

Hate Myself for Loving You

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Summary: Mayson Drake leaves the courthouse at the end of the episode “Lucky Leon” in search of Lois and Clark and finds the couple sharing their first kiss. Distracted by her discovery, Mayson takes matters into her own hands.

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Teaser

The city of Metropolis had a different look and feel in the evening Spring air as Lois Lane walked a few steps ahead of her partner Clark Kent. Her mind was still reeling from the events of the day. Her heightened emotions after the close call at Lucky Leon’s warehouse with the nuclear warhead kept her mind swimming as she reflected on the last twenty-four hours.

Why had she been so easily fooled by Lucky Leon’s underlings?

Perry’s question about Superman being fooled by a bunch of terrorists weighed heavily on her mind. She had been instrumental in convincing the superhero that a crime had been committed and thus making him help steal the nuclear warheads for the terrorists. Had she been on her game and realized how out of character the supposed colonel—later to be revealed as Jimmy’s friend Gregor—was in divulging military operations to a known journalist.

She should have known something was wrong, but she ignored her gut. Just like she had the previous night, choosing instead to push Clark away by ending their date abruptly and slamming the door in his face. She stole a glance toward him, wondering if he would bring it up or if she should. The date had been...perfect until she ruined it.

Why had she shut that door in Clark’s face like that?

She still didn’t have a good answer for herself, let alone Clark, but she knew she owed him an explanation, an apology—something.

Clark looked back at her, breaking the uncomfortable silence between them as he asked, “Lois, I really don’t know how to say this, but... why did you come back for me at the factory tonight?” He motioned with his hands as a look of disbelief washed over him, “I mean, you were running back into an atomic explosion.”

Lois shrugged her shoulders, “I know,” she shook her head. “It doesn’t make much sense, does it?” She let out a deep sigh and breathed out, “I guess... I couldn’t just leave you there.” Her eyes caught his for a brief moment, and the reminiscent spark she’d felt the night before, staring into his eyes as they tried to call an end to the evening, came back.

The look had crossed his face time and time again over the last year and a half they’d known each other. She’d catch a glimpse of something hidden from beneath those dark bespectacled eyes and yet brush it off, ignoring the flutter from her insides that told her time and time again there was something more to Clark Kent. How had she denied it for so long?

A cautious expression crossed his face as he stared back at her, seeming to think momentarily of what to say before he pointed out the giant, pink elephant that had been following them around for the last twelve hours. “You slammed the door in my face last

night.”

As if on instinct, Lois felt herself move closer to him as she stopped in front of him, meeting his questioning gaze, “That was...a mistake.”

His tone was soft yet somber as he looked back at her, moving just slightly closer as he responded, “Don’t let it happen again.”

A nervous sigh escaped her throat as she leaned in closer to him, uncertain if she should respond or just continue to allow herself to drown in his dark eyes and lose all sense of space and time. She could feel her heart hammering in her chest, drumming softly as her body instinctively moved closer to him. Her eyelashes fluttered, and she leaned in closer, “I guess we’ll just have to see how things go, won’t we?”

She saw a glimmer of a smile cross Clark’s lips, feeling herself almost salivate as she watched his lips move closer just before he whispered, “Fortunately, there’re no doors here tonight.” “Fortunately...”

She barely whispered her response out before his lips touched hers. An electrical storm erupted from within her. The power behind the simple brush of her partner’s lips against hers pulsed through her. They had kissed before—putting on a ruse or trying to trick their way out of a hairy situation—she’d felt that tremble of power behind his kiss before. But nothing like this. Before, it had always been a means to an end as they both knew it was for show. This was different.

Everything was different now.

She pulled back, taking a moment to savor the shift that had just occurred between them. It would be easy to end the night just like that. Hold onto the moment and take things slow as they both dipped their toe into the is uncharted territory with one another, but who was she kidding?

She never did anything halfway.

A split-second later, she leaned in again, this time much less hesitant as she felt Clark’s hands bury themselves in her hair as his lips found hers fully. She could feel her insides melt as her lips parted, tasting the hint of coffee with the donut Clark had earlier that afternoon. A soft gasp escaped her throat as Clark’s palm cupped the side of her face, tracing the frame of her jaw with his thumb.

Mayson Drake jerked her purse strap back on her shoulder as her heels clipped the pavement in sharp pursuit of a certain reporter who appeared to have bailed on her once more. It wasn’t the first time he had left her hanging. He did it countless times. A quick interview here. A canceled lunch. Even a canceled weekend away where she’d been left sitting in the cabin, she’d rented on a whim looking like a fool.

She had forgiven him. She had looked the other way when she saw his attention focused on his partner with exact precision, despite the reassurance that they were just friends. She had swallowed her pride, and whether it be lust or if she was honest with herself, pure desperation, she couldn’t seem to walk away.

Clark Kent was like a drug. Taking her on a high with just a small taste and leaving her wanting – no – *needing* so much more. Yet, just like any drug, there came the fall. And boy was the fall hard.

Still, she was the one that tolerated it.

But today had been different. There had been hope. Instead of inserting her claws into Clark like the rabid animal she knew Lois Lane to be, the reporter had surprised her and actually encouraged Mayson’s lunch with Clark. It had been surprising, but at the time Mayson hadn’t thought too hard about it. Instead, she’d jumped at the chance to finally hash things out and put her cards on the table with Clark.

Instead, Mayson found herself heartbroken once more when he dashed off to answer a call from her –Lois Lane. Had he even heard the words that came out of Mayson’s mouth before he had

disappeared? After months of agonizing over it, she'd finally mustered up the courage to say the words only to have Clark run off.

