, Clark sped out the window faster than the eye could see.

It didn't take long to locate the source of his morning interruption. He honed in on the dulcet sound of the woman's voice and dropped onto the balcony of the apartment building as she waved him down like a one-woman flight crew.

"My hero!" she gushed, almost a little too excited to see him. Clark wrinkled his nose for a split second before neutralizing his expression.

"What seems to be the problem, ma'am?" A slight frown pulled around her face at the term, and Clark smirked. He couldn't help but get a little enjoyment out of putting her in her place. Not to mention, he didn't see any obvious signs of a fire.

She gestured into the apartment behind her. "There's a fire in the kitchen, and I don't know where my fire extinguisher is! I figured you could solve this better than me running around like a chicken with my head cut off—"

He rolled his eyes and moved past her into the apartment. He found the flames immediately. It was lucky he'd gotten here when

he did. The stove, engulfed in flames, seemed to be the source of the blaze, but it had already spread halfway across the room to the curtains and the kitchen table. He breathed in deeply and loosed a long breath of cold air to quell the flames.

A blast from the fire extinguisher hit him from behind, and he turned with a questioning eyebrow raised. The woman covered her mouth in shock as she realized he'd put out the flames already. "Sorry—found it."

Clark smiled and shook his head in amusement when the smell suddenly accosted his senses. He coughed a few times, but the thick scent wouldn't leave his throat. He frowned at the blonde woman who had her nose buried in her shirt collar. "What—ahem—what the hell was that?" He hacked into his elbow heavily, perhaps a little too loudly, if the way the end table next to him shook was to be any judge.

The woman backed out of the apartment and onto the balcony again, trying to get away from the smell. He didn't blame her. It was atrocious. Her voice was muffled by the material over her mouth when she spoke. "Oh my God, it must have been expired! Can you do something—anything—to get it out?"

He sighed, and turned back towards the smokey mess—it must have really been expired, it didn't even foam properly, just spewed this acrid gas everywhere. He sucked it in with a deep heaving breath, deodorizing the apartment as he went. He held his breath and launched out into the sky, shooting high above the clouds before releasing his breath and dispersing the chemicals where it wouldn't risk drifting down again.

The blonde woman bounced on the balls of her feet as he touched back down on her balcony. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! You're the best!"

"Don't mention it." He brushed away her gratitude, feeling like he was missing something here.

Suddenly she launched her arms around his neck in an enthusiastic hug. He nearly stumbled back a step with the force of her body, but he managed to stabilize. His right hand hovered over her shoulder for a moment before giving her a quick pat and pushing her back. "It's..."

Her blue eyes sparkled at him, almost in an unnatural way. He swallowed past the lump of uneasiness that her lovesick gaze put in his stomach and gave her as neutral a smile as possible. He pulled her arms off his shoulders, gave her a jaunty salute and launched off the building, unable to shake the feeling that something was off-kilter.

He landed on the roof of the *Daily Planet* building in a huff. His fingers pulled at the elastic material around his neck and he gagged. He was assaulted with another wave of that pungent odor... He ought to shower.

Perry's voice cut across the floors of the building and Clark winced. Speed or no, he didn't have time to go catch a quick shower when Perry White was on the warpath. Technically, he was supposed to be in charge. He whirled rapidly around out of his suit and shook himself to dissipate what he hoped was most of the smell before racing down the stairwell.

One deep breath and he pushed the door open, quietly making his way back into the bullpen as though he'd been there all along. Clark shook his hair out a bit and casually made his way to Lois' desk. She turned to look up at him just as his shadow crossed her workspace. "Hey, where'd you sneak off to just now?"

He planted his hands squarely on the corner of her desk and leaned down with a smile. "Just took a quick break on the roof."

She wrinkled her nose in distaste, and it was adorable. "I'd say I should have joined you, but you reek. What were you smoking?"

Clark felt his grin vanish, and he leaned away a little. "I do not reek," he defended pointlessly.

"You do, trust me. If anybody says you don't, they're lying to you. You know, 'cause you're rich."

He tsked at her. "Well, I don't know what you're talking

about. It was just me and a pretty nice blonde I like to call Gitanes."

The expected response was a laugh, but instead all he got was her attention. She frowned and rolled her chair out from the desk a bit. He cocked his head at her inquisitively before she found the right words. "You don't smoke blondes."

Clark was taken aback by her attention to detail, although he shouldn't have been. She was the best reporter in the city. Why did he ever imagine he could pull a fast one on her? Blondes just rolled off his tongue because of that ridiculous lady and her not-so-burned-down apartment and now he was in too deep all because he was trying to be clever.

And yet, part of him was flattered. "You know what cigarettes I like?"

It was Lois' turn to stammer a bit, but she was saved by the loud clap of Perry's voice. "Kent! Don't think I didn't see you slink in here just now!"

Clark winced and turned to shoot Perry a self-deprecating smile. "Sorry, Perry. I was taking a quick smoke break."

"Quick isn't the word I'd—phew!! You smell like my son's old gym bag when we found it under his bed three weeks after he moved out."

He gaped and felt his neck getting hot all the way to the tips of his ears. Nervously, he clapped a hand over the back of his neck and scrambled for an explanation as Perry swiveled away from him exaggeratedly. "I, uh, a kid selling something on the streets sprayed me with it—some 'hot' new scent or something. It's real bad."

Lois' brow furrowed in his peripheral, and drat, he'd told her he was on the roof, hadn't he?

"Well, get out of here. Thanks for covering for me this morning, but I've got it from here."

He wanted to protest, but he knew he couldn't hang around here like this. Clark nodded at the man and rocked on the balls of his feet for a second, before shooting a quick smile to Lois and turning back to the elevators.

Chapter 44: Howlin' for You

She was feeling scattered today. Every time she tried to wrangle her focus back in, a stray thought or a random distraction around the newsroom would pull her away again, and then there went her concentration.

Focus, Lane! She shook her head sharply and retrained her gaze on the computer screen. She had to write some puff piece about a dog show sponsored by the elusive Gotham recluse because Perry hated her or something... And she had to keep working on the Aymee Valdez case. The girl was still missing. The puff piece could work as good background noise, for the time being.

Perry didn't hate her. He hated Clark.

She didn't understand that. They'd been getting along so well to a point. She huffed with annoyance. She didn't like that the men in her life weren't getting along... No! Clark wasn't a man in her life. He was in her life, sure, and he was a man... Definitely a man. Mmm.

Lois jumped up from her seat, jolting James as he walked past, and she shot him an apologetic look. Her eyes alighted on her empty coffee mug, and yes, that would be a good distraction. Maybe if she had enough caffeine flowing through her veins she wouldn't be so flighty and they—she—could get some work done.

Coffee first. She crossed the bullpen to acquire another cup of medication and was dismayed to find they had run out of creamer. She frowned.

Black coffee it was.

Black, like the pupils of Clark's eyes after she had kissed him last night.

She could stop by Kent's apartment again. He wasn't here

anymore, and they did need to keep working the case. Lois bit her lip, weighing the options. There were plenty of reasons to swing by, and only one reason not to. Two, if Perry's sad excuse for an article had to be done first.

That kiss was one of the best she'd ever had, and that was compared to the other kiss they'd shared. More like make out session. Mmm. Her stomach twisted pleasantly. His lips had a drug-like effect on her. He tasted like coffee and chocolate and cigarettes, and damn, why did he have to leave?

The luxurious dark liquid spilled over the lip of her mug and shocked her back into reality. She swore venomously as she set the coffee pot down and reached for the paper towels to mop up the mess.

"Great, Lane. Now the rest of us have to wait for coffee!"

Her eyes cut over to Ralph darkly, and she shoved the wad of soaking paper towels into his chest. "Shut up, Ralph!" He seemed too stunned by her actions to make any sort of reply, and Lois proudly scooped up her mug and sauntered away from that pitiful excuse for a reporter back to her desk.

Remorse ultimately bit her on the rear as she sipped at her comforting beverage, and she swiveled around to make some sort of apology, but it seems Cat Grant had beaten her to the punch, helping the man clean the coffee stains off his shirt and cleaning up the rest of her mess. Lois rolled her eyes as she rolled her chair back to face forward, slouching over her coffee mug. Snob. Had to prove she was better than her. She didn't need their opinions. She had Clark's.

But she didn't *have* Clark.

That was slowly becoming a problem. She popped her head up over the edge of her computer like a meerkat and glanced around the bullpen. Her shoulders slumped as she realized he wouldn't have come back to the office so soon. He only left thirty minutes ago.

She could take the office to him.

Lois clapped her hands together and bounced a little in her seat. Yes, perfect! She grinned broadly as the plot came together in her mind and she haphazardly swept her belongings into her purse. It hardly even registered that her cigarettes had missed the bag entirely and fallen on the floor.

Miranda took a beat as her hand hovered over the solid oak door, ready to knock. She withdrew her hand and instead fluffed her hair up a little bit more. Extra volume never hurt. She knew he was going to be mad. There was no getting around that. But maybe it was better to get it over with than wait another moment. Besides, maybe he'd be less mad and more... suggestible, if he got a whiff of what she had.

She took in one last deep breath for luck and knocked on the door before her.

It swung open nearly before she could pull her hand away, and an irate-looking Nigel St. John stared down at her. She almost withered under his gaze, but then the pheromones did their job and jolted her attention once more. She smiled and flung her arms out wide. "Nigel, darling! Wonderful to see you."

He took a step back from her and she took it as a welcome and strode past him confidently. The room was sparse. She looked around, her turn dizzying her slightly. Her head felt too light. She knew there was a risk of absorbing some of the solution on her attempt, but that was the name of the game. She turned back to face Nigel with a slightly inebriated smile, missing the knit of his brows as he frowned at her.

"Is everything all right, Miranda?"

She sighed happily and tossed her arms in the air. "Wonderful. I just love love, don't you? Better than any other neurological stimulant."

He shook his head firmly and crossed his arms. "You do realize that your concoction won't work on me. Sociopaths generally don't feel much of anything."

"Firstly"—she staggered back a step in her heels, feeling a little unsteady but determined to put him in his place—"it's a chemical compound. So check the attitude... although," she debated, swaying towards him with a leering grin. "Maybe don't. I like it when they play hard to get."

Nigel's eye-roll was probably warranted, but she also noticed the spy was holding his breath. She flashed her teeth at him and moved into his personal space. He believed her a little bit, then. Good.

"Did you remember to bring me what I asked?"

Miranda nodded and giggled as she dug through her purse and dragged out several vials of red liquid and a syringe. "Not sure why you'd rather this stuff than mine..." She batted her lashes at him as he reached past her and pocketed the items.

He straightened his tan overcoat and patted his pocket where the concoction rested safe and sound. "I prefer tried and true to still in testing. Although I'm assuming the fact that you're here free and clear means that your test was successful?"

Her face fell immediately and a wave of sadness washed over her. Miranda pulled away and went over to the cheap particle wood desk, trailing a finger across the surface with tears burning the edges of her eyes. "No. I mean, the plan worked. Blue showed up to stop the fire—although there was a second where I thought he wouldn't. For a hero, the guy sure knows how to take his sweet time. Buns of steel, though." She hummed in appreciation, losing the thread of her thoughts as her mind wandered across his tight form, and that even tighter spandex... Nigel cleared his throat and Miranda sighed. "But the potion didn't seem to have any effect on him. He could smell it, so that's not the issue. It just didn't affect him."

Nigel slammed his fist against the wall violently. Miranda turned to him with wide, startled eyes. The older man shook his hand out to relieve some of the pain, and smoothed the lapels of his jacket back down calmly, but the response did little to settle her own nerves.

She'd never seen Nigel lose his cool before.

"Apologies," he muttered, not looking her in the eye. "It's just not the news I wanted to hear."

"You're telling me. He didn't even seem interested in me."

He scoffed. "You apparently got a healthy dosing. Are you going to be okay?"

She waved her hands through the air. "It'll wear off, I'm sure. It was only the fifty percent solution, and he'd dissipated most of it already." Nigel went very still at her explanation, and she turned to him with a curious frown. "What?"

His face reddened, and Miranda felt her heart racing in her chest. "You were supposed to use the one hundred percent solution," he growled angrily, taking a menacing step her direction.

Miranda's stomach tumbled at his words, and she realized her mistake. "I didn't think it was wise—"

"You didn't think?"

He loomed large over her, his face red, and she leaned back only to hit the large wooden desk behind her and find herself trapped. "Y-you really want an all-powerful god to be blinded by lust permanently? He wasn't even Luthor's main focus. This was just a test—"

"Oh, this was a test all right. One you failed."

He had her pinned against the oversized piece of furniture and Miranda gasped for breath as the room closed in around her. All she wanted was approval. "Please, give me another chance. I didn't think we were going up against the real enemy here. I was told that Miss Lane was the end game, and since Lex didn't want her drugged out of her mind I thought..." Nigel growled at her, and she swallowed thickly, shaking her head. "Just let me prove it to you! I can do it this time, I swear."

Nigel grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "You don't

understand. Kent is the enemy. Kent is who we have to worry about. And as long as that freak is flying around and playing hero, Kent will be untouchable.”

Miranda couldn't blink the tears away fast enough, confusion pitting her stomach with fear. “Who the hell is Kent?”

Nigel snarled and shoved her to the floor.

Miranda cried out more from surprise than pain, and looked back up with tears streaming down her face just in time to watch Nigel St. John storm out of the room. She hiccupped violently and braced as the door slammed, stranding her all alone in this no-tell motel. She didn't understand. All she wanted was for someone to care. Someone to love her. A long time ago, she'd thought that someone would be Lex, but apparently he had a fixation of his own. She didn't much care who it was anymore.

“I'll show you,” she growled under her breath as she pulled herself to her feet. Miranda caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror in the hallway and stuttered. She was a wreck. Her eyeliner and mascara were smeared everywhere, halfway down her face, and her hair a frizzy mess. How on earth did things come to this? She should have known better than to get in bed with the sociopathic spy. His standards were too high anyways.

Lightning flashed through her brain, and she almost giggled at how easy it all was. She could prove her worth to Nigel and Lex, and then they'd really love her. She would save the day. She adjusted herself as best she could in the mirror and bolted from the space without a second glance.

Her white LeBaron raced across town like a bat out of hell, not caring about the speed limit or anything of the sort. She was single-minded in her destination, and only took a half a minute to pause and look through her trunk to make sure she had the necessary supplies.

Three flights later and she was knocking on another door.

“Hold your horses, I'm coming.”

The door swung open abruptly and Miranda turned with a smile. “Hi, are you Miss Lane?”

The brunette woman furrowed her brow slightly and leaned against the doorjamb heavily. “Yes? Who are you?”

“Lex Luthor sent me,” Miranda said softly with a grin. She saw the confusion lance across her delicate features—the woman was indeed pretty, but still nothing on herself or any other woman Lex could have. What was it that made Lois Lane so special?

“Lex? Why did he send you for me?”

She made no reply except to lean forward and smother a rag over the woman's mouth, not caring in the least about the crashing sounds around them as she struggled.

Clark hadn't picked up on her presence until the elevator dinged. His ears prickled at the sound of rushing fabric and slight jingles, and he frowned. He couldn't place the sound for the life of him. Slowly he shut the drawer under his desk and locked it, standing up to go find the woman of his dreams and figure out what she needed—

“Oh, Clark!” She sing-songed delightedly, a note of humor in her voice. A wry grin pulled at his lips...

And disappeared as he rounded the corner and set eyes on her.

Woman of his dreams indeed. He groaned as he stepped behind a chair to hide his reaction and shot a weak attempt at a smile her way. “What... What's this?”

Lois grinned unabashedly, and cocked her hip to the side with a gesture to herself that would make Vanna White proud. The motion made some of the more... jangly bits flash and jingle, and his eyes drifted down before he could register the distraction was a mistake. He swallowed hard. “What's it look like, Kansas?”

The first thing that came to mind was “hooker” but he knew he couldn't say that. He swallowed thickly, zeroing his eyes on one particular patch of fabric that did nothing to cover her skin. “The only words I have I think might be offensive. Accurate, but still...”

Her eyes flashed darkly but not with anger or irritation. It felt like lust. She crossed the room quickly, each step branding his brain with an image that would never leave, and he swallowed thickly again. This couldn't be real. He had to be dreaming.

She should always wear gold. Like a beautiful statue of a goddess and draped in the most striking turquoise scarves that really were hiding nothing.

His mouth went dry when she flashed a scarf in his face and hooked it around his neck. The gauzy, silky fabric gave him goosebumps as it slid against his skin, mimicking an image of something else he really wanted against his skin, and holy hell, Clark was trapped before the words even had time to leave her mouth.

“Make love to me, Clark.”

Chapter 45: Love Lockdown

Her eyelids were heavy and her mouth was dry.

Those were the first sensations Lucy could put a name to as she slowly emerged back into consciousness. The splitting headache followed closely after, and she raised her hand to cradle the throbbing sensation in her forehead, but her arm was stopped short by a sharp tug. She groaned. She didn't want to have to open her eyes yet, but it was becoming clear she'd need to fight her way out of wherever she was if she wanted to escape.

One, two... Lucy's brown eyes fluttered open slowly on a blink. It was bright, but somehow still darker than she'd expected. There was a blonde woman in the corner, typing away at some computer, and suddenly the memory clicked. The woman had come to Lois' apartment, and stupidly she'd answered the door without hesitation. Lucy could have kicked herself. She'd grown up in the city, she should have known better than that. Now she'd probably pay the price.

A figure stormed in and Lucy craned her neck to try and get a look at the man's face without moving too quickly. All she could see were the patent leather, polished tips of his shoes. Very expensive shoes. His sharp, loud tone startled her in the small, quiet space. “What the bloody hell did you do, Miranda?”

The blonde's shoulders ratcheted up with tension before she whirled around to reply. She grinned and puffed out her chest proudly in contrast to her initial reaction. “I did exactly what you needed to have done.”

The new intruder clicked his tongue at her and Lucy racked her brain to place his voice, the accent so familiar. “The situation was under control. I did not say to go and kidnap Miss—who is this?”

Lucy froze, stilling her breath and any minor motion she might exhibit in hopes that they wouldn't notice she was awake. The British man's fancy loafers strode over confidently and she firmly closed her eyes. Her heart was pounding so hard she could hear the blood flow in her ears.

He stopped short by her face.

“What are you talking about? That's Lois Lane.”

Her fingers were tingling and her throat closed up. They wanted Lois? Oh God, she was going to die because she couldn't afford her own apartment. She had to get her life on track. She could defer on her student loans for a while. She had to re-enroll anyway and then—

A yelp of pain was pulled from her throat as he yanked her head up by her hair. Tears brimmed in Lucy's eyes as she scrambled against her captor, but he held her firmly in place by the nape of her hair. Suddenly his face loomed large in her view, and Lucy swallowed thickly.

“Hello, Miss Lane. Fancy seeing you here.”

She floundered for a response, only managing to half croak, “Nigel.” Her mind raced as he chuckled ominously. Nigel St. John. Lex Luthor's butler-slash-driver-slash-right hand man. What the hell did he want with Lois? Who was this chick he was

working with?

He grinned at her and turned her face up to look at her other captor. “Do you see this girl, Miranda? How frightened she is, how unsure of what’s going on?” He let her head drop sharply and turned away as she cried out again. “That is not Lois Lane.”

Miranda froze and braced herself against the table behind her. “Wh-what are you talking about? She answered to Miss Lane when I grabbed her—”

“Lois Lane would have put up a fight. This is her little sister— isn’t that right, Lucy?”

Lucy whimpered. Oh God, what had Lois gotten her into? She tried to stay calm, but her breath came heavier as she struggled to repress her fear. “Please, j-just let me go. You said you didn’t want me.”

“I’m afraid it’s much too late for that, Lucy. Do you have any idea just how badly you screwed up, Miranda?”

Miranda shook her head fiercely. “How was I supposed to know—”

Nigel swept his arm across the desk and knocked everything off it. Lucy flinched at the sound. “You weren’t supposed to know! You don’t know anything!”

Outrage swept over Miranda’s features and she shoved Nigel away from her violently. “Don’t yell at me! You’re the one that insisted we do this!”

“I did no such thing! Now she’s seen my face. What do you think she’s going to do the second we let her go?”

“What’s the big deal? She won’t blab. I’ll make sure of it.”

Nigel ran a hand across his mouth and Lucy swallowed hard as he tried to gain some composure. “She better not. There’s more at stake here than you’re aware of. Which is why you don’t get to run off and make snap decisions.”

Lucy remained quiet as a mouse, absorbing as much information as possible while she still could. She had to tell Lois about this. Lex’s lackey was a serious baddie. Did Lex know about this? Did Lois have any idea who the man she was almost engaged to was? Her stomach lurched, and Lucy fought the fear off as best as she could when she heard Miranda’s next words.

“What do we do with her in the meantime, then?”

His palm smacked against the wall to brace for impact before his back followed. She surged her body up against his, grabbed two fistfuls of his nicely pressed shirt and claimed him with a kiss. It was amazing. He threaded his fingers through her hair and pulled her deeper into him, tongue swirling in her mouth.

“Mmm, Lois.”

She gasped for breath and dove back in. A shiver rolled down Clark’s spine. He could feel every inch of her body flush against his. She hiked her leg up and Clark caught it and wrapped it around his waist like it was the most natural place for it in the world. “Oh, Lois,” he sighed into her hair, “Are you sure about this?”

She hummed unresponsively, peppering his neck with kisses.

“What about Lex?”

She nuzzled him with a growl in the back of her throat. “Who?”

He didn’t want to be frowning. He wanted to keep going, be happy, sleep with his dream girl and spend the rest of his life waking up next to her. But he shook his head and leaned away as much as he could to get a good look at her face. “Lex Luthor? Your boyfriend? The one you went scrambling out of this apartment over just last night?”

“I don’t wanna talk about him. I just want you.”

That answer would have been good enough if he hadn’t seen her eyes.

He heaved for breath and allowed his mind to race as her hands and lips roamed his chest, every button she popped bringing him dangerously closer to losing control. But the glassy look and slight redness at the corners of her eyes tipped him off that she

wasn’t in her right mind. It was the same look he’d gotten from the woman whose apartment he’d helped extinguish. Was it something he was doing to attract their attention? This had to be more than attraction, and this wasn’t Drunk Lois—he remembered Drunk Lois clearly. It was like she was drugged... Damn, why had he even asked? She was looping veil number four around his hips and if he only hadn’t thought to ask, he’d have been free and clear. His brain was halfway to system overload as it was. Lois Lane pressed against him in nothing more than a skimpy bikini was proving to be one of the hardest trials he’d ever faced—

White hot lightning flashed in his brain as she sank to her knees, and he bolted.

Probably too fast. She blinked into the space where he was a moment ago and turned with a frown on her face. Clark swallowed, bracing himself once more. “Lois, we can’t do this. Not like this. Remember?”

She spotted him on the other side of the couch and her confusion dissipated, immediately replaced with a goofy smile and a sultry spark. “Hey, come back here.”

He shook his head petulantly and took a step back from her. “No.”

Lois sauntered towards him, skating a finger across the leather of his couch with an overly pronounced pout. “No? Why no? Isn’t this what you wanted?”

He groaned and tripped over his coffee table, stumbling slightly as he regained his footing. “Lois... Oh, Lois, I never imagined I’d say these words to you. I love you. But I can’t in good conscience allow you to do this. As much as I want to—God, do I want to—you’ll hate yourself in the morning, and I’ll hate myself for making you hate yourself, and it’ll be a whole thing.”

“But I want you, Clark.”

Clark slapped his hands over his face and moaned into them. “I hope to death that’s true, but I still can’t take advantage.”

“I’m giving you the advantage,” she whispered, a spark in her eyes, and Clark almost jumped. She’d gotten too close again.

He rolled his head back on an exaggerated eye-roll before clutching her face and kissing her again. He didn’t let her take control this time, firmly guiding her back towards his bedroom. She stumbled a little in her gold stilettos and Clark swept her into his arms. Lois wrapped both legs around his waist as he carried her off, and he moaned again, wished he hadn’t picked her up in the first place. Despair furrowed his brow and tugged at his heart. She was going to kill him with this, and he’d still never get this close to her again. The dream come true was fast becoming a nightmare.

His knees hit the edge of his mattress and he sank down gently, hovering slightly so as to not crush her against his bed. She fisted his hair and he tousled his fingers through hers as he swept his tongue between her lips once more. And once more. And then once more again.

He wrenched himself away from her lips before he got too carried away. He pulled off of her body and resettled his glasses on his face.

“Don’t stop,” she murmured hazily. “Come back here.”

He pushed her hands off his shirt tails and gave her a smirk. “I just have to grab something real quick. I’ll be back.”

Lois’ eyes brightened with enthusiasm and her teeth sank into her lower lip. “Is it a fun something?”

He grinned mischievously even as his heart tugged at him again. “Maybe.”

She practically pushed him away to go get it, and Clark closed the door to his bedroom behind him. He made it all of three steps before he slumped against the wall and slid to the ground. What the hell was wrong with her? Why couldn’t this have happened yesterday? She was going to kill him, with her sexy, tousled dark locks spread over his black bedspread and her smudged, smokey eyes and her sinfully long legs latched around his waist...

Clark ran his fingers through his hair, shaking it loose. He had to get out of here. He was bound to make a mistake if he was stuck in this apartment with Lois Lane for a moment longer. His eyes darted over to his bedroom door and wondered how long she'd wait for him before she stirred up trouble again.

He didn't think about it for long, instead bolting out the window in his suit. He had to get to the bottom of this. The cool air dragging across his body as he flew helped slough off some of the heated effects he'd been feeling. Rational thought began to resurface in his mind again, and he remembered the blonde woman's similar reaction to him earlier. He arced through the air and changed course for the apartment fire he'd put out.

His red boots touched down on the balcony gently and he tapped on the glass door. He tilted his head to listen to the shuffling noises. The curtain opened a smidge and a smallish, portly man peered out. Clark frowned. The man seemed just as surprised to see the Man of Steel on his balcony as Clark was to see him instead of the woman he'd rescued earlier. The curtain slid closed again, and it took a few seconds too long for it to open. Clark leaned forward and knocked on the door more firmly this time. He peered through the curtains to see the man pacing nervously, sweat beading on his forehead, and Clark put his guard up. There was definitely something up here.

"Open up. I have some questions for you."

The man blotted his forehead with a handkerchief and pocketed the cloth again before coming to the sliding glass door. "Oh, wow! Come in, please. Mr— uh, can I call you— sir, or uh... Well, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Clark crossed the threshold with his arms folded tightly across his chest. He pressed his lips together and darted his eyes around the room for any other signs of life or a possible threat, but he came up empty-handed. He shot his host a taut smile. "Sorry for the intrusion. I just figured I'd stop by one more time and make sure everything was okay."

The gleam of fear disappeared from the older man's eyes and was replaced by glassy-eyed confusion. "One more time?"

"There was a small fire here earlier. Your... wife called for help—"

"I don't have a wife."

Clark shook his head with a smirk. "Sorry. Girlfriend maybe —"

"No, you're misunderstanding. I'm single. I live alone."

Those three words keyed him up again, and Clark took a step back. "What?"

"And besides which, I was out of the house all day. I just got home. I work at the Beckworth Orphanage, y-you can check with my employers."

His eyes snapped up to meet the bumbling man's gaze. "Beckworth?"

"Yeah. Did you say there was a fire here?"

Clark walked around without answering, combing every inch of the apartment with his x-ray vision. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. There was something he was missing here, some connection... He spotted a diploma hanging on the wall in the next room and got his name. "Dr. Carlton, is it?"

"That's right."

His heart pounded in his chest and he tried to project an aura of calm. He continued searching the apartment. "And what do you do for the Beckworth School?"

"Oh, I'm basically a glorified school nurse. Although I do also offer psychological counseling to the students who need it."

He nodded and turned back to face the man. "Ever speak with Ines Valdez?" Dr. Carlton went pale as a sheet. "Or maybe you're more familiar with her sister, Aymee."

The doctor's voice was a rasp when he spoke. "How do you know those names?"

He grinned viciously and took a step towards the smaller man.

"I think we need to have a little chat."

Chapter 46: Don't Touch Me Please I Cannot Stand the Way You Tease

It had been a long day. Mostly because it was a slow day. Which wasn't a bad thing. He was actually going to make it home in time for dinner—an impressive feat he hadn't accomplished often since making inspector. Bill tossed his briefcase in the trunk of his car and slammed the lid shut, shutting his time on the clock officially and the knot in his shoulder felt looser already.

A loud slam behind him startled him, and he reflexively reached for his weapon. He relaxed again when he saw who it was. "Hey. You got me for a second there. What's going on?"

The cape-clad hero didn't waste time with any niceties and instead thrust a man at him with his hands tied together with rope. "Inspector, this is Dr. Carlton. It's not going to make much sense right now, but he's connected to the missing girl from Beckworth."

Henderson frowned. "You mean the missing children?"

Watching the color drain out of the all-powerful man's face was unnerving. He clearly hadn't been expecting that. Bill frowned a little deeper. The Man of Steel perplexed him at times. "What?"

"Three more children disappeared from the orphanage. One was called in yesterday, and the other two tonight. Three boys and a girl."

The horror on the hero's face settled into disgust and dismay. He gestured at the man now in Henderson's custody. "Well, the good doctor's been doing experiments on them. I couldn't get anything out of him on where they are now—"

"I told you! I don't know! They ran away from Beckworth—"

"Because of you, I'm assuming."

The doctor stammered, and Bill sighed. Looks like he wasn't getting home early then anyways. He opened his trunk and grabbed his briefcase once again before linking an arm through the criminal's. "Well, thanks for your help. I mean, you kind of broke the chain of custody, but I appreciate it and we will look into this as deeply as we can."

The Man of Steel nodded again, somber.

"And we'll find those kids, don't worry about it."

The hero shot him a small, grateful smile, and took off as quickly as he'd arrived, leaving Bill with his ward and a whole host of questions. There was something off about the Man of Steel that he couldn't quite put his finger on yet. He'd say it had something to do with the missing kids, except he hadn't known about the other three.

And if he was honest with himself, this wasn't the first time he'd felt this way.

"Can I file a report against him?"

Henderson snapped out of his thoughts suddenly. He blinked at the doctor responsible for kidnapping four kids or worse, and catalogued his appearance. His hair and clothes were disheveled, there was blood pooling under the surface of his skin near his collarbone, most probably where the Man of Steel had gripped him too tightly. A twist in his stomach made Bill think that wasn't the only bruise from the hero he'd find. He made the decision then and there whose side to take. "Nice try, Doc. Nobody's gonna believe a guy that experiments on orphans."

The man gaped and pleaded, but Henderson dragged him along. Back to the elevators, up to interrogation, taking his fingerprints. All the while ignoring him. He put aside any qualms he had about the situation. They were putting away a bad guy—a real bad guy by the looks of things.

And besides. It never hurt to gain some friends in high places.

Lois groaned, the familiar ache of a world-class hangover beating inside her brain. She rolled over gently, eyes shut fiercely, and stuck a hand out in hopes that she'd left herself an aspirin and a water bottle on her nightstand last night.

Her brow furrowed slightly when she instead reached for more satiny fabric. She stretched a little beyond her reach—still nothing. How drunk had she been last night? Was she upside down? And something was tangled up around her—she squirmed to get out of the death grip of the blankets...

She scrambled to an upright position when she opened one eye. Her heart leapt into her throat.

Where the hell was she?

She didn't recognize her surroundings at all. She was in a king-sized bed underneath a black satin bedspread, in a large room with a big red stripe on the wall. Lois pushed the unfamiliar bedding away, curling in on herself protectively before realizing what she was wearing. The pit in her stomach deepened as she looked down at the golden, bikini-style underwear and the few scarves tangled around her. What the hell had she done?

A figure crossed her field of vision and she clutched the blankets to her chest with a squeak to cover herself.

Clark looked up from his coffee and paper at the sound, and he shot her a small surprised smile. "Oh, hey. You're awake."

Mortification flamed her cheeks hot and she gaped at his casual manner. As if it was no big deal that she woke up in his bed, barely clothed. "Oh, God," she groaned, slamming her eyes shut. She curled into a ball as tight as she could and rocked back and forth.

"Hey, hey, hey! Don't worry—nothing happened."

She snorted at him, still not daring to look up at him even when she felt the bed shift beneath his weight. "Sure you'd say that."

"Lois, I swear to you on my father's grave, nothing happened. Maybe some light making out. But after that I was a perfect gentleman—are you feeling okay? Can I get you anything?"

"You can get me my clothes, you sick, twisted—"

Clark cleared his throat nervously. "You, uh, didn't bring any."

She peeked out at him quickly and examined his face for any hint of a lie, but the tightness of his expression and the way he was steadfastly not looking at her was reassuring.

"You did leave a trench coat in the elevator? Or I could grab you a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt?"

She swallowed thickly and nodded, retreating back to the relative safety of the comforter. She listened intently to the woosh of drawers opening and snapping shut, and the soft pat as the items were tossed on the satin bedding. She didn't dare look up yet. His sigh barely reached her ears. "Why don't you get dressed, and then we'll talk and get you up to speed."

That got her attention, and she whipped her head up to glare at him. "You said nothing happened!"

His surprise would have been comical if she hadn't been fuming. He raised his hands defensively and backed out of the room slowly. "Nothing like that! This is about work."

"Oh sure. You expect me to believe that you went and actually worked on a story without me when I was in your bed a few hours?"

He cocked his head to the side and looked down at her strangely, some mix of hurt, anger and amusement on his face. She got the sinking feeling that they were not on an even playing field for some reason. "Firstly, I know that I try to come across as a laid-back, easy-going guy, but I've worked very hard to get where I am. And secondly, you've been conked out for a day and a half."

He turned on his heel and left her feeling somehow more humiliated by that little slip than she did over her whole ensemble. She huffed and rolled out from under the covers, only stopping a moment to brace a hand against her throbbing head. First things first, she'd need to coax a couple of Advil out of the man. Then she could apologize and figure out just what the hell happened here.

She padded out and around his apartment in a sinfully comfortable pair of sweatpants and a Metropolis Tigers shirt, not

sure where he'd run off. A new turn took her into a room she hadn't seen before, and her steps slowed. The view was breathtaking—the whole wall was one giant window, looking out on the entire city of Metropolis. A twinge of guilt strummed at her heartstrings when she caught sight of Lexcorp Tower, but she quickly shoved it aside as she turned to look at his desk.