She could have just stormed home and buried herself in her case files and a bottle of Merlot like she always did, but instead, she chose to put an end to this game and corner Clark Kent once and for all. They had a connection. She wasn't blind to the way he looked at her. He just needed a little encouragement.

She needed to find him and finish their conversation. Without the distractions of work, well-meaning colleagues and mostly Lois Lane. Mayson never would understand Clark's obsession with trying to constantly take care of his partner as if she wasn't a grown adult – capable of looking after herself. It seemed every time they got close Lois was there with a hot lead or a drop by – killing any chance Mayson had at pursuing anything real with Clark.

She turned the corner, spotting the gazebo in the middle of the four-way stop just outside the Planet. She felt her chest tighten as she stared at the two figures – easily recognizable as Lois Lane and Clark Kent – wrapped up in a tight clinch with one another just below the street lamps. A lone tear escaped her left eye as it rolled down her cheek. She felt red, hot anger run through her and a fire lit in her belly. Try as she might, she couldn't bring herself to look away from what she was seeing.

The distant sound of a faint buzz coming from her pocket finally reached her ears, pulling her away from the living hell she found herself in, staring at the man she loved in another woman's arms. She cleared her throat, swallowing back the tears that threatened to overtake her as she answered the phone, "Mayson Drake here."

"Mayson?" her assistant's voice came through the static of the phone line. "Where did you go?"

"I, um, went for a walk," Mayson replied smoothly, continuing to stare at the two traitors that were too oblivious to notice her presence. She backed away, checking the street for cars coming as she raced across the crosswalk. "I'll be back shortly."

"See you soon," came her assistant's reply.

Clark strolled through the walkway with Lois, uncertain how to bring up tonight's events – or last night's, for that matter – up with her. She ran back into the factory, putting herself in danger – not for a story, but for him. Clark Kent. The days of playing second fiddle to himself seemed to be a thing of the past. If they could get past the awkward ending of their first date and decide what it was, they both wanted.

He wanted nothing more than to put aside the pretense and finally be open and honest about his feelings for Lois. He'd known how he had felt for a long time. It seemed every time he moved toward her, trying to break down the impenetrable walls that forced him to stay just out of reach from her, she would get spooked and push him away.

It wasn't until recently when the barriers she'd kept up – barriers that prevented him from getting too close – fell to the wayside. Maybe it was from the close call she had with almost marrying Luthor. Maybe it was the hard jolt of reality they'd both been faced with after his 'death' or the reminiscence of old friendships. Whatever the reason, Lois not only let him in, but she welcomed him with open arms.

This new closeness made hiding his feelings for her unbearable. He wanted nothing more than to share the depths of his soul with her and tell her how much she meant to him. He'd been a goner since he first laid eyes on her and he suspected even if she turned her back on any resemblance of a relationship beyond friendship with him he'd still be forever in love with Lois Lane.

He stole a glance at Lois, breaking the unbearable silence between them and asked, "Lois, I really don't know how to say

this, but... why did you back for me at the factory tonight?" He motioned with his hands as he spoke, "I mean, you were running back into an atomic explosion."

Lois shrugged her shoulders, not looking directly at him as she responded, "I know," she shook her head and looked back at him. "It doesn't make much sense, does it?" She let out a deep sigh and breathed out, "I guess... I couldn't just leave you there." He caught her gaze for a brief moment and felt a shiver of something run through him. Reminiscent of the spark he'd felt the night before, staring into her eyes as he tried unsuccessfully to call an end to the evening in as diplomatic a way as possible.

<< "I mean a really nice time. Maybe the best time I ever had in a long time...">>

<< "It just seemed to 'work.' That's why I can never see you again.">>

He stood there in front of her, afraid to move for fear it would scare her off. Still, he had to know. "You slammed the door in my face last night."

He noted the slight sway her hips made as she leaned closer to him, turning to face him as she met his gaze. Her voice was soft as her lips barely opened to speak, "That was... a mistake."

He felt his body almost on instinct, lean toward her, incapable of stopping the magnetic pull that drew him to her. He let out a soft whisper, "Don't let it happen again."

Her lips parted, allowing a nervous sigh to escape her throat as she leaned toward him. Her eyelashes fluttered as she stared back at him. She was just a few millimeters away from him. "I guess we'll just have to see how things go, won't we?"

Clark felt a smile spread across his lips as he stared back at her, knowing full well that there would be no going back if he chose to close the gap between them. Feeling almost bold, he leaned toward her and murmured to her, "Fortunately, there're no doors here tonight."

"Fortunately..."

The word barely escaped her lips before he closed the last few millimeters between them, leaning in to capture her lips with his in a soul-shattering kiss. Every fantasy he'd had about this moment paled in comparison as he felt a firestorm rage from within him, threatening to overtake him as he held back, trying to give Lois the chance to pull away if she so desired. He wanted so much more, but after last night, he didn't dare show how desperately he sought to bury his hands in her hair and taste her lips on his for all eternity.

A soft moan escaped her lips, and he pulled away, dreading the very real end to the magical moment he'd been picturing for the better half of two years. He could stand here and pretend he wasn't desperate to close the gap between them once more and kiss her senseless. He'd become an expert at burying his feelings and balancing between friend and confidante. Yet pulling away from her was the last thing he wanted.

But was it what she wanted?

Before he could ponder on that thought for too long, he felt her hand snake around his neck, pulling him back to her, inviting him back into her arms as she kissed him more fully. He let out an involuntary groan as the taste of coffee and chocolate tingled on his tongue, savoring her unique taste. His hands moved up both sides of her face, burying themselves in her hair as her lips tightened around his.

He'd never felt anything like it.

The mind-numbing exhilaration that came with the knowledge that his alter-ego had finally been pushed to the side and it was Clark she ...

As quickly as the euphoria of the moment washed over him, it was squashed by the knowledge that he was still lying to Lois about Superman. She had shared her deepest and darkest secrets with him – both as Superman and Clark – and if she found out he was lying to her, everything would end before it even began.

He pulled away, ending the soul-shattering kiss with one last lingering caress. He closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of her wrapped in his arms. He heard something rustling in the distance and turned to look behind him.

“What is it?” Lois asked, tugging his sleeve with her hand.

“Nothing,” he turned back to her, unsure how to respond to the question as he ran through the possible scenarios of explaining himself to Lois. Tonight was not the night to go down this road with her, but soon. Very soon.

Lois pointed to the dimming lights at City Hall a block away. “I think we’re too late.”

Clark nodded, “I guess we’ll have to catch up with Mayson tomorrow.”

Lois smiled back at him, smoothing her hand across his chest, “Walk me home?”

“Always,” he cracked a smile at her.

He could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he stared back at Lois. A mixture of guilt and euphoria filled his mind. This was the start of everything he’d ever wanted. No more hiding how he felt about Lois Lane. He could finally show how he felt and not fear backlash.

‘Not exactly,’ he reminded himself.

That was the problem. He was still lying to her about who he was. Who he really was. He wanted to scream and jump for joy all at once. Finally, he had what he wanted, and his own choices and secrets threatened to rip it all away. Before he could give it any further thought, the sound of a blast coming from the City Hall building caught their attention.

He stiffened, ready to prepare a quick excuse to exit so he could tend to the rescue but found himself unable to think of anything. He looked down at his arm, spotting Lois’ arm hooked securely in his.

“That sounded like it came from City Hall,” Lois murmured with a pensive expression.

“Yeah,” He nodded, turning to her and motioning in the direction of the explosion, “We should...”

“...check that out.” She finished for him with a smirk, tightening her arm around his as they made their way across the street as fast as humanly possible.

“Hey!”

Mayson shouted at the speeding Beemer that sped past her. She let out a snort when she spotted the red and blue lights that followed the car racing around the corner to where the City Hall steps were. The sharp wailing of the officer’s siren filled the night air as a loud blast erupted in the distance.

“What the...?” Mayson could barely finish her train of thought as she raced around the corner on foot and let out a muffled gasp when she saw the fiery scene. There in her parking spot, just a few feet from the City Hall steps, was the remnants of her car in flames. The out of control driver was unconscious at the wheel, unaware of the damage he’d caused.

The police officer that had been chasing the young driver was now outside the car, trying to get his attention. Mayson looked around in dismay, uncertain what to make of the remnants of her vehicle that resembled a charcoal briquette more than an automobile.

“Ms. Drake?”

Mayson turned to see her assistant standing on the corner with a worried expression. Her smile was weak as it spread across her face, pointing to the scene, “I suppose it’s lucky you decided to take that walk.”

“I suppose so,” Mayson nodded. She motioned to the steps leading back into the office. “I don’t think anyone’s going anywhere tonight. Shall we?”

“Of course, Ms. Drake.”

The chance to sneak away hadn’t come easy. It never did with Mayson Drake. Mary Williams tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear as she looked down the narrow hallway outside the District Attorney’s office. Nearly everyone had already left for the evening except Mayson—Everyone that is except for him.

“You’re late.”

Mary jumped when she saw the slender man in the corner of the corridor. “I couldn’t get away.”

He stepped out of the shadows, straightening his tie as he looked at her. “We had a plan, Mary. You didn’t have to do anything but make sure Mayson Drake was in the car when it exploded. I didn’t think it would be that hard.”

“It wasn’t my fault, Albie!” Mary shouted louder than she should have. She jumped back, looking behind her to make sure her outburst hadn’t caught any unwelcome attention. Albie looked at her with an unamused expression. Mary cleared her throat and collected herself and whispered, “It wasn’t my fault. She ran off before I could stop her.”

“Mr. Gables doesn’t accept failure, Mary,” Albie warned. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Yes, Albie.” Mary nodded, watching as Albie walked away. “Tell Mr. Gables I’m sorry.”

Lois tapped her pen against the notepad in her hand as she walked through the crash scene carefully. Everywhere she looked, she saw first responders and investigators trying to survey the scene and find the cause of the explosion. It didn’t look like a gas explosion. So what could have caused Mayson’s car to erupt into flames? The blast had been loud enough to hear a block away. The remnants from the explosion were thankfully isolated to the front of the City Hall building while nearby residence were shielded from its presence by the trees and shrubs surrounding them.

Lois looked to her side, noting the careful attention being paid to what used to be Mayson Drake’s car. Thankfully Mayson hadn’t been in the car when the drunk driver had hit it, but she couldn’t help but wonder why Mayson was noticeably absent from the investigation that involved her vehicle.

Clark reached over to place an arm on her shoulder. She felt a shiver run through her spine at his touch and turned to him, unable to squash the butterflies that fluttered in her abdomen.

She was in *big* trouble.

“Looks like it wasn’t just gasoline and motor oil that sparked,” Clark pointed to the incendiary device that was in the investigator’s hands.

“A car bomb?” Lois wondered aloud, looking back at Clark. “but that would mean...”

“This wasn’t an accident,” Clark finished for her with a grim scowl.

“And we’re sure Mayson wasn’t in the car?” Lois asked.

“Nope,” Clark shook his head. “The officers I spoke with said they took her statement already.”

“Her car explodes, and she’s not down here in the trenches looking for who did this?” Lois wondered in disbelief.