Everything in here was so pristine that she'd hardly have known it was an office if it weren't for one corner of a file sticking out of the drawer. She bent down and pried it out of the drawer, hissing slightly when a nail broke. She shook her hand out and powered through, flipping to the first page.

"Lois? Where'd you go?"

She barely heard him, eyes fully focused on the image of Nigel St. John passing a package of what she could only assume to be cash or drugs to a small, portly man in glasses.

"Lois? Are you decent?"

She scoffed at that one, and called out to him. "In here." He turned the corner with a mug of coffee and a bottle of aspirin. She lifted the file she was looking at in the air with a question in her eyes.

Clark grimaced and set her mug down carefully. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I found Dr. Carlton."

Lois reached for her much-needed mug of comfort and took a sip before responding. "You mean from Beckworth?"

A nod. "He had been receiving payments from a benefactor to run some experiments on a group of children through a company called Deadshot Research Facilities."

"Experiments?"

"He'd been dosing them with a drug to make them smarter."

"And Deadshot Research is Nigel St. John?"

The purse of his lips made her question him a moment. "As far as I can tell, Nigel appears to have gone underground, disappeared without a trace."

"You mean he's not at Le—" She choked on his name, and she realized how long it had really been since she'd seen her boyfriend. If she could even call him that.

"I mean, I haven't been by to check. But if he is there, Luthor's got him hidden pretty deep in that tower of his. Dr. Carlton is already in custody, but the kids are still missing."

Lois' head swam with all this new information. She only knew one thing for sure right now. She set her mug down and popped the cap off the bottle of pills to pour out a generous amount. "I need to get home."

"Ha! Project K. Like Kent. Get it?" Lex looked around himself for a response when he didn't get one. A scowl sliced across his features. "I guess it's not that clever. Where the hell is everybody?"

He pushed aside the folder of information he'd gotten from Colonel Fane for the time being and stood up. No Miranda in his business, bugging him for money or attention or a guinea pig. No Lois, although that was fast becoming less and less of a surprise.

No Nigel.

That was what bothered him.

He dialed down for Asabi and was pleased to hear his voice at least. "Asabi, when was the last time Nigel's been in?"

"I'd say it's been at least four days, sir."

Lex swallowed his initial reaction of fear down and ended the call with a brief thank you. If Nigel was gone there had to be a good reason.

His fingers grazed over the manila folder in hesitation, wanting to learn more... but if he didn't address this, it might be the end of the road anyways. Decision made, he picked up the file and slid it into the bank box marked B.39.

It had waited eighteen years. The Bureau could wait one more day.

Clark kept an eye on her the entire ride over. She was retreating into her head, he could tell that much. He hoped he

hadn't overdone it with letting her find the file. He'd figured she'd go snooping around at some point, so it was an easy assumption to think she'd stick her nose into any visible paperwork. And it's not like he had steered her down a wrong path—they were on the same page. He just would have to kill Nigel before she found him.

He followed her up to her apartment in spite of her protests, stating that he'd get bored in the car. He couldn't give her space to think about the circumstances too hard. Finding that file might have been too obvious, but he just couldn't pass it up. She'd passed out in his bed. Clark congratulated himself on his perseverance in not sleeping with her under the influence, and rewarded himself by pointing her suspicions once again in the direction of Lex Luthor.

She stuck her key in the middle lock and her form went completely rigid. Clark frowned. "What's the matter?"

"Sh-shh!" She swatted at his arm harder than she probably thought. He strained his hearing, but didn't notice any sounds coming from inside the apartment. Lois removed her key carefully and veered towards a different lock, this one on the door handle itself. Clark observed silently with confusion, her fingers steady as she unlocked that one and turned the door handle.

The door swung open with ease, and suddenly Clark was privy to Lois' suspicions.

Her apartment was overturned.

Chapter 47: Poison Kiss

"Lois."

She ignored him completely in favor of tossing more papers and memorabilia over her shoulder. Her eyes skimmed through another packet, cataloguing it and scrabbling for something else. She wasn't moving fast enough. Her fingers flew faster, and she looked harder. There had to be a clue, something, anything...

"Lois—"

She brushed a hand through the air. "Not now, Kent."

"Maybe if you told me what you were looking for—"

She threw her hands up in the air sharply and brought her fists back to ball at her forehead. "I don't know what I'm looking for! There has to be something! What did they take? What did they come here for? When? I mean—how long did you say I was out?"

"You slept for about a day and a half, but you were at my apartment a little more than three days."

"Three—" Lois rocked back on her haunches and planted her backside on the ground. Three whole days gone. She barely had a timeframe to work with. She cupped her face in her hands.

"Hey, come on. It'll be okay. Let's just take a beat, take a step back."

His hand gently landed on her shoulder, and a measure of comfort washed over her at the gesture. He was right, they could figure this out. "It had to have something to do with a recent case we've worked on, or it wouldn't matter. The Invisible Man case... Maybe the Beckworth kids?"

Clark inclined his head slightly. "Maybe. Dr. Carlton is in custody though. I don't see how he could have done this."

"He could have had a partner." Lois' eyes fluttered open gently, and she sought his searchingly. His expression was soothing and warm. She swallowed thickly, afraid to even say the words. "It could have been Nigel."

Horror and disbelief struck across his face for a split second as his jaw went slack, but it was quickly lanced by anger and a grinding of his teeth. "No."

"Think about it, Clark—"

He shook his head and stood up from where he was crouched at her side and walked towards her kitchen. She scowled after him and laid out her argument. "You're the one that found evidence of Nigel and Dr. Carlton working together. He was funding his research. And the money had to come from somewhere."

"No way."

Lois got to her feet slowly, mind spinning with a theory already. "And just what have we been working on this whole time? Who's Lex Luthor's right hand man?"

Exasperation made his tone gravely when he turned back to her. "Lois... listen to yourself. I know things are complicated, but you're still talking about Lex Luthor here. He still cares about you. Why would he send Nigel to trash your apartment? Especially if he wants you back."

Her eyebrows rocketed up. "You think he has a shot in hell anymore? After everything I know about him, and now this? Heck, Kansas, I was under the influence of some crazy aphrodisiac and all I could think about was you!"

His expression went slack as her words registered. Heat flamed at her cheeks and Lois turned away in embarrassment, hands coming up to cover her ears. She knew what he was going to say before he even said it, and she couldn't afford to have this argument right now. Not again. "Let's not do this right now. Let's just calm down and take a look at the facts, okay?"

Clark opened his mouth as if to protest but then shut it and nodded. "Okay. But, Lois?"

She looked back at his face with pain in her expression. She nodded at his unspoken question. "I know."

He seemed partially satisfied with her reply, and moved on for the time being. "All right. What do we know?"

"We know someone broke into my apartment." She tried to rein in her attention once more to the task at hand, kicking at some old trinkets on the ground.

"We know they didn't do that for no good reason."

"We don't know what that reason is," she countered, glaring at him. They said they'd stick to facts.

"Okay, but we know it had to be really recent, otherwise Lucy would have tried to tell you about it. I don't know your sister all that well, but I imagine she'd have cleaned up a little or called the police, and I didn't see any yellow tape—"

Icy dread filled her stomach and she froze, rooted to the spot. "Clark."

"Hmm?"

She was going to be sick. "Nothing's missing."

"Well, I mean, we don't know that for sure yet—"

"Clark."

He turned away from the mess and met her wide, frightened eyes once more, and his features seemed to mirror hers as the realization sunk in for him as well.

"Where is my sister?"

Clark was white as a sheet, and Lois had thought that was just an expression. Her heart leapt into her throat at the fact that he was on the same page. Her stomach twisted into a knot and she bent over in agony. "Oh my God, oh my God. Lucy..."

He was at her side in a second flat, protectively encircling her in his arms and guiding her to the door. "We need to leave, go somewhere safe."

Lois pulled away from him, pushing a hand against his chest. "I'm not going anywhere until I know where my sister is."

"Lois, this could be a trap. It's not safe. We need to get out of here—I'm calling Henderson right now."

Lois snatched his phone out of his hands and turned back to face her apartment. This was more than a break in to send a message. Whoever did this really wanted something from her, and she'd do just about anything to get her sister back. "No, I'll call. They'll respond to me faster."

"Okay. Can we please go back to my apartment? Nobody knew you were there obviously, so we'll be safe for now."

She cradled the phone tightly against her ear as the nine-one-one operator came through. "Not until Henderson gets here."

"Not that it's any of my business," she said, her voice grating on his every last nerve. Four days, stuck here with these two women. He was regretting every aspect of this plan, except one.

“But what exactly is that concoction going to do to you? And I will ask again why you don’t want mine.”

Nigel sighed as he rolled up his left shirtsleeve. “It isn’t any of your business in fact. But your drug will put me out of my right mind; this one will only enhance it.” He removed the cap from the syringe and tapped the side to ensure there weren’t any bubbles in it. That would be a quick way to an aneurysm. Listening to Miranda another day would lead to a much slower-onset aneurysm.

“Yes, but mine’s so much more fun!” She giggled, and Nigel felt a twist in his stomach.

“Dear Lord, did you dose yourself with more?”

Another fit of laughter was answer enough for him, and he rolled his eyes. Of course she did. He tried to focus on the task at hand.

Her giggles finally subsided and she brushed a stray tear away. “If I don’t dose myself every time it wears off, I’ll pass out.”

“Hey! Bonnie and Clyde! Any chance you’ll be letting me go anytime soon?”

Nigel shot a glare at their captive tied to a chair and then back at Miranda. “I told you not to feed her. She’s gaining too much strength back.”

“I could knock her out again.” They both turned and sent matching scowls towards the younger Lane sister, who squirmed uncomfortably at their turn in conversation. Miranda laughed at the girl. “Hey, it’s not our fault your family hasn’t missed you in four days. Pretty soon you’ll outlive your usefulness.”

“Miranda,” Nigel warned quietly.

“And why aren’t you just drinking that potion?” She whirled back to Nigel and ran her fingers up his arm smoothly. “It’ll give you the same effect five minutes later, and then you won’t have an arm that makes you look like a heroin addict.”

“Five minutes too long,” he muttered, and turned his attention back to his arm, brushing her hand away.

She snorted and flipped her hair. “That’s right. Never know when Hunky Blue might appear around a corner. Or Kent. Or God forbid, Luthor.”

“Kent? As in, Clark Kent?”

Nigel tried not to react to Lucy’s reaction to the name, instead taking his time finishing his business and tossing the needle into a far-off corner. A coldness slid through his veins, and he could feel his mind whirring already. Those bratty kids had better have been worth it.

Miranda crossed her legs as she sat on the edge of the table, her attention now fascinated by Lucy. “You know the guy?”

“Miranda, I think it’s time we take care of our guest,” he hinted quietly.

“No, I wanna hear this.”

“Me too.”

Nigel whirled around at the voice, weapon drawn and at the ready. Lex raised his hands in a gesture of surrender and a dark chuckle rumbled up his throat. “And here I thought you were going to betray me,” he said to Nigel, a slight lilt of unsteady mirth in his tone. “I do appreciate the sentiment, Nigel, but as much as I hate Kent, I’d rather it not come at the expense of my future sister-in-law.”

“Ha! You wish! At this point, I wouldn’t call you my brother-in-law if you kept a gun to my head for as long as I lived.”

Lex sauntered over menacingly. “That can be arranged,” he quipped, leaning down to her level. “Hello, Lucy.”

She spit in his face. Lex frowned and wiped his face across his shirtsleeve. “Lovely. Now, which one of you wants to explain what the hell is happening here?”

“Don’t look at me, it was Nigel’s idea—”

Nigel tossed his hands up exasperatedly. He was about done with this woman. “On what bloody planet—”

Lex held up a hand for silence, and they both shut their

mouths. Nigel pursed his lips. A tingle of uncertainty ran up his spine at Lex’s behavior. The man rubbed at his temples as he spoke. “I need to know... what in the hell went wrong here. What happened to the first human trials, Miranda?”

She pouted and flicked a lock of hair over her shoulder. “Buns o’ Steel wouldn’t play with me, and Nigel wouldn’t play either.”

Lex’s eyes went wide and quickly dissolved from shock to anger. “What do you mean—your first test was on that flying freakshow? What would possess you to—” He cut himself off, running his hands over his visage to try and stop the spasms, and he tried to explain himself in very clear, precise words. “He’s not a human, Miranda. At the very minimum he’s some sort of superhuman, if not an alien altogether. Or a demon.”

“Nigel said it would be best.”

“Nigel said—” Luthor whirled on him, and Nigel swallowed thickly. “Why would you suggest that? And what is wrong with her?”

He finally holstered his weapon, remaining cautious but slightly more optimistic. He could explain his way out of this. “I figured it would get him out of the way. And if *someone* had used the hundred percent solution, we’d likely be having a completely different discussion.”

“I brought the hundred percent stuff this time!”

Lex waved her off and turned his focus back to Nigel. “Do you realize what you’ve done? You think Lois could ever forgive me for kidnapping her sister?”

“To be fair, that wasn’t part of my plan—”

“Shut up. I’m done talking with you. We have to release her. Before it’s too late.”

Fear spiked through Nigel, and he stepped between Lex and their captive defensively. “We can’t do that.”

Lex’s eyes met his with a cool anger. “Step off, Nigel.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that, sir.”

“And why is that?” The billionaire folded his arms irately.

“We’ve had her here four days.”

Lex’s pallor changed instantly, and Nigel knew he understood the problem now. Lex shifted on his feet. He looked between Lucy and Nigel, uncertainty in his eyes. “Four days? And nobody’s reported her missing yet?”

Nigel shook his head. “Not according to the police scanner, sir.”

“Then—” he choked on his words, panic eating away at the edges of his tone. Nigel knew what he was going to ask, and he had no honest answer yet.

“Where the hell is Lois?”

Clark held the door open for Lois, who ducked into the town car gracefully. He’d successfully convinced her that they should at least wait in the car, that it would be safer until Henderson got there. She slid over with a smile and patted the seat next to her for him. A twinge pulled at his heart, and he smiled at her warmly.

Then he shut the door.

Confusion filled her features, as she scrambled back to the window and rolled it down as much as the driver would allow. “Clark? What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t have you running headlong into danger on this one. I’m going to stay and talk to Henderson when he gets here, and see what else I can do. But someone is after you, Lois. And you have to stay safe. So this car will take you to my place, and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She tried to protest, but the car pulled away in that moment, and Clark was left at the curb all alone. He steeled himself. He knew she would be beyond pissed at him when he got back, but he had to do this alone. Nigel had crossed him for the last time. He couldn’t return without her sister.

And he wouldn’t return without Nigel in a body bag.

Chapter 48: Running From the Devil

Lucy tried to focus on her breathing, in and out. It was genuinely the only thing she could do right now. She kept a wary eye on her sister's boyfriend, stomach in a knot and heart pounding hard in her ears. She'd lost track of time, between her slight bout with delirium and the fact that Miranda had been keeping her drugged out of her mind... But four days? She could scarcely believe that. Where *was* Lois in all this?

She winced. Trying to break her thumb was not going as well as she'd planned. She kept an eye on each of her captors, trying not to attract their attention as she tried to recall every tip her sister had ever given her about self-defense and how to escape a situation like this. So far she wasn't passing muster.

The motion of Lex taking a seat in her peripheral vision drew her attention away again. Head between his legs, fingers pulling at the ends of his thinning curls. He didn't seem like he was really in on this. But his familiarity with these two degenerates didn't make that thought any more comforting. It simply made him an adept liar and a snake in the grass.

Lois could really pick 'em.

The blonde woman cooed over his shoulders, leaning her bosom against him heavily. "We can figure this out, Lexy. Don't you worry."

Lex scowled, and he rolled his shoulders violently. "Get off me, Miranda." She tsked and whined, but he gave no room for argument. He stood up rapidly and pointed at her. "No. This is all your fault. Touch me again and you'll pay."

She pouted and cocked her hip. "But Lex, you're the one that convinced me to make this love potion to begin with."

Love potion? Lucy frowned. She didn't know what they were talking about. "I didn't ask for you to do any of this. Either of you." His eyes landed on hers, and Lucy stopped fidgeting, breath tight in her chest. Lex stormed back to her side, and she flinched. He raised his hands in a submissive gesture and knelt at her side, eyes wide and imploring. "Lucy, you have to believe me. I didn't ask for any of this. I'd never hurt you, or Lois, in any way. You believe me, right?"

She didn't. But saying that might seal her fate. She licked her dry, cracked lips before speaking. "Of course. You're only doing what you have to do. I'm sure Lois will understand this whole mix-up. In fact, if you let me go now, we can explain this whole mess together."

His face lit up at her apparent amenity, and for a split second Lucy almost believed he would.

The sound of a gun cocking drew her attention back to the real threat in the room. "Don't you dare."

A dark look sprawned across Lex's face as he stood and turned to face his butler. "Nigel, we have to let her go. This has gone far enough."

"She's playing you."

"She wouldn't."

"She absolutely would. They all are. I don't know why you can't see it." Nigel huffed and gripped the gun tighter. "You're either too stupid or too blind to see it."

"Nigel," Lex growled, taking a menacing step towards his butler. "Put the gun down."

"Do you have any idea where she's been this whole time? Shagging Clark Kent. She's cheating on you."

The surprise Lucy felt didn't compare to the look of horror on Lex Luthor's face. She spent the distraction wisely though, rubbing her wrists raw as she attempted another escape. Lex's tone was tremulous when he spoke, but without a hint of doubt. "She is not. Lois would never—"

"Wouldn't she?" Nigel asked calmly, head cocked to the side. "Why do you think she hasn't been home to notice her sister is missing?"

Lex shook his head back and forth rapidly, coming a little

unhinged. "She's not a cheater. She's not capable of that level of deception."

A dark chuckle rumbled up Nigel St. John's throat. "You have a major blind spot for deceptions like this. How long did it take you to realize Clark Kent was after you? How long before you took matters into your own hands? How long did you trust the Man of Steel? How long have you thought I was on your side?"

Lucy watched in confusion and horror as the world tilted on its axis for Lex Luthor. His voice was a rasp. "What?"

"You never can see the whole picture. Which is why you don't understand why we have to kill Lucy."

"No, Nigel, wait—"

Lucy braced for impact as the man turned and fired his weapon at her, her eyes clenched tightly. Her last thoughts were for her sister, who, no matter what happened here, had to get out of whatever psychotic relationship she'd stumbled into with Lex and—

She opened one eye slowly, unsure of where the impact went. A hand reached out from a blur of red and blue that took up the majority of her field of vision. Lucy blinked, and her brow furrowed as the hand tossed a bullet to the ground. Slowly it began to pull together in her mind, and she gaped at the hero.

The hero of mythic proportions leaned over and tore her bindings completely in half, freeing her in less than a second. Her heart skipped a beat in an effort to catch up, and she felt dizzy. Lucy rooted her eyes on the red crest he wore. She rubbed at the chafed skin on her wrists gently.

"You all right, miss?"

Lucy nodded, speechless.

The superhero turned back to face her captors with a smug smirk as he helped her to her feet at his side. "As you've seen before, your bullets don't affect me. So why don't we wrap this up early—"

"Miranda," Nigel called over his shoulder.

The bubbly blonde bounded towards the hero with a giggle and a grin, taking him off guard. Lucy frowned at the hero's look of confusion and recognition. "You again? You're working together?"

"That's right, big boy." Her fingers skated down the crest of his suit, gliding lower, before she pulled out a bottle of something pink and viscous from behind her back. He eyed the potion warily as she waved it in his face.

She sprayed a puff at him, and the hero coughed at the acrid smell. Lucy covered her mouth and nose, backing away from the terrible scent. For whatever reason, Miranda waited, watching the Man of Steel closely as he finished his coughing fit. "How you feeling now, Big Blue?"

He shook his head harshly and looked up at the woman with a glint of something in his eyes. A tinge of red entered Lucy's field of vision before dissipating, and she frowned again at the light-headed sensation. Her voice was scratchy when she tried to speak, unable to even get out his name.

Surprise overtook Lucy's face as the hero scooped up Miranda into his arms, and a gleeful smile took over the woman's face as he pinned her to the wall. A small shriek echoed in the space, and she ran her hands through the man's dark, luscious locks before he leaned down for a kiss.

A kiss that never came.

Instead he exhaled deeply, passing his breath on to her, and with it, her poison. He fished the bottle out of her other hand and threw it on the ground sharply, prompting a small pink puff of a cloud to billow up around Miranda and himself, and she coughed uncontrollably.

He stepped back from her and let her drop to the floor with a dark smirk. Lucy was struggling to keep her eyes open, dizzy now with confusion and whatever was in that terrible-smelling perfume. "That was really your plan, Nigel? If a bullet and a bomb

didn't affect me, why would you think some love potion would?"

"He-help," Lucy croaked out, slumping to the ground as her knees gave out from underneath her, and the conversation around her took a confusing turn.

"I should kill you right now, end this for once and for all."

"You won't."

"Give me one good reason."

Nigel's arm shot out and he pulled Lex into him. He pressed his gun to the man's jugular and smiled. "I can give you three. For one, you don't want Lois to find out you're a killer, which she will assuming Lucy lives. For another, you probably want to know where those smart orphans ran off to, and I have that answer. But mostly, you won't make a move because you don't want me to kill him."

"Nigel," Lex whispered, all confidence gone from his tone, and struggled against the old man's death grip.

"You won't do it." He folded his arms and frowned, but sweat beaded at the edge of his hairline and a touch of nerves swathed his words.

"Oh, I will. Unless you let us leave unharmed. What'll it be, *sir*?"

A flinch ran through the Man of Steel, but beyond that he didn't move a finger, eyes solely focused on his antagonist.

Nigel's sneer mocked her from across the room amidst another wave of dizziness and nausea. Lucy gave into the darkness around her as she watched the Man of Steel let Nigel St. John and Lex Luthor escape scot-free.

"Hey! Honey-Buns of Steel—don't let these bad men take me away! I love you! Please, sweetheart... If you don't save me, I'll kill you— Ooh, you're cute. Are you single?"

Henderson shook his head at the woman as his officers bent her head over to slide her into the backseat of a police car. Miranda's attention was scattered, her attention split between about three different officers now. With Miranda locked away in the squad car, he removed the breathing apparatus from his face and tucked it under his arm. They would have to keep a close eye on her, possibly keep her locked in solitary. The risk of her manipulating a guard and escaping was very high.

The Man of Steel approached him warily and Henderson smiled gently at the hero. "Is Miss Lane going to be okay?"

Henderson's smile dissipated at the question, and he glanced at the ambulance that was pulling away now. "I hope to God she will, if only for Lois' sake. They're all they have, you know? But her vitals were all within normal range, so that's good. It seems like a reaction to the poison Miranda was using, but why it didn't affect her this way is a mystery."

The hero shifted his weight somewhat uncomfortably, pulled at his ear. "Maybe four, five days ago, Miranda tried to influence me with a lower grade dose of the same potion. It didn't have any effect on me, and I dispersed most of it, but I know she was exposed to some, and it made her... overly flirtatious. A few other people were affected residually—"

A thought clicked into place in Bill's mind, and he nodded. "Ah. I'm guessing you mean the Daily Planet."

The Man of Steel blinked at him in confusion, like he clearly hadn't known that, but went along with it like he did anyway. "Uh, yeah. Right."

Bill looked askance at him, and filed away the disconnect as another oddity of the hero. Maybe he didn't read the paper. When would he have the time? He prompted the man to continue, and the complicated man shook himself. "Anyway, this stuff was much stronger, a completely undiluted solution. She must have thought it would have an effect on me in its purest form, but still nothing. My only guess as to why she didn't have the same reaction as Lucy is that she's been dosing herself with it steadily for days."

A thought scratched at his brain, and Bill paused in his writing and looked at the Man of Steel with a question. "Do you think

she'll recover?"

An unnameable flicker passed across his expression. "I don't know. I didn't get a chance to dilute it before she was exposed. She might never be the same again."

Henderson pursed his lips tightly. Something was off still. He was getting closer and closer to figuring out what it was, but it was still just out of reach. "What about the second captor? Anything else you can think of regarding him besides that he was older and had a British accent?"

The hero paused a second too long before grimacing tightly. "Nope. I'll let you know if anything comes to mind."

Bill's eyes became slits as he glared at the hero. He might not have any superpowers, but he knew when he was being lied to. He smiled falsely at the Man of Steel. "All right. Thanks again for all your help today. To be honest, I don't think we'd have found her without your assistance."

The hero nodded, expression reined in tight, and took off on an arc through the air. Henderson watched awhile as he faded into the distance, before turning to focus his attention on the remainder of the crime scene.

Clark strived to contain his emotions on the short elevator ride up. The anger swirling inside him at Nigel's betrayal, the relief that he'd found Lois' sister, the frustration that Nigel and Lex had escaped his grasp, and that he still couldn't find them. He breathed in deeply, and tried to run through what he was going to say to Lois when he saw her.

Hey, Lois. I slapped on some spandex and saved your sister, and Lex Luthor was behind it all. Hey, Lucy's in the hospital but we think she's going to be fine. Well, maybe. She's alive at least. Hey, Lois—I'm sorry for leaving you here. I was worried for good reason. You were right about Nigel—

The doors slid open before him, and Clark steeled himself as he walked around the corner. Empty. He craned his neck to try and see where Lois was, but to no avail. He frowned. He could hear her heartbeat, maybe back near his bedroom somewhere. He headed that direction and called out for her. "Lois? I'm back. I'm sorry for leaving you like that, but good news—"

He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw her, blood running cold.

She sat facing away from him on the floor, looking down at something in her lap. His room was a mess, drawers open, a few trinkets tossed onto the floor, closet doors opened and clothing on the floor. She turned big, soulful eyes back over her shoulder and asked him one simple question. "When were you going to tell me?"

Clark rocked back on his heels in surprise. "Uh, Lois. What, uh, what happened—"

She launched to her feet in outrage, pacing already. "Don't even start. You know, I knew it, too. I knew you were hiding something from me. You were shifty and always running off at weird times and... and you're just so... damn, uber-secretive. About everything! You walk around wanting people to believe you're a mystery, and you are. You were." She corrected herself, looking him square in the eye now. Clark swallowed thickly. "You're not so much any more."

He could lie. He could evade. He was good at those things. No one ever tried to look closer—not the ones that lived to see tomorrow, anyway, and he didn't for one second place Lois in that other group. Part of him felt paralyzed with fear, the other part of him laced with adrenaline. It only resulted in confusion and a knot in his stomach.

He could lie. But for some unknown reason, Clark actually didn't want to lie to her. She didn't deserve it. He wasn't ready for all that meant in the long run, but he wanted a shot at whatever that future might look like. "Lois, I can explain."

She scoffed. "Explain what? That you lied to me, or that you moonlight in tights?"

“I just—what?”

She gave him a scathing glare and waved a swatch of red fabric at him, and Clark felt the ground shift underneath him as the room tilted sideways. All of his confidence and determination to tell her the truth went up in smoke, and he was left with the startling realization that she wasn't on the same page as him. She was talking about his alter ego, true, but not the one he'd been thinking of.

He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or more concerned.

Clark cleared his throat, eased the cape she had in a death grip out of her hands. He ran a thumb over the fabric gently, in an almost self-soothing pattern. “Look, Lois. There's a lot more to explain. What do you want to know? I'll tell you everything.”

And part of him meant that.

Her shoulders slumped and she sank onto the edge of his bed. Clark removed his glasses and ran a hand across his face, uncertainty filling him with dread.

“Did you at least find my sister?”

He bit his lip and sank down beside her. This day was not going as planned. “Yes. That's what I came to tell you. She's in the hospital, though.”

Lois pursed her lips, eyes brimming with tears. “I suppose that's why you shipped me off here. So you could go—” She mimed a swooping gesture with one hand, unable to say any more. Clark grimaced. “And it makes sense. I guess.”

His heart stirred. He had to tell her. “Lois, listen—”

“No, I know. I know we need to talk. About this, and so many other things... But I just... I need to think it all out, okay?”

He swallowed thickly, toying with his horn-rimmed glasses as a distraction. He didn't understand what had happened to cause her to go digging through his room, or how she'd found the suits at all. But it was a moot point. They sat in a relative amount of calm for a few long minutes, the most peace and quiet Clark had seen all day. Ultimately, he knew it wasn't to last. His secret—the other secret—was still hanging like an ax over his head, and hanging on by a thread at that. The longer he waited to come out with it, the harder the fallout was going to be. And if her reaction to this secret was any judge, it was going to be worse than he'd anticipated.

If anything, now was the time to tell her. All he had to do was open his mouth and say the words. *You know, Lois, I hate to bring this up right now, but I want to come completely clean. This isn't the only part of my life that I've hidden from you.* It was like a bandage, best ripped off hard and fast. Plus, it was like pairing good news with bad news. *Lois, the good news is I'm a superhero. Bad news is that I run most of the crime in this town anyways.* He rolled his eyes at himself. Maybe he'd at least get points for total honesty.

However, the seconds ticked on. And with each passing second, he felt the opportunity to come clean slipping through his fingers. His heart plummeted as he warred with himself, practically begging the words to escape from his throat, out of his brain, off his tongue. But nothing would come. His subconsciousness was reaching, stretching, ultimately drowning as it fell into a deep, fathomless cave below. And for the first time since he'd started up with this whole revenge business, he felt regret. Because eventually, Lois would find out. She was by no means a stupid woman, and secrets always came out. Just like this one did.

Too many seconds. Too much time now, and he was out of his.

So regrettably, Clark locked that steadily growing dread right back up and outstretched a hand to her. “Hey. Let's go see your sister, okay? We can talk more later.”

Lois stared at his hand for a long moment, scrutinizing it. He tried to still his shaking fingers, closing his hand into a fist nervously before stretching his fingers out again. Clark usually felt quite unflappable, but this was different. He felt like he needed a

good drink, but unfortunately he didn't have an ablution to cleanse him of this fear. He had to just let it pass, and hope that she didn't see right through him to his troubled soul.

Gingerly, Lois' fingers landed in his palm, and Clark felt his heart soar. He smiled at her, swallowing the knot in his throat. This was a good sign. Maybe she didn't hate him. Maybe she wasn't disgusted that he was an alien, or that he'd lied to her. Maybe they could move forward still, without her ever finding out he was the real Boss.

He might be simply biding his time, but as long as that secret could stay hidden, he was going to savor every moment.

Chapter 49: Take the Plunge

Lex kept his jaw firmly shut. He was grinding his teeth, and his eye was twitching, and he was about three seconds away from exploding. If he could just keep breathing, he might be able to postpone Nigel's death.

The silence in the elevator was rudely interrupted by the soft ding of its arrival on their floor. Yes. Focus on the physical things. That's what he would do. The crush of his soft carpets underfoot, the dim lighting of his office space, the shuffle of Nigel St. John's feet behind him... He hit the door to his office violently and shoved it open, releasing some of his rage into the gesture. His eyes alighted on the box and files open on his desk from Fane and he scoffed. Not ten hours ago had he received the package and all relevant information from Lieutenant Fane about Trask's association with Bureau 39. He'd been sitting here, going through as much random information as he could, trying to pull together twenty-year-old puzzle pieces—

“Sir, may I just—”

“No, Nigel, you may not.”

“I merely wanted to show—”

Lex flipped the banker's box over and sent the contents spewing onto the floor. That felt good. He picked up a small silver box and chucked it at Nigel's head. The man ducked, and Lex scowled. “You have the audacity to talk now? Fine. Let's talk.” He walked around his desk, feeling the heat of rage flaming at his cheeks. “Let's talk about you going behind my back, and superseding my orders to Miranda specifically, huh? Or how about—and this is good—deciding to *kidnap* my girlfriend's sister for half a week? And what about that nonsense about not being on my side?”

“I can explain,” he said carefully, his words metered and even.

Lex glared at him. “Can you? Because I'd love to hear what excuse you have. Just what the hell have you been thinking, Nigel?”

Nigel threw his hands up in the air. “I am the only one thinking clearly! Do you have any idea how much thought I've put into this? Yes, kidnapping Lucy Lane was not a part of the plan—and I told you Miranda would be serious trouble if you let her come back—but trying to manipulate that freak of nature—that was a good plan. Foolproof, even. Almost.”

Lex cupped his face in his hands and rubbed at his eyes. “You wanted the *Man of Steel* to be under the influence of a pheromone. Great idea.”

“Yes, it was a great idea. We need to know the man's weaknesses—”

“I'm through trying to take on that prick! Hiding behind all that spandex and hair gel!” Lex exploded, silencing Nigel. He scoffed at the man. “All this time I've been... wasting. Worried about him, or Kent... when I could have just been content and happy, and spending my efforts focused on Lois. Now...” Lex looked down at his hands, shaking now, eyes welling up. He swore under his breath, trying to keep his anger up and keep his burning tears at bay. Lois would never take him back after this. Assuming she even knew he was a part of it... no, she had to know by now. Surely the superhero wouldn't keep it a secret. He swallowed

down the bile creeping up into his throat. What had he done?

“We can still defeat him, sir. If we just don’t give up, I have a plan—”

Lex sank into his desk chair, defeated. “There is no we, Nigel. We’re through.”

Nigel froze. “Sorry?”

He let his eyes drift close. He hated to do this, but Nigel had gone too far. “I need you to leave. You’re fired.”

The resounding silence almost made him wonder if the British ex-spy had already left, but Lex knew better than that. At this point, he just wanted to be left alone to wallow in misery.

“You’re not serious.”

Lex’s eyes fluttered open, irritation flaring up once more. “You think I’m joking.”

“I know this went poorly, but—”

He catapulted from his chair and pulled open the middle left drawer of his desk. He shuffled around for the catch on the false bottom, and released it to brandish a gun. Nigel took a step back, and Lex smiled. “Do you know what this is? This was my father’s gun.” He ran a hand over the weapon affectionately. “It’s a .42 caliber Merwin and Bray revolver. A lovely family heirloom. To the best of my knowledge, it’s only been fired twice. Once, when my father finally did the world a favor and took a bullet to the brain, and again, when that asshole found it and used it as a show of his strength.”