“Oh, you’ve got that ‘I’ve got a hunch’ look on your face.” Clark let out a deep sigh. “Can we limit it to just one close-call with explosives a day? I mean, we did almost get caught in a nuclear explosion...” he looked at his watch, “*Ohhhh*, three hours ago?”

“Fine,” Lois grumbled, shaking her head. “but you’ve got to admit Mayson being noticeably missing during the investigation is weird.”

“Well, Mayson did have someone plant a bomb in her car. I think she’s entitled to act out of character.” Clark pointed out, reaching over to brush a stray hair out of her face. “Come on, we’ve gotten all we’re going to tonight. We can finish chasing this down tomorrow.”

Mayson looked around her office, staring at the board she'd pinned to the wall. There in the center was a 4x6 glossy photo of Lois Lane. She felt a rush of fury run through her as she looked to the left where a picture of herself and Clark dancing at the Charity Ball was pinned. She had to understand. How had she and Clark gone from being so close to ...

"Ms. Drake?"

Mayson jerked her head around, lunging toward the door to stop her assistant from entering. "What is it?" Before her assistant could push the door open any further, Mayson slammed it shut, calling out to her. "I'm busy. What is it?"

"The police are done, Ms. Drake. Do you want me to call you a cab?"

"No," Mayson replied coldly, her gaze shifted to the board where the tidbits of information she'd found on Lois Lane were pinned around her rival's photo. "I have a lot of work to do."

"Yes, Ms. Drake."

Lois smiled wistfully as they walked back to her apartment. Two hours. That was all that had passed from the time they shared their incredible first kiss and now. She stole a glance toward him, noting the uncertainty on his face. Given how things had ended so horribly the previous night, she couldn't blame him for being nervous.

"Well, uh," Lois began softly. "I guess this is goodnight."

"Yeah," he nodded, offering a weak smile. "I'll check with Jimmy in the morning and see if he can track down some intel on that police report."

"Certainly, puts a damper on the evening," Lois shrugged her shoulders, eying the half-foot distance between her and Clark as they stood at her door.

What were they supposed to do now? Kiss goodnight? Shake hands? It's not like they had just ended a date or something. It was the end of a workday that just so happened to include a mind-numbing kiss.

Uncertainty clouded her mind as she stared back at him nervously, wondering if he would try to kiss her again and if she wanted him to. How she currently felt she knew it wouldn't take a lot of convincing on her part.

"Goodnight, Lois," he whispered, reaching over to cup her cheek. He leaned in to kiss her and before she could stop him, he pulled away, straightening up as he turned to leave.

"Clark?" she called out to him, feeling a fleeting sense of boldness run through her.

He turned back to her, and before she could think twice about her actions and second-guess herself, she reached up, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him in for a kiss goodnight. She heard him let out a soft moan against her lips, and she smiled against him as he took the kiss deeper.

Unlike before, when they had been sharing their first kiss as a couple underneath the moonlit street, she allowed herself to savor the moment and divulge herself. This time was different as she reached up to pull him in deeper, tugging him close by his tie. She sighed inwardly as she felt his hands cup both sides of her face as he traced her lips with his tongue. She could feel him responding to her and smiled against his lips.

She could easily lose herself in his arms tonight. But she wasn't prepared to take that step, and she suspected neither was he.

He slowly broke off the kiss, taking a step back. It was clear he was just as affected by the kiss as she was. "I'll ...see you tomorrow." He motioned toward the hallway.

"Tomorrow," she agreed, taking a step into her apartment. "Goodnight, Clark." She slowly closed the door, watching as he turned to leave through the crack in the door. She began to slowly lock the several different locks on her door and sighed, leaning against the door frame. "Wow..."

Chapter 1: No Turning Back

Mayson Drake looked around the dimly lit office, bleary-eyed from the late evening. It had taken her several hours, but she had dug up everything the Metropolis P.D had on Lois Lane. A flash of white-hot anger coursed through her, jolting her awake. The memory of Lois Lane and Clark left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Work partners.

Just friends.

A bitter bile burned in her throat. She had never felt so humiliated. Clark cared about her. She knew he did. He was genuinely a good guy so why would he...?

He said *yes* to lunch.

He said *yes* to the mountains.

He said *yes* to their dance at the Charity Ball.

It didn't make sense. He wanted to be with her. He said he cared about her. He said Lois was just a *friend*.

'Friends don't kiss like that.' She thought bitterly.

Clark couldn't wipe the smile off his face as he flew through the sky, checking the city on his morning patrol. His uncertainty over his and Lois' relationship was long gone. There was still the underlying issue regarding his alter ego, but he would cross that bridge soon enough. Right now, he wanted to savor this feeling.

His smile morphed into a sloppy grin as he recalled the delicious taste of Lois Lane's lips against his and the warm sensation of being in her arms. The memory of the goodnight kiss they had shared made his heart soar.

He spotted the familiar brick complex on Carter Avenue and swooped down to deposit the package on Lois' doorstep.

Unfortunately, he didn't have time to give it to Lois in person. He still had to check Hobbs Bay before work.

Lois finished the last of her morning cup of coffee as she stuffed pens, notepads, extra batteries for her tape recorder and her tape recorder in her bag. Her mind still felt like it was swimming after last night. The debate is should she or shouldn't she seemed never-ending from the kiss good night to what to wear.

She felt overdressed as she stared back at her reflection in the mirror one last time, examining herself critically. The light lavender suit had been worn time and time again, yet today it felt different.

'Just forget it,' she told herself, making her way for the door. She had to get going if she was going to make it to Joes for her morning bagel.

She opened the door, juggling her purse and handbag in her right hand when she spotted a white pastry bag on her doorstep with a single yellow rose. A small smile spread across her face, and she reached down to grab the bag and rose. Inside she found her bagel that appeared to still be warm from the bakery and a note. She pulled out the note and read it aloud.

"You're probably running late too."

See you soon.

-CK"

She chuckled to herself and readjusted her purse strap as she carefully gathered her pastry bag, handbag, purse, and rose, preparing to face the day.

Detective Ryder looked through the police report from the previous evening's events outside the DAs office and then looked up over the brim of his reading glasses to where the now sobered up Michael Carter was sitting across from him. "You're in a lot of trouble, Michael."

"I'm telling you the truth, man." Carter pleaded with him. "I had no idea there was a bomb in that car."

"You just happen to be joyriding at the time when the ADA is leaving her office...every night?"

"Yes!"

Detective Ryder snorted in disbelief, “Who hired you?”
 “No one!” Carter slammed his fist against the table. “Why won’t you believe me?”

“This isn’t a game, kid,” Ryder growled irritably. “*Who sent you?!*”

“You can’t do this. You can’t railroad me for this. I’m innocent!”

“You’re not innocent of anything!” Ryder growled back. “You think I’m stupid? We know it was a hit. Now you’re going to start talking or...”

“David, that’s enough.”

Ryder looked over and spotted Inspector Henderson in the doorway. “Bill, I’m in the middle of an interrogation.”

“The kid’s telling the truth.” Bill handed him a report. “ATF did an analysis last night on the incendiary device. Just came in.” Bill folded his arms across his chest. “It was triggered to go off when the door was unlocked. This kid probably saved Mayson Drake’s life.”

Lois took a sip of her coffee as she pushed the doors of the Daily Planet lobby open. It seemed like just another day. Another day to dig deeper into her investigation into Intergang and following up on the next story. And maybe even something more?

She looked down at the yellow rose that was tucked in her bag. How much difference twenty-four hours could make was astounding. Her world had shifted with the change in her relationship with Clark. She’d gone from running for the hills to being the one to instigate a goodnight kiss that was powerful enough to make her toes curl and send goosebumps down her spine. As exhilarating as her and Clark’s budding relationship was, there still was that nagging voice in the back of her head, warning her of where this would lead.

A nervous smile crossed her face when she spotted Clark standing by the elevator. Glancing at the time, she noted it was a few minutes after eight. She wasn’t the only one running behind this morning.

“Late start?”

Clark smiled back at her, “Something like that.”

She felt her mouth go dry as her heart hammered in her chest. She felt like she had the wind knocked out of her as she stared back at him, trying to think of anything to say to rid this fog that wiped her mind of all coherent thought.

How long does it take for an elevator car to arrive?

Clark’s half-smile morphed into a broad grin and she thought for sure she would melt right there. What was wrong with her? It was one date. One...okay maybe four incredible kisses and...

The empty elevator doors opened and she stepped on the elevator car with Clark a few steps behind her. She watched the doors close behind them and reached over to press the button for the newsroom floor.

Her cheeks flushed slightly when she realized she and Clark were the only ones on the elevator. A memory of the kiss they’d shared last night flashed in her mind, and she could swear the walls around them grew smaller. She quickly looked away, choosing instead to focus on the worn appearance of the walls.

It was amazing how little attention was paid to the upkeep of the elevators’ appearance. After what felt like an eternity of silence between them, Lois cleared her throat, “Ever notice how little attention maintenance gives to these elevators?”

Clark looked back at her with a bewildered expression, “What?”

“Look here.” She pointed to the crackling wood in the corner. Already falling apart after less than a year.”

“Well, the Planet has had its fair share of less than civil visitors lately,” Clark responded with a frown.

“Right,” she nodded, recalling all too well the recent visit from Kyle Griffin.

“So,” Clark paused, looking around the elevator car. “Would you care to examine the carpet, too or do you want to just talk about what’s bothering you?”

“Am I that obvious?” She cringed, stealing a sideways glance at him.

He held his index finger and thumb up in the air with a half-inch between them and teased, “Just a little bit.” He placed a hand on her shoulder, “Come on, you’re acting like I grew a third eye. What’s going on?”

She let out a light chuckle at the mental image he painted and shook her head. “I wasn’t acting like you had a third eye.”

“Second head?” He offered with a grin.

“You’re not funny,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Hey, I finally got you to talk to me. I’m not going for funny.” Clark said with a pleased smile.

“I was talking to you.”

“Were you? ‘Cause it looked like you were talking to the elevator panel.”

Lois sighed, “Fine,” she jerked her head up to meet his gaze. “Better?”

“Much,” he grinned back at her.

She felt the corners of her mouth twitch to a half-smile as she stared back at him, “God, this is so ridiculous. We’re adults...”

A joking grin crossed his face, “Last time I checked, yes.”

“...most of the time.” She amended with a teasing smile. “This is why office romance is not a good idea.”

“It makes you talk to inanimate objects?”

“No!” Lois rambled slightly flustered. “It makes everything more complicated. We’re at work and should probably be talking about the next story, but instead, we are avoiding...”

“You’re avoiding.”

“Whatever, fine. I’m avoiding talking about last night and... everything is changing.” she paused, staring back at him with a pensive expression. “I am not very good at this.”

“Talking?”

“Not funny.” She countered with a scowl.

He reached over to stroke her cheek, “You’re right. Things are changing. I’d like to think they’re changing for the better, though.”

Lois felt the weight of her fears threaten to crush her right there. The thought of losing Clark was too much to bear. She had suffered through the three-month blackout when they had hardly spoken during her engagement to Lex. With the exception of her trying and failing miserably to persuade him to attend her wedding. Then there had been those days of mourning when Clark had been shot. She came to face the reality of just what he meant to her when she was faced with the bleak future without him in it. She never wanted to go through that again. She couldn’t bear to lose him. That was the bitter reality.