He glanced up at Nigel’s face, somewhat pleased with the sinking look of fear in his eyes. He’d never been able to scare the MI-6 agent before. “I keep it as a reminder: that I am not a bad guy. My father—now he was a bad guy. Clark Kent—he’s a bad guy, but I don’t even know if he’s as bad as Lionel Luthor once was. But the Man of Steel... he’s an inconvenience. He’s no god, like the masses seem to think he is, and he’s clearly not perfect. But going after a so-called superhero? You’re trying to paint me a villain, Nigel.”

“He’s more than an inconvenience, sir, he’s a menace.”

“He sure didn’t want me dead when you were holding a gun to my throat, did he?”

St. John gaped helplessly, searching for his words. “I’m trying to protect you.”

Lex scoffed again. “Well then, you’re relieved of your duties. I no longer require your protection. Now get out, before I find a need to use this gun a third time.”

Nigel stood there silently, grasping for the right reply, but Lex was done arguing. He packed his gun away once more, closing the drawer soundly. The end of an era. Nigel and Lex no more.

“You’ll live to regret this. You have no idea what I’ve sacrificed for your sake.”

“Well now, that’s your own damn fault, isn’t it? You backed the wrong horse.”

Nigel St. John squared his jaw firmly and stood tall. He straightened out his rumpled jacket, tugging at his sleeve politely. “It would seem I have.”

Lex gestured at the door pointedly.

“Oh, and one last thing. When they find my body—if they find it—watch your back that Kent doesn’t pin it on you. You’re not wrong about him. He’s absolutely out to get you, and he’s easily a worse man than your father. And you will live to regret this moment.”

Lex furrowed his brow at that, but Nigel turned on his heel and stormed out of his office firmly.

“Lucy. Lu-cy,” she sing-songed lightly, fingers toying with the sweat-slicked bangs plastered to her sister’s brow. A slight flutter to her eyelids had Lois sitting up ramrod straight in a flash. She hit the call button behind her sister’s hospital bed and she focused her attention back on her sister.

“Come on, Luce. Wake up.”

Lucy stirred and slowly her eyes opened. A wave of relief

crashed over Lois, and she tackled her sister in a fierce hug. “Oh, thank God.”

“Lois? Wh-where am I? What’s going on?”

A nurse came in and pressed to turn off the call button before shuffling her out of the way and doing a few checks on her sister. Panic made Lucy’s voice tight as she called out for her again, and Lois made her way back to the other side of the bed. She reached out for her sister’s hand and gripped it tightly.

“How are you feeling?”

Lucy closed her eyes again and breathed in deeply. “I feel light-headed. A little nauseous still. But better.”

Lois felt her heart calm down a little with those words. She hadn’t even realized how on edge she’d been this whole time. Finally she could breathe easy. “That’s good to hear. What happened? Did they... They didn’t... hurt you, did they?”

A soft, sad smile crossed Lucy’s face. Lois felt her stomach drop in the moments before Lucy spoke again. “No, not in any real way. They were pretty much just keeping me drugged, so I was pretty out of it.”

“Then are you sure—”

“Yes, Lois, I’m sure.”

A sigh of relief eased past her lips. She leaned her forehead against their joined hands. She didn’t know what she’d have done if anything worse had happened. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Lucy shook her head back and forth sharply, bringing Lois’ attention back up to her face. Her heart ached for her sister as tears welled up in her eyes. “I don’t know how you live like this, Lois. You know you were their real target. They didn’t even want me. You go through scrapes like this just about every other week, and I can’t even handle it once. I don’t even know if I can go home again.”

“No,” Lois cut in firmly, brushing her sister’s hair back. “You can’t think of it that way. It’s not special that I get in trouble all the time and you think I can miraculously handle it. You react how you want to react. Feel your feelings.”

Lucy took a deep shuddering breath in and brushed her tears away. “I guess. Right now I mostly feel... off.”

“That’s understandable—”

“No, like there’s something else wrong. I don’t feel right in the head still.”

Lois froze. That wasn’t a good sign. She glanced at the nurse, who seemed to be surreptitiously checking her charts in the corner while eavesdropping. She reached an arm out and felt her sister’s forehead. “You don’t seem to have a fever or anything,” she started hesitantly, “so that’s good.”

A knock on the door drew her attention away, and she smiled softly when she saw Kansas standing there. An image of him in the Suit superimposed over him in her mind, and she shook her head wryly to dispel it. It was hard to believe still, even with all the evidence she’d found, and the fact that he’d admitted it, and that he’d flown her here from his place. His grin was soft and a little goofy, and put a flutter in her stomach. “Everything all right in here?”

Lois nodded, and turned to look back at her sister with a smile.

Except Lucy wasn’t smiling. Her pupils were blown wide, and her expression was some cross of anger and something more. That pit was back in Lois’ stomach.

“What’s handsome doing here?”

“Um,” Lois hedged, scrambling for the right response that wouldn’t give away his cover, “we rode over here together. We’ve been working on finding you—”

“You two shagging?”

Lois’ eyebrows rocketed skyward at both the accusation and the odd term. “What? No! Luce— where did you—why would you—”

“That’s a shame,” she purred, batting her eyes at Clark across the way. Lois felt disgusted, and turned to look back at her—

Clark. He seemed as bewildered as she did. “He is a fine-looking specimen. Maybe one of these times, you and I can go a few rounds, Kent.”

“Lucy!”

She hadn’t expected Kansas’ cheeks to flame as red as they did, and if the situation weren’t so tense and awkward she would have laughed. He cleared his throat. “Why don’t I go, uh, get us some coffee?”

“Clark—”

He was bounding out of the room before she could even get another word in. Lois turned back to her sister, flabbergasted. Lucy dissolved into manic-sounding giggles at her expression. “Oh, Lois, lighten up. If you’re not together, then what’s the harm in having a little fun?”

“Lucy,” she groaned, cradling her forehead in her hands. This would be just her luck. Her sister gets affected by the same pheromones she was, and of course they’d be fighting over the same guy. “It’s the pheromones talking,” she told herself as much as she was telling Lucy. “It’s not you. You’ll bounce back.”

“If you two aren’t together yet, then why are you together all the time?”

Lois leaned back in her chair. “Clark and I are friends. Good friends.”

“Nigel seemed to think you were more than that. Said he had proof.”

She was surprised by that bit of information. Firstly, that Nigel was there in the first place, that Lucy had recognized him from their few encounters together, and that he would reveal any amount of information to Lucy, the prisoner. “Nigel told you that?”

“No, he told Lex that.”

Her blood went cold. “Lex was there?”

“Yep.” Her sister’s flippant manner sent another chill through her bones. “He’s handsome too, although not nearly as handsome as Clark. Miranda seemed pretty focused on Nigel, which I guess I can get, in a kinda twisted way. You know, in an authority-figure, daddy-issues, hot-for-teacher kind of way. But still, wouldn’t be my first choice in a lineup—”

“Lucy, back up. I need you to focus, okay?” She grabbed her sister’s hands between her own, probably squeezing a bit too hard to keep her attention, but it worked. Lucy looked up at her, a little of the dazed look starting to dissipate again. “Who was in that... that bunker with you?”

“It started out with just Miranda—she’s the one who kidnapped me. Then came Nigel and then Lex.”

Lois’ heart raced uncontrollably. “So Lex was involved.”

“Yeah. And you definitely need to break up with him. He’s a bad guy, Lois.”

“I know,” she admitted, a measure of relief settling over her and lifting the pressure in her chest. She needed to end things with Lex, especially after all this. Hearing her sister confirm it took a little of the blame off her shoulders. It wasn’t all her fault. She was right to suspect him.

“And if I’m perfectly honest,” Lucy continued, starting to sound more like her normal self again, “I’m not so sure if Clark is a good guy either.”

Her heart stopped for a second, but then she shook her head. “Lucy, this isn’t some game so you can get your paws on Clark yourself. This is serious.”

“I’m being serious,” she whined, but her eyes were earnest. “Lex and Nigel were talking about him. They don’t like him.”

“Of course they don’t. Because they’re the bad guys.”

Lucy shrugged and folded her hands in her lap. “If you say so.”

Lois pursed her lips and turned to look at the nurse in the corner, who was scribbling away in a notebook. Lois stood up slowly and walked over to her. “Excuse me, I know she was

exposed to the pheromone solution, but how long do you think she’s going to be affected?”

The nurse looked over her shoulder at Lucy and smiled grimly. “Honestly, we don’t know. It was a one hundred percent compound. We’ve never dealt with anything like this before. It seems to come and go in waves. We’re going to keep her under observation for a few more days, see what pans out. We might be able to treat her with some medication for manic-depressive mood disorders, but we might also have to send her to a specialist.”

Lois bit her bottom lip. That wasn’t good news. If she’d been hit with a diluted solution and still been out of it for three days, there was no guarantee for Lucy. Her stomach churned and she glanced back at her sister disconcertedly.

A soft rap on the window drew her attention away, and she smiled at Kent, apparently too afraid to come back in her sister’s room. She rolled her eyes and made her excuses to Lucy and the kindly nurse before following after him. He smirked conspiratorially at her and pointed up. Lois glanced upwards in confusion and back down, only to find him already making his way towards the elevators. She hurried after him, catching up just in time to beat the doors closed, giggling.

“You couldn’t have just asked if I wanted a smoke?”

He grinned—that wonderful, knee-weakening, mega-watt grin she loved so much. “That’s no fun.”

The doors opened back up, and she followed him to the stairwell, where they took the last few steps up to the roof, and he pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. She noticed that he almost always smoked her brand now, and a flush ran across her cheeks.

“Now that you, uh, know... you know... I probably shouldn’t be encouraging your smoking habits.”

Lois scoffed and snatched the cylinder out of his hands.

“What, now you have an image to uphold, Mr. Superhero?”

He huffed a laugh and shook his head mirthfully. “No, it’s just... These things aren’t good for you. I’m pretty much invulnerable, so it doesn’t have an effect on me, but you—”

Lois put a hand on his chest to stop what she thought might become a world-class ramble. “Let me set one thing straight here. My decision to smoke or not smoke has nothing to do with you. As with every decision I make—they’re all my decisions. So before you get your tights in a bunch just know that I don’t do anything I don’t want to do and give me a light.”

A smirk pulled at his lips, and he nodded. “All right. Here, hold still and breath in.”

Confusion furrowed her brow, but she leaned in with the barrel between her lips and did as he asked. He glanced around before pulling his glasses down the bridge of his nose and his eyes glowed with a reddish tint. A tingle ran through her as she realized what he was doing, before she remembered his instruction and she dragged in a deep breath.

He smiled broadly at her following plume of smoke and pushed his glasses back up satisfactorily. “I’ve always wanted to do that. I can’t light my own that way.”

Lois spluttered a laugh at that, tension evaporating between them. A peaceful silence took up residence with them as they both stood there enjoying their break. The first break they’d really gotten in a week or two. “So why do you smoke? If you’re not affected by it.”

He shrugged and released a puff of smoke into the air. “Why do I drink alcohol? Or coffee? It’s habit, mostly. Fixes your mindset. A relaxing pattern.”

Lois hummed. “Same as the rest of us then, mostly. Just without the impairments.”

“Some would say without the good parts,” he joked.

A stray thought came and went, distracting her from their temporary bubble of calm. She looked darkly at the ground. “So how long have you known about Lex?”

He'd been holding his smoke in his mouth for a minute now, but her question made him cough and lose his concentration, and all the smoke came pouring out. "What?"

"Lucy told me Lex was there with Nigel and Miranda when you rescued her. Why didn't you tell the cops that? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, for starters, I didn't expect you to figure out who I was."

Anger filled her up again, and their bubble popped. She glared daggers at him and took another drag off her cigarette. "That's right. Why on earth would you stop lying to me? It's not like my life or my sister's life was on the line or anything. Better let me go on thinking everything is situation normal, right?"

"Lois—" he began, but she held up a hand.

"No, I'm serious. If it's so important to you that you put Lex Luthor away for being the Boss, you should have come to me with all the facts in the beginning. Even if you didn't want to tell me your secret identity, you could have come to me in the costume and said 'By the way, you're dating a sociopath.' No muss no fuss."

"Be honest, would you really have believed me if I came up to you with barely knowing each other and told you about Lex?"

"Yes!" she cried, waving her cigarette through the air on a broad gesture.

His gaze was patronizing, and her stomach twisted with doubt as he spoke, because he was right. "No, you wouldn't have. Not without evidence. I know you, Lois. You would have thought I was some crazy alien, or if I'd said it as myself, you'd have just called me jealous. Which you did. I needed to amass my evidence, slowly build it up, then present my case. Just like I did. There's... some things I know as"—he glanced over his shoulder, as though ensuring they were alone—"as the man in the cape, that the man in glasses couldn't possibly have learned on his own. So I had to show, not tell."

"You lied to me."

The hurt was written plainly across his face, and Lois folded her arms. He made plenty of valid points, but she was right on this one, and he knew it. "Yes."

"I don't appreciate being lied to."

"I know," he admitted, and flipped his glasses up so they rested on the top of his head while he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"And you should have told the cops everything about what happened with Lucy."

He sighed. "Look, I can trust Henderson, I think. But Lois, if Lex Luthor is the Boss, there's no way he doesn't have eyes and ears inside the police force. I don't want to tip my hand until this case is completely shored up."

Lois could understand the logic on that, and she almost hated him for it. "We can trust Henderson. I've known him a long time—he's a good cop. He'll be on our side."

Clark inclined his head slightly and conceded. "We can bring him in when we have a little more to work with."

She sighed heavily and leaned against the building's edge. It was nice working things out like this. Compromising. Discussing. For the first time in her life, Lois felt like she had an actual partner. It was almost a scary thought.

"Can I make the case that you lied to me also?"

"I never—"

"About your feelings for me?"

She shut her mouth with an audible click, and the heat in her ears told her she was blushing hard. "I do not—"

"Ah-ah-ah. No more lying, right?"

She glared at him, suddenly unhappy with this two-way street they were on. "Okay. Maybe somewhere, buried incredibly deep inside me, is some eensy-weensy, microcosmic although highly unlikely possibility that I could feel some sort of unmotivated and

completely unrealistic attraction to you, and the pheromones brought it out."

A grin pulled at the corners of his lips and he flipped his glasses back down to rest on his face. "As long as you're being honest with yourself, Lois."

She smiled and turned away bashfully. She couldn't believe he was going to call her on this now of all times. Where did her high ground go? She bit down on her cheek and leaned her head out over the edge of the building, looking down at the street below.

His warm, large hand landed softly on her shoulder, and she turned to look up at him. Somehow he filled her personal space, and Lois didn't seem to be bothered in the least. "Don't lean out too far, wouldn't want to have the guy in tights come and rescue you."

"Something tells me he wouldn't mind," she quipped.

A spark ignited in his eye, and he smashed the butt of his own cigarette before turning back to her and cupping her face in his hand. "Any chance to sweep you off your feet?"

Her eyelids fluttered closed gently, and he sealed his lips against hers.

Chapter 50: Cowboy Casanova

The yellow tape stared back at her fearlessly. As though they were locked in some staring contest to the death, and Lois was losing. She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes. She could do this. Her place had been broken into on multiple occasions before. Hence her intricate system of locks. She didn't know why this one felt so different.

She shifted on her feet. She did know the difference. This one was about Lucy. And was perpetrated by Lex. The level of betrayal and violation was instrumentally worse.

Eyes forward and head held high, she strode forward firmly through the tape and into her apartment. Signs of Henderson were all over the apartment, from the little yellow number tags to the way some things had been stacked and catalogued. She fought the twist in her stomach as she absorbed it all again. It was still a mess, possibly even more so now than it had been when she'd left it. She set her purse down on the corner of her couch, about the only surface left uncovered and felt the finality creep in around her.

Poor Lucy.

She shook herself and carefully trod to her kitchen. She couldn't think about it right now. She couldn't think about how her sister had been ripped from her home, held against her will, and possibly changed forever. She couldn't think about how Lex was responsible, that it was all some ploy to win her back. She couldn't think about Clark being—

"Dammit!"

The puddle of water at the base of her fridge had her cursing a blue streak under her breath and she scrambled to where her freezer door was slightly ajar. She opened it wide and stared at the melted disaster, particularly dismayed at the chocolate ice cream dripping down the side of the door. Lois tossed her hands up with a mirthless laugh. "Perfect. Just perfect."

She shut the door firmly on that disaster, saving it for another day.

Her poor sister. God, how awful a person was she? She was gone for days, chasing after Kent, when she already had a boyfriend. Not a second thought about her kid sister. Or Lex. Even though she knew Lex was a bad guy and she should have been keeping an eye out for him.

You were affected by the drugs. You weren't in your right mind. You can't possibly blame yourself for that.

Clark's voice soothed her in her mind, but she pushed it staunchly away. She didn't deserve soothing or pity or excuses. Besides, it was really his fault anyway. If he wasn't off playing hero, she never would have been exposed to the love potion to

begin with.

“Kent.” She spat the name out irritably, simultaneously forcing down the fluttering in her stomach at the name, and paced back across her kitchen. This whole time, he had been lying to her. Were there no honest men left in the world, or did she just seem to attract all the crappy ones? At least Clark’s excuse was a noble one. Lois swore and wiped her shaky, clammy hands on her slacks. She needed another cigarette to process this. She had to get her nerves under control.

She searched through her purse frantically, cursing when she couldn’t find anything. Her hands flew across the contents of her purse, shoving a cylinder of lipstick aside, shaking past her keys, receipts and a pack of gum. Her heart in her throat, she emptied her purse onto the floor, adding to the mess. No cigarettes. She clutched at her hair and tried to breathe deeply.

She flung open the door to the kitchen cabinet with gusto and poked around. She inspected the shelf with a critical eye. No cigarettes. Damn, where had she left them? Her heart started pounding as the events of the past day—was it two days?—finally crashed over her in a rush. She chewed her fingernail and desperately tried to think where else she might have any hidden.

She would have found it by now, if Nigel hadn’t already.

“Oh God.” She cupped her face in her hands and sank into the only upright chair in her kitchen. She smoothed her hands across her brows to press at her temples. Her fingers were shaking. She pushed harder trying to still her digits from pressure alone.

It was all wrong, so very wrong. Anger welled up inside her, and in the span of a few breaths, she got up and crossed the kitchen to grab her phone and dial a number she knew by heart. She seethed as the dial tone went through, teeth grinding and fingers drilling into the counter.

The beep of the answering machine filled her with more rage, and she spat his name into the receiver like a curse. “Lex. You—I can’t believe—I...” She swept her hair back heavily and braced a hand against her brow. “I don’t have the words for how angry I am right now. I don’t understand what’s going on anymore... All I know is I’m through. The lies, the deception, the kidnapping my sister and trying to poison me with a love drug—I refuse to subject myself to this any longer. And you can make all the excuses you want, but we were over long before Kent came into our lives. You’re a monster, and someday you’ll get what’s—”

The beep of the machine cut her off, and she frowned at the handset. Dumb timer. She hung up the phone and tossed it onto her counter. Fine. Better that the threats weren’t recorded anyway. If she’d learned anything from her father, it was how to shake an investigation. Nothing in writing, nothing recorded. No visible bruising. No paper trail to be seen, just in case.

Lois shook her head and closed her eyes again, trying to summon some amount of peace. She was spiraling and she was spiraling fast. She just wished someone was there to catch her when she inevitably fell.

Clark’s warm brown eyes flashed across her brain and her heart fluttered a moment before she batted the imagery away. She couldn’t possibly be thinking about that right now. It didn’t matter that he was the only shred of calm in her life, that his lips sealed against hers washed away the rest of the world. It didn’t matter that his eyes connected with hers on a spiritual level, or that his knowing smirks were highlighted by the little mole resting over his lip, or the fact that his tights left absolutely *nothing* to the imagination and he was drop-dead gorgeous...

And he cared. She worried her bottom lip between her teeth, because he actually cared. And right now, she needed somebody else to care. Because she couldn’t spend another moment caring for herself without losing it.

That kiss had been wonderful. She breathed in deeply and grounded herself in the memory of his lips against hers on that rooftop, trying to calm herself. She knew what she had to do.

The space of his apartment seemed grossly oversized tonight. Clark entered the space with a sigh trapped in his chest, unable to completely release it. Something felt off, like maybe he’d missed something, some small aspect that was going to screw everything up. He racked his brain for any detail of the past few days that might have thrown him off track. They’d found Lucy, and she didn’t appear to have any inside information on him from Nigel. Which was good. That meant Nigel hadn’t said anything in front of her, which meant Miranda also didn’t know.

Luthor’s thoughts would remain to be seen.

Nigel escaping hadn’t been the plan. He would have to be dealt with, and quickly. Nigel was a pendulum swinging over his head. He didn’t know how much longer he could escape unscathed.

And he’d gotten so close with Lois, too. Shame.

His footsteps fell heavily and echoed loudly, the only sound in the silent loft, but he was in no mood to fly. He should have been. He should have been quite literally over the moon, ecstatic. Because Lois had kissed him; of her own free will, and with purpose. Sure, he’d cherish the hot and heavy make out session with under-the-influence-Lois for as long as he lived—logged in a very sexy, twisted mental file he could call upon when needed—but ecstatic he was not. The only thing he could think about was time and how little he had left of it.

He turned the corner to his bedroom and even that seemed cavernous. For as much of a mess Lois had made in it, it still felt empty, the items strewn about farther and farther apart from each other. Clark sped around the room and righted everything to its proper homes. A small smile pulled at his mouth. She’d just been so mad, she told him. She’d felt so maligned by him shipping her off like some “damsel in distress” that she’d lost it. She went to his room, went in search of something she could blackmail him with, write a scathing story about, and found more than enough.

Her words.

He thanked his lucky stars that the room she’d chosen to ransack was his bedroom and not his office. As bad as it was with her finding out he was a literal hero, the other thing would have been way worse. Then he’d really be on his own.

He looked about himself and realized he was alone anyway.

Clark scrubbed his hands over his face and flopped onto his bed. The carousel was spinning now, and he wasn’t the one turning it anymore. Time to jump off or ride it out.

Lead settled in his belly at the prospect of having to make a decision.

He couldn’t turn back now. He was in over his head anyway. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t stop. Luthor was so close to being done for that he could taste it. It tasted like blood in his mouth. It tasted like victory. He wanted so badly for Lex Luthor to pay for what he did. For his father. For his mother. For Lana. For himself.

He was so. Damn. Close.

But for the first time, Clark realized that he might just end up over the cliff with him.

He slammed his fists against his forehead forcefully, eyes squeezed shut. He had to get out of here. He was losing it, locked up with his own thoughts. Clark liked to make sure he wasn’t alone with his thoughts often.

The ding of his elevator chimed softly, and in a flash he was at the doors, fully alert. What if it was Nigel, or the police, or Lex—no, he rationalized. It couldn’t be any of them. Maurice would have phoned to alert him. He didn’t have long to panic though because the doors slid open and there was Lois Lane.

His heart skipped a beat before landing back into a steady rhythm, and he rocked back on his heels, hands fisted in his back pockets. “Lois! What... what are you doing here?”

She seemed as taken aback by his sudden presence as he was hers, and took a moment to gather herself before stepping off the

elevator.

“I thought you were heading home?”

“I was. I did.” She took a deep breath and locked her eyes on his. Clark swallowed, and a thousand reasons for her visit raced through his mind. “Look, let me—just—let me. Okay?”

He nodded wordlessly, begging silently for her to get on with it.

“I... I’m not a damsel in distress. Okay? You should know me well enough by now to know that. And I’ll be damned if you think I’m anything less than a strong, capable, independent woman. You might be the one with the superpowers, but I could be a superhero in my own right just by sheer force of will. So don’t get on my bad side, got it?”

“Got it.” Clark nodded fiercely, fighting the small smirk that was threatening his lips and the tightening in his stomach. “You’re already a superhero.”

A flicker of a smile crossed her lips before disappearing and she huffed, “Damn straight.”

The imagery in his brain teased him with thoughts of Lois in spandex and thigh-high boots. He knew he was already on uneven ground but the temptation was too much to bear, “What would you go by, Ultragirl?” A smile curved on his lips as he continued, “Huntress? Dream Girl?”

“Woman,” she corrected.

“Right, Ultrawoman”—he licked his lips at the mental image in his brain—“I’m sure I can find you some nice thigh-high boots and a scrap or two of spandex—”

“Kent.”

“Hmm?” She broke him away from his increasingly lustful thoughts, and he smiled at her innocently.

“We’re not into role playing territory yet, pal.”

Scorching fire zipped through his veins and he bit down on his lip hard, because *yet*... “Understood.”

“And I’m not anybody’s Ultrawoman anyways. I can take care of myself. I can protect myself. And it takes a little more than a measly break-in to rattle Lois Lane.”

“Of course.”

She eyed him carefully a few long seconds. “Good. Now, that being said, on a completely unrelated note... My apartment is a little depressing right now, and I don’t want to be alone with my thoughts or I might track down Lex and murder him myself... So can I crash here?”

A small laugh bubbled up in his throat at the fact that their trains of thought were running on parallel tracks. She shot him a sharp glare and tightened her grip on the duffel bag he just realized she was carrying on her shoulder. He raised his hands defensively. “Sorry. I’m not laughing. Strong, independent woman.”

She looked at him pointedly.

“Yes! Of course. Make yourself at home.”

She glared at him suspiciously as she walked past him into the space, making sure to hip-check him with her duffel bag. He chuckled at her as he followed, the room already feeling more full from her presence alone.

Lois unceremoniously dropped her bag on his couch and he caught himself laughing again. “What are you doing?”

She looked at him like he’d grown an extra head. “I like you and all, Kent, but I doubt I should be sleeping in your bed already. Your couch is sinfully comfortable anyway.”

Blood flow switched tracks once again and Clark cleared his throat nervously while stepping smoothly behind his recliner chair. “Uhh, no. I just meant—there’s more than enough space for you in here. I can show you to a guest bedroom?”

It was her turn to look sheepish and confused, a blush crawling across her delicate features and sending his heart on a roller coaster again. He grabbed her bag for her—considerably overpacked—and gestured for her to follow him.

Clark set her bag gently on the neutral-toned bedspread, turning to her with an equally neutral smile as she observed the room. “Well. Here we are. Like I said, make yourself at home. You’re welcome here anytime, so I genuinely mean that.” She hardly acknowledged him, instead walking around him distractedly and wringing her hands. He noted the action with a hint of confusion. “Is there anything else I can do for you? I can, uh, get you something to drink, or a sleeping pill, or something to eat?”

Lois shut her eyes and shook her head firmly. “No, I’ll be fine, thanks.”

He looked askance at her dubiously but shot her a shy smile. “Okay. Just let me know if there’s anything you need.” He landed his fist in his other palm, unsure of himself for the first time in a long time and he slowly turned around.

“Oh, there is one other thing...”

He turned back on his heel with a question in his eyes, and suddenly he found his arms full of Lois Lane as she launched herself at him. Surprise sliced through him as she slammed her lips against his. His arms came up around her slowly as he processed what was happening, and he pulled her tight against him. Her lips were soft and plump and her breath was hot against his as he pulled back from her gently. “Lois—”

“Shut up.”

“You’re—”

She cut off his question with another kiss and the wrap of her arms around his neck. Her lithe body draped against him gloriously, and Clark shivered. She was perfect. Her breasts pressed into him. Her tongue in his mouth. Her fingers threading through his hair.

His fingers grazed her skin where her shirt rode up, and a tingle of anticipation ran through him. He slid a possessive hand underneath the material up to her rib cage and held her firmly while his other hand skated down to the jut of her hip bone. The swell of her unfettered flesh rested against his knuckle and he groaned. Oh, God. She wasn’t wearing a bra? He hesitated half a second before reaching up to take hold of the tender flesh and squeezed, wrenching a harsh gasp from her throat and she tore her lips away.

She couldn’t do this to him again. There was only so much a man could take, super or not. He refrained from kissing her again to ask her what he wanted to know. “Lex?”

She shook her head fiercely, a fire burning in her eyes. “Nope.”

And with one word, hope filled him again, and he slanted his mouth against hers passionately. He walked her back into the wall and pinned her with his body. She gave as good as she got. Legs twined around his hips, arms snugly wrapped around his neck and fingers gripping his hair tightly, a little forcefully. He adjusted her position against him, hands on her hips, and his eyes fluttered shut. “Mmm. Lois...”

She gripped his locks and forced his head back, scraping her teeth sharply against his jaw, and he groaned. It was a delicious contrast to the slow, steady roll of her hips. He untangled her arms from his neck and pinned them against the wall above her head, taking back control. She shivered against him, and he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

“I take it back,” she panted, breath brushing hot and sticky against the side of his face. “Your bed might not be such a bad idea after all.”

Clark huffed a laugh across her skin. In a flash, he raced them across the loft to his bedroom, and Lois’ delighted squeal chased them all the way to his mattress.

Chapter 51: Wanna Play Cheat

Ronnie sighed as he stepped off the city bus, the sounds and smells accosting him. Central City wasn’t anything to sneeze at,

by any means, but Metropolis was on a whole other level. He slung his bag higher up on his shoulder as he looked out across the sea of people, trying to find a good mark. A pretty blonde walked past in a group of friends and briefly grabbed his attention—but no, no. His girlfriend would kill him. And anyway, he needed a loner, someone by themselves and not confident of it, maybe someone else new to the city.

Bingo.

His eyes alighted on a man in his maybe early thirties, by himself, looking at a wrinkled map with a bead of sweat on his brow. His brown hair was mussed significantly, a sure sign that he had been nervous and lost for a while now. Ronnie grinned and walked with a purpose in that direction, only to run straight into the man.

“Hey! Watch it—”

“I’m so sorry, my friend,” Ronnie said smoothly, placing a sturdy hand on his arm to stabilize him. “Are you all right?”

“N-no thanks to you,” he complained, and bent over to retrieve his map. Ronnie did the same, picking up another paper the man dropped.

“Here, let me get that. I’m sorry, again.”

The man waved him off. “It’s fine. I’ll live.”

Ronnie grinned. “Good. Hey, this is going to sound random, but do you know what the name of the next cross street is?”

“Uhh...” He twisted the map this way and that, trying to make sense of the directions. Oh, he’d found his mark all right. This was gonna be too easy. “It should be Park. No, no, La Brea?”

Ronnie chuckled. “It’s all right, pal. I was just hoping you might be able to help me out.”

“I-I can help you out,” the man stuttered, a note of offense in his tone.

“Hey, I don’t need anything from you. I can find my way around.” He gripped the strap on his pack a little tighter. “I was looking to see if anyone knew where the closest cheap room would be is all—”

He hesitated before responding. “Well, I don’t know if there’s another place around, but I’m staying at this place a few blocks from here.”

Ronnie grinned and clapped the man on the shoulder firmly. “Great! Would you show me where it is, if you don’t mind? It’d be a huge favor.”

The hesitation was engraved in worry lines on his face. “I suppose not.”

“Perfect! Name’s Ronnie, by the way.”

The man ran a hand through his hair nervously again, and begrudgingly gave his own name. “J-Jordan.”

“Well, I’m glad I ran into you, Jordan.” He grinned and shook the man’s hand, making note of the odd-looking class ring he wore. He ran his tongue over his teeth and debated just how far he could take this. “And I didn’t think I’d make any friends in this city.”

Jordan smiled back at him tremulously, and Ronnie couldn’t squash the adrenaline running through his veins. All he needed now was the man’s room number and a quick pickpocket, and then he’d be set up for the night. He darted his eyes down to the ring once more, quickly, and dismissed the idea. It probably wasn’t worth anything anyway. Besides, he had other things to worry about without this guy putting the cops on his tail. He had to focus if he was going to find Kent.

This trip had better be worth the effort.

“You can’t stop us, old man!”

“No, my dear, you’re mistaken. I’m not going to stop you. But the Metamide-5 will wear off soon enough, and you won’t be much of a threat when that happens, will you?”

Aymee and Patrick shared a look and looked back at the red vial of liquid in his hand, mesmerized.

“There’s plenty more where this came from,” Nigel added,

ensuring their rapt attention instead of just their envy.

“All right, talk. What do you want from us?”

Nigel smiled facetiously. “Oh, nothing much. I just need you to lure a reporter out here—how you do it is at your discretion, but it needs to be someone very specific, and I need you to hand her over to me immediately.”

They looked at each other again, minds working quickly, and it was starting to creep Nigel out. This was not a normal project, even if it was a successful one. And like hell were they getting any more of the Metamide-5 stuff. It was too wonderful a product, and with Dr. Carlton in jail, it was now a hot commodity. He needed to keep it for himself, stay one step ahead of Kent and Luthor.

Everything was wasted on the young anyway.

“Deal.”

His breath whiffed softly against the skin at her shoulder. She shivered slightly at the sensation, suddenly awake and alert. She bit her lip as she blinked out at the room. She’d woken up in here once before, but it felt different now. The dark tones of the room that were once imposing were now seductive; the silky satin sheets were luxurious instead of foreign and frigid.

The addition of his arm around her waist was intoxicating.

She hummed under her breath and snuggled deeper against him. He murmured something unintelligible against her ear, and pulled her closer into him. Every point of contact between them sent a shiver down her spine. She reveled in it. Slowly, she became aware that he was awake, his breath coming faster, spaced more evenly. She wrapped a leg between his behind her, and a low growl escaped from his chest. A smile pulled at her lips and she turned in his arms to face him.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” she replied, her grin starting to feel goofy at the surrealism of the moment. She turned to bury her face in the pillows and he laughed at her softly.

“Oh God,” she breathed into the stuffed down pillow. “This doesn’t have to be awkward, does it? Can we not be awkward?”

“No! It’s not awkward at all.”

“Awkward and—”

“Amazing.”

She flushed, glad her face was buried now. She peeked out at him with one eye, and her heart skipped a beat. His big brown eyes were shining at her with something shiny and hopeful and... could it really be love? Did he truly love her? She’d thought he couldn’t possibly be serious, before. But he was grinning like an idiot and staring at her with an open expression and a sparkle in his eye that she couldn’t put a name to otherwise. It didn’t look like lust—she was familiar with that expression now.

God, he was cute, with that little flop of hair hanging just over his brow.

He seemed to realize how long he’d been staring at her then, and shifted a little uncomfortably, maybe embarrassed himself. “How about breakfast?” His suggestion took some punch out of the air between them, and she could finally breathe again. “And then maybe we could go for a second round?”

He wagged his brows at her and her giggle burst out of her. “God, I feel like a teenager! Sounds good to me.”