Her feelings for Clark ran deep to her core, but admitting to them and exploring them opened up the possibility of losing him. Given her track record, she knew the chances of losing him would be far greater than by a sure chance of fate it working out between them.

“Clark, I just don’t want this...whatever this is to change our working relationship. I mean, everything is so *much* right now, but that could easily change. We make a great team...a really great team and last night...”

“What?” Clark asked, stroking her cheek with his thumb.

“Who is to say this leap of faith we are taking won’t result in everything crashing and burning? It’s not like we can avoid dealing with one another if we get into a fight...” Lois pointed out hesitantly as she felt his hand drop from her cheek.

A concerned expression crossed his face, and he asked, “Lois, I’d like to think our friendship is strong enough to withstand something like that, but I honestly don’t know. As much as I’d like to predict the future and tell you everything will be fine, I can’t. I

care about you, and I would love to explore where this could lead, but if you'd rather not..."

She stared back at him with a watery smile. "You and I both know there's no going back."

Before he could respond, she illustrated her point, closing the gap between them. She tilted her head slightly, leaning up to capture his mouth with hers. A flood of emotions rushed through her as she heard a low moan escape her throat. His hands moved through her hair, and she felt her insides melt as she lost herself in the one thing she was absolutely sure of.

Their lips parted, and he murmured in her ear, "So, I take it, we are not pulling a U-turn."

"We are cautiously moving forward," she amended, reaching up to stroke his cheek.

"Cautiously optimistic then," Clark grinned back at her.

"Thank you for ..."

Before she could finish her sentence, the elevator pinged, announcing their arrival on the newsroom floor. She let out an annoyed huff. "We will finish this later."

"Promise?" Clark grinned back as the doors opened.

Before she could open her mouth to respond, she heard her name being called from her editor's office. She exchanged a guilty expression with Clark, wondering if the brief exchange they'd shared had somehow been seen despite separating before the doors opened on the newsroom floor.

Mayson Drake toyed with a stray blonde curl with her index finger as she walked through the impound lot, looking for the remnants of her car. Though the police had assured her most of the contents had been lost, she had to be sure.

Her mind was racing after the late-night she'd spent analyzing everything with Clark Kent. The fog had lifted temporarily when Detective Ryder had called, asking her about her belongings in the car wreckage. The police had apparently finished going over the damage to her car. All that was left was for her to pick up her things before it was scrapped for parts. Though she suspected it had been destroyed in the initial explosion, she still had to check.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Ryder asked as he looked over her shoulder.

"Let's just say I came across an important piece of evidence that certain people would prefer was destroyed." She paused, glancing at Ryder with a weak smile, "Let's just hope they're wrong."

Lois barely made it two steps out of the elevator before she found herself summoned into her Editor-in-Chief's office. She crossed her arms over her chest, preparing herself for whatever lecture Perry had prepared for her. He hadn't said a word before closing the door behind her. She'd been left to stand in silence, wondering just what had motivated the summons to her editor's office like a grade-schooler waiting to see the principal.

She watched as Perry took his seat behind his desk, and motioned to the seat across from him for her to sit in. He still wasn't saying a word.

She let out a frustrated grunt, wondering if she should just ask him what the problem was or if she was better off waiting him out. Finally, she let out an exasperated shout, "Well?"

"Well, what?" Perry asked, leaning back in his chair.

"You were the one that called me in here, Perry," Lois muttered between gritted teeth. "What is it?"

"Oh," Perry shrugged his shoulders. "I wanted to let you know your request has been denied."

"What request?" Lois argued through gritted teeth. By this point, she could feel her exasperation boiling over to anger.

He raised an eyebrow at her with an amused expression, "Were you not just in my office yesterday morning demanding a new partner?"

Lois let out a low breath, feeling her cheeks flush at the

memory of just how badly things had ended the previous evening. She'd been desperate to avoid Clark at any cost. Even going so far as to request a new partner. She hadn't realized Perry had been still considering the request.

"Perry, that was..."

Perry held up a sheet of paper and ripped it in half. "I'm assuming the issues—whatever they may be—have been worked out and I don't have to file this?"

Lois pursed her lips, fighting the small smile as she caught the twinkle behind her editor's eye. Try as he might to remain tough in the newsroom he couldn't hide the soft spot he held for his reporters. "I'm fine, Perry. *We're* fine. Everything's fine." She pointed to the newsroom behind her. "Don't worry about me. Can I go back to work?"

"Fine," Perry folded his hands across his desk, looking back at her. The look on his face told her he didn't believe her for a minute.

She let out a soft sigh and relented, "I really don't want to talk about this right now, Perry."

He nodded, pointing to the door. "Just remember the door is always open."

"I know," Lois smiled back at him. "Thanks, Perry."

Mayson tapped the small metal capsule, holding it up in the air for inspection. She glanced behind her to where Detective Ryder was watching her curiously. She was sure she would have to explain why she was so relieved to him at a later time, but for now, she chose to focus on the small blessings.

Despite being engulfed in flames by the explosion last night, the evidence she'd uncovered from McCarthy's prison cell hadn't been destroyed. That meant she still had time to track down the culprit behind these prison escapes and stop them.

She quickly tossed the metal capsule in her purse and made her way toward the exit, leaving a bewildered Detective Ryder behind. She couldn't take any further chances after last night. She had to get this to STAR Labs.