“Well if you’re so eager, maybe we just skip breakfast—”

Lois put a hand out on his chest and shot him a patronizing glare. He pouted and jostled her against him again, setting her heart thrumming with electricity. “Breakfast. Breakfast sounds good.” She gathered up a sheet and slipped out of the bed, prompting a whistle from the peanut gallery. She made her way over to the bathroom before turning back for a second. “Besides,” she sniped back at him in a sultry tone, “wouldn’t it technically be round four?”

His jovial expression vanished, and *there* was that look of lust. She winked at him and shut the door on his face, ignoring his groan of frustration.

She couldn't have taken more than three minutes in the bathroom, but when she left the room marginally refreshed, Lois found herself blinking to make sure that she was seeing things correctly. His room was completely cleaned up: bed made, clothes off the floor and magically put away. They'd made a bit of a mess last night, she was a little proud to admit to herself. The smell of bacon and eggs wafted through the air to greet her, and he rounded the corner with two plates. Lois glanced over her shoulder and back at him, gesturing at the bathroom over her shoulder. "How long was I in there?"

He chuckled lightly and lifted a plate to gesture at the glasses on his face. Her expression must have read as surprise, because his excitement shifted into hesitation. "Is... is that all right? Sorry, I thought you knowing meant you'd figured—"

"No, no. It's perfectly fine. Just... still getting used to it, you know?" Clark slid the plates gently onto his end table and wiped his palms on his pants. She felt the need to reassure him. "I mean, I know you flew us to the hospital and all, and last night—well, you know how I felt about that—but it's just something that creeps up on you in the everyday stuff."

He sighed with relief and plopped on the bed, and her heart hurt for him a moment—for whoever in his past found out about his abilities and taught him it was bad. She resolved to fix that. She sank onto his side of the mattress and put a hand on his shoulder. "I think it's wonderful, Clark. I'm not just saying that. You could have just kept on hiding it forever, but you chose to use your powers, for good. If I'm completely honest, I'd probably—definitely—misuse that x-ray vision, at least."

He huffed a laugh at that, and nudged his glasses down the bridge of his nose. He gave her a prolonged once-over, and she felt like she was blushing from head to toe. "Don't tempt me."

She mocked affront, and snatched the spectacles off his face while he laughed. She scrutinized them carefully, holding them aloft in the light. She wondered how she'd never noticed it was just plain glass, a little fogged over. "Why the glasses anyway? You don't need them to see, obviously."

He took them gently out of her hands and carefully put them on her face. She grinned up him, the glasses too oversized for her features, and he chuckled and tapped her nose with a finger. A look of sadness creased the corners of his eyes, and he pulled back a second. "It's something I did after I left home growing up. At first it was a way to hide... separate the 'then' from the 'now.' But they kind of became a part of me. I liked the irony of it, hiding in plain sight. Not to mention, it's a nice reminder to not use my powers in public, keep myself in check."

She made a soft, sad sound at the back of her throat, and leaned up to give him a peck on the cheek. He grinned as his glasses jostled against his face, and turned to kiss her more fully. Lois twined her arms around his neck, threading her fingers through his hair. She wished she could wish away his sadness, but unfortunately they couldn't change their pasts. She knew that all too well.

Clark pulled back slightly, and took his glasses back off her face. He held them in his hands pensively, lips pursed. Lois clambered over him to reach her plate of food, and he shook himself. "Sorry. I got distracted—eat, please, before it gets cold."

Lois popped a piece of crisp bacon in her mouth and moaned a little at the taste. She hadn't realized just how hungry she was—they did burn a lot of calories yesterday. "It's okay. I'm very distracting, I know."

He smirked at her, and she grinned coquettishly. "Don't I know it."

They ate together in silence peacefully, each deep in their own thoughts. Lois knew they'd have to have a deeper conversation about all this, but so far this morning seemed to be going well. She didn't know what she was expecting, but she wouldn't have been surprised if he'd made an early exit just to avoid it. Maybe he

really was in this for the long haul. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear nervously and eyed him carefully as she spoke. "So... where do we go from here, Clark?"

He set his fork down carefully, chewing his food torturously slow. "Honestly? I'm not exactly sure."

That almost dumbfounded her. "All this time you spent pining after me, and you're telling me you don't have a plan for how this is going to work out?"

Clark shrugged and set his plate aside. "I had an idea of a plan. I really never thought it would come to pass." Lois scoffed incredulously. He was unbelievable. "This is really a first for me, you know."

"What is?"

He gestured vaguely through the air. "You, me, this—us. I want us. I want normal. I want normal with you."

Her mouth formed an "o" shape, and she felt like she'd been doused with ice water. What did that mean? He'd never had a real relationship before? Or what? "Haven't you ever been in love before?"

He looked up at the question, arched an eyebrow inquisitively. She flushed and rolled her eyes. "I said before."

He smirked, but the expression fizzled into a sad sort of smile. "Once, I think. When I was young."

"What happened?"

He busied his hands by taking her plate and stacking it on his on the table. Her eyes narrowed a little. He was fidgeting for time. "It's a long story. But it was my fault."

Lois hummed non-committally, letting his vagueness be for the time being. She'd circle back to this conversation another time. "Funny how things turn out. You think what you have will last forever one minute, then the next you're alone again."

"Lois," he said in a low voice, and he turned to face her more fully. "Nothing lasts forever, I know that. But, for as long as possible, I want something real with you. I want to be able to come home to somebody that knows me, really *knows* me, and to be able to talk about work and our goals and our struggles... Normal stuff. Relationship stuff."

Lois felt her heart swell achingly. His proximity and his enthusiasm were intoxicating. "I want that too."

"I've never had normal," he mused, eyes drifting down to her reddened lips and he swallowed thickly.

"Never?"

His eyes snapped up from her lips suddenly to look her square in the eye, and she saw another spark of sadness there. It made her want to take him in her arms and comfort him. "No. And it's not possible. My life... it will never be normal, Lois. I don't know what I would have to do to make it that way."

Lois moved to a kneeling position on the bed, and took his face between her hands and looked him in the eye. "Then we'll do our best to find our normal."

His eyes fluttered shut, and her heart fluttered along with them. A measure of relief spread across his face, and Lois leaned forward to seal her lips against his. He curled an arm around her waist, pulling her against him, and she stroked her fingers through his hair in a soothing motion.

Clark looked up at her, mouth ajar slightly like he had something to say, when a loud ringing sound cut him off. Startled, he looked over at his dresser, where his cell phone was ringing. He shot her an apologetic look and untangled himself from her gently. Lois plopped back to a seated position on his bed, waiting to find out who dared interrupt their first morning together.

A little thrill ran up her spine at that thought. Their first morning together. A twinge of guilt still pulled at her, but she quickly brushed it away. She wouldn't allow any negative feelings right now. This was the best she'd felt in a long time. It was like they were on a whole other playing field, miles above any of her past relationships. She didn't put a lot of stock in destiny, but they

felt like they were meant to be together.

“Yes? Oh, hi Perry. No, uh, no, not a bad time.”

Lois arched an eyebrow at him and threw her hands in the air exasperatedly.

He winced and mouthed a quick sorry to her. “Uh-huh. Yeah. Oh, no, don’t worry about—no, she’s fine. How do I, uh, what? I, um, ‘cause she’s... here.”

She flung a pillow at his head when she pieced together Perry’s question, which he promptly caught. He shrugged his shoulders at her and she rolled her eyes, leaping from the bed and holding out a hand for the phone. He shook his head and leaned away with the device. “Yeah, um, I figured she could stay here... for her safety after the whole ordeal—”

“Give me the damn phone,” she growled, and finally got him to surrender the device into her custody. She shook her head at him with a scowl. “You’re such a bad liar... Hi, Perry.”

“Uh, Lois! Surprised to find you there—”

“What do you want, Perry?” She sighed in exasperation, pinching the bridge of her nose. “You can’t be too surprised, you called Kent’s phone looking for me.”

“I’ve been calling your place since yesterday, and nothing. I heard about Lucy and a little of what happened. You okay, darling?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Lucy’s fine. What do you need?”

“No need to get irascible. Just checking on ya.”

“So is there not anything else you called about?”

She was met with silence for a beat, and she looked at Clark pointedly. He was listening too, brow pensive and furrowed. “Well, since you’re okay, there is the matter of those missing kids.”

Ice ran through her veins, and she sobered up fast. “I know. We’ve been working on it. We’re real close too—”

“Well, I might be closer. We’ve got one of them here, sitting just outside my office.”

Clark stood ramrod straight at those words, the panic and fear swirling with doubt and relief in his dark eyes. Lois put a hand on his chest, stilling him a minute. “Are you sure, Perry?”

“Yep. It’s the girl. Name’s Aymee Valdez.”

Their eyes met sharply, and Lois knew what he was thinking immediately. “We’ll be over there as fast as we can. Don’t lose that girl, Perry!”

She hung up before her boss could get any more words out, and turned to Clark with a slight stammer. “Look, I know it’s our first morning together and all, but—”

“We need to go help that girl.”

Lois smiled with a sad understanding. They were on the same page. Again. It felt good to be in synch. “Let’s get out of here.”

They entered the bullpen together, but kept an arm’s length of distance between them, just to not draw suspicion. Lois’ idea. He hated how smart she was; because he knew she was right to keep them as much of a secret as possible, but all he wanted to do was crush her body against his, kiss her in the elevator, up against the wall, maybe even the stair railing...

“Stop picturing me naked and get your head in the game,” she murmured under her breath so only he could hear. An amused grin overtook his features for a minute at her words—that she was able to read his mind so well, and that she was already making use of his powers. Of course, now that she’d mentioned it, it was really all he could see. On her desk, on the conference room table, on Perry’s desk, in a supply closet, on the copy machine...

“Stop it.”

He pouted a little. “Party pooper.”

She shot him a glare before opening the door to Perry White’s office and he ducked in behind her. Perry and Jimmy and Bill Henderson were all standing around the chair in the center, featuring none other than the young Aymee Valdez. A knot eased in his chest at the sight of her—alive and as far as he could tell

unharméd. He breathed a soft sigh of relief.

“Lane, Kent.” Perry nodded to each of them passively, as if he hadn’t called earlier and found them together. Clark would like to hate the man for interrupting their morning, but he would have been more upset if he hadn’t known about Aymee being okay.

Lois knelt down gently to the girl’s level in her seat, careful not to make any sudden moves or touch her in any way, which he thought was very considerate. He frowned as the thought developed more. Maybe too considerate. Like she understood what it meant to be in that situation herself, and that didn’t sit right with him. “Hello. Aymee, right? I’m Lois Lane. Are you doing all right?”

The young girl swiveled her gaze up to him and Clark schooled his features into a calm, passive smile. The last thing she’d need was any imposing men glaring at her. “Who is he?” she asked, eyes darting away from him quickly and back again.

“That’s my partner, Clark Kent.”

His eyebrows jumped up to his hairline. Partner? That was a big jump up from unwanted shadow. Clark beamed a little at the moniker, and chose to ignore Lois’ responding eye-roll. “You know, we spoke with your sister. She’s been worried sick about you.”

Aymee’s eyes tracked back to hers, full of hope and only a small amount of trepidation now. “You saw Ines?”

Lois nodded slowly. “Yes. She misses you. She’s never been without her sister before.”

Aymee looked to her shoes guiltily, only glanced up to give a wary look to Henderson and then himself again.

“Did you want to tell us what happened? Was there a reason you ran away?”

Stonewalled. The girl didn’t make a peep. Lois looked to him for help getting through to her, and Clark nodded. He crouched down as well, so as to not appear as formidable, and tried another tack. “It’s very nice to meet you, Aymee. Ines told me lots of fun stories about you guys. I wish I’d had a sister as cool and as loving as you when I was in foster care.”

That clicked with the girl, and she looked across at him curiously. “You were in foster care?”

He nodded, not daring to glance up at the stares he knew he’d be getting from the rest of the room. “Oh yeah. When I was nine, and then when I was eleven, until about fifteen, and then about a year and a half more when I turned sixteen. So you can trust me when I say I know how tough it is.”

She seemed skeptical of him, something he hadn’t expected to find in the eleven-year-old girl. “Prove it.”

Clark gaped at the girl for a minute, trying to come up with something to say that would convince her. “Okay. I don’t have any physical proof, really.”

“How did you end up in foster care?” She jutted her chin out proudly.

He croaked a little, looking across at Lois this time. She seemed as surprised as he did by the questioning, but a hint of curiosity lined her eyes as well. He supposed it didn’t make sense to lie at a time like this, so he provided a sanitized version. “My dad was taken to prison when I was nine. And my mom didn’t take it well.”

“Did she hurt herself? That’s what my mom did.”

His stomach flipped, and he looked across at Henderson, who pursed his lips grimly. His heart broke a little more for this girl, and he met her blue gaze with sympathy and not empathy this time. “In some ways, yeah. She did.”

Aymee scanned his eyes for any hint of deception, and leaned forward when she couldn’t seem to find any. She patted a hand on his knee gently. “I’m sorry that happened to you. I can tell it still bothers you.”

Surprise at her reaction ran through him and made him shiver. That was not a normal response from a young girl, whether she

sympathized or not. He glanced at Lois sharply, and cleared his throat. “Thank you. Uh—can I ask you a question now?”

She seemed to calculate the danger of that question behind her eyes, and eventually nodded. “Okay.”

He suspected he already knew the answer to this question, but he needed to hear her say it. “When Doctor Carlton would see you at school, did he ever give you any medicine?”

Her eyebrows jumped in shock, and she pulled back from him. Her eyes traveled around the room to find everyone’s grim, expectant expressions staring back at her. “You guys know about Metamide-5?”

Lois nodded slowly.

Aymee scowled and jumped out of her seat, wearing a completely different attitude now. She flipped her hair out of the collar of her jean jacket and straightened up. “Well, there goes that plan.”

Clark stood up as well and took a step back, confusion furrowing his brow. “What?”

“Sorry to waste your time, guys. I’ll be leaving now.”

“Aymee, wait,” Lois began, reaching out for the girl. Henderson appeared on edge too, but they were all being too tentative.

Clark physically blocked the door with his body and a frown. “No, you will not.”

“Out of my way, old man.”

He scoffed at that and crossed his arms. She thought she was all that, with her steroids and her attitude and her ability to throw them off track. It ended now. “You want to know something scary, Aymee? Sometimes, smarts aren’t all that matters. You can be the smartest person in the room, but that doesn’t matter if you’re not holding all the cards.”

“Kent.” Henderson’s voice was low with warning, and a tick of irritation pulled at his jaw.

“No. If she wants to think she’s an adult, then fine. Let’s talk like adults.” He looked down at the girl, who shifted on her feet uncomfortably. “Here’s how it is, Aymee. We apprehended Dr. Carlton. He’s in jail now. So that means no more Metamide-5 coming from him, and he’s the only guy who can make it. Now, it can’t be permanent, or you wouldn’t be here, fishing for something so you could get more. So you’re going to run out soon, if you haven’t already.”

“You don’t know that. We have another source.”

Clark smiled devilishly. “Oh do you now? Let me guess: tall, old, British guy?”

Her smug grin fell away instantly, and Clark took a little pleasure in being able to surprise her like that. Lois’ gasp from across the office told him maybe he’d said too much, but these kids were top priority right now. “We want to help you, Aymee. I know you don’t like feeling out of control, and Dr. Carlton convinced you that this is the best way to get some of your control back, but he lied. He was performing experiments on you, because he thought nobody was looking and nobody would care. Well guess what? I care. Lois over there cares. Inspector Henderson cares. Ines cares. And if you think being an adult is about taking care of yourself all by your lonesome, then you’re not as smart as you think you are.”

Tears brimmed in the girl’s blue eyes and she wiped them away firmly. “I don’t want to be stupid again. I’m sick of being stupid.”

Clark shook his head firmly. “You’re not stupid, Aymee. You’re very smart. Dr. Carlton wouldn’t have chosen you for this project if you weren’t. And besides, you’re just going to go back to normal for a little while, and you’ll get smarter every day.”

She sniffed and seemed to mull that over. Clark looked around at the room, gauging everyone’s reactions. Henderson seemed impressed, but disapproving. Perry and Jimmy were stunned. And Lois was observing pensively, brow knitted like she was still

trying to put together a puzzle. He looked back down at Aymee and smiled. “Now why don’t you tell us where the other boys are, and we’ll help you out.”

Chapter 52: Slippery

“I thought what you told Aymee about being an adult was very sweet.”

He smiled softly down at her where she stood in line in front of him. “You think?”

Lois nodded, leaning back against him slightly to look up and meet his gaze. “Spoken like a true lone wolf,” she quipped, measuring him up with her eyes subtly.

Clark smirked and pushed his glasses up his nose. “Yeah, well... those who can’t do, teach, right?”

She snorted. “Nerd.”

“Kent,” Henderson’s voice called out to him across the room. Clark frowned as the detective crooked his fingers at him.

“I’m gonna go see what he wants.”

“Fat chance, Kansas. *We’re* gonna see what he wants.”

Clark rolled his eyes, but was grateful for the buffer. They made their way over to the scowling inspector. “I’m not sure how good your hearing is, Lane, but I only called your shadow over.”

“Funny. You can talk to us both.”

Clark put a hand on her shoulder to calm her down and turned his focus to Bill. “What did you need?”

Henderson’s eyebrow arched, obviously not missing the gesture and the proximity between them. “Is there something I need to know going on here?”

Lois flushed with anger and Clark’s mouth fell agape. “No! None of your business!” she exclaimed in outrage.

“Lois—Bill, is now really the best time for this?”

“I don’t really think this should wait.”

“Well?”

“You described a person to Aymee after explaining Carlton was incarcerated.”

Clark sobered up, and all the severity of their predicament fell back around them. He nodded. “I did.”

“Want to tell me how you came up with that very specific description?” Henderson questioned, eyebrow arched disdainfully.

Clark shared a look with Lois and then glanced out at the empty alleyway now filled with cops, debating how much he could say. “It’s... a very specific description for a very specific person—”

“Bill”—Lois cut him off with a gentle hand to his diaphragm and kept her voice low and soft—“there’s a lot at stake here. I know you’re a trustworthy guy, and a good cop, but there’s a lot of people that aren’t. And just like you’re not always entirely forthcoming in your investigations, we can’t be entirely forthcoming in ours.”

Bill glanced out at his team of cops, the magnitude of what Lois had said slowly registering across his face. “So you think you know who this guy is, and you are investigating.”

Clark nodded his head firmly, never more sure of anything in his life, his heart pounding so hard that he was sure Henderson would hear it. “Absolutely.”

“And you’re aware that’s almost exactly how our neighborhood superhero described the man who kidnapped your sister?”

Lois looked sad for a moment, but nodded her head anyway. “I’m aware. And that doesn’t change our answer.”

Henderson pursed his lips and seemed to mull over his options. Clark shifted his weight on his feet, unsure as he waited, and finally spoke up. “Look, Henderson. We have a pretty good idea of what’s going on here, and it’s a bigger investigation than you think. But if all goes well today, maybe we can meet up and have a drink. Talk about this more.”

Bill grimaced and finally acquiesced with a nod. “Fine. But

I'm taking you up on that offer.”

Clark exhaled with relief as the man stalked away, doing the final checks on his guys before they raided the place. He'd hoped that their response was passable. He needed a little more time to gather his physical proof, organize his actual paperwork to pin on Lex. Tonight. He couldn't be caught off guard with this again.

“Hey, don't look so worried. It's all going to work out.”

A muscle in his jaw jumped. “It has to. Otherwise...” he let his voice trail off, thoughts spiraling down into words he couldn't say aloud. Otherwise Nigel would rat him out. Otherwise Lex wouldn't be ruined. Otherwise he'd get caught, go to jail. Otherwise he'd lose Lois.

Everything hinged on this handoff of information going smoothly.

“It will.”

He glanced down at her reassuring words. She didn't have any idea how comforting they were, even if it came from a place of ignorance. Clark darted his eyes around to see if anyone was watching, and smuggled her a quick kiss. She grinned against his lips before pulling away.

“Were you going to go, you know, help out?”

Her question was paired with that swooping gesture again, and he huffed a small laugh at the shorthand she was already developing for his alter ego. “I don't know. I figured I could help out if things get hairy, but for now... I can't see or even hear that Nigel's here. It might just be the kids—which would be great of course, for their sake. But if Nigel's not here—”

“Then how are we going to find him?”

His smile was tight, hints of his nerves pulling away at the expression. “Yeah.”

They watched from the sidelines as Henderson instructed Aymee to enter the building first, and they were to follow behind a minute or two later. The young girl steeled herself and followed directions—it seemed the serum was wearing off little by little. As the cops disappeared into the building, Clark allowed himself to get closer to Lois, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her into him. She smiled up at him and hooked an arm on his. He could allow himself a moment of peace. He wished that he could just fly her to his place and make a little better use of their time, but this was nice.

He wasn't entirely sure what to do from here anyway. This morning was unlike any previous mornings. It was soft and warm and tender, and Lois knew his big secret already. It was as close to normal as he'd ever had, downright domestic. And he hadn't hated it. But that probably had more to do with the company than with the setting.

His heart beat a little faster as he looked down on the top of her head, her raven-dark hair so soft and silky. He wanted to run his fingers through it again, but that would probably be too intimate a gesture in public. He'd honestly thought he'd care less afterwards, that she'd be out of his system. But if anything he only loved her more now than he did yesterday.

Holy crap. He really loved her.

“What are you overthinking up there?”

He huffed a laugh against her scalp and dropped a kiss to the top of her head. “I'm thinking about how amazing you are. And how much I don't deserve you.”

Lois turned around in his arms and leaned into him with her arms around his neck and a sappy smile. “I'm not some flawless gem you can wear around your neck, Kent. Even though I'm pretty damn flawless, and I just so happen to be in this position.”

He chuckled and adjusted his hold on her waist. “I used to own a diamond mine, Lois. I think I know a little something about flawless gems.”

She teasingly smacked his chest, and he beamed at her even as she gathered herself again. “If we're going to do this, we need to be fair to each other. Partners. Through thick and thin. So you can

call me on my garbage and I can call you on yours. Deal?”

He smirked. She continuously amazed him. “Deal.”

“Seal it with a kiss or it doesn't count.”

He chuckled again and leaned in—

A shriek from above tore his attention away, and he left her waiting on his lips.

“*Help! Somebody help me!*”

He pulled her arms off of him and only briefly catalogued her frown. “Sorry. It's Aymee. I gotta—”

“Go,” she stated firmly, pushing him away from her.

He made sure no one was looking and darted around the corner to change into his suit. He rocketed up the side of the building and found one of the boys holding Aymee halfway out the open window. Clark looked darkly at the boy and crossed his arms sternly. “Let her go.”

“Sh-she's a liar! She told us she was going to get us more of the Metamide-5, and instead she brought the cops?”

“You don't want to make this any worse for yourself. Why don't we all go back inside and resolve this?”

The boy glanced down at the streets below and back up at the hero nervously, even as Aymee whimpered. After a long moment of debate, he finally backed up, and Clark floated in through the window. “I heard there're some problems here. Where are the police?”

Aymee dashed away her frightened tears before replying. “They trapped them in the elevator. They knew they were following me. I don't know how—”

“Shut your face, Aymee!”

Clark glanced around the space, covered in wires and camera equipment and a small pile of duffel bags in the corner. A quick sweep with his x-ray vision revealed it to be stocked with cash. A wave of surprise washed over him, and he touched down on the ground gently. “Color me impressed. I didn't hear about any robberies recently.”

“Shows how much you know,” the main boy said snippily, arms folded and a smirk on his face.

“I'll tell you what it shows,” he said, floating in the air and folding his legs in a casual, seated position. The murmur of the other two kids amused him, but he kept his features schooled. “It shows ingenuity. Creativity. You can't buy smarts like that, and you certainly can't get it from a drug. The Metamide-5 might enhance your intelligence, but it's not you. You guys are the smart ones. I want to see what you can do.”

They shifted on their feet, and Aymee's whimpers quieted down as they contemplated his words. Clark knew he had it in the bag at this point. He gestured at the girl with a twinkle in his eyes. “Aymee figured it out. What's the point in being so smart if everything you do is credited to the drugs?”

Phillip shifted his weight nervously. “We're not that smart yet.”

“Then you're cheating.”

He watched as they each seemed to come to the right conclusion, and he smiled. “So. I'm gonna go get the elevator, and what do you say we get you guys back to normal life?”

His head started spinning the second he opened his eyes. The throbbing, aching reminder of last night's bender-turned-blackout was ever present, and Lex clutched at his head firmly, exerting enough pressure that some of the blood stopped rushing in his ears. His mouth was dry as a bone. He clenched his eyes shut firmly again at the glare of the... late evening light? He would frown, but his face hurt too much to move any muscles. He groaned loudly. How long had he slept? He couldn't remember getting drunk like that in ages. Drinking just to drink. Drinking to forget. He'd sworn he'd never do it again after that awful night in Kansas.

Kent.

He counted to three and took a deep breath. He had to get up.

As luxurious as his carpeting was, it was scratching at his face after sleeping there all night and day. He rolled over onto his side before giving up again, and sinking back down. Maybe he could just die here. That seemed easier. He lay there staring across his floors glumly.

Something glinted back at him, in the waning evening light as the sun began to dip beneath the Metropolis skyline. Lex frowned at it curiously. He didn't recognize it. Something silver? Hidden in the corner, underneath the table and the large potted plant.

A memory asserted itself, and an image. Looking through the police reports and crime scene photos. Reading Sheriff Harris' scrawl about young Clark Kent and a silver box that went missing. He fought the wave of nausea as he struggled to his feet slowly.

The box he'd chucked at Nigel's head.

He staggered over to it, and spent a solid minute trying to convince himself to bend over and pick it up, but every time he did, the aftertaste of bourbon and stomach acid burned its way up his esophagus. He leaned forward heavily, resting his hands on his knees. *You are not a young man anymore, Lex.* He girded himself, and heaved forward to pick it up successfully this time. A small grin twisted his lips, and he winced as he brought the box in close to his chest. The metal was cool to the touch, grounding him a little. Lex breathed in a few deep breaths and flipped the latch on the small lead box unceremoniously.

A sickly green glow greeted him the moment it was open, and his heart skipped a beat. A laugh bubbled up in his chest and he stared at it mesmerized. He ran a hand over his brow and swore. Lex had no idea what it meant for his plans, but he had one more piece to the puzzle. He licked his dry, cracked lips. "God damn green rocks."

Lois smiled up at the caped hero as he drifted into the window of the building high above her. Giddiness threatened to overtake her. He was wonderful, truly. She could hardly believe the whirlwind of events that brought them here, to this moment in their lives. Maybe destiny was real. She had a feeling deep down that this would be one of the most important relationships of her life. There was the real possibility that it would be the last one.

A gloved hand appeared over her face and covered her mouth firmly.

Time slowed down.

Her eyes widened as adrenaline shot through her veins. She tried to scream, but he smothered what sound he could, and then the jut of something hard and metallic in the center of her back stilled her.

"Hello, Miss Lane."

Her blood ran cold at the sound of his voice. Lois struggled valiantly against the old British butler, panic racing down her spine.

Nigel jostled her as he pulled her back with him. Her palms were sweating, making her grip too slick to fight back. *Crap.* He dragged her around the corner, out of sight of the building. Out of sight of Clark. Every step away from that building dug the pit in her stomach deeper, but he was stronger than her and clearly knew what he was doing. She dragged her feet across the concrete, trying to slow them, catching a heel in the crack of the sidewalk. Her heart pounded heavily. That was a good idea. She'd leave her shoes behind, so she could make a fast escape. Lois toed off the other shoe, and tried flinging it away to be noticed, when Nigel hefted her up so her feet weren't touching the ground. She kicked through the air with a mangled cry of outrage.

"Go ahead and try me, Miss Lane. I've got no loyalties left and you've cost me a lot more than you're worth alive. I'd be much obliged to shoot you." He pulled sharply on his next drag, and his other hand came up to press on her windpipe. Before she could even recognize what was happening, she found herself being stuffed into the trunk of an unmarked car. Fear zipped through her veins. This wasn't fair; her life was finally getting back on track

and things were going well—

"You must have some balls on you to kidnap me in a group of cops with the Man of Steel floating above. You'd better let me go before he finds you and trust me, you won't like it when he does."

He smirked at her and shook his head, and a sinking feeling knotted up her stomach once more. "Oh, I'm counting on it."

He slammed the lid of the trunk and Lois was entombed in darkness.

Chapter 53: Drag Me Down

Clark watched the last of the orphans get packed away in a squad car and felt a knot ease in his chest that had been there for weeks. They'd be okay. They were all okay. It was a small miracle, but it was a miracle nonetheless. He'd keep an eye out on them, from a distance. They'd shown incredible promise. Maybe when they grew up, he could find a use for them in the future...

He suddenly realized that there wouldn't be a future. He blinked in surprise at himself. He was close, so close to being done with all this revenge business. He had the girl, he had more money than he could ever need in his life, and he had plenty of plans in the works that pointed back to Lex Luthor as being the Boss. And as soon as he wrapped up that, it would be all over. That was the plan from the beginning.

He tried not to think too hard about how surprising that realization was.

"Hey, thanks again for all your help. Those kids almost had us. If not for you—"

He brushed aside Henderson's compliments. "No need to thank me. Just doing what I do."

"Well, we appreciate you doing it."

He smiled and nodded politely, and turned to greet Lois in hopes that she'd explain away Clark Kent's absence—

He froze. Lois was nowhere to be found.

"Excuse me, uh, Inspector? I thought I saw Miss Lane and Mr. Kent down here when I came through, do you know where they —"

Bill snorted. "My advice would be don't ask. It seems to me they probably snuck off to, uh, have a little delight in the afternoon. If you catch my drift."

Clark had to bite his initial response back. This was all wrong. "Really? That doesn't seem like Lois Lane to bail on an interview. And wasn't she seeing—"

"Lex Luthor? Yeah. Like I said, don't ask."

The world felt like it was spinning too fast around him, and Clark wanted to puke. This wasn't right—there was something wrong and nobody could see it. Henderson ducked into his car and took off without a second glance back at the hero—he didn't think anything of it.

Fire filled his veins. He was gone for all of ten minutes, and Lois Lane got herself kidnapped. Because of course she did. He didn't know why he ever left her alone. All he wanted to do was go help out these kids, to make sure everything was okay...

This smacked of Nigel St. John.

Clark gritted his teeth. Fine. He'd just signed his own death warrant. He took off through the skies in search of her.

Nigel opened the trunk of his car to an unconscious Lois Lane and pursed his lips. She'd likely wake soon. He'd had to stop a few blocks away to smother her with some chloroform to knock her out—she was making quite the racket banging around back there and screaming for help—before continuing on their journey. He wasn't sure how much time they had until Clark did the math, but it wasn't enough.

He was grateful for the cover of darkness as he hoisted her limp form over his shoulder and slammed the lid of the trunk hard.

Casually, he strolled into the building and carried her down to the lift. He pushed the down arrow and waited a long moment for it to arrive. He tapped his foot impatiently. If Kent caught up with

him now of all times, he'd hate himself for the rest of his life, however long that was.

The doors finally slid open in front of him and he breathed a sigh of relief as he got on with a surreptitious glance about the room. He shifted her weight over his shoulder with a wince and pushed the button for the third basement level.

She didn't start to stir against him until they were getting off the elevator. He hurried his clip as she groaned to life and suddenly stiffened in his arms. She pushed off him as best as possible and pummelled his shoulders with a barrage of fists. "No! Let go of me! Put me down!"

"You really think that'll work," he drawled sarcastically.

She pulled against his grip and shouted for help. For a moment, he froze, fear at the name gripping his heart, and he dropped her onto the cold hard concrete in a flash.

Lois gasped at the sudden drop. Just as quickly, Nigel pulled her to her feet and clamped a hand over her mouth and locked on her jaw firmly. She tried to shake him off but couldn't move now with the death grip he had on her. Nigel smirked predatorily, finally having the upper hand. "Nice try," he hissed hotly into her ear. Lois squirmed. "But I don't think your knight in shining spandex will save you this time."

She fought and wriggled and mumbled into his hand, but Nigel ignored her as best he could as he tied her to a lone chair tightly. He regrettably had to let go of her mouth to finish tying her up—a good solid minute spent with Lois emptying her lungs into the cavernous space—until he finally brandished his gun again. He grinned. That shut her up. He shook his head with a chuckle.

"You know, I ask myself, all the time really: how is it that two of the most influential, wealthy, powerful men in the world are both so fixated on you? And until recently, I hadn't come up with an answer. You're not the most beautiful woman in the world, you don't run in their circles, you're by no means as wealthy or prominent. And yet you've gone two for two on billionaire bingo."

She shot daggers at him. "Watch it."

"But then I realized," he continued on, not fazed in the least by her small threat, "it's not them. It's you. You're the one with all the power in these relationships. It doesn't make sense that you won't reach out and take what's yours."

"I'm no gold-digger."

Amusement flared through him, and Nigel almost smiled again at her thickheaded ways. "Money and power are not synonymous. I know you're not in it for the money, or any of the outward things. In a lot of ways, you and I are quite similar, Miss Lane."

That pulled a loud laugh from her. "Right. We've got loads in common. Why don't you untie me, and we can make friendship bracelets?"

He glared at her. "Your sarcasm is bound to get you killed one of these days, you're aware of that?"

"Speaking of, why exactly haven't you killed me yet? If I'm such a threat to you."

"Oh, you have no idea how much I'd like to kill you." He bared his teeth at her in a sadistic grin. "I've dreamt of killing you. It's like those old American Westerns; the ones where they square off in a duel and say this town ain't big enough for the two of us. Only I'm afraid you see me as the man in black. The big bad guy."

An unflattering snort. "More like the ugly. I know who the real bad guys are here."

Nigel ran a tongue over his teeth, bemusement at her ignorance returning. "Do you?" The little flicker of fear he saw in her eyes was worth all the trouble. He itched to see that fear again, to put that fear into her. She deserved it. She'd ruined damn near everything. "No. But that's neither here nor there. For now, we wait."

"Why?"

Did the woman have no sense of self-preservation? He shook his head at her and turned back to the table against the wall—far enough away from Miss Lane so that she couldn't cause any trouble. Her chair was very meticulously placed in the middle of the space, away from absolutely everything else. No chances. He rummaged through his duffel bag for some duct tape. "Sorry, darling. Much as I'd like to just shoot you and never see your face again, I'm afraid you're just too good a bargaining chip."

Lois' voice had a slight tremor underneath all her bravado as she boldly defended herself. "Won't be waiting long. He'll be here soon enough."

Nigel scoffed. "Right. Big Blue." His eyes alighted on the shiny silver roll and he smiled a little gleefully. They'd had enough conversation for one day.

"You don't know what you've gotten yourself into, pal."

He frowned as he turned around, and quickly absorbed her demeanor. Chin jutting out proudly, chest puffed, her eyes unwavering in her stare. A pit formed in his gut as the realization hit him. "You really believe that, don't you?" She didn't squirm, didn't flinch, and the knowledge behind her eyes were more than enough confirmation for him. "You *know*, don't you?"

There was the flinch. Nearly imperceptible, but present. "Know what?"

He felt a wave of dizziness swirl around him as all the blood drained from his face, and he took the last remaining steps to reach her side swiftly. She struggled against him as he smothered her mouth with the duct tape roughly. She kicked at his shin and he groaned, smacking her across the face in kind. Her head swung away from him, and she shot daggers at him when her gaze turned back.

Nigel stepped back and scrubbed at his jaw while his mind raced. "Bloody hell. He told you. You know." He paced back and forth. If she knew Clark Kent's pseudonym, what if she knew the rest of it? He shook his head sharply. "This is just bloody perfect. How did he tell you? Romantic candlelit dinner? Rooftop rendezvous? Flight through the clouds?" He glanced back at her as she stiffened in her seat, and he smiled. She'd connected the dots. Level playing field once again. Her stillness spoke volumes, and a bout of giddiness filled him as he realized what she couldn't vocalize. "Oh, no. He didn't tell you. Did he? You figured it out. Didn't even give you the courtesy, the dignity—" He scoffed a dry, smug laugh, happy with the heat in her glare. "Well, join the club. Dignity is in short supply around here."

She glowered at him, and he chuckled as he turned away. "Wonderful. Let's see just how fast your boyfriend comes running for you, shall we? Now be quiet. I have an important phone call to make."

She squirmed viciously in her seat, mumbling beneath the duct tape. Nigel swallowed thickly and turned away from her, shoulders racked with tension. He clenched and unclenched his fists. He'd had a plan. He knew what he was doing. And now... now it was all falling apart, because Lois Lane knew the truth. He was grasping at straws to pull himself together.

The image of a little red vial struck him, and he patted down his pockets trying to find it. He'd had one more vial of the stuff, he knew it. He'd wanted to save it, but desperate times... "Dammit," he muttered under his breath, coming up empty in his pockets.

A thought, a piece of a memory sprang to mind, and Nigel spun to look at his duffel bag once more. He swore and collapsed to his knees, rummaging through the bag like a madman. His fingers touched the edge of something sharp and dread sank into his bones. "No... no, no, no—" He ignored the prick of pain as the shards of glass broke his skin and he pulled the shattered vial out of the bag. The red, viscous serum dripped off the edge, absorbing into the black fabric of the bag, and his heart almost gave out.

He looked across the room at his captive and found her eyes

staring back at him with some mix of pride and confusion.

The duffel bag had been in the trunk with her, when she'd been kicking around. He squared his jaw firmly.

"You little—"

He stormed over to her side, needle in hand and grabbed her by the hair roughly. She gave a muffled cry at the pain and he held the sharp edge of the glass to her throat. "Do you have any idea what you've done?" She squirmed and cried underneath his grip. He gritted his teeth with the difficulty of holding back, hands shaking with rage. "God, I want to kill you so badly." He ground out the words sharply, feeling like they were venom in his mouth.

His focus wavered a second, and a thrill chased up his spine as he nicked the skin of her neck slightly with the glass. A small bead of blood rose to the surface of her skin; a beautiful, red color not too different from the Metamide-5 solution he so desperately needed... Maybe killing her would be enough.

He wrenched himself away and shoved her head down forcefully. Nigel struggled to catch his breath, anger making his chest tight. "Not worth half the trouble you cause, you know that?" He walked away, ignoring her whimpering.

He didn't need the drugs. He was a smart man. He could figure this out without them. He smoothed a hand across his hair, straightened the sleeves of his jacket as he went. He needed to compose himself.

He had a phone call to make.

Chapter 54: You Can't Wake Up This is Not a Dream

A sonic boom shook the entirety of Lex Tower as the caped menace flew past, and Lex cursed the hero. He stood up from his desk, distracted now, and craned his neck out on his balcony in effort to get a glimpse of the Man of Inconvenience. What in God's name did he have to take care of so fast that he had to shake the windows every time he—

Lex jumped as a pair of heavy red boots cracked sharply against his balcony. His hand flew to his chest at the start, and he shook away the shock at the man's sudden appearance with a brief shake of his head. "Holy— You know, you might have more powers than God, but you can't go around scaring people like that."

The hero didn't give him a second glance, instead scanning his office space methodically behind him. Lex glanced over his shoulder with a quizzical look, but found nothing obvious out of place—the papers on the Project K studies sat innocuously on his desk, along with a couple of trinkets from the Bureau 39 box, but nothing that would cast any aspersions on him. His stomach twisted unpleasantly—no good ever came from his interactions with the Man of Steel. Nigel had said as much, but he was determined to prove him wrong. Lex grinned widely as compensation for his nerves and gestured for his guest to come inside. "Please, do come in, sir. To what do I—"

"Where is she?"

The hero's voice came out more as a growl, paired with long, menacing strides into his office. Lex bounded to catch up to him, not so subtly covering up the papers he'd been reading as the hero's gaze roamed the space searchingly. Lex frowned at his dark mood and bizarre behavior. "Where is who?"

"You know who," he snapped, his eyes glowing red at him.

Lex choked down the lump of fear in his throat as best he could, eyes level and squared on the superhero's. He straightened the lines of his jacket out deliberately. "I don't know where she is. Lois Lane's daily whereabouts isn't my business, and neither is it yours. I presume you've checked the Daily Planet?"

The way the hero squared his jaw at him angrily sent a chill down his spine.

Lex gagged as the Man of Steel's hand suddenly wrapped around his throat. He gasped for air, struggling against him. He had him pinned against his own desk, the hard mahogany at his

back cold and unforgiving. He clawed and scratched at the hand frantically for purchase, to no avail.

"I'll be damned if you think you can pull this on me again."

Black crept in around the edges of his vision, and along with it, panic. He flung his arms wide, searching for something, anything, to get the menace off of him.

His face was hard, angry, terrifying as it loomed large over him, his voice a malicious hiss in Lex's ears. "Lois is not yours."

Lex's hand connected with something hard, and he winced, pulling his limb back to himself. He couldn't fight this. It was the Man of Steel, for the love of God! Lex clenched his eyes shut tightly, bracing for a final blow, not entirely sure what he'd done to deserve this.

A strangled gasp of breath brushed across his cheekbone, and in a flash the hand was gone.

Lex coughed and sputtered as he dragged precious oxygen down into his lungs. A few seconds more, a slight twist, a pound more of pressure, and... He shook himself, opened one eye hesitantly, but the hero was nowhere in sight. A sigh loosed from his chest, and he slowly righted himself on his own two feet.

The alien stood across the room with an expression that looked like he'd been struck across the face. Lex guarded himself once more, drawing himself upright. Man of Steel no more.

He looked like he'd seen a ghost.

Lex followed his gaze to the desk behind him, and caught sight of the overturned metal box and the green crystal shards loose on the surface. He glanced back at the hero, trepidation all over his features.

And finally something clicked.

Luthor made a move for the green rocks, and the Man of Steel held out a hand for him to stop. Huh. He didn't actually make a move. He held one of the chunks in his hands reverently, heart pounding in his ears as the blood finally started rushing back into place.

"Where... where did you get that?"

Lex snapped his gaze up and scrutinized the hero. He was pale and clammy, and slowly backing away into the sunlight of the balcony. His heart pounded faster. What the hell was this stuff? Lex filled his tone with bravery he didn't feel and took one step towards the Man of Steel. The hero took two steps back. "I don't think I have to tell you that."

A nasty look crossed his face, but he still didn't make any defensive or offensive moves. The man was faster than a speeding bullet, for Christ's sakes! Why hadn't he just taken him out already?

A bead of sweat ran down the clammy skin at his temple, and the sight of the droplet chased a chill down Lex's spine.

Nigel had been right about two things then. Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive... but the man was not invulnerable.

That changed things.

Lex took another step closer, leaning forward and pointing at him with the crystal. "Why are you here?"

The Man of Steel shifted his weight on his feet, eyes glued to the green rock in his hands. "Lois—she seems to have gone missing. I thought you might know something about that."

Lex grimaced. She was probably off with Kent somewhere. Either way, it wasn't his fault or his problem. He eyed the hero carefully. "You know, correct me if I'm wrong, but I get the feeling you don't like me very much." He paused to run his hand across his throat soothingly, and examined the man's features as a slight pinch pulled at his face. There was something there, just outside his reach, something he was missing... "But alas, I'll have to be a disappointment today. I don't have the faintest idea where Lois is. But I appreciate the accusation."

"If you touch one hair on her head—"

"Do you honestly think I'd do anything to harm my own

girlfriend?”

“Do you honestly still think she’s your girlfriend?”

A pit formed in his stomach. He didn’t know anything. He couldn’t. He was bluffing. “We’re done here. If Lois is in trouble, I expect you to find her.” Lex hefted the green crystals in his hands, a newfound confidence filling him at the trepidation in the man’s eyes. Because he was just a man after all. “But if you ever try to cross me again, I’ll end you. Do we have an understanding?”

He steeled his gaze on Lex, sweat beading on his brow. No hint of a smile or amusement. This didn’t bode well. Lex swallowed thickly.

He would be screwed if he ever got too far from his rock collection.

After an indeterminable amount of time, the abomination finally spoke. “Fine.”

“Good. Now get the hell out of my office.”

The hero faltered as he took off, a wobble to his flight before disappearing from view. Lex finally let his shoulders slump as the exhaustion caught up with him. He brought a hand up to gently soothe his neck and walked over to his full-length mirror. The marks were already showing signs of bruising. The hero had almost killed him. He wasn’t just an inconvenience, he was a downright villain, and nobody knew it.

Lex froze, fingers hovering just above the imprint. Nigel knew.

He looked down at the crystal shard in his other hand. A sense of dread came over him. What the hell was this stuff? He hadn’t just been affected by it, he’d been afraid of it. Afraid of the stuff that Harris had said Clark had been obsessed with as a boy.

This was the key. As long as he had this, he had the power. He had to call Fane.

Lex rushed over to his desk and grabbed his phone, ready to dial, when he noticed the blinking light. His hand hovered over the voicemail button, and curiosity got the better of him. Fane could wait two more minutes. He hit play and the sound of Lois Lane’s voice met his ears.

Clark landed rockily around the corner of Lex’s building, mind spinning and his body aching. He’d tried to cover the toll his pain was taking as best he could, but that had come out of left field. He ran a hand through his hair and fought off the wave of nausea sweeping over him.

Lex had Kryptonite. *Lex Luthor* had Kryptonite. How the hell did that happen?

This was a nightmare. He couldn’t find Lois, nobody believed she was missing, and to top it all off, now he had to deal with his powers weakening because Lex had *Kryptonite*. He ducked into the alleyway and curled in on himself, the pulsing pressure in his head slowly alleviating with time and distance.

He hadn’t thought about that poisonous rock in months. Years, probably. He’d thought he’d gotten it all.

Clark gritted his teeth. He didn’t have time for this, but his speed seemed to have abandoned him. He tried to rationalize the situation.

If Lex had Kryptonite, it was for a reason. Nigel didn’t know about the stuff yet—that he knew of anyway, or he would have used it on him by now. Lex must have discovered it on his own, recently. Perhaps as insurance against him for when they kidnapped Lois.

He straightened up, smoothing his hair back into its usual style. Nigel had to be hiding Lois somewhere nearby. He’d want to show Lex his prize, and soon.

He didn’t have time to waste, but unfortunately for now waiting seemed to be his only course of action. He’d wait for Nigel to show up or for Lex to try to leave, and one way or another, they’d lead him back to Lois. At least until his powers came back.

For now, he’d soak up as much sunlight as he could and ignore

the burning sensation it left in his bones.

Chapter 55: Your Love Could Start A War

His eye twitched, and he did nothing to soothe it. The flicker and pull weren’t even registering. The only thing he could hear was his own heart pounding in his ears as his blood pressure skyrocketed. That, and the sound of Lois Lane’s voice as she broke up with him over voicemail.

He seethed and, masochist that he was, hit replay on the message again. And again. And again. He listened to it until he felt his blood run cold, until the words no longer held any meaning to him. Just syllables strung together that could have meant anything at all. Complete gibberish.

It was gibberish. She wasn’t making any sense. He wasn’t responsible for half the things she laid at his doorstep. Her sister, the lying—okay, she had him on Kent, and she had him on the love potion, but how the hell she even knew about that was beyond him. Miranda hadn’t gotten to use it on her yet! They’d screwed the pooch and kidnapped her sister instead!

The anger in her voice, though. It would have made his blood run cold if he wasn’t so riled up by the content.

She’d left the message days ago.

And only a message! Not even the courtesy to do it in person, face to face... He’d proposed to this woman three times! How could he have gotten it so wrong? He wanted to marry her. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her at his side. Now he didn’t even want to say her name in his own head. And yet...

His fingers hovered over the button briefly, hesitating, before hitting play on the message again like the masochist he was.

“Lex, I—”

A ring interrupted his pity party abruptly and Lex nearly jumped out of skin. It took a few more rings for him to shake himself and pick up the line. He snapped into the device curtly. “What?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line that drew on for a few seconds too long. Lex gritted his teeth and took a shot in the dark at the caller. “Lois?”

“No, sir.”

The crisp British accent drew him back instantly, and it all came crashing over him at once. He stepped back and landed into a chair, hand coming up to cradle his forehead. “Nigel. Oh, Nigel. What have we gotten ourselves into?”

“Sir?”

“That lying, cheating bitch. She can’t do this to me. She can’t just... just...” He struggled getting the word out, throat tight with tears and rage and the horrible thought that it kept happening over and over again. Bile rose up in his throat. “Abandon me like this. Everything I’ve done for her... Everything I’ve... She’s probably already gotten her legs around *him*, she’s... she’s probably with him right now—”

“Not likely, sir.”

That pulled a mirthless laugh from the billionaire. “What do you know, Nigel. You’ve been gone a week. You’re out of the loop.”

“I have Miss Lane.”

Lex froze, hand falling from his forehead as temptation was laid out before him. He’d never have asked for this, never have even thought... But here Nigel was, offering her up on a silver platter, and he suddenly found himself laughing. He wiped a tear away. “No accounting for serendipity.”

“No, sir.”

Luthor stood up with a wolfish grin. Big Blue wanted to believe he was a villain? So be it. He’d show the Man of Steel what Alexander Luthor was made of. “Where are you, Nigel?”

Movement, from the door of Lex Tower. He’d expected to be waiting longer. Clark watched studiously from around the dusty corner of the alleyway, peering through traffic as Lex Luthor

ducked into his town car, casting a nervous glance around before sliding in. He was hiding something. He didn't want to be seen.

Tough luck.

"Hey, Jimmy, I gotta go now. You found it, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I found it. It's... great shades—"

"I know, Jimmy, I know. Look, just take care of it, all right?"

I'm getting help to track down Lois. Let me know as soon as you hear anything, all right?"

"Will do. Good luck. Don't let that son of a gun lay a finger on her, got it?"

"Not a chance, Jim."

Clark hung up the phone and delicately brushed the dirt off his spandex as he stood to follow the car, but a bout of unsteadiness beleaguered him. He braced himself with a hand against the wall. Tension knotted in his gut. He wasn't stable enough yet to go after him at full speed—he hadn't expected Luthor to be on the move so soon. Clark pursed his lips as the town car's engine turned over, and calculated his options as it started to pull away into traffic.

He smiled as his eyes landed on an open cab.

No one would ever believe it.

Clark strode confidently out of the alleyway in full regalia and hailed a taxi.

The cabbie—hardly more than a young kid, really—looked dumbfounded when the superhero slid into his backseat. "Hello," Clark smiled in a friendly, non-threatening manner, smoothly closing the door behind him. "Small favor to ask. You see that black town car up ahead?"

The young man spluttered and nodded, glancing at the car but mainly keeping his gaze trained on the hero.

"Breathe. Relax. I'm just another passenger." He glanced at the driver's name badge and I.D. hanging behind the seat, smirking when he saw the picture didn't match the face. The kid was probably terrified he'd been caught. "It's okay. I'm not here to bother you. What can I call you?"

The boy stuttered out his name, unsure of himself. "J-Jack."

Clark gave him a serene smile and played along. "Jack. You seem like a good kid. Really need to update that driver's license photo, though."

The kid nodded, starting to catch his drift. "Right. Yes. I'll remember to do that, sir. What can I do for you, sir?"

Clark smiled, and gestured calmly at the car in question again. "The guy in that car just tried to kill me. I'll owe you one if you follow him for me."

Jack nodded rapidly, the gesture so sharp that Clark was almost afraid the boy would snap his own neck. "Yes. I can do that. Yeah."

"Great. Keep a safe distance, I can keep track of where he's at. I just need you to get me there."

"Got it."

Clark finally leaned back in the seat of the cab, ignoring the stickiness of the pleather and choosing to relax a moment. It would all be done soon enough, and that thought alone made him smile. "I owe you one big time for this, kid."

A loud smack sounded as the hefty envelope hit his desk. Henderson arched an eyebrow at the cop who brought it in. "What's this?"

"Express delivery from the *Daily Planet*. Labeled for your eyes only."

Bill furrowed his brow. Certainly odd. They'd only just finished processing all the details for the smart kids case. Couldn't he have one day without Lane bugging him about a new case? She was relentless. Her nickname was well earned.

He grumbled as he reached over and picked up the overstuffed envelope and ripped it open none too gently. He swept his keyboard to the side to clear some space before turning it to dump the contents onto his desk, and out thumped a stack of papers rubber-banded tightly together, along with a lone piece of paper

separate from the rest. He clicked his tongue at the mountain of paperwork, and turned his attention to the single letter.

It was short, harried, and it came from James Olsen of all people.

His grip tightened on the paper as he forced himself to slow down, pay more attention, reread what it was exactly that the young man said. His blood ran cold as the statement sunk in, and he slammed the paper down on his desk.

"Maggie! Get your ass back in here!"

She turned around and marched the few short steps she'd gotten back to his office. "What is it, Bill?"

He looked up at her with sharp eyes. "Shut the door behind you."

She did as asked, and folded her arms as she turned back to face him. "What's going on, Henderson?"

Henderson didn't respond just yet, busying himself by spreading out the documents Lane and Kent had gathered over the last few weeks. Worry niggled at the back of his mind about Lois, but he trusted Olsen when he'd said that Kent and their friendly neighborhood superhero were out looking for her. And besides, if this information was true, they might get the bad guy before he knew what hit him. He glanced over the first set of documents—the biggest stack. Banking statements, documents from all of LexCorp's holdings and where money seemed to be channeling out, and back in. He recognized some of Lois' scrawl in the margins, directing attention to suspicious charges. There was another set of handwriting though, one he didn't recognize, but presumed to be Clark Kent's. He squinted at some of the suggestions. There were photos—Nigel St. John, passing cash to known criminals, consorting with mysterious figures. His eyes widened. Connections between Lex's actions and attempts made on the Man of Steel.

They'd hit the mother lode.

Bill laughed, the thrill of a big case winding him up and leaving his stomach with that anticipatory feeling. "I hope you ate lunch already, because we might have just been handed the keys to the biggest case in the city."

Chapter 56: Why Did Love Put a Gun in My Hands

She kept her eyes sealed shut tight, head throbbing. Nigel's attacks had been brief and sparse, but the ferocity of his hatred for her made him an unstable element, and she didn't want to provoke him again.

To be fair, she hadn't meant to provoke him. The second time, anyway. The first time... well, she knew she was pushing it. But she had to test the boundaries, see just what she was up against.

And damn.

If Clark didn't show up sometime soon, she'd find herself at St. John's mercy in a more permanent capacity. She'd severely underestimated her enemy this time. Perry always chastised her for jumping in without checking the water levels. Should have listened. She shouldn't have assumed just because Clark was the man behind the cape that she'd have an easy escape. She shouldn't have assumed that because Lex had loved her she'd be generally untouchable. Money and power and intellect and superpowers all on her side, and still she was in this position.

Maybe she'd cheated death one too many times.

Lois wasn't sure how much time had passed when she first heard the footsteps approach. She shivered and braced herself.

"What the hell did you do to her?"

Her eyes fluttered open at the familiar voice, and a spike of relief stabbed through her. She looked up at him pleadingly, hoping he'd take some pity on her, maybe remove the duct tape from her mouth.

His gaze was cold, calculating, and she had a funny feeling he wasn't coming to her rescue.

"You try kidnapping her next time. She's more difficult than

one might think.”

Lex glared at his one-time butler... Henchman? Lackey? Lois couldn't quite define their relationship beyond the fact that they had one, and that was frightening enough.

“I said not to touch her until I got here.”

“I believe you fired me. That means I'm no longer in the way of taking orders from you.”

She took the moment of conflict to glance around the space surreptitiously. It had the bones of an old, abandoned warehouse. There was some defunct factory equipment off to the left, and the room was cavernous. She scowled as she realized she was in the exact center of the clearing, nothing of use within reach. She was sure there was something useful in that duffel bag Nigel had been hauling around, but no way would she get close to that.

“And you—”

Lex got her attention with a hand gripping her hair. Tears sprung to her eyes as he pulled, directing her eyes back to him physically.

“You really thought you could end things like that? Over a God. Damn. Voicemail?”

Lois shook her head, fighting to hold back her tears fruitlessly.

Rage contorted Lex's face, and he ripped off the duct tape fiercely, ripping a cry of pain from her throat. God, that stung.

“Tell me how many times.”

He spoke in calm, dulcet tones, and it would have been soothing in any other scenario. As things stood, it came across as terrifying. Lois licked her chapped lips where the tape had made them raw and croaked out a response. “What?”

“How many times did you sleep with Kent?”

Heat flooded her cheeks as a slice of a memory struck, the image of his darkened eyes boring into her soul, his body large and toned and looming over hers, strength and power and raw masculinity... Lois tamped down her visceral reaction to his words with a gulp and refuted his accusation warmly. “Lex, I never—”

“Liar!” He roared out suddenly, making her jump.

“Lex—”

His hand cracked against her face.

Pain. Pain and surprise, both stinging and sharp, following the path of her head as the blow knocked her back. She blinked, a tingling heat washing across her face in its turn as the impact sank in, driving home the ramifications of what he'd just done. He hit her. He actually laid a hand on her and... and... Shock triumphed over pain ultimately, the internal hurt far outweighing the physical. Desperately, she bit back her tears, driving her teeth into her bottom lip.

A flicker of doubt, or remorse, came and went behind his eyes before Lex steeled himself again. And a hot ball of hatred settled in her stomach. Because he knew. He knew her past, everything she'd been through, and he did it anyway.

It was suddenly easier to swallow back her tears.

Lex spun on his heel, pulling at his hair like he was trying to tear himself apart. “Lying, cheating... you manipulated me. You made me think I was wrong to doubt, like I was crazy for even thinking you would stray—”

“You are crazy!” she spat back with venom, struggling against her restraints. She refused to be helpless.

He laughed unevenly and wagged his finger at her. “No. Because if I'm crazy then you wouldn't have ended things, and Kent wouldn't be so smug, and those are both facts. Ergo: not crazy.”

“You ever stop and think maybe your insanity is the catalyst that brought on all this?”

His face went slack for a moment before twisting into snarling rage again. Lois braced herself for a reaction, nails digging into the ropes that bound her. Even still, she flinched when he stomped and lunged at her.

“Stop!”

Tears flooded down her face at the sound of his voice, and she exhaled with relief. “Cl— Oh, thank God—”

Lex chuckled darkly, slowly leaning away from her. “Back for seconds so soon?”

Lois locked eyes on Clark. What did that mean? He looked slightly pale, almost unwell. He trained his gaze on her, as if he was trying to impress his thoughts on her like she could read his mind. A knot twisted in her stomach. Something wasn't right. He could take care of Nigel and Lex, but for now...

She'd have to take care of herself.

Discreetly, she started to shimmy the ropes binding her against the edge of her chair, keeping one eye on the action going on around her. She'd been smart at least, when Nigel had tied her up. Tensed all her muscles, flexed her wrists. The man had even been sweet enough to drop the broken needle on the ground within the circumference of her reach. Lois eased a foot out and kicked it towards her subtly.

A gun at her temple froze her, and she suddenly remembered the other person in the room.

“Just how fast *is* faster than a speeding bullet, hmm? Fast enough from here?”

Panic rushed in on Clark's face, and he held up a hand defensively. “No, Nigel— don't!”

Lois felt the gun pull away from her temple, and she glanced over to see why the man hadn't just pulled the trigger. Nigel, for his part, looked one part surprised and one part gleeful. He'd pulled the gun back and tipped it casually up at the ceiling, a smile blossoming across the old man's face.

It wasn't something she wanted to see twice.

“That was fear. Real fear. You really doubt you could make it in time.”

Lois analyzed him carefully: the sweat beading at his forehead, the slight pinch between his brows. Her first impression was right. Something was off.

The trouble was, Nigel could see it too.

Clark suddenly raced across the space towards them, and covered the barrel of Nigel's gun. Nigel fired into his hand.

Lois felt her heart stop for half a second.

Clark cried out in pain, and he gently pulled away his hand, cupping the bullet gently. He was in pain. He was never in pain. She couldn't make out any blood, as he dropped the shell casing onto the ground, but still—

The slackening of Nigel's jaw told her he'd arrived at the same conclusion. “So you do feel pain.”

Clark's eyes widened in response, and in the blink of an eye, Nigel fired again. He tucked and rolled, out of the line of fire as Nigel fired off a few more rounds into him.

Concern for Clark and the realization that he wasn't getting her out of here any time soon prompted Lois to keep working at her restraints. Fear was an excellent motivator. She knocked her wrists sharply against her tailbone. No success. Lois bit her lip. This was outrageous. For the first time in a long time, she wasn't sure that they would get out of this one.

The taste of blood springing from her lip startled her back into action, and she gathered her senses. There was a way out of this, because there had to be. Because this wasn't the end of their story. She had to be the strong one, for Clark.

She knew what she had to do.

She inhaled deeply, eyes fluttering shut as she braced herself tightly, and tipped her chair over onto the floor.

Lois blinked a few times, clearing the brief fog from the fall out of her mind. Panic flooded her veins, adrenaline rushing her system and slowing her fingers down, making them clumsy. She forced herself to breathe a moment in spite of the chaos around her. One, two...

A cry of agony ripped from her throat as she finally did what she'd set out to do, and felt the joint of her left thumb slip and a

snap sounded. She didn't have time to waste, quickly shimmying out one hand before the joint swelled too much and it was all pointless.

His eyes found hers at the sound of her pain, and his voice was tremulous when he spoke. "Lois?"

Clark's concern gave Nigel just enough time to load a second clip, and as her wrist finally slipped through her restraints, he fired again, hitting Kent square in the back. The momentum pushed him forward slightly, but he rallied, unhurt and regaining his strength with every attempt. Clark turned back to face Nigel with a grin. In a flash, he knocked the gun out of his hands and slammed Nigel into the wall across the room.

"Enough!"

Clark's position faltered at Lex's exclamation, and he staggered back.

The pit in Lois' stomach grew into a sinkhole.

A sickly green glow emanated from a metallic box in Lex's hands. Lois looked at her ex in horror, the light from the crystals inside painting his features with a sickening pleasure. Her stomach lurched as Clark stumbled and fell to his knees.

Nigel's responding laugh sounded like defeat.

Hands free now, Lois turned her focus to untying the rest of her. She had to save him. She had to help somehow... But if they were able to stop Clark with all his abilities, what hope did she have?

"What is this wonderful trick that brings the Man of Steel to his knees?" Nigel murmured darkly. Lois shivered.

"Haven't thought of a name for it yet. So far, all I've got is Project K, but it doesn't have that ring to it, you know?"

Lois couldn't stomach much more of this. She reached out towards him with a note of begging in her voice. "Lex—"

"Get away from me!"

He turned around and kicked at her, or more precisely the chair she was tied to, spinning her to face the scene more fully. The tears started streaming once again as she watched Clark struggling to go to her with a strangled cry in his throat, but St. John just laughed at him and kept him grounded on his knees. She worked rapidly to free herself from the rest of her restraints, but all she wanted to do was puke. How did it come to this? Another instant hit of fear raced through her as the British man fisted his jet-black hair tightly and exposed Clark's throat—much like he'd done to her earlier.

"I don't care what you call it, but I want some."

Lois glanced over at Lex to find the man picking through the box carefully. He seemed to find a suitable piece, and tossed it over to his right hand man. Nigel twirled it in his fingers to adjust his grip on it and placed the sharp end against her lover's neck. Her heart skipped a beat, palms sweating.

"I've been waiting for this moment for a long time," Nigel crooned at him.

Clark let out an exasperated laugh. "I bet you have."

"No," Lois murmured under her breath, chest tight. She looked around, and her eyes alighted on the glint of gunmetal.

St. John yanked on his hair again, added some pressure to the green shard against his carotid. "Any last words, Kent?"

Her stomach sank at his use of the name, and at the whisper of an echo coming from Lex as he put it together. She pulled herself together and scrambled for the weapon, pulse racing, hands shaking.

"I swear to God, you'd better do it this time, Nigel." Clark glanced at her for half a second, saw what she was thinking, and immediately steeled his gaze on Lex Luthor. He was resolved in his focus. "Or you won't be so lucky next time."

Nigel snarled menacingly. "I don't doubt it. Save me a seat down below, would you?"

The sharp snap of a gunshot echoed across the cavernous space.

Chapter 57: Blood on my Name

Focus. He couldn't focus. His eyes glazed over slightly. He didn't have time to process that new piece of information before the gun fired. In his periphery, he saw Lois fall backwards, and in a moment of sheer terror, he thought she'd taken the bullet.

He turned to look at her, white as a sheet, only to find her resting on her haunches, trying to find her balance again after the kickback, dropping the offending weapon and cradling her left hand to herself once again.

Lois wasn't shot; she was the shooter.

He turned back with his mouth agape and saw Nigel slumped against the wall and sliding to the ground, blood pooling around him and pouring from his chest. His heart started racing.

Nigel St. John was dead.

And something about that thought finally clicked, and if Lex knew one thing for sure, it was that he couldn't do this again. He refused. He wasn't going to stick around while another Kent tried to kill him, frame him, made him testify... He snapped shut the metal case he'd been holding, clutched it in tight against his chest. He had to get out of there.

And so without so much as a word, Lex Luthor ran.

The blood thrumming in his ears was the only measurement of time that he had right now. There wasn't a sound, hardly a movement. It felt like the world stopped turning, waiting with bated breath to see how this all unfurled.

A sharp snap sounded, and some of the immediate pain ebbed away. Clark darted his eyes over to Luthor, and the slack-jawed expression of horror. He tensed. He could still try something, come after him, call the police—

The crunch of gravel underfoot echoed throughout the room as he turned tail and ran.

A knot loosened in his chest, and the space returned to silence.

Silent as the grave.

He fell to his hands and knees on a groan, weakness overcoming him. There was still one piece of Kryptonite left, but at this point he was content to just sit there and let the tingling sensation of pain wash over him with the rest of the day's events.

He rested his forehead on the ground, ignoring the dirt and junk and rubble, instead squeezing his eyes shut. Lex knew his identity now. He couldn't believe it. The man was a hair's breadth away from putting all the pieces together, if he hadn't already. Nigel had actually come out and said it.

Nigel.

Clark sat up, breathing deeply. He glanced over his shoulder at the man he'd once depended on. He was gone already, eyes glazed over and unseeing, blood pooling out around him. A prick of some unknown emotion pulled at his conscience. They'd been friends, once upon a time. More than that. Nigel St. John had been his one and only confidant.

The moment passed as Clark blinked. They'd parted as enemies. Besides, he'd always known it'd end this way.

He turned then to the most important person in the room.

Lois sat as motionless as if she was the corpse. Staring in a daze at the old man's body, she didn't emote anything other than shock and a rather icy disinterest. A sour taste filled the back of his mouth, and a memory—one he tried to keep buried deep in the back of his mind at all times, even through his plots for revenge—surfaced. His stomach lurched and suddenly he was back *there*, poring over his body curiously, watching the red tint the bathroom sink as he washed the blood off his hands, mesmerized, numb. A stripe of blood smudged across his cheek in his reflection. The echoes of his father's yelling resounded in his memory, cold and distant.

Goosebumps erupted over his arms, and the sensation moved Clark to his feet and into action. He was at Lois' side in a heartbeat, and he spoke in hushed, calming tones. "Lois... hey,

Lois... you need to come back to me. Okay? You need to wake up, Lois.” Gently, so carefully he was barely touching her, he ran a hand down her arm, smoothing her skin consolingly. “I understand, I really do. I know what you’re feeling—I get it. But right now, we don’t have a lot of time. Okay? We only have a few minutes to decide what you want to do here.”

Her eyes remained fixed on the body, unwavering even as she scoffed at his words. “You think you know.”

“Lois—”

“You don’t know. You have no idea—” She shook her head vehemently, whole body shaking now in response. She scrunched her eyes shut tight. “You can’t possibly understand—”

He gripped her chin gently to stop her from nodding and guided her eyes to meet his. “Lois, stop.” Her eyes fluttered open softly, shiny and bright with unshed tears, and empathy coursed through him the likes of which he’d never felt before. “Trust me. I. Know.”

She scrunched her face in confusion before it dawned on her what he meant, and her eyebrows jumped. He swallowed thickly but did not shrink back from her examination. She needed to know what he was saying was true. She needed to know that he’d do anything to keep her safe, keep her by his side. Even if it meant telling her everything.

A flicker of understanding passed across her features, and she bit her lip. He left his hand on her chin comfortingly, trying to keep her attention from straying so her mind didn’t wander down a path too dark. “I don’t...” she said in an undertone, like a confession, “I don’t know what to do. Oh my God, what did I do?”