Detective Ryder frowned as he watched Mayson turn to leave, uncertain what could have been so important that she thought to hide it in her car's doorframe. He waited until she had left and circled around the car to where Mayson had been standing. He lifted up the plastic cover, looking for any sign of a clue but found nothing but dark ashy residue leftover from the explosion last night.

He wondered momentarily if he should go after Mayson, but just as quickly as the thought entered his mind, he dismissed it. She made it clear she wanted to do whatever it was she was doing alone. Still, something felt amiss with Mayson. Her normal bantering and wit were gone and in its place was a distant and cold person he wasn't sure he wanted to get too close to for fear of having his arm ripped off.

He glanced at the car door that was slightly ajar and tapped it closed, not noticing the small metal capsule that rolled out as he walked away.

Jimmy juggled the large stack of files in his arms while trying to navigate through the chaos that was the Daily Planet newsroom, where many reporters were oblivious to his attempts to pass by. He let out an obnoxious cough trying to get the attention of Alan Davis, one of the more seasoned reporters on the Daily Planet's Political beat who so rudely happened to be standing in front of Jimmy's desk.

"I'm telling you I have it on good authority that Lois Lane asked for a new partner." Alan continued to jabber on to his colleague. "Whatever was going on between those two has fizzled out."

"I don't know, Alan," Mark Watts from Finance shrugged his shoulders. "According to Meyers, they seemed pretty cozy when

they left here last night, and they seem awfully comfortable with one another right now.” He pointed to the elevator doors where the duo had just disappeared behind.

“Care to put a wager on it?” Alan asked, holding his hand out. “Loser buys the first round at Taggart’s.”

“You’re so on!”

Jimmy, having heard enough, finally pushed his way between the two reporters, dropping the files on his desk with a loud thump. “You know, maybe if you two focused on something other than the Planet grapevine, you might have something for the Chief before he starts riding your butts for the next editions’ copy.”

Alan rolled his eyes back at Jimmy, “Yeah, what do you know about it, copy boy?”

“Davis! Watts! Quit your lollygagging and get your butts in gear! You got time to socialize you got time to write!” Perry’s voice boomed from across the bullpen. Jimmy couldn’t help but smirk to himself when he caught the surprised expression on both the reporters’ faces.

Clark held his hand up over his brow, looking up at the steps to the Metropolis P.D. Lois had rushed out of Perry’s office this morning and practically shoved him out the door. A drastic change from the way Lois had behaved earlier, practically drawing a line on the elevator floor to avoid talking to him.

Things were different now.

He knew it would take some getting used to for both of them. The shift in their relationship wasn’t something either of them could adjust to overnight. The walk over to City Hall had been quiet as he wondered what to say after how they had left things earlier.

<< “You and I both know there’s no going back.”

“So, I take it we are not pulling a U-turn.”

“We are cautiously moving forward.”

“Cautiously optimistic then.” >>

Cautiously optimistic was putting it lightly if he was honest with himself. He’d been emotionally throwing caution to the wind for months now. Ever since he’d made the decision to take that leap of faith and pursue a relationship with Lois, he found the barriers that for some time he had thought had been put there by Lois were actually his own. Lois was still skittish about the change in their relationship changing, but she wasn’t running. She wasn’t pushing him away. Skittish he could handle.

Now, if he could just take on the last remaining barrier in their relationship – Superman, he knew it was a necessary step if he expected their relationship to last, but the thought of confessing that he’d been lying to Lois for the better part of a year so soon after having the door slammed in his face – *literally* – wasn’t swaying him toward taking that step. He knew it needed to be done. But for now, he had to approach the subject with caution. The last thing he needed was a repeat of the end of their last date.

“It’s been six hours,” Lois said, readjusting her purse strap as she began climbing the steps to the Metropolis P.D. “They’re sure to have some sort of lead by now, right?”

“One can hope,” Clark let out a long sigh as he followed Lois through the double doors of the police station lobby. “Not sure how much ground the police will have been able to cover in six hours, though.” He let out a sigh when he spotted the deputy behind his desk, taking a sip of his morning coffee.

“Excuse me?” Lois pulled out her press pass, waving it in the air, “Lois Lane, Daily Planet.” She pointed behind her to Clark, “This is my partner, Clark Kent. We’re here to see Detective Ryder.”

The deputy sized them up for a moment before cocking an eyebrow up and asking, “He expecting you?”

“No, we just thought we’d take our chances and surprise him,” Lois replied in a sarcastic tone. Little did the deputy know she was dead serious.

A loud buzz came from the door behind deputy, and he motioned for them to go through the door. “First office on the right.”

Clark let out a long sigh as the door closed behind them. He leaned in to whisper in Lois’ ear, catching a whiff of the mixture of lavender and vanilla from her as he spoke, “What exactly are you going to say to him? Hi, we’re in the neighborhood please tell us about your high-profile investigation?”

“He was the first one on the scene. He’s got to know something,” Lois reasoned aloud as they reached Detective Ryder’s office. “Besides, it’s better than waiting for a press release from the DA.”

Clark let out a groan, “And if he doesn’t have anything to share?”

Lois shrugged her shoulders, “We wait for the press release, I suppose.”

“Great,” Clark grumbled in a barely audible tone as he followed Lois down the hall.

Chapter 2: Chasing Pavement

The Metropolis Prison security room was quiet. Each guard on duty sat diligently at his monitor, keeping an eye on the prison through the closed-circuit security system. Officer Christopher Gomez leaned back in his rolling desk chair, stretching his legs as he monitored the activity inside the visitor’s room. He was just about to change cameras when a familiar face caught his attention.