She started shrinking before his very eyes, and he tugged her attention back once more, shushing her soothingly. “Hey, hey. Don’t panic. It was self-defense. The man kidnapped you, for Christ’s sake. We can call Henderson, and—”

“Nobody even knows I’m here! Cops aren’t here—Lex isn’t here—any verification is gone—there’s no excuse—”

Clark sucked his teeth, thinking. She wasn’t wrong. Lex would be a problem. And though he’d be a problem that Clark would ultimately take care of, they were running out of time. The cops did know she was missing. But they didn’t know who, or why, or any of the details. A set-up would take time. He let his hand drop into his lap.

He knew what to do, but he wasn’t sure Lois would go for it. “There is another option.”

She looked up at him with tear-soaked, doe eyes, hope dubiously shining up at him. The expression almost broke him.

“You leave. Run away, far away from here as you can get. Get to a payphone. You call Henderson, tell him you were kidnapped by Nigel St. John and that you just escaped, but you don’t know where you were being held or where Nigel is now.”

She wrung her hands until her knuckles were white. “No, I can’t. What about Ni—what about the body? What about Lex? What about you?”

Clark shook his head firmly. “Don’t worry about me. I can take care of the rest.”

“Clark, no—”

“I’m serious. Just beg off trauma, or confusion, or being drugged. Lex won’t dare come forward with anything.”

“What... what if they find him?” Her voice had dwindled down to a whisper, horror filling her expression once again as she glanced over at the man in question.

Clark breathed in deeply, ignoring the sharp pain and residual tingle as he did so. “They won’t. I’ll take care of it. And besides, this is Suicide Slums. No one will think twice about looking down here.”

“I-I can’t ask you to do that. Not for me.”

“Lois,” he sighed, cupping her face in his hands. “You’re the only person on the planet that’s worth it.” She shuddered, lips falling open slightly. Temptation bit him fiercely and he ran his

thumb over her lower lip. He dragged his gaze back up to her eyes, making one last plea. “Please. Let me take care of you.”

Lois searched his eyes meaningfully, her brown orbs scanning back and forth between his a little frantically, and he almost gave up hope. She wouldn’t possibly agree to this. She couldn’t possibly accept him still after this. He was just trying to help, trying to save her, and it wasn’t fair for her to reject him in this moment when all he wanted was—

She sealed her lips against his, catching him off guard. His eyebrows jumped to his hairline before he surrendered to her passion with a shudder. Clark clutched her to him tight, taking over the kiss, swiping his tongue across the seam of her lips and demanding entry. She ran her fingers through his hair, tugging forcefully, and he hissed into her mouth at the unexpectedly delightful pull of pain, adding a little more pressure to his onslaught of kisses in response.

She pulled away suddenly, breath hot against his, sharing their air for a few more lingering seconds. He’d happily keep kissing her until the Kryptonite killed him, but he knew they had other things to attend to.

Her fingers ruffled his dark locks affectionately, as though soothing the hurt she’d unintentionally caused. “Are you all right, Clark?”

He let his eyes shut finally, tipping his forehead to rest against hers. “I will be. Would you take the Kryptonite with you when you go? It’s just the one piece.”

“Kryptonite?”

Her question made him chuckle. That’s right. He was the only one with a name for it. “It’s what I call it. Radioactive chunks of meteorite from my home world.”

A small gasp fell from her lips. “I’ll get rid of it, I promise. I’ll never let you near it again.”

“No.” He shook his head slowly, opened his eyes again to make eye contact with her once again. “If you do that, we’ll just run the risk of it cropping back up again, in some other villain’s hands. It’s safer if you find somewhere to hide it—anything covered in lead will block the effects of radiation. Once that’s done, I can take care of it.”

She nodded, understanding, and finally pulled away. She put a hand on his shoulder and stood up slowly, joints cracking as she went. He tracked her movements as she bent over and picked up the glowing green stone, examining it with that reporter’s eye, then turned back to examine him. A tingle ran down his spine at the sight of her standing above him wielding Kryptonite, a weird feeling settling in his gut. He brushed it away and smiled at her placidly.

“Last call,” she muttered, fear still carving out vacancy in her eyes, glancing back at Nigel’s body.

He reached out and landed a possessive hand on the side of her thigh. She looked down the length of her body at him with heat replacing the emptiness in her eyes. And while he liked the road her mind was heading down, he knew they had to move fast.

“Go.”

Chapter 58: Needle in the Hay

“Lois?”

Henderson glanced up at the voice, a tick of irritation flaring up at his sudden interruption, but he nodded at the officer guarding the barricade to let him through. Kent bounded up with long strides and engulfed Lois in an emphatic bear hug. She returned the gesture heartily, cradled against his chest. Bill looked away as the hug went on a little too long, trying to watch them surreptitiously without appearing to watch them.

Clark pulled back to grip her face in his hands. “Don’t ever scare me like that again. I thought I’d lost you.”

Lane dashed a tear away and smiled at him. “Can’t get rid of me that easy, Kansas.”

Clark ducked his head to lower his lips to hers, and Henderson cleared his throat pointedly. They seemed to realize where they were and who they were with in that moment, and they stepped away from each other like nervous middle schoolers. Bill's smile was saccharine. "If you'll allow me to continue, Mr. Kent?"

He nodded, bashfully turning away. "Of course. Sorry, Bill."

An eyebrow arched at the familiar use of his name, but he didn't bother to address it. "Lois, you don't know where he went?"

She shook her head vehemently. "No. I woke up and I wasn't even in the same room as before. I'm not sure if they moved me completely or just to a different part of the building. But I was alone. They'd left me tied up, but clearly they underestimated my skills."

"Skills? You broke your own thumb. I'd hardly call that a talent."

Kent seemed to only just notice her hand, wrapped and iced, and gently cradled her injury between his own two hands. Henderson narrowed his eyes at the two. There was something he was missing here, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Then again maybe it had to do more with their furtive relationship.

"What about you, Kent? Olsen's note said that you and our mutual flying friend had gone after her. Any luck?"

It was Lois' turn to look confused. "Note? What note?"

Henderson hesitated, knowing there were too many eager ears eavesdropping right now. "The packet you sent over. On yours and Kent's... side investigation, let's say?"

"I wasn't aware you'd sent it already," she said to Kent, brows knit together, tone slightly injured.

"I got scared when you disappeared. I thought maybe there'd be something useful in the notes, and at the very least, Henderson would be in the know."

She huffed a little, but relaxed into her boss—partner's?—arms. "It's important that you don't share that with anyone else, Bill. Not yet, anyway."

He looked down at Lane. "Do you think I'm stupid? Only me and my partner Maggie Sawyer have even seen it. Now, back to my question?"

"What was the question?"

That from Kent threw him off a little. If it had been Lane, he'd have expected it, or thought it was her playing coy about some tidbit of information that she wanted before the cops. From Kent, it just seemed like dodging. He rephrased his query more deliberately. "You two didn't find anything on your search for Lois?"

He shook his head, wrapping an arm around Lois' shoulders. "Regrettably, no. But the guy said they must have been keeping her somewhere lead-lined, so he couldn't see her. He went to search for Lex on his own after hearing that Lois had been found over the police scanner. He thought he had an idea where he might have gone."

"And where might that be?"

Clark shrugged. "I told him that Luthor has some property holdings over on the north end of Suicide Slums. He said he'd do a quick patrol and get back to you, but I just really needed to see Lois, so he dropped me off."

Lois snuck him a quick peck on the lips. Henderson kept his poker face on, for their sakes as much as his own.

Kent was lying about something, he just didn't know what yet.

"You feeling all right, Clark? You're not looking too hot."

He seemed uncomfortable for a moment, squirming away from the question. "Yeah. Yeah, just, uh, allergies kicking up."

Another lie. But maybe he was sick and just didn't want to tell his girlfriend that. Or emotional about Lois and didn't want to show it. "Well, you don't look half as bad as Miss Holyfield here." That got a chuckle out of the pair, but Lois seemed tired, her laugh a little more forced. Henderson sobered. They could tackle the ins and outs of her kidnapping later. "Look, we've set up a perimeter

and we've got an APB out for Mr. St. John. We've got our eyes peeled for our other... assailant, but I'd rather keep his name in the inner circle for now, good?"

She nodded, eyes drooping as she did. "Good. We'll get him. I'm sure of it."

"I'll do everything I can, Lo. Promise." She seemed to be fading fast, so he nodded to Kent. "Go home. Rest. Recover. Would you like me to get you a ride—"

"I'll take her home. Don't worry about it."

He eyed Kent suspiciously again. "Didn't you just say the Man of Steel dropped you off?"

"Yeah, but I already called a car. No sense wasting good police resources when this is something I can actually help with."

Bill nodded with a beatific smile and shooed them off. The second their backs were turned, his smile vanished. There was something else going on here. His cop instincts were firing all over the place, but he couldn't yet place the source for his mistrust.

Later. For now, he'd focus on finding St. John, come hell or high water. Lois Lane needed a win.

She sat there unseeing as he flitted around her, tending to her without a word of her own input. It was comforting, at least. She couldn't shake the fog over her head, unable to see anything other than the way his body jerked as the bullet hit, the way he laid slumped against the gritty concrete wall. When she was able to shake that imagery, she was bombarded with the sight of Lex, angered, lifting his hand against her.

She needed a reprieve. So she shut down. Shut it all down, barring breathing and the muscle control necessary to keep herself sitting upright.

His hand, firm and warm at her back, nudged her slightly, and she followed the path of least resistance as he guided her to her feet, walked her into his bathroom. She stayed mute as he slowly, painstakingly lifted the hem of her shirt over her head. And though part of her was able to recognize he was undressing her, she didn't have it in her to protest.

It wasn't until she felt the pulsing hot stream of water cascading over her shoulders that she realized he wasn't making any advances. She blinked heavily as he appeared before her in the shower, naked now as well. And she knew she was out of it, because although her eyes were riveted to the line of his abs where his obliques met his six-pack, she wasn't really seeing him.

He bathed her, and the pattern and flow of his soapy hands as they massaged across her body did a lot of good. He was gentle in the extreme, exceedingly so with her hair, and after a while, the rhythm of it had her eyes fluttering closed.

The water shut off, and he took to drying her with a fluffy black towel. He took his time, making certain she was good and dry, before running the towel roughly over himself and pressing her forward again, back into the bedroom.

It was simultaneously the most intimate and innocent thing she'd ever experienced.

She registered the black silky sheets beneath her skin, warm from her shower but cool from where the air met the silk, and sank into them with a slight sigh of relief. She wasn't expected to do anything else right now, no stories to chase, no bad guys to worry about, no expectations whatsoever. She just had to rest, let Clark take care of her.

He slid in behind her, the mattress dipping under his weight, and she rolled back into the cradle of his warm body. The skin-to-skin contact felt grounding, made everything around her feel real. Maybe she'd get some rest, and her mind would finally stop floating. His fingers toyed with a lock of hair brushing across her brow delicately, and the motion had her drifting off towards sleep.

Lex burst through the doors of his office in a blind panic, the only thing grounding him to reality being the silver box he had clutched in a death grip.

It was Kent. This whole time it was Clark freaking Kent.

He batted the thought away as he scrambled to toss everything he'd been reading back into the Bureau 39 banker's box, along with the locked silver case. He slammed shut the open file folder on his desk and tossed it on top.

Clark Kent was the Man of Steel. The do-gooder. The superhero no one could shut up about... especially Lois.

He cast a glance around the room, searching frantically for the lid to the box. He wished he'd never opened it. He wished he'd never found out about it. He wished he could get rid of it, never doubt Lois, never investigate Kent. But there was no resealing Pandora's box. He knew things now. Things he couldn't unknow.

Like Clark Kent being Metropolis' newest golden boy. *Man of Steel*.

He stopped on his heel and waved a finger through the air at no one in particular. He turned back to his closet, where he kept his safe. Lex punched in the combination rapid-fire—Jaxon's birthday—and flung open the door. He grabbed the briefcase out of it and a few precious trinkets, along with his passport. He froze with the little blue book in his hands. What good would this do him? He had nowhere to run to.

Clark Kent was *the Man of Steel*.

He was so royally screwed.

He didn't have much time to waste. If Lois had half a brain, she'd have already gone to the police, and no doubt Kent would have twisted the truth, and they'd be after him any minute. He just needed a place to hide where he could ride out the storm, until they figured out he was innocent. Or somewhere he could run and never have to come back.

Or he could go on the offensive.

The idea was appealing. He couldn't unlearn his revelations, but he could certainly share them. He grabbed his emergencies-only cell phone out of his desk drawer and stopped short before closing the drawer. He debated the pros and cons for all of three seconds before making his mind up.

He grabbed the gun and stuffed it in his briefcase.

Deed done, he locked the case filled with cash, and pulled out his phone and dialed a number he knew by heart at this point. His heart raced as he waited for the other line to pick up. He didn't have time for this. He didn't have time because Kent was a freaking god in a cape! He was the devil in sheep's clothing and Nigel was dead and Lois had cheated and he felt like the most hated man in Metropolis for no good reason... and he was spiraling. He forced himself to breathe, stopped pulling at his hair, and tried to gather his composure.

A click sounded, followed by a voice. "Who is this? How did you get this number?"

Relief washed over him. "Fane. It's Lex. I need to talk immediately. It's urgent."

There was a pause too long for his liking. "Look, Luthor, I understand you have a lot of questions, but I think I've answered just about all of them. I'm really a busy man—"

The banker's box thunked heavily against his desk where he plopped it, and he set the briefcase on top of it squarely. "No, no, no. No more questions. I take it back. I'm taking it all back. I want out. I don't want to know anything else."

"What? That's insane. You're the one that asked—you—"

Another pause, and Lex knew the lieutenant colonel was finally putting it together. "You know something."

"I can't talk right now. I need to get somewhere safe, and we need to talk in person. Only call me at this number. All right? I'll call back in as soon as I can with details on where we can meet. Got it?"

Fane agreed rapidly and Lex hung up. He pocketed the device in his breast pocket, and looked at his neat little stack. He hesitated, eyes lingering on the Bureau 39 box. He pursed his lips, debating once more, before ultimately giving in and fishing out the

silver box again. He popped the latch and grabbed a handful of the rocks for himself, shoving them alongside his gun in his briefcase and resealing what was left in the metal latch box. It was for the best to split the supply up anyway, more chances for it to avoid ending up in the wrong hands. Like Kent's hands.

Satisfied, he hefted the box under one arm and gripped the briefcase tightly in the other, and made a break for it back into the outside world.

Chapter 59: Sympathy for the Devil

Lois heaved a sigh and slumped against him. His breath brushed against her hair, his hands drifting down from her hips to the mattress below. A quick grin cracked across her face at how spent he was... the idea that she could wear out the Man of Steel was intoxicating and a little bit heady. She nuzzled against his chest—his flawless, perfectly smooth skin, taut over his Adonis-like musculature. She huffed against his skin—because thoughts like this were exactly how they'd ended up like this, and she had serious things she wanted to address.

As if he could sense her shifting mood, he ran a hand down her spine soothingly. "What is it?"

She bit her lip. This would change the direction of their relationship, and she liked where they were at right now. Physically speaking, she *really* liked where he was at right now, but that was neither here nor there. "I don't want to ask," she finally confessed, a quiet murmur of words into his heart. She pressed her lips over his chest, as if sealing her words there for safekeeping.

"You want to know, don't you?"

His words tickled against her ear hotly, and she shuddered. There he was again, blazing across her conscience, slumped against the wall, blood pouring from where she'd shot him. "No. The less I know about Nigel, the better."

A breath of hot air washed across her cheek on an amused chuff, and he tightened his grip around her waist ever so slightly. "No, that's not what I meant."

He didn't clarify, but for the first time in her life, she didn't need him to. They lay together in silence, the room filling with it, as they came down from their mutual high, legs intertwined, sheets twisted around their bodies.

It had been five days. She'd finally started to come out of her stupor yesterday, and she'd been well enough to check in with Henderson. No sign of Nigel yet (good news), Lex appeared to have vanished into thin air (bad news), and they were making progress on mounting a case against Lex Luthor as the Boss—the mysterious man responsible for running half the crime in Metropolis.

She'd also been well enough to participate in other... more strenuous activities.

They were in a mostly good bubble. Things were finally looking up, slowly but surely. And though she would always be haunted by the ghost of Nigel St. John, for the first time she'd realized she could move on beyond it.

He wanted to pop their bubble.

She slid off him and cuddled against his side as a distraction. She pulled his arm around her and snuggled into him tight, hoping he'd take the hint that she wanted rest and end the conversation.

"Lois."

His tone was austere, and she shut her eyes against it on another sigh. This was ridiculous. She wanted to know what he meant when he said he understood what she was going through. She did. But she also knew that curiosity killed the cat, and something ominous in the back of her mind was telling her to let sleeping dogs lie. What more did he want from her?

"Please."

"You ever hear those stories," she began off-topic, pulling an unrelated thread and trying to make a point of it. "About these

wives. And they have these picture-perfect little families, right out of a J. Crew catalog, and the big house and the fancy vacations, the two-and-a-half kids and a yippy dog to boot. And then the story comes out, and turns out their husband cooked the books for the mob, or laundered money, or covered up a politician's sex scandal or murder. And they always, *always* pretend they didn't know."

His hand skated up and down over her bare skin, at a maddeningly slow pace, but he let her say her piece without interruption. She shuddered. "I used to hate those women. I'd think, how could they possibly not know? Were they that self-absorbed, or maybe that distanced from their husbands, that they didn't know there was something going on? I mean, the guy would be like, a bank teller, or run a Radio Shack. Where was all this influx of money coming from?"

"But you start to get a few of these cases, and it clicks into place. It's not that they didn't know something was fishy. It's that they didn't want to know. And it's not like it was even for their own personal gain, or selfishness—although there was some of that, too. It's that they didn't want anything to change." A hiccup lodged in her chest with the emotion, and she felt the tears pricking at the back of her eyes. She rolled over and looked into his eyes searchingly. "Please, Clark. Can't you let me be a mob wife?"

His face fell at her request, and she knew that she wasn't going to like the answer she got. He leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead, and her eyes fluttered shut.

"I know you, Lois. And you don't mean that. I even hate those women." Her heart started pounding. "Besides, if I wanted some mob wife, I could have been with just anyone. I want to be with you."

She dragged in a shaky breath. There was no going back after this. It was time to let the chips fall where they may. "Just... tell me a story."

His eyes held an immeasurable amount of sadness when he finally moved, a slight smile on his face. He took his time getting her situated beside him, turning her so she was cradled against him, and he stared up at the ceiling blankly. Absentmindedly—maybe even in a self-soothing gesture—his hands skated across her skin, drawing inane patterns. It was just shy of sensory overload. She breathed his scent in deeply and cozied further into his side. The motion of his hands and the rhythm of his heart beating underneath her ear where she laid almost had her lulled into a state of drowsiness. It was intoxicating, peaceful. She never wanted this moment to end.

His roughened baritone struck through the silence, but she didn't mind because of how it vibrated against her in all the best ways. "It was spring. I had just turned seventeen. Things were finally turning around in my life, or so it seemed. It's funny. You're so... naive as a kid. Even if you've seen things, or been through things... You still think you can rule the world one day."

Lois nodded, her hair tangling slightly as she moved against his bare chest. She hardly dared to move any more, instead letting him get this off his chest.

"I was staying with the Langs. I'd known their family my whole life. We'd been friends growing up. They had a daughter who was my age. Lana. She was the prettiest girl in school, and the sweetest. She never took any of my crap, called me on all of my antics and shenanigans. She was good for me." He paused for a beat, then looked down at her with a smirk. "You're a lot like her, actually."

He nudged her arm good-naturedly. Lois snorted, trying to inject some humor into the situation. She didn't want him to spiral into depression. "Yeah. See how much crap I'll take with you talking about another woman in my bed."

She waited for an answering laugh but only got the emptiest smile she'd ever seen. "Girl."

"Hmm?"

"She died too young to be called a woman."

The words sucked the air right out of her lungs, and she stiffened next to him. "Oh. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Hey." His hand brushed up and down her arm soothingly, easing her back onto the mattress. "Don't. You didn't know."

Lois lowered her eyes, somehow still feeling guilty anyways. She should have figured. This was why they were talking about this in the first place. It wasn't just going to be some unrelated story. She glanced up at him when she'd realized he wasn't talking still, diving deep into his thoughts. She had to say something to keep the conversation going. "What happened?"

Clark pursed his lips and fiddled with the edge of his sheets distractedly. "Her family... Look, I know I'm not the best person. I wasn't the best person, especially back then. I got into a lot of trouble, bounced in and out of foster homes. When the Langs took me in, it was more for them than for me. It was 'the right thing to do,' helping a troubled teen who they'd watched grow up. But it was made very clear that I wasn't wanted. Especially by Mr. Lang. He hated me. Probably just didn't like me being so close to his daughter."

"I don't know many fathers of teenage girls that would like a teenage boy hanging around."

A small smile pulled at his lips; a bit forced, but better than nothing. "Lana was my saving grace. I actually wanted her to like me. And she actually did, I think. Eventually. In spite of everything everybody else said."

"We got close. She was my best friend, and then she was more. It was a great, fun, wonderful couple of weeks. Just us, nobody else in the world. Sneaking around, stealing kisses, going on tame little adventures. Always home in time for curfew, and it stopped there. It was... innocent."

Lois couldn't help but compare their stories in her head. They had similar tones—forbidden romance, disapproving figures, the one woman who kept him on his toes and didn't give an inch. She wasn't blind. Briefly she toyed with the idea that maybe she was just his type. Just like her type was emotionally damaged men she felt she didn't deserve but she had to fix. She'd been to therapy enough to admit that.

But then she glanced across their forms, loosely draped in his sheets and each other and nothing else, and noted where the similarities ended. Their relationship could hardly be classified as innocent, and considering the circumstances of how it started, she didn't think he would call it that either. No one was blameless here.

He shook his head quickly, as if to dissolve the memories before his eyes. "It didn't last long. Scott caught us kissing under the stairs at the library—Lana's older brother, that is. He hated me more than her dad. He threatened to turn us in, told me to stay away from his sister or else. I tried, actually, even if Lana didn't try very hard. She insisted her brother wouldn't dare. But of course he did."

"I'd mostly cleaned up my act, but a reputation is a hard thing to shake. Nobody thought twice when Scott turned me into the school and said I was dealing drugs. Miraculously I was able to prove him wrong before I got expelled, but not in time for the Langs to see it. They kicked me to the curb without a second chance, especially when they found out about me and Lana. We kept dating for a couple more weeks, but it's hard when you're between places. And then I got word that my dad died."

His words hung heavy in the air, loud and clumsy in the silence that followed. Lois had to look up to make sure he hadn't fallen asleep or anything, with how quiet he got. Instead she found him deep in his head, his expression unreadable, his eyes faraway. She gave him his moment of silence, trailing her fingers along his pectoral soothingly, before questioning softly, "How did your dad die?"

Clark didn't make eye contact, zoning off into the distance as he recalled the memory. "He was stabbed. Bled out. In a penitentiary in upstate Missouri."

Lois jolted at this information, but quickly reined in her reaction, smoothly turning her attention to the black silk around her instead of looking at him too hard. Her mind spun at this information. She'd known his father had been in prison, but somehow she hadn't done the math. She supposed it added up—foster homes, only talking about his mother, dropping out of school...

"You're really not gonna ask?"

She looked up into his eyes and found a twinge of amusement twinkling back at her. "I didn't want to push."

"You? Lois Lane, investigative reporter?"

Her eyes rolled and she crossed her arms stubbornly. "I wasn't sure it was on the table to share. You'll tell me when you're ready. Just like this." She also wasn't sure she wanted to know.

His eyes darkened as they darted down to her chest and a spark flared in her heart. He licked his lips. "You're a much better person than me. So, so much better."

Lois shot up to fuse her lips to his passionately. His arms lifted her gently and repositioned her over him. A tingle spread throughout her limbs, and that spark began consuming the rest of her body again, before the memory of what they were talking about struck through her mind once more.

She wanted the story more right now.

She put her hand up between them and pushed him down to the mattress once more, leaving him looking dazed for a moment and blinking at the ceiling. "So you're out on your ass..."

He huffed a slightly annoyed laugh, but pressed a kiss to her temple. "Yeah. I spiraled real quick. Here I was practically homeless, barely hanging on in school, and with no friends or family to speak of... and yet nobody in Smallville gave a damn about me. They said the lines they had to—platitudes about how sorry they were to hear about my dad. And these women—I don't know how it's possible, but somehow all these middle-aged women would say that thing about 'if you ever need anything' and then trail off before actually offering any help. Nobody meant a word of it. Otherwise I wouldn't have been homeless."

Lois hummed sadly in the back of her throat and pressed a soothing kiss to his hand where she had it clasped between hers.

"But as bad as those patronizing adults were, school was worse. Everyone else had this bright future ahead of them—looking at colleges and moving out and getting jobs or even getting engaged. And none of it was an option for me. I had quite the little record for all of seventeen. Nobody was gonna hire me, I wouldn't get any scholarships, academic or otherwise. And my classmates... Kids are the worst. Because adults are fake but at least they can look at a kid lashing out and see it for grief or whatever, throw you a little rope. The only rope a high-schooler gives you is one to hang yourself with."

His eyes slammed shut as he said the words, pain furrowing his brow at the memory. Lois pushed his hair back from his forehead, soothing away the wrinkles as she did. Her heart wrenched for him. She wished he would just spit it out, so she could help him shoulder the burden. But the other part of her didn't want him to go through the pain of telling her.

He released a long, tight breath through his nose, and continued his tale with his eyes closed. "Three kids, maybe, told me they were sorry about my dad. One being Lana. Everybody else just gave me hell. And then, somebody got to Lana too. She started to distance herself, make excuses of homework and studying and keeping up her extracurriculars... touring colleges. And I had nobody left. I couldn't take it anymore. There was nothing for me in Smallville, no point in living there. So I made the decision to kill myself."

Lois stiffened, hand hovering just above his brow. Her heart

sped up as the chill settled into her bones, and her breathing came faster at the thought. This was just a story, he was alive, there was blood running through his heart, same as hers. The reminders weren't doing a bit of good in beating back her panic at the thought of Clark committing suicide.

His eyes flickered open hesitantly, and the fear she saw reflected in them steadied her. He needed her to be strong for this. She brushed her hand through his locks again soothingly, pouring all her empathy out of her eyes and into his soul. He swallowed before continuing. "I almost did for real, actually. With the... the Kryptonite. I had some, I kept it... But I couldn't... I knew there were things I was put on this Earth to do. So I faked my own death. My suicide. Got away with it too. And so many of my problems just... vanished. Juvie record, gone. Academic record, gone. Foster families and judges and paperwork... There was nothing left that could tie me back to Smallville. That's part of why I laid low for so long. I didn't want to risk anybody finding out about me, particularly when I got rich. Then I started to realize there just wasn't anybody left in Smallville who cared."

"What about Lana?"

His eyes dropped down again. "That's my biggest regret. I should have told her, before. What I was planning, what I was doing. I didn't think it'd be so hard to just leave her behind forever."

"I'm sure she wouldn't have taken it well if you did."

"No," he agreed solemnly. "She didn't. About four days later, I couldn't take watching her grieve for me anymore. They had a small funeral and everything. Lana was so sad... worse than my mom."

"Your mom wasn't as sad as your girlfriend?"

"She was confused, mostly. How it was possible for me to be dead, when she knew her son was... special. She didn't even know I could fly yet, though, so the pictures must have really confused her. Not to mention her mind wasn't all there anymore."

"I'm sorry, Clark. I'm sure she was devastated."

He grimaced tightly, apparently not wanting to address that issue right now. She let that part drop, for now. "So I snuck into Lana's house late the next night, and told her I was alive." He shivered and tugged at his right ear. "To this day I've never heard anyone scream so loud in my life. She completely freaked. And of course, I couldn't let anybody else see me, so I fled.

"I tried again during the day. And again, whenever I could catch her alone. I should have told her before. But I didn't tell anyone anything. I didn't want anyone to talk me out of it. And if anyone could have, by God, it would have been Lana."

Lois felt her throat start to close up as a sense of dread came over her. "Clark..."

He shook his head vehemently, words flowing from him faster than he could control. "I didn't realize how hard it would be to convince her I wasn't really dead. I didn't think... I didn't know it would drive her crazy. She thought she was seeing ghosts. I did everything I could think of to prove to her otherwise. I told her things that only I would know, I touched her, kissed her, begged her to believe me. She tried to tell people what was going on with her. Nobody believed her. And like I said, kids are cruel."

The inkling of an idea started to form into a fully shaped vision, and Lois' heart started pounding.

"I finally left her alone out of frustration. A week later, I hear that Lana Lang slit her wrists. On April Fool's, for Christ's sake. I hardly thought it was real, until I saw the pictures."

"Oh, God." She brought a hand up to her mouth to keep her lips from trembling. He hadn't really done all this, he couldn't possibly think that it was all his fault... Lois turned and watched a tear roll across his cheek, and pulled herself together for him. She brought a hand up to cradle his face and wiped at his tears with her other hand. "Oh, Clark," she whispered hoarsely. "I'm so sorry. I can't believe... I'm just so sorry."

Her hands soothed through his hair again, and he shut his eyes. “Not more sorry than I am.”

“No, I’m sorry that you’ve had to carry that around with you for ten years.”

His eyes flew open at her sympathetic words, and her heart broke as he searched her expression for any hint of a lie. His eyes welled up with tears and he broke eye contact with her before he broke down completely. She brushed back his hair soothingly again to calm him down, and after what felt like an eternity, it finally worked. He wiped at his face before he caught her hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss, and a flicker of doubt or some other emotion crossed his expression as he continued on. “Don’t be too sorry.” He cleared the emotion from his throat heavily before resuming. “I learned some very valuable, very powerful lessons that day.”

She understood his need to move on from the topic, and let him draw the conversation in a new direction. “Like?”

“I learned... I learned what the word bloodguilty meant. La—” A knot of emotion garbled the name, and he cleared his throat and tried again. “Her blood will always be on my hands. Her death changed my life. But it didn’t have to be meaningless. I think, with time, you’ll understand much the same with Nigel.”

She shot him a quick smile, but her heart wasn’t in it. He massaged her hand in his, focused solely on the task, and his expression darkened. “I also learned another lesson... that if I was responsible for Lana’s death in any part, then I wasn’t the only one accountable.”

“What?”

He looked up at her finally, determination in his calculating brown eyes. “Just like Nigel’s death isn’t only on you. It’s on Lex, for getting involved. It’s on me for not being able to save you—”

“No, that’s on Lex, too. The kryptonite—”

“I know. But it’s still a piece of blame I have to share in—”

“Clark—”

“—and a lot of it’s on Nigel himself.” Anger started to color his tone, and his face clouded over. “He kidnapped you. He hurt you. Against direct orders.”

Lois cocked her head at that turn of phrase. “Direct orders?” He didn’t respond right away, and a bad feeling started eating away at her insides. Suddenly the room felt smaller. Her senses sharpened around him. All she could see was him, the black silk only a backdrop for his frame, shadows casting a sharp relief over his skin, darkness smudged under his eyes. He smelled like sin and sex and heady masculinity—and she came to the halting realization that she didn’t know much about the man she’d been sleeping with. “Orders from you?”

His eyes flashed up at her and they locked gazes unflinchingly for a solid minute. Lois felt her heartbeat pick up again. His eyes were dark, pupils wide, and there was something hard, something stubborn and defiant that he didn’t try to hide shining back at her. No sparkle of humor, or wit, or charm to cover it up. It was honest. It was frightening. It was the closest she’d ever been to knowing the real Clark Kent. “Clark... Why would Nigel take any orders from you?”

Silence followed her question, and it became crystal clear that she wasn’t going to get an answer she liked.

“Because...” His voice cracked a little on the word before he steeled himself. “Because I first met Nigel in the Congo in 1987.”

Chapter 60: Let Me Be Your Killer King

Lois slid off of him slowly in the silence, getting off the bed and searching for her clothes.

“Lois... wait, Lois, hear me out.”

She shook her head vehemently as she slid her tank top over her head, stepped into her panties. Her voice held none of the bravado she was trying to put forward, instead croaking out on a hoarse whisper. “No. No way. I can’t... I can’t believe—”

“You have to understand. He was working for Luthor already ___”

Lois spun on her heel and whirled on him as he moved to perch on the edge of his bed. “And what? That meant he was worth death?”

“Oh, please!” he snapped back at her defensively, and Lois felt nauseatingly off-kilter again. “You think Nigel was some sort of saint? He was a spy, Lois! A double agent, on the run from MI-6 and wanted by Interpol. Nigel St. John has passed by death’s door unscathed a hundred times over. He more than deserved what he got.”

She gaped at him, surprise stretching across her features at his venom towards the man. A man she’d killed. Oh, what had she gotten herself into? Her eyes teared up, and she blinked in an effort to clear them. She couldn’t cry right now, she had to stay angry. Not a difficult thing to do. “So what? You’re telling me this whole thing was orchestrated so I’d... what? Kill Nigel for you?”

“No,” he uttered solemnly, his initial outrage lanced by a sudden wave of sadness, and he got to his feet. “I’d do anything to spare you the pain of that. I’d kill him myself. I was really trying not to.”

She scoffed and folded her arms. “What a gesture.”

He stepped towards her and reached an arm out to her side. “Lo—”

“No.” She pulled back sharply, and he stood there like she’d just kicked his puppy. “Just answer me one thing.”

He nodded rapidly. “Anything, I swear.”

She licked her lips, throat suddenly parched. A part of her already knew what the answer to this question would be, but she had to hear him say it. “Was Lex right? About you having it out for him?”

Clark squared his jaw and stood tall, and she almost didn’t need him to say the word.

“Yes.”

She exhaled deeply, eyes slamming shut before she started crying. The temperature in the room changed suddenly. Her head felt light and a wave of dizziness enveloped her, his words swirling around without meaning.

“Lois, everything changed when I met you. I truly love you. I love you so much—”

“Just—” She choked on the word, emotion strangling the rest of her sentence.

She felt his hands land on her hips gently. She pushed at him half-heartedly, eyes still closed, but she didn’t have the energy for anything more.

“Lois. Lois, look at me. I’m sorry. Please.”

She couldn’t, heart pounding, mind racing. She shook her head, eyes sealed shut against the world around her—his world, his room, his life that she’d somehow found herself falling into and now she was trapped without a clue as to how she ended up in this position. She was a strong, independent woman. How had she let herself get pulled into this stupid tug of war with these... these men? Pigs. Monsters. The lot of them.

He landed his forehead against her hip, a submissive gesture, and the sensation of skin against skin sent a tingle running through her body. She cracked an eye open and looked down at him: on his knees, begging, holding her in a woeful embrace, like he’d lost her already.

She stopped that thought in its tracks. He *had* lost her already. ... Hadn’t he?

“The second I met you, at that stupid club, everything shifted. It stopped being about Luthor, about revenge—”

“And what did Lex ever do to you, huh?”

He looked up the length of her body with tears in his eyes, face marred with confusion.

“Lex killed my father.”

That statement struck her hard across the face. She must have

looked dumbstruck, because he seemed to see an opening and he kept pushing his argument. “He’s the reason—he deserves everything I’ve done and more. He’s attacked me on multiple occasions, tried to kill me twice this week—he had you kidnapped, and drugged, and thrown off the roof of a building, and kidnapped your sister, and—”

Her eyes were wet with unshed tears as she looked down at him. His words stung, but nothing he said was untrue. And with Clark kneeling before her, his hair still sex-tousled, and naked, both physically and emotionally... She didn’t have much of a defense to make. His voice was gravelly when he spoke in a hushed tone.

“He hurt you. He... after everything he knew about your history, everything you told him... he still hurt you, Lois. Consciously.”

A tear rolled down her cheek, where she knew some bruising still remained. She couldn’t hold back anymore. Her hands were shaking as she brought them up to her face, brushed away her tears as fast as they fell, barely able to see.

His lips seared hotly against her thigh, in what she guessed was supposed to be a chaste, loving gesture, but was decidedly not. It startled a hiccup out of her as she looked back down at him.

“Lex Luthor is not a good man. And I’ll be damned if I ever let him hurt you again.”

She scoffed, but a soothing sensation flooded her at the statement. There was something comforting in his words. She didn’t need to be kept, or babied, but it felt nice to have someone at her back, no matter what she did or said. Her voice was low with warning when she finally gathered her emotions again for speech. “I won’t be some pawn for you to play with in order to get back at Lex.”

Clark shook his head, the ends of his unruly locks tickling her skin. “You’ve never been a pawn, Lois, and you never will be. If anything, you’re a queen. I’m at your mercy. Say the word, and I’ll walk away forever. I’d do anything for you. Just, please, don’t say I’ve lost you.”

His words had a familiar echo, and she remembered Nigel’s statement, about reaching out and taking her power. Wise words from the last source she’d ever expect. She took a long, shuddering breath—how long had it been since she’d had a cigarette?—and took the reins. “Anything?” she asked quietly, suspiciously.

He nodded. “I owe you my life.”

A thrill at the words zipped through her veins, a little bit heady and certainly more than she’d expected. Nigel had been right. She held his life in her hands, and the rush of power was exhilarating.

She could turn him into the police, make him pay for his crimes.

She could tell Lex, and turn him in together, although getting back together with Lex was not at all appealing.

She could hold this over him in order to get whatever she wanted.

She could control the most powerful man in the world.

The silence stretched on for a few moments past the comfortable. She was trying to put her thoughts in order when his lips started traversing her skin in the most distracting manner. A hand drifted down to tangle through his hair, gripping tight when he nipped at the sensitive skin just beside her knee. She pulled him back by his locks and stared down at him with wide, smoke-filled eyes.

“Number one, you put everything down. If I’m going to stay with you, you’d better be damn near unimpeachable, got it? Purer than the alter ego.”

He nodded rapidly, an inkling of hope written in his features. “Of course. That was always the plan to begin with. Once Lex was taken care of—I walk away.”

She blinked at the reminder, and she frowned at him. “And

Lex. We can’t let him—”

“Lois.” His voice was low, chiding.

“You can’t just—”

“Things are in motion, Lois. I can’t exactly take that packet back from Henderson, say never mind, wrong criminal. Someone has to take the fall.”

She scowled at him. “You said you’d do anything.”

Clark’s mouth opened to protest, but he shut it after a moment of thought. He hung his head, hair brushing against her once more, and her heart started pounding at the idea that he was considering it. Would he really do it, for her? How far would he go?

“You’re right,” he murmured, sliding his hand down her leg to more neutral territory. “I did say that, and I meant it. So whatever you need from me, I’ll do it. If it’d make you feel better, I’ll turn myself in. I’d wait an eternity to be with you.”

There it was again. The thrill of power, the chase of exhilaration up her spine. Holy crap, Nigel was right. She had the strongest man on the planet on his knees, willing to sacrifice everything for her.

She reached down and ran a hand down his cheek, turning his gaze back up to garner his undivided attention.

“We’ve all done bad things.”

His eyes flashed with some heady mix of arousal and gratitude, and she smirked at him a little. “Lex isn’t beyond impunity. But at the end of this road, the justice system will take care of it, wherever that leaves him. No more vigilante justice. Not a hair on his head comes to harm.”

“He deserves to die. For hurting you alone—”

“He’s not worth it,” she snapped back at him. He swallowed thickly and nodded in acquiescence. She shrugged her shoulders in admittance. “It’s not like I ever really loved him. And if you ever break any of these... terms... Just remember I know all your secrets. You owe me for keeping them.”

He didn’t respond, but she knew he was in agreement. He clung to her still, his breathing steady against her skin. The room was quiet, but it was a peaceful silence this time. They were resolved. Lois almost couldn’t believe it, but they’d gotten to the other side of this thing.

“I have an addendum.”

She looked down at him as he finally rose to his feet. He pulled her into him warmly, stroking a strong, warm hand down her arm soothingly. “*We* put Lex Luthor away. We put him behind us. We’ll be the epitome of a peaceful, happy couple. Unimpeachable, as you say. And then someday—maybe someday soon—I’m going to ask you to spend the rest of your life with me.”

Her heart raced again, and she froze. Was he really proposing? Or, proposing to propose? Their relationship had been a whirlwind so far, but this still seemed fast. She shook her head fiercely. “I’m not ready for that—”

“I know you’re not, I know. Not now. I’m just saying... someday. I want you to be prepared.”

It was hard to swallow it all at once, but she understood what he was saying. No more surprises. They’d be above board. “I still need time,” she hedged nervously. Time to process the fact that they’d essentially come up with a life plan together, that he’d lied to her but come clean about it, that he’d sworn his life to hers.

“Of course. But?”

She licked her lips, feeling her pulse even in her tongue. This was monumental. “Yeah. I think those’re some terms I could agree to.”

Keeping a low profile was not Lex Luthor’s forte.

He huddled in a corner, quietly waiting, exuding impatience with every tap of his foot, hands wrapped firmly around his coffee mug so they wouldn’t start nervously shaking, or fiddling with something on the table and drawing more attention to himself. That was the last thing he needed.

He sat up rigidly when Fane entered the small coffeehouse, looking a little too eager. He wasn't in uniform, thank goodness, and took his time ordering his coffee before taking a seat at the table next to him.

"Anything interesting in there?"

The casual comment threw him for a loop. Lex looked down at his copy of the *Daily Planet* sitting open on the table and pursed his lips. "Depends on what you think is interesting. Is it interesting that Lois Lane hasn't returned to work after an entire week? That Friaz is writing the bigger articles? Or that there hasn't been a single mention of Nigel St. John or myself in the pages when I know they have something on me?"

Fane didn't flinch, hardly acknowledged that he was even hearing a word. In fact, he was exceedingly calm. Lex squinted after the man as he got up to pick up his order from the counter and returned, still silent.

"Do you have anything to contribute to this conversation?"

The army man shot him a quiet glare as he sipped his coffee—a strong dark roast, no cream or sugar. Luthor wrinkled his nose. The man didn't have to be a stereotype.

"I think we need to be... cautious."

The word sent Lex's eyebrows skyward. "Cautious? You want to be cautious now?"

"Yes."

"I don't have time for cautious," Lex snarled. Fane looked around the cafe with his eyebrow raised, and Lex realized just how loud he was being. He took a deep breath in, trying to absorb some of the calm Fane was giving off. "You don't understand. There's a body out there somewhere. One of my friends inside the MPD says the higher-ups are working on some big case, keeping it all close to the vest. There's only one reason for that, I'm sure of it."

"You're being paranoid—"

"No." His word cut firmly and he reinforced his statement with the jab of his index finger into the table. "You're not being paranoid enough. He'll come for you, too, as soon as he realizes you exist."

Fane inhaled deeply. "It would go a long way if you would just tell me what you found out. I can't help you if my hands are tied."

"Why? All you care about is what I learned, and I've told you that when the time is right, I'll give you that information. But I need some assurances first."

Fane snapped at him under his breath. "I can't get you any assurances without a little sign of good faith."

Lex growled and ran a hand through his hair. "And what do you consider to be acting in good faith?"

"Honestly? Just your word. I'm not even asking for any evidence."

He shook his head frantically. "I can't. Not yet. I just—"

"Look. We've been through this. There's nothing I can do for you as is. It's an impasse."

"Well then, you better keep some of those green crystals handy, because you're going to need them."

"Green crystals?" Dawning illuminated the man's paunchy face, and Lex winced. He'd probably said too much as it was. "What do you mean? They worked on somebody? It had an actual, physical effect?"

Lex clammed up.

"Was it... our friend in tights?"

Shock flooded him, and Lex snapped his gaze over to Fane's a little too quickly, slack-jawed.

Fane smiled wickedly and thumped the table with his hand in excitement. "I knew it. I've been trying to get approval to test it on him, but no one's gone for it. You know, because of this little thing called evidence," he hinted.

Lex shook himself. "What makes you think it would work on him?"

"You mean besides your terrible acting skills?" Fane scoffed and leaned in closer. "The Bureau has an odd amount of old memorabilia. A lot of it came from this crash site in Kansas—the crystals included. It's the case Trask had been working on when he died... The Bureau shut down, and it's all just sat in storage for the past eighteen years."

Lex leaned back in his seat, face stricken and white as ash.

"Oh my God."

"What?"

His mind was spinning. It all made sense. He couldn't believe he'd never put it together before now. All he needed was the missing piece—Clark being the man behind the cape—and it fell into place. The crashed spacecraft in the middle of nowhere, Kansas. The secret government agency tasked with retrieving it. Sending Trask, a young, evangelical follower, and finding out that there had in fact been a child inside—an alien one. Tracking him down, finding him, confronting the Kents—Kent kills Trask to protect the family secret, to protect the son that wasn't theirs.

Then he came along, and messed it all up for young Clark Kent.

Lex rocketed to his feet a bit unsteadily. "I have to leave."

"Lex, talk to me. What's going on?"

"You need evidence, you say?"

"Yeah," he dragged out the word suspiciously.

"Last question, Charlie. Why didn't anyone agree to test this, this—"

"Meteorite," he supplied.

"This meteorite, on our mutual friend?"

"The symbol on his suit." Lex frowned at him curiously as he waited for the man to expand. Fane shifted in his seat. "People were unsure about how it would look to have the government attacking a figure for good, a literal superhero, but if we had information on who he was in his off-hours... It's not much of a difference in my opinion, but perception would be vastly improved, should anything come out. Should a grand jury be convened after taking drastic actions, it'd be easier if we could say we were protecting national security by finding out what he did in his private life. Like I said, evidence."

Lex couldn't imagine that stopping Bureau 39 from acting, but he supposed even the most off-books organizations had to follow some sort of bureaucracy. It didn't matter anymore anyway. Lex was convinced of the truth. He was finally right about something, and he had the upper hand. "I'll get you your evidence. I don't expect it'll go well for me, but you'll know it when it happens."

"How?"

"Trust me. It'll be everywhere." A smirk toyed with his lips as a phrase entered his mind. He slipped into his jacket and gathered his things. The words had only been truer once.

"It's gonna be a big news day."

Chapter 61: Babe, I'm Not What You Think, Come on Listen to Me

"Lois! Glad to see you back, darlin'. You still look like hell, but you're starting to look like you got a few licks in of your own."

She smiled shyly at her boss, pulled her hair forward a little to cover the bruising around her jaw more. "Thanks, Perry. Good to be back."

"It's not too soon, is it? Because one wince, one moment of hesitation, and you'll be back home faster than a knife fight in a telephone booth"

"No, I'm fine, Perry. Believe me. I... I just really want to go back to normal."

He gave her a tight-lipped smile. "I don't know how you do it, but I'm amazed that you do. Well, go ahead and get situated. I don't have any stories for you right now, but I heard you've been working on a spotlight-type investigation, so if you want to work

on that, feel free.”

She turned to face the door to his office, glanced at her co-workers outside and sealed them off from the rest of the bullpen. “Perry, there’s going to be some stuff coming out with this investigation—”

He held up a hand to cut her off. “I know. I got the rundown from James already. You sure you’re okay to work on this thing?”

She shot him a watery smile. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be fine. It’s just...” Her mind drifted back over Clark’s revelations, the pit in her stomach lessening a little more every time she thought about it. She shook her head to clear away some of the darker thoughts. “You think you know a guy?”

Perry stood and rounded his desk to rest a gentle arm across her shoulders consolingly. “Hey, hey. It’s gonna be all right. Before you know it, this will all be behind you, just a blip on the radar. Besides, it seems like Kent has been there for you, right? Everything’s good there?”

She drew a shade down over her eyes but projected a warm smile anyways. “Yeah. He’s been great.” She hoped there would be a day where those words didn’t taste quite so bitter in her mouth. “I don’t know how I would have gotten through all this without him.”

A sharp rap on the door had Perry grumbling good-naturedly. “Speak of the devil... Come in, Kent.”

“Everything okay in here?”

Lois stiffened a little at his intrusion. She didn’t like feeling as if he were checking up on her. He should trust her by now.

“Yeah, come in, come in. Shut the door. Now listen, Kent, I feel like I owe you an apology. I don’t know what got into me the last time we really spoke, but I ain’t too proud to admit when I’m wrong. Thank you for looking out for our girl, here.”

“Happy to do it.”

Another knock on the window, and Jimmy popped his head in. “I hate to break up the party, but Lois, you have a visitor.”

Lois frowned. A visitor? That was odd. She followed James out to the bullpen and left Perry and Clark to hash things out. Men were stupid sometimes. But she supposed that it was good for them to get along. If Clark was going to remain a part of her life, and she’d determined that already, then Perry would have to learn to deal with him.

A man she didn’t recognize stood nervously at her desk, looking around the bullpen with passing curiosity. She approached cautiously and shot him a smile to put him at ease. “Can I help you, sir?”

He startled at her sudden intrusion into his thoughts, and gave her an awkward half-bow, half-wave. He cleared his throat, and she was thrown by his deep, midwestern accent. “Ma’am. Are you Lois Lane?”

She cocked her head at him curiously. “I am; and you are Mr —”

“Oh, please. Call me Ronnie.”

She would have been charmed by his aw-shucks routine if something wasn’t telling her that there was something fake about him. “Okay. Ronnie. What can I do for you?”

“Um, this might seem like an odd request, but I actually used to be friends with Mr. Kent, and I heard he owns this paper, and that you work together a lot. I was wondering if you would make an introduction.”

Lois squinted her eyes at Ronnie, unsure still. He seemed nervous, but genuine. “Uh-huh. Ronnie. Where you from?”

“Central City, by way of some other places. Look, it doesn’t have to be now, I’m sure he’s a busy man, but if you’d just give him my card—here—and have him give me a call. Any time. Day or night. Tell ‘im I got something that belongs to him.”

She took the card hesitantly, looked over the plainly typed details on the front, and her alarm bells were going off all over the place. She gave him a placating smile. “Look, Ronnie—”

The man suddenly straightened as he saw someone walk in—Lois craned her neck and clocked Henderson and Sawyer walking up, badges visible, and her frown deepened. Something definitely wasn’t right here with this Ronnie, and his acquaintance with Clark or any piece of his past didn’t do anything to soothe her suspicions. “I’ve taken up enough of your time. Have a nice day, ma’am.”

He turned on his heel and kept his head down low as he blazed past the detectives and out into the elevator. Henderson stopped and did a quick double take before approaching her once again and shaking himself. “I swear, I know that guy from somewhere...”

Lois quickly grabbed a piece of tape from the roll on her disorganized desk and taped the card to the edge of her computer so she wouldn’t forget about it. She frowned at the sticky note beside it, written in some barely legible scrawl. Lois plucked it gently from her screen and turned it sideways, only able to make out a few words. Something about someone wanting to deter her from going to see a Shadi broke, whoever or whatever that was?

“Lois! You’re looking... uh, well, anyway. You got a moment?”

Lois gave Henderson a polite smile and nodded, pocketing the sticky note discreetly. Her pulse skyrocketed and she tried to project an aura of calm, not the oh-my-God-they-figured-it-out reaction she initially had. She hated Clark for making that her first reaction when she saw her friend; then again, it was better than losing said friend over a manslaughter charge. She smiled placidly at the detective, telling herself reassuring thoughts as she followed him to the conference room.

They shut the door behind her, and she couldn’t suppress the tiny jump at the sound. Bill looked at her questioningly. “You okay, Lane?”

She sighed and fidgeted as she took her seat. “Yeah. Just a little jumpy still. What’s up?”

Bill and Maggie shared a look before he finally sat at the table with them. “We just wanted to follow up on a few questions we had about this Luthor investigation. You up to talking about it?”

She considered her options for a second, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Uh, yeah. The sooner this is over with, the better, in my opinion.”

Bill smiled sympathetically. “I get it. Now, you said that... Nigel St. John was the one who kidnapped you, correct?”

She schooled her features carefully and leaned in as she agreed.

“And he was the one also responsible for kidnapping your sister?”

“Yes. Although I think in that case it was Miranda who was her... primary... abductor. But in both cases, Lex was paying them, on and off the books, to torture us.” She paused while Henderson scribbled something down. “That’s not to say they’re still not responsible. I’d like nothing more than to see Nigel St. John rot in a cell for the rest of his days, but I know who was in charge.”

“Can you describe what happened when you first realized Lex was behind your kidnapping?”

She tried to keep her hands very still as she sat there, giving away no hint of fear. “I suspected from the beginning. But Nigel didn’t confirm anything. He’d knocked me around a bit, and then I feel like Lex came out of nowhere. He was just suddenly in front of me.” She slammed her eyes shut at the memory, trying to bury it deep where it belonged. “I kept my eyes closed for a while.”

Maggie reached a hand out across the table to soothe over her own, and Lois jolted alert at the sudden touch, pulling her hand away in a snap. “I’m sorry,” she intoned softly, offering a soft smile before nodding back at Bill.

“And what did he say to you? Lex. What did Lex say to you?”

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. This part of her statement was all true, but it still stung. “He... He mostly wanted to know about Clark. If we... If we’d been together. I was so

worried he'd found out about our investigation, but no." She watched him scribble his notes down, a bitter scoff escaping her throat as she thought about it more. "That's Lex for you. Self-obsessed to the end. If he had known about the investigation, I'm sure you would have found me in a body bag instead, or floating ashore in Hob's Bay."

Bill stared at her intently at that, hand frozen mid-scribble, and she puzzled over what she said. "What?"

"Nothing. Just curious you picked the bay."

"Well, we weren't near the West River. Why, what's wrong with Hob's Bay?"

Maggie brushed away Bill's comment out of the air. "It's nothing. We just heard about a jumper who washed up in Hob's Bay yesterday."

Lois nodded like that made sense, but it decidedly did not. She did her best not to dart a furtive glance up at Bill, but they'd nearly told her something, and she had an idea what it was. She uncrossed her arms and leaned forward across the table. "So, have you found anything yet? How close are we on the Luthor investigation?"

Henderson sighed and stood up to pace. "We're getting all our ducks in a row. Hence the grilling. Better to have as much hard evidence as possible going into a trial like this. We want every charge to stick. Kidnappings, assault, murder—everything."

"Me too."

He smiled and gave her a once-over. "You sure you're all right, kid? Looks like Lex really did a number on you."

"I'll be fine, Bill. Just make sure you get the son of a bitch.

Now tell me when this is all going down so I know when to save space for my article."

He beamed at that and nudged his partner in the arm. "There's the Lois Lane I know and love. I told you she's an Amazon warrior." Maggie smiled and nodded, and Lois tamped down her embarrassed flush at the praise. In a lot of ways, Bill Henderson was like a proud and teasing older brother. Bill continued. "Like I said, we're still tying up a few loose ends, but should be soon. We'll be raiding his building within the week, but it seems Lex has been in the wind since your kidnapping."

That surprised her. She'd expected him to have gone home at some point. Maybe he had someone do that for him, or he could be hunkered down inside somewhere. She swallowed thickly. "Well, they can't stay hidden forever. I'm sure Lex and Nigel will come out of the woodwork with some other plan in play."

Henderson agreed with a smile that seemed a little too big, and Lois stood up. The interview seemed to be done, so she made for the door.

"Oh, one more thing—would you mind sending Kent in here when he gets a chance? Like I said, the more evidence the better."

Clark flipped through his folder casually, eavesdropping on their conversation. The bad news was Henderson seemed to have a lead on Nigel. The docks on the other end of Hob's Bay was where he'd dumped him, and he was definitely sensitive to that throwaway line, even if Lois genuinely didn't know that's where he was. The good news was they were still going after Lex.

He busied himself more thoroughly in his paperwork when he heard Henderson say his name and dammit, he was next. Lois looked a little shaken as she walked over to greet him, and he stole her hand away to press a discreet kiss to her knuckles. "Everything okay?"

She gave him a faux smile. "Yeah. I just don't like talking about Lex this much."

He bussed her lips, massaging her wrist gently. The swelling had gone down significantly in the last week, but the bruising was still vicious. "I know. It'll all be over soon, don't worry."

A twitch of regret or remorse or something bitter flickered across her features, and Clark did his best to ignore it. She knew Lex was a bad guy. She'd seen enough of it first-hand, and yet still

there was an element of doubt. He wished she'd square away any residual guilt she had already and get it over with, but he was painfully aware that they weren't on steady enough ground yet to say so.

He wasn't sure what it would take to get her over it.

"They want to talk to you, too," she muttered, eyes darting to his lips as she spoke.

"I heard," he murmured, lips a hair's breadth away from her own, tasting her breath on his lips. It was almost as good as kissing her.

A catcall from outside Perry's office sounded, and the moment was shattered. Clark glowered as Eduardo slapped a twenty-dollar bill into Ralph's hand, and a low growl rumbled in his chest. He'd kill them for their asinine, juvenile—

"Clark," she warned, pushing his mop of hair back in a soothing manner. He darted his eyes over to hers, still displeased, but more pacified by her ministrations. He quirked his lips up at her, and a spark of mischievousness ran through him. He ducked his head towards her again and claimed her lips as his own in a strong, powerful kiss. She moaned into his mouth, and he shivered. He opened his eyes to peer out of the corner of his eye, and watched the two's faces fall and grow to new levels of distaste for every moment he spent kissing their co-worker.

Lois wrenched herself away from him suddenly and smacked his hand off her hip where it seemed to be traveling of its own accord. "Do you have to be an asshole?"

He laughed at that, eyes sparkling. "I'm not."

An eye-roll. "Sure. Just go talk to Henderson already."

He stuck his tongue out at her before turning to do as she asked. She was right, he liked being an—

She smacked his butt playfully, and he feigned mortification at her. Lois laughed, and he walked backwards out of the room, miming the I'm-watching-you gesture before finally turning back to the conference room.

"Took you long enough. Are you finished?" Clark bit his lip to stop himself from saying something blue, and instead nodded. Henderson stood up and shut the door behind him, much less carefully this time. "Good. Question time."

Clark smiled politely as he settled into his seat. "Anything to help. What do you need to know?"

His pause was weighty as he rounded the table and sat back down. "It's more what you need to know. And I don't want this getting back 'round to Lois yet." Clark agreed eagerly, ready for him to get on with it. "We found Nigel St. John."

Clark had figured as much. He let surprise read easily on his face and tried to react as naturally as possible. "Oh, thank God. Where is he? You have him in custody? Oh, please—please tell me you have him in custody."

Henderson pursed his lips and flitted his eyes over to his partner's once again. "Oh, we got him all right. In the morgue."

An involuntary tic of nerves flickered across his face before he loosed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness." Clark scrubbed a hand over his face and leaned back in his chair, trying to come across more refreshed by the news, instead of anxious.

"You seem relieved."

He scoffed at the inspector. "Look, I understand that this is part of your job and all. But I really just need this to be over. For Lois' sake. She's been... She'd never tell you, but she's been a wreck. Constantly looking for Nigel or Lex over her shoulder, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Maybe this will help calm her down a little."

Henderson nodded sympathetically, and a part of Clark felt a tingle of victory run through him at the success of the ruse. "I hear what you're saying. How long have you and Lois been seeing each other now?"

Clark shrugged and played it vague. "Couple of weeks."

"Must be hard."

Clark glanced through the windows out at Lois, currently berating her co-workers for the apparent betting pool that was going on regarding their relationship. He grinned as she smacked Ralph over the head with the morning's edition, and a bubble of sappiness welled up in his chest. "Lois is a tough nut. She's gonna get through it."

"Actually, I meant for you."

He looked back at Henderson with a furrow in his brow, and waited for the man to clarify.

"It must be difficult, seeing someone you care about so much go through something so traumatic."

Ice settled in Clark's bones and he stilled. Henderson wasn't actually suggesting... he cocked his head innocently at the inspector. "Where you going with this, Bill?"

Henderson twiddled his thumbs absentmindedly but kept his gaze firmly trained on him. Clark took the moment to glance over at his partner—only to find himself stonewalled there too. His heart skipped a beat. He was so close, so *close* to being done with it all. And now—

"Where were you at eleven thirty in the evening on the twenty-sixth?"

The conference room was silent for everyone except Clark. He wished he could have silence. Instead he heard everything. The printers running downstairs, the clacking of keyboards in the bullpen. Perry's bellows at everyone to get back to work and Lois defending her assault on Ralph. Clark tried to focus, and instead zeroed in on the two in front of him. Maggie Sawyer was notably more nervous—her heart rate betrayed her—although she didn't waver in her focus on him. Calm, cool, collected, like she'd been there before.

The difference was that Henderson actually was calm, cool, and collected. He had that glint in his eye, like he had an ace up his sleeve. And for a moment Clark forgot his own cards.

"I, uh, I can't say I remember exactly. It's been a crazy week."

"Try."

Clark looked up at him piercingly. "I'm pretty sure I was at home. With Lois. I wasn't watching the clock, if you know what I mean, but—"

"Lois was with you, then?"

He frowned. The inspector was using very clear, very precise phraseology, and he felt cornered. "Yeah. I believe we were enjoying some... life-affirming... activities. And then we went to bed." Sawyer squirmed in her seat then, momentarily drawing his attention away. "That enough detail for you, or would you like a diagram?"

Bill's grimace gave him a small pleasure, but it didn't last long. "What about earlier that day, when Lois made her escape. Maybe three in the afternoon?"

"As I believe I told you before"—he ground out the words through clenched teeth—"I was with the *Man of Steel*." He emphasized the phrase. If they didn't believe the caped hero, then his word would literally mean nothing. Fear knotted his stomach. "We were looking for Lois."

"And he will corroborate that of course?"

"Of course."

"I hope for your sake, Mr. Kent, that Big Blue is as keen on making his court appearances as he is at making his rescues."

The muscle in the side of his neck pulled as he squared his jaw before smiling wolfishly. "Inspector, is there a question you're trying to ask me?"

Bill shrugged. "Just curious. Who do you think would have motive to kill Nigel?"

"How about the man who hired him?" he spat back, leaning forward over the table. Henderson narrowed his eyes at him, but it was Sawyer who spoke next.

"Why would Lex kill his right hand man?"

"Because he let her escape? Or maybe because he hurt her at

all? I don't know! I ain't his—I'm *not* his psychiatrist! All I know is that Lois is the most important thing in the world to Luthor—"

"And you would appear to have the exact same motivations."

Clark huffed a dry laugh into the silence that followed. He could hear his own blood rushing in his ears. This was insane. The one time he didn't do anything really wrong, the one time... He straightened in his seat, pulling at the cuffs of his shirtsleeves to distract himself. A twisted smile pulled at his mouth, and he made eye contact with his accuser. "You know, Henderson, it sure as hell sounds like you're dangerously close to making an accusation. If you have something to say, just say it. But you better be careful about what it is you're saying before I get offended."

Henderson stared him down, and Clark didn't dare move. He waited for the death knell to come with a growl trapped in his chest. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for it all to come crashing down around him. He'd almost had it all. His gut churned, but part of him almost welcomed the chance for a change.

Henderson had no idea who he was dealing with.

"We have a witness who claims someone with your description was out around the docks about when we assume Nigel's body was dumped."

"And that's it? A witness?" Clark laughed. "Did this witness see me dragging a body around? Did he say me specifically? Because if he did, I'd remind you who we're up against in these files, and if he didn't mention me by name, then it could be anyone."

The inspector blinked, the detective beside him squirming a little uncomfortably. That threw them. It was as if they hadn't considered he wasn't a suspect before now. Henderson scrubbed a hand across his jaw. "We'll look into the source. There's a chance this is actually Luthor's doing." Relief. They were buying it. He was safe. Lois was safe. "In any case, don't go too far, got it? We might have some more questions for you."

Clark didn't breathe for another long moment, hardly daring himself to speak as he collected his thoughts. The rush of adrenaline flowed out of him so fast it almost left him shaky. "Right," he drawled. This wasn't over yet. "I wouldn't leave town before seeing Luthor behind bars anyway."

"Good. You can tell Lois she doesn't have to worry about St. John anymore."

Clark eyed them both carefully, a small smirk creasing the corners of his eyes and his mouth. "Of course. I appreciate you both... keeping me informed."

"Not a problem. Crazy how the world works, huh? Sometimes the bad guy sorts himself out."

The line felt like a jab, and Clark gave him a tight smile in return. "Crazy is a word for it," he agreed.

"We'll keep you and Lois apprised of our investigation. Let you know if anything else crazy crops up."

Clark wasn't sure if that was a threat or a reassurance. He stood up and nodded curtly before slamming open the door and storming out of the conference room.

Chapter 62: Can't You See I've Been Played

Clark took long, quick strides across the pit, neck coiled tight and muscles clenched. God damn Henderson. He was almost blind in his rampage, Ralph jumping out of his way at the last second, following the sound of Lois' heartbeat unseeingly.

"Clark?"

Her hand landed on his forearm, stopping him short and informing him that he'd reached his destination, the heat of her palm searing through his crisp sleeves. He scrunched his eyes shut tight and told himself to breathe.

"Clark, what's wrong? What happened in there?"

"I can't—" He gestured broadly through the air, waving her off. "I need some air." Because he was so close. Luthor was all but

in handcuffs. Nigel was gone. Lois knew the truth—

“Talk to me, Kansas,” she intoned quietly, glancing over his shoulder at the cops in the conference room.

He shook his head sharply. “I can’t. I— Air. I need to breathe.”

“Okay. Why don’t we go up to the roof, take a quick smoke break, and we can discuss it when you’ve calmed down?”

He pushed his glasses up slightly to pinch the bridge of his nose, the slight pain of his grip grounding him a little more in reality. “No. I just need a minute. I’m gonna take a quick... walk.” He gracelessly reached around her and grabbed his jacket off her seat, pulled it on with sharp, staccato movements. This wasn’t at all going to plan. He stormed away from her desk and to the elevator, ignoring the sound of her calling his name. He saw Henderson and Sawyer gathering themselves out of the corner of his eye, and the back of his mind told him not to draw so much attention to himself, in a voice that sounded like his father’s. Another fainter, yet still familiar, voice told him that he was stronger than them all, and that it didn’t matter what anyone thought. That might makes right, that strength is power. He straightened his back and inhaled deeply until the elevator doors opened and he stepped in calmly.

He just needed some distance from it all, to clear his head. Maybe he’d fly to the North Pole, scream out some of his frustrations, cut some ice caps down to size. Maybe he’d fly to space, get some perspective on the issues. Henderson didn’t really know anything. All he had was the word of some bum on the docks, someone that could feasibly have been paid off by Luthor. He berated himself for not having seen this guy when he was dumping Nigel’s body. He’d been so careful not to leave any fingerprints.

Clark shoved into someone’s shoulder, spilling the man’s coffee, as he brushed past him into the lobby of the Daily Planet, toward the entrance. “Hey, watch it—Kent?”

He could see sunlight, just out of his reach. He ignored the man, the sunlight drawing him like a tractor beam. He didn’t have time for nobodies that recognized him from the paper or thought they met at some gala—

“Cl—Hey, Kal!”

He froze. Panic and sheer terror at the name rushed his system all at once, and he couldn’t move. The sunlight was right there, and here he was as frozen as a block of ice.

“It’s really you! Hot damn, are you a hard man to find. E’rybody thought you were dead.”

Clark turned around to face the stranger and it took him a few seconds to place where he’d met the man and who he was. The name took another second to come to him. “Ronnie?”

Ronnie grinned. “I knew you wouldn’t forget me.”

He rolled his eyes, a sick feeling in his stomach, and he turned back to push through the front doors.

“Hey, wait up!”

The sunlight washed over his face, and his skin tingled warmly like he was too close to a fire. He sighed. “I thought you were in jail, Ronnie.”

“You would think that, seeing as you’re the guy that put me there.”

“I did not—”

“You sure didn’t do me any favors. You outran me, s’all. Otherwise, our fates woulda been the same.”

A grumble rolled through Clark’s chest, and he made a decision to walk east, against the flow of foot traffic. “How did you get out?”

“Good behavior.” Clark shot him an incredulous look and the man laughed and ran a hand over his shaggy, dark hair. “You got me. You really wanna know, though?”

Clark weighed that question. On the one hand, catching an escaped felon would probably earn him some points with Henderson, and he could use some points there. On the other... the

less he knew the better. He weaved around a woman pushing a stroller. “Never mind. Why are you here, Ronnie? And what do I have to do to get rid of you?”

He laughed again. “You got almost as much spit to ya as Jesse.”

“Who?”

“Girlfriend. Helped me escape. You’d like her. You’re both pretty vicious. And quick on your feet. Ha.”

Clark growled and cut off the rambling. “Pineda.”

Ronnie sobered, and shoved his hands deep in his pockets. “I’ve got your globe. Figured you’d want it back.”

The face of his birth father seared through his brain, and he stopped in his tracks. He hadn’t thought about that thing in years. The echoes of gunshots, the blood-curdling screams, the coldness of his father’s voice as he spoke his parting words, passed on his plans for revenge.

“They’ll never catch me alive.”

Fear zipped through him, followed closely by nausea, and Clark turned on his heel and walked back the other direction.

“Kent—”

“No.” He wagged a finger back at the man trailing him. “You don’t bring that thing up to me ever again, understand? Destroy it.”

“I don’t know. It’s got some pretty juicy stuff on there.” He nodded his head at the Daily Planet building to their side. “Wonder what the press would think of it.”

“And I wonder what Inspector Henderson would think of an escaped convict roaming around Metropolis,” he snapped back, glowering.

Ronnie raised his hands defensively. “Hey, all right. Truce.”

“I mean it, Ronnie. Destroy it.”

“I’m not going to do that, but I’ll make sure it stays somewhere safe.”

Clark stood toe to toe with the man, a good few inches taller, and glared down the bridge of his nose at him. “I’m having a crap day, Ronald. Don’t push me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. But I’m not gonna get rid of a precious family heirloom like that. You might want it one day. Pass it on to your own kid.”

“No child of mine will ever be allowed to see that,” he ground out tightly.

“Hey, I don’t blame ya. Rough stuff, man.”

“Jor— please—”

“Shut up and die already, Lara.”

He squinted at the man, throat tight with anger and feeling accosted by the memories, and about two seconds away from launching Ronald Pineda into outer space. “Leave, Ronnie. Before we both do something stupid. Cops are just upstairs.”

Ronnie laughed. “Cops can’t catch me anymore, Kent. I’ve outgrown them.”

“Yeah?” He flashed the man a wicked grin and stepped into his space domineeringly. “I could still kick your ass all the way back to Central City without breaking a sweat.”

They squared off at each other for a few more long moments before Ronnie finally blinked. Clark leaned back proudly, shoulders square. He’d won.

“Fine. I’m going. Just remember—I’ll be out there somewhere, walking around with this information. And one of these days, you’ll want it back, and you’ll have to do something for me to get it.”

He smiled devilishly. “Over your dead body, Pineda.”

Ronnie grinned back at him in return. “Maybe, Kent. Maybe.” He paused as he turned, pivoting back for a moment with a softened smile on his face. “It was good to catch up. We should do this again sometime.”

He turned on his heel and walked away, and Clark felt the upper hand shifting away from him with a pit in his stomach as he

watched him go. This was *not* his day. He'd promised Lois to be honest from here on out, but he didn't have a clue how to start this conversation.

A loud clap of sound from behind him gathered his attention away from Ronnie and the ghosts of his past. Before he could even turn, a ripple of discomfort washed over him out of nowhere, washing a wave of nausea along with it as it came. Clark frowned. He looked down at himself, limbs tingling, feeling slightly wrong. The pain started flaring through him more sharply, and he clutched his right side where it seemed to be resonating the most. Slowly, it started registering that there were people screaming around him. He tried to take a step forward only to fall to his knees. He flung out his hand to catch himself, only doing a half-decent job. His glasses clattered to the ground.

It wasn't until then that he noticed the blood.

He stared at his hand, covered in blood, and he tried to process it. He had blood on his hands. Could everyone see it? Whose blood? Another drip of blood landed on the concrete beneath him, and it connected suddenly. It was his blood. He was bleeding. *Why* was he bleeding?

A sharp kick landed on the opposite side of his ribcage, and the wind left him in a rush as he collapsed. He slammed his eyes shut at the pain where he landed on his wound. The foot kicked him again, pushed him over so that he was lying face up. He kept his eyes closed, the sun beating down harshly on his face, a counterpoint to the pain in his side.

It burned. Oh, it burned.

A familiar laugh met his ears, and he wished it would all just be over before that damn man opened his mouth.

"Oh, how the almighty have fallen."

Clark gritted his teeth as hard as he could, trying to block out the noise. Lex's laugh only seemed to get louder.

"I can hardly believe my luck. Here I was, on my way to the Daily Planet, assuming I'd have to take some hostages before I drew you out, and you just walked into my line of sight!" His glee skittered his laugh unevenly, and Clark moaned. Another nudge from one of Luthor's fancy Italian loafers drew a gasp of pain from his chest. "Open your eyes, Kent. I want to see the look in your eyes when I finally end your miserable life."

The little bit of stubbornness he had left kept his eyes sealed shut, and the smallest part of him that was still alive felt a little proud at it. He wouldn't give Luthor the satisfaction.

Another crack of thunder sounded, and pain seared through his thigh this time. Clark screamed out, eyes shooting open, as he attempted to curl in on himself to stop the pain. He'd never experienced such torture.

Lex chuckled darkly. "Oh, these little green bullets are my new best friend."

Clark opened his eyes finally, and stared at the man who'd ruined his life with open hostility. He gritted the words out through his clenched teeth. "I hate you."

"Feeling's mutual, pal. If I'd known the sort of pain and suffering you'd cause, I'd have killed you twenty years ago." Lex grinned maniacally. "Trask wanted to, didn't he? He should have. Maybe if he did, your father would still be alive. So that's your fault too, isn't it?"

Clark swore under his breath, not capable of much more. He felt weak. He felt like the bullets were tearing him in two, like the sun was burning his skin off his body. If this was how it ended, he could be okay with that, as long as the pain stopped.

Lex leveled the gun down at his forehead, not a waver or a tremor in his form. "See you in hell, Ultraman."

Chapter 63: Destined to Fade

Lois shook her head at his back as he got on the elevator, shoulders tense. He should be turning to her, not away. He'd promised. He'd said they'd face things together—with an implied

for better or worse at the end of it all. She swallowed down her fears thickly. She supposed she couldn't expect him to change overnight. If she was going to need time to process everything, then he was too. They were going to be okay.

Provided Henderson didn't do anything stupid to provoke him.

Jimmy cruised past and she caught him by the sleeve. "Hey, Jimmy? Real quick, did you happen to take any messages for me this morning or the last few days?"

He shook his head with an eye-roll. "No, Perry had Ralph covering your messages this week. Why?"

"Ralph? That unreliable jerkwad has chicken scratch for handwriting! How am I supposed to read this?" She thrust the crumpled up sticky note in his face, and James plucked it from her hands quickly.

"Lane... Doctor... Shadey broke?" he hazarded with a somewhat apologetic smile.

Lois snatched it back with a sneer. "Wow, thanks so much for your interpretation. I now still have zero clue what that means."

James shrugged. "Hey, maybe he'd have told you if you hadn't got on him so bad with that betting pool, but good luck now. He already left for the day."

Lois scowled at him as he walked away, but he may have been right. Maybe she'd catch him tomorrow and get it out of him. Until then... her eyes slid back to the elevator doors, and the pit in her stomach returned. It wasn't fair for them to think it was his fault, this whole Nigel thing. Even if it was, partially.

She knew it was the wrong thing to do, but she strode back into the conference room firmly, finding Bill and Maggie murmuring quietly to each other. She folded her arms over her chest and huffed irritably. Bill looked up at her with a question in his eyes. "Can I help you, Lois?"

"Yeah, what did you say to make my boyfriend so mad?"

Henderson pursed his lips. "I was just asking him some more questions about the day you were kidnapped. Same as you."

"Bull. What did you ask him?"

Henderson gestured for her to sit, but Lois stood her ground, tapping her foot firmly. Bill gaped and looked back at his partner for reassurance. Maggie shrugged, leaving the decision up to him. Lois waited patiently for him to come out with it.

"We found Nigel St. John's body on the shores of Hob's Bay."

She breathed out heavily. Okay. They found him. They could deal with this. That didn't mean she was guilty. She sucked her teeth thoughtfully, retreating into her head.

"Lois? You all right?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" she shot out at him angrily. He seemed taken aback at her reaction.

"I didn't want to worry you anymore. Besides, I wanted to corroborate your story first—"

"Why? You think Clark did it?" The hesitation after her question answered her better than any words could. "Oh my God, you really think he did it, don't you?"

Henderson shook his head nervously. "He got really defensive, Lane. We have a description of the guy who was seen dumping the body—"

"Wouldn't you be defensive if I accused you of murder?" she cried out. Henderson shut his mouth. Lois turned to pace, chewing a fingernail distractedly. "And a description of Clark is like describing a Ken doll. Tall, dark hair, brown eyes—did your mystery witness happen to mention any glasses even?"

Henderson wasn't keen on answering any more of her questions apparently, so Maggie stepped up to the plate. "No. No glasses were mentioned."

Lois quirked a smile at her. She knew he hadn't been wearing his glasses. They were too easy an identifier. "No glasses even. Sounds like half the men in Metropolis to me. Hell, it sounds like Lex, although I gotta admit someone probably would have noticed his hair was curly." She let that statement sink in a moment in

silence before continuing. “Besides which, neither of you thought to ask me if I knew where he was that night?”

“And where would that be, Miss Lane?” Maggie got some fire back to her, planting both hands on the table dominantly.

She flashed a naughty grin at the woman. “Between my legs.”

“Dammit, Lois, I don’t need to know that!”

Lois gestured at his partner pointedly, an innocent expression taking over her face. “She asked, Bill!”

Henderson swore and rubbed his temples. “Okay, fine. Let’s say all that’s true. Why did he just run out of here like a bat out of hell?”

Lois gave him a simpering smile. “The police just told him he’s a suspect in a murder investigation. You think the guy hasn’t earned a quick smoke?”

The pair went silent after that. Lois felt a sense of accomplishment wash over her. She’d thrown them off the scent. They couldn’t think Clark had killed Nigel when it had been her. She couldn’t let him take that fall for her. Then she’d owe him her life, and she liked how the tables in their relationship were turned right now.

The crack of a gunshot outside the windows drew all three of their attentions away. Suddenly Henderson and Sawyer were up and on the move, running past her out of the conference room and over to the emergency stairwell. Henderson pulled a radio off his belt. “All units, all units. We have a 10-31 with shots fired outside 111 East Fifth Street, possible body. Repeat, shots fired—”

Lois’ heart skipped a beat, and she followed them, cutting across to grab her notebook off her desk and yell for Olsen to follow her with his camera.

“Lois?”

“On it, Perry!”

“No, Lois, stop, it’s too dangerous—”

She slammed the button for the elevator vigorously until the doors opened, Olsen slipping in behind her just before the doors shut.

“How often does this happen?” James gushed. “Gunshots outside the Planet? Talk about a story landing in your lap—”

“Shut up, Jim. Listen to me. I want you to get as many shots as you can, good angles. If they’re good enough, you just might make the front page with my first article back.”

He beamed at her, and Lois centered herself. She had to be focused. She couldn’t think about Lex or her kidnapping or Clark or anything else right now. She had to be Mad Dog Lane. She dragged in a long inhale and the doors opened up.

Henderson and Sawyer just burst through the stairwell doors ahead of them, guns drawn and at the ready. She smirked; they weren’t faster than the elevator. She heard James clicking away behind her, getting stills of the cops running. Lois ran after them.

The street was in mayhem. People were running past her in a flurry. A man knocked into her as he bolted, and she scowled after him briefly before looking around to see where the commotion was coming from.

Her heart stopped. Lex Luthor stood over her partner, with a gun leveled at his head. A cry ripped from her throat.

“Clark!”

A shot sounded, and tears sprang to her eyes. She gasped, unable to move, unable to speak, riveted to the scene before her.

Lex stumbled, the gun flying out of his hand. Lois felt relief flood her as she saw Maggie holster her gun and Henderson ran up to pinion Lex’s arms behind him. Processing what happened took a minute, but she didn’t care what happened to Lex, as long as Clark was okay. She bolted to his side and skidded to a stop. He was bleeding significantly. The tears streamed down her face as she knelt down at his side. “Clark, Clark—please, Clark, say something, please.” She grabbed his hand in hers and gripped him tight to her heart.

“Someth—” He cut himself with a sharp gasp of pain.

She sighed, and leaned over him to press her forehead against his. He was clammy and sweaty, but he was alive. She spent a few moments just breathing with him, trying to stop crying. “I love you, Clark. I love you so much. Please don’t die on me.” He moaned, and she distracted him by capturing his lips in a quick, passionate kiss. He couldn’t reciprocate, but she felt soothed a little by his breath alone.

“You two deserve each other.”

Lex’s vicious laugh rang in her ears, and she turned to glare at him. He was bleeding from a small bullet wound in his left arm, a through-and-through shot staining his crisp white shirt. Lois took a moment to be impressed by Maggie’s sharp shooting skills before turning on Lex himself with clenched teeth. “You’re right, Lex. And you deserve to go to jail for a very long time.”

He swore and lunged for her, even with his arms shackled, but Henderson pulled him back. Rage sparked like iron striking iron in his dark brown eyes. “You’ll be sorry you ever left me, Lois. Mark my words. One of these days, you’ll come crawling back, but it’ll be too damn late.”

Henderson shoved him bodily into the back of the squad car, being none too gentle. He slammed the door before he even had a chance to duck, but Lex still smiled that uneven grin. He tilted his chin up to shout at her through the crack in the window.

“If he doesn’t kill you, then I will!”

She shivered. She hoped to death his words were only empty threats, and not promises.

The sirens wailing in the distance covered his cackle, and Lois finally tore her eyes away and back to Clark. He had his eyes closed, and his breaths were shallow. Her heart wrenched. She pushed back his hair soothingly, whispering reassurances of nothing to him as the ambulance pulled up.

A gentle hand landed on her shoulder, and she looked with bleary eyes up at Henderson. He motioned for her to take a step back as the EMTs stepped in around her to do their jobs and carry Clark away.

Lois turned and buried her face in Henderson’s chest as she tried to stem her tears.

Frail was never a word he’d have attributed to Clark Kent.

In the few months since he’d known the man, he’d always been a large presence, physically and intrinsically. And while he didn’t always trust him, generally speaking he seemed like a good man. Lois genuinely seemed to love him, and for all her history, he didn’t think he’d ever see that happen. He smiled sadly at her as he watched her hold his hand between her own, clutched tight. She was whispering to him—what he didn’t know—but every now and then she’d crack a smile or laugh, only to be followed by tears. Bill took a deep breath before slipping inside and shutting the door behind him.

Lois looked up at him with wide, wet eyes, and released a sigh of relief at seeing him. He landed a comforting hand on her shoulder and gave a slight squeeze. “You doing okay, Lane?”

She sniffed and nodded. “Yeah. Considering the fact that my ex just tried to murder my current partner... I’m fan-freaking-tastic.”

Bill found himself laughing unexpectedly. “There she is.”

Lois shot him a watery smile and leaned her head against Clark’s hand.

“Are you ready to talk for a minute?”

Her face fell at that, and he hated that he had to do this. “As a friend, or a witness?”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

She mulled it over for a second before replying. “Those are two different statements, Bill. There’re some things I can only tell Bill, the beat cop I befriended after he arrested my dad. If I’m talking to Inspector Henderson—”

His heart broke for her for the millionth time. She’d been so scared that day—doe-eyed and in shock, and so young. He

scrubbed a hand over his face. She'd hardly been seventeen. Here it was—almost ten years later—and she was coming to him with the same look in her eyes. Hell, she had echoes of the same bruising. Lucy had it easy, sent off to live with an aunt, but Lois... He felt his neck tightening at the memory. "It's not on the same level as your dad, is it?"

She shook her head sharply, hair skating against her jawline as the motion settled. "No. Well, not in some ways. In other ways..."

Henderson tossed his notebook down on the foot of the hospital bed and took a seat in the rickety chair beside the bed. "Okay. Tell me what you need to say, and we'll come up with a sanitized version for Inspector Henderson."

She smiled at him, grateful, and looked over Kent's form. He was still out cold, breathing through a tube. Bill waited patiently for her to collect her thoughts.

"Clark had nothing to do with Nigel's death."

That wasn't what he was expecting to hear. Bill leaned back in his seat and blinked at her. "Oh. Okay."

Her eyes were full of sorrow as she turned to look over at him. "He hurt me. And then Lex really hurt me. And Ultraman flew in to save the day, but Lex had something that could hurt Ultraman. And he was going to kill him."

The wheels started spinning in his brain, piecing the story together. "You mean like the same stuff he used to shoot Clark?"

She gaped at him a moment before her shoulders slumped, and he watched her give in. "How did you know?"

Bill grimaced. "I suspected something was off with him. Ultraman, and Kent. But then I saw those green bullets—one at the scene, and the other one they pulled from his leg—"

"Kryptonite," she whispered, and he filed the name away in the back of his mind. "He was going to kill him, Bill. He'd all but accepted his fate." She sulked. "It was Nigel's gun. It was self-defense."

He read between the lines and figured out what she wasn't saying. Bill nodded slowly, and chose his words carefully. "Nigel St. John was a bad man. The MPD isn't looking into his death too closely. Why look a gift horse in the mouth, right?"

She exhaled loudly and rested her eyes for a minute. "Thank you, Bill."

"What about today?"

"Hmm?"

"Those... Kryptonite? Those bullets. Lex knew he was—"

"Bill." She glanced around sharply, and he lowered his voice.

"Lex... got his wires crossed." He waited for a nod from Lois before continuing, coming up with the story as he went. "Between his hatred for Clark Kent, for stealing you away and your investigation of him, and his hatred for Ultraman, for ruining his operations... He took the gun he'd intended to use on Ultraman and used it on Clark... because he found him first."

"Yeah. Sounds about right." Lois bit her lip hesitantly before leaning in and speaking again. "Thank you."

Henderson smirked. "Lois, not only does the man run half the crime in Metropolis, but he hurt you. What's one more charge?" She huffed a dry laugh at him, and it bolstered his spirits a little. "Plus, I feel a little bad accusing Ultraman. If there's anything either of you need, let me know, all right?"

"I might call you on that sooner than you think. Our blue friend here... He tends to heal a bit faster than your average attempted murder victim. So not yet... but soon... we might need to get him out of here."

Henderson nodded, and it all started sinking in for him. Clark Kent was Ultraman. It was a surprising revelation, especially given Kent's personality defects, but he supposed it added up. He couldn't begrudge the man for trying to be a good guy. It only improved his opinion of him.

He stood up and tousled her hair teasingly. "Keep me updated, all right, kid?"

She scowled at her newly-mussed hair, but settled when she saw the sincerity on his face. "I will. You too. With Lex."

Henderson nodded and picked up his notebook. "We're throwing the book at him. You won't ever have to worry about that man again."

Chapter 64: No Happy Endings, Not Here and Not Now

"That was beautiful."

Clark's roughened voice surprised her. She turned away from Henderson's retreating form to look at him, nestled in scratchy hospital bedding and surrounded by tubes and beeping machines. Her heart pounded hard inside her chest, because she really had almost lost him, and there were reminders everywhere keeping time with the rhythm of his heart. She shot him a watery smile and leaned over him to toy with a lock of his hair. "Hey. You're awake."

He grimaced tightly. "Yeah. Not much better though."

She ran a hand through his dark locks gently, enjoying the way his eyes fluttered shut at the light sensation. "How much of that did you hear?"

"Enough to know you're better at making up stories and manipulating people than I ever was. You sure you don't wanna run a criminal empire?"

She smacked him upside the head before realizing what she was doing, and she pulled her hand back to cover her mouth on a gasp. "Oh, Clark! I'm so sorry! Are you okay?"

He gave some odd mixture of a groan and a laugh, eyes shut. "Damn."

She sighed in relief and shook her head at him, fingers worrying at the hem of the sheets absently. "Not ready for jokes about that yet."

He opened his eyes slowly, understanding. "I know. I'm sorry. But it's all over now, I swear."

She leaned over him carefully and pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead and murmured her words into his skin. "You scared me, you know. I thought I lost you."

He looked up when she pulled away, and twined his fingers together with hers. "Never. You'll never lose me."

She searched his eyes and found he was telling the truth. And in spite of everything she'd found out about him, and everything they'd been through, she wanted that future with him. She didn't say anything, but in her heart she was resolved. When he eventually asked the question, she'd have an answer for him.

"Are you going to be okay?"

He huffed a laugh and winced at the subsequent pull on his side. "Of course. The House of Il is the house of strength." Lois cocked her head at the phrase, almost rote sounding, as if he was quoting someone else. He gave her another smile that drew into a taut grimace. "My birth name. Kal-Il. Point is, I'll bounce back."

Lois smiled, and leaned over again to lock lips with him.

They would survive this. And they'd live happily ever after, she just knew it.

Lex sat shackled to the table, legs shackled to his chair, grinning like a fool. He'd won. He had a captive audience. He'd tell them everything—his whole story, including discovering Clark Kent's true identity, and they'd let him go in a heartbeat. Kent—if he wasn't dead already—would be incarcerated. Maybe they'd bring the death penalty into play, for special circumstances.

Lois would see the error of her ways.

The door to the interrogation room swung open, and he leered at the inspector. Good, it was someone he was familiar with. Henderson and Lois were close; he'd understand the circumstances. "Inspector! Good to see you. How's your wife?"

Henderson's eyes sparked sharply at him, and he was trailed by the blonde woman who had shot him. "Is that a threat, Luthor?"

Lex sobered and held his hands up as much as he could in his given situation. "No threats, just being friendly. She's a lovely

woman, if I recall.”

The inspector didn't flinch in his glare, and Lex turned his attention to the female detective. “We only met briefly; Lex Luthor. I believe you shot me—”

“Can it, Luthor.” Henderson's tone was sharp, angry, and he plopped a stack of folders onto the table between them. “See this? We got a lot to go over, so you might wanna save your voice.”

Lex frowned at the pile in confusion. “What's this?”

The lady detective sat down besides Henderson, and ignored his question. “My name is Maggie Sawyer, I'm the captain of the new Metropolis Special Crimes Unit over at the Eighth Precinct.”

“You hear that, Lex? We had to make a new division for you.”

Lex felt his pulse spike, and for the first time since all this started, he realized he might not have the upper hand. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Henderson cut in again. “Let's start with a softball, okay? How about yesterday's attempted murder?”

“Attempted?” Lex laughed. “So the bastard survived. Good to know.”

“Kent is going to be pressing charges—”

“Clark Kent deserves to die,” he spat venomously, leaning forward over the table sharply, only to be pulled back by his chains. Lex inhaled deeply and pulled himself back under control. He smiled serenely at the two, tried to present a collected image. “He's manipulating Lois. He covered up—he killed Nigel St. John. He's been out to get me since day one—”

“Your so-called eyewitness came forward and said he was paid to make up that story about seeing Kent dump Nigel's body.”

Lex frowned in confusion, mind spinning. “My— what? He *did* see it! I did no such thing—”

“Not to mention the several attempts on Ultraman's life, the bombing of the Carlin building, the bombing of the *Messenger* colonist transport and attempted bombing of the *Prometheus*, the kidnapping of both Lois Lane and her sister, the hysteria subsequent from releasing a psychotropic hallucinogen on the streets—”

“Now hold on, that wasn't me, that was—”

“Plus numerous wire transfers to local and international criminal elements, such as the gun runners from the Congo we've been trying to stop for the past seven years, the drug cartels circulating cocaine and heroin in the streets, the testing of Metamide-5, an unknown and unapproved drug, on a group of orphans, and the gang violence—”

“Criminal—” Lex cut himself off this time. The litany of crimes against him was appalling, and outrageous, and just plain wrong. He shook his head fervently. “No. No. No.”

“Try us, Luthor. We have all the evidence we need to back it up.”

“Lies. You're all a bunch of liars. You're on his side—he's manipulating you—”

“Nice try, Lex. But you're gonna need something more than your word to get out of this one.”

His mind was racing, his chest tight with panic. He didn't understand. Where did all this come from? He didn't do it, dammit. “I think...” He swallowed thickly. “I think I'd like to make a phone call now.”

Henderson shrugged. “Call whoever you want. But you're going to be behind bars for more time than you got left, pal.”

They were talking about her, she just knew it. And why wouldn't they be? It would be one thing if she was completely insane and didn't know what was going on, but the bouts of lucidity only exacerbated her humiliation. She toyed with the edge of her favorite cotton t-shirt—man it felt nice to be back in her own clothes again—and glanced up at the Metropolis General sign somewhat dejectedly. A soft pinging sound rang out twice as somebody with the voice of a flight attendant calmly called for a Code blue to Labor and Delivery. All the chaos spinning around

them, all the things that they surely had to do, and still the nurses behind the check-in desk were whispering her name.

She wouldn't miss this place.

Lucy chewed her thumbnail nervously. Bad habit, but she couldn't stop. She sat staring at the phone, and chewed on her nails, and waited for something, anything, to happen. She'd left plenty of messages. What else did she need, an engraved invitation?

“You ready?”

The voice behind her nearly had her jumping out of her skin, and Lucy put a hand to her heart in a vain attempt to still its rhythm. She glanced sidelong at the phone again, ignoring the nurses trying not to stare, although they weren't trying too hard. “Uh, yeah. Just another minute.”

“Lucy,” the doctor chided softly, “we talked about this. It's been a week. The hospital staff isn't equipped to handle your situation.”

“I know,” she answered sullenly, shoulders sloped as she sank into the wheelchair.

“And you've given her a week,” she reminded her yet again.

Lucy huffed much more irritably this time. “I know.” The ping sounded again, cancelling the call to Labor and Delivery, and it felt like it was marking the end of her time here. A sense of finality wrapped around her, and Lucy folded her arms with a shudder.

“Dr. Deter knows what he's doing. He'll take good care of you, and before you know it, you'll be back home with your sister in no time, perfectly happy and healthy again.”

She bit her lip this time, her gut churning as she turned back to the kindly doctor who'd been working with her throughout this whole ordeal. One of the few she could actually tolerate. A pang of sadness washed over Lucy at the thought of not working with her anymore, although she knew the isolation at her new living situation would be better, would help her more in the long run. “Do you think she's got my messages?”

The doctor smiled sadly and tucked a strand of short, blonde hair behind her ear. “I think you've had a very difficult week. Your sister may just be trying to give you some space.”

Lucy stared at the phone again, knot in her stomach. What if she left and missed Lois' call as soon as she was gone? What if something terrible had happened to her and she had no way of finding out? Or worse... her shoulders dropped. “Do you really think that she's giving me space, or do you think I'm being ignored?”

“I'm sure she's not—”

“Or maybe she's forgotten me already,” she snipped, a wave of anger cresting inside her chest.

“This isn't healthy,” the doctor chimed in again, placing a hand on the phone. “You need time to focus on yourself. Get better. Maybe, when things have settled down, you can reach out again.”

“Yeah,” Lucy muttered, but the words slowly sunk in the more she thought on it. “Yeah. You know what? You're right. Who cares what the great Lois Lane is doing right now? It's my turn now. She can go for a long walk off a short pier, for all I care.”

“Good for you,” Dr. Kelly cheered. “Maxwell is great, by the way. Top of his field. You're really going to like him.”

“And Shady Brooke is a nice place?” she questioned quietly, unsure.

“Yes, it's wonderful.”

Lucy stared at the phone a little longer, resolving herself with a straight back and her firm, determined eyes. “Let's go, then.”

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Fane pursed his lips as the message from Lex ended. He glanced across the desk at his superior officer, nervously awaiting a response. “Well?”

“You know what I'm going to say.”

“We wouldn't have half the intel we have if it weren't for Lex Luthor. Don't we owe him something for that?”

The man snarled at him. “What we owe is to the people. To the citizens of this city, this nation. I don’t care if Lex Luthor rots in prison for the rest of his pitiful life. Hell, for that matter, how do we know anything he told us is true? The feds are even going after him—”

“He didn’t lie about Ultraman. The Kryptonite works on him. And he was right about Clark Kent not being who he said he was,” Charlie pointed out optimistically.

“All the more reason to cut ties with him.”

Charlie’s shoulders slumped. He didn’t like doing his friend dirty like this, but if it was an order... “I understand, sir.”

“Look, Fane. You’re a smart guy. Too smart for your own good, and you know it. It’s not a pretty quality. But you should be able to follow this.” He took a pause to light his cigar and take a few thoughtful puffs. “If you want to exonerate Lex Luthor, that’s on you. But you’re going to set off a lot of red flags in the process, and we’re dealing with someone much smarter and faster than we are. You’ll both end up in hot water, and there won’t be anyone left to bail you out.”

Charlie grimaced. He knew he was right. There wasn’t anything they could do about Ultraman right now. They needed time to gather their resources, find a way forward.

“But on the other hand, if you take what you learned, apply it, we could train a new batch of agents, prepared for alien warfare, invent new technology so that they’re ready to take on the worst. It’ll take time, and effort, and you won’t see the immediate benefits... But you’ll be the most respected man in the Bureau, looked up to and revered by all.”

Fane felt his pulse race at that thought.

“What do you say, General?”

“General?”

“Of course. If you took the job, there would be a few promotions involved.”

His eyes widened and he stood up straight. A few promotions? He was jumping to General. He’d be running his own department. The message from Luthor was the last thing on his mind.

“Then thank you, sir. I accept your generous offer.”

George Thompson smiled with the cigar hanging out of the corner of his mouth, and held out a hand for the young man to shake. “General Fane, welcome to Bureau 39.”

3pilogue—One Year Later

He was shaking.

He told himself it was excitement, not nerves. He told himself he was anxious to see his bride-to-be, to call her his wife for the first time. To hold her in his arms and know that this was it. Lois and Clark. Together forever. His stomach churned and twisted, but it wasn’t butterflies.

Forever never felt this fragile.

Clark took his glasses off and ran a hand over his face. It should be the happiest day of his life. He set the frames gently on the dresser and turned to pace across the room nervously. Breathe. He wasn’t breathing. He stopped to lean his back against the wall and fold forward, letting his head hang between his knees as he tried to pull air into his lungs. The panic that was coursing through his body slowly started to drift away with each labored breath. What was he thinking? This wouldn’t work. Sure, it was what he wanted, what they both wanted, but what happened when something changed? What happened when she found out?

He exhaled deeply, ignoring the way the silk bedskirt fluttered in the breeze.

She wouldn’t find out. He was done with it all. He’d made a promise, and he’d stuck to it. He just had to take a little break, to handle some things. He’d put it aside again. Soon. Tomorrow even.

He scrunched his eyes tight enough that he could see spots.

Tomorrow was no good. It was their honeymoon, and he wasn’t planning on returning to Metropolis for the week.

As soon as they got back. He’d handle things again and get it all back under control. Then he’d put it down forever, and his world would be true once more. Clark brought his hands up to scrub across his face, wishing a cigarette would do the trick but knowing it would only stress him out more. He cursed his invulnerable body not for the first time, and stood to his full height. He could do this. After all, he was Ultraman.

He inhaled one last shaky breath, and strode slowly back over to the dresser. His glasses stared back at him innocently, almost mocking him. Clark swallowed back the lump of fear inspired by his reflection, and grounded himself by planting his palms firmly on the oak chest.

Monday. It would all be settled by next Monday.

He glanced at his reflection in the television set, and flashed a weak smile at himself. It wasn’t quite there yet. He ran a hand through his hair thoughtlessly and took another attempt, grinning broadly, falsely, toothily...

A beautiful smile flashed across his mind, and just the thought of how she smiled at him, had his lips turning up into a genuine grin.

Lois.

Everything he did, he was doing for her. His perfect, wonderful, beautiful...

A chirp sounded from his watch, and he glanced at the time. His stomach flipped, with *excitement*, and he finger-combed his slightly mangled-looking locks. He locked up the sense of dread that had been encroaching on him for the past few hours and focused on his wedding.

He was marrying his best friend, the woman of his dreams, his main confidant. What could go wrong?

This was perfect. This was exactly what she needed. Just him and her, and a justice of the peace. Sand between her toes and the big blue sky stretching out into pink and orange tones around them. The waves crashed and rumbled in the distance, and she stepped towards him in a similar rhythm. She didn’t know why she stressed this so much.

One step.

The crush of sand beneath her bare feet was soft, like the sand was untouched before this moment. Trust Clark to find the most secluded beach in the country for their runaway wedding. It was perfect. It was destiny.

Two steps.

He stood ahead, staring back at her with the world’s biggest grin. Her insides flipped and fluttered at the sight of him, gorgeous as ever. She couldn’t wait till she could rip that suit off him and they could enjoy each other’s bodies for the first time as husband and wife. He seemed to read her thoughts, and wagged his brows at her flirtatiously. Lois looked down to her feet as the blush raced up to her cheeks and she took another step towards him. He was so ridiculous. She wouldn’t put it past him to pay the justice to speed through the ceremony just so they could get to the “good parts,” as he would say.

She bit her lip to cover her grin. Good, indeed.

Lois shook herself and tossed her mid-length locks over her shoulder to look back up at him.

For a split second, she could have sworn she’d seen a flicker of uncertainty cross his face.

As quickly as it appeared, it was gone again, replaced by that knee-weakening, soul-warming, megawatt smile. She smiled back at him, but suddenly her mind was racing. Was he nervous? Why? Should she be nervous? She supposed it was a little nerve-racking, committing to someone for the rest of your life. That’s probably all this was. Or maybe even it had nothing to do with her; maybe it was a cry for help that he felt he had to take care of. Her stomach settled. Of course. That’s what it was. It had to be.

She smiled at him, searching his eyes for any moment of hesitation, took another step closer.

He smiled still, but his brow wrinkled in a funny way, as if questioning her own expression.

This was ridiculous. She cast her gaze down again and tried to play it off as bashfulness as she talked herself off the ledge. She was marrying her best friend. The only real friend she'd ever had. He was smart, funny, crazy good-looking, great in bed... He knew everything about her, and she him.

Everything.

She squashed down the niggling doubt at the reminder of the past and steeled herself. Now wasn't the time to dwell on all that. It was in the past. He'd changed. She'd changed him. She had the power in this relationship; she didn't doubt he'd do anything she said, even without her holding the past over his head.

Her train of thought was leaving a sour taste in her mouth, so she chose to focus on the good. She took another step closer, reaching his side, and noted how excited he was, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet, his pupils blown wide. She couldn't help but grin in return.

They were going to work out.

He held out his hand for her and she smiled at him crookedly as she gave him her hand. He caressed her knuckles with his thumb and deftly brought them to his lips. She curled her toes in the sand.

God, was he handsome. Not yet married, and he already knew exactly how to make her respond in just the right way.

She couldn't wait to get to the rest of their lives.

THE END