Gomez frowned as he watched a short brown-haired man exit the prison visiting room on the monitor. Gomez had just returned to his post after an investigation into a prisoner’s death less than a month ago. The man on the screen had been the last visitor for Sean McCarthy before his surprising death that Gomez found himself questioned about again and again with no explanation for McCarthy’s death other than a possible undiagnosed heart problem. The image of the last visitor’s face had been thrust on Gomez during the investigation again and again. Seeing his face so soon after McCarthy’s death left an unsettling feeling in Gomez as he called out to his fellow security office for assistance.

“Sanchez?”

William Sanchez rolled his chair over to Gomez, looking over his shoulder, “What’s up?”

“That guy look familiar to you?” Gomez pointed at the image of the man leaving the visitor’s room with his head ducked down to avoid the cameras.

“Looks suspicious,” Sanchez commented.

Before Gomez could reach for his phone to call in the suspicious activity, Sanchez shouted at the screen, “Damn! Diego Martinez’s down!”

“What?!” Gomez bolted out of his chair, racing for the door as he heard the sirens fill the hallways.

“All guards report to the visitor’s room. We’re on lockdown! Repeat! All available personnel report to the visitor’s room! Lock it down!”

The police station was abuzz with activity as Detective Ryder walked through the busy walkway, weaving and bobbing his way to the printer to retrieve the printout for his surprise guests. He looked over his shoulder and pointed ahead, “It’s been less than twelve hours, Ms. Lane, I’m not sure what you expect to find.”

“Well, you were the lead detective on the scene last night, Detective Ryder,” Lois Lane responded, stopping a few feet behind him as he reached for the printout on the printer. “Surely, there must be something the police are looking into besides a drunk driver?”

“Carter was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Ryder said with a shrug. “Any evidence regarding Ms. Drake’s bombing was sent over to the ATF lab for further examination,” Ryder explained. “Sorry I couldn’t be of more help.

“So, is the Metropolis P.D.’s investigation stalled?” Clark Kent

asked with a look of shock on his face.

“We’re...” Ryder shrugged his shoulders, unsure of how to respond. “Running down more leads and talking to suspects.”

“Anyone in particular?” Kent asked, crossing his arms over his chest with a stoic expression that made Ryder think twice before responding.

“The department is doing everything it can to find Mayson Drake’s arsonist, but at this time there are no suspects.” Detective Ryder explained almost on auto-pilot with the phrasing he’d repeated to numerous networks and journalists that continued to try and get the scoop on the ADA’s attempted killer.

“I’m sure you are, Detective,” Lois Lane smiled back at him. “I’m actually surprised your department was able to dismiss the charges against Mr. Carter so quickly. That’s got to be a lot of long hours from your department.”

“Yes, Ms. Lane,” Ryder’s chin jutted out, and his chest puffed out proudly as he responded to her. “We were able to secure the crime scene and finish the exam in less than four hours. Everyone was determined to bring the suspect to justice.”

“Which your department is still searching for.” Kent clarified, tapping his hand on the report Ryder had handed the duo earlier. “According to the report, you suspected the drunk driver?”

“Yes,” Ryder let out a deep sigh. “Off the record, the guy seemed to fit the character of our suspect. He was at the crime scene and couldn’t explain where he was going or how he had so perfectly struck the ADA’s car in such a way that the trigger on the incendiary device hadn’t blown the entire block” A look exchanged between the two reporters and Ryder continued sheepishly. “I’ll admit I had him in my crosshairs, but the evidence just wasn’t there. We cut him loose this morning with a DUI charge and are still looking for the person responsible for this.”

“And no one else was at the scene?” Lois inquired, crossing her arms over her chest.

“No one other than the ADA’s assistant,” Ryder sighed, running a hand through his hair. “We have an interview scheduled with her this afternoon, but given the lack of statement we got from her last night, we’re not really holding our breath.”

“Well, since your department has finished its exam of the crime scene, would it be all right if Mr. Kent and I had a look at Ms. Drake’s car?” Lois Lane asked, her voice dripped in a sugary tone that he was sure could have given Detective Ryder a diabetic coma if she kept it up.

Ryder swallowed hard, realizing he had no choice given he’d just admitted that the department had completed surveying the crime scene the night before. Besides, what harm could it really do to show them Mayson’s car?

The long corridors of STAR Labs almost seemed to be closing in as Mayson made her way to the intake lab. Time seemed to be determined to fight against her. Less than a day after she came into possession of this mysterious pill, she had found herself in the crosshairs of someone dangerous enough to bomb her car. Last night had been terrifying and enlightening all at the same time.

The bitter memory of what else had occurred last night threatened to push its way to the forefront of her mind, and she quickly dismissed it. She couldn’t allow that to draw her focus away from whatever it was she had discovered.

She reached the intake desk and leaned over to fill in her information, reaching absentmindedly into her purse for the capsule. She frowned when she didn’t feel the round capsule in her palm. She set the pen down and rummaged through her bag, searching for the missing capsule. It had been right here...

“Ms. Drake?”

Mayson looked up, apologizing to the intake technician. “I’m sorry. I don’t know where it is in this mess of a purse. I just had it.”

“We’re open till five, Ms. Drake.” The attendant gave her a reassuring smile as she removed the top form from the clipboard.

“I’ll set this aside for you.”

Mayson nodded, accepting defeat as she turned to leave. Where could it have gone?

Lois walked through the impound yard, careful not to trip over the disarray of bolts, bumpers, and headlights that were scattered through the yard like a jigsaw puzzle. She followed Clark through the maze of broken car parts and abandoned cars with a grimace. “Is this an impound yard or a graveyard for everything with a motor?”

“You’d be surprised what the patrol picks up around this city, Ms. Lane,” Detective Ryder responded, pointing up ahead where a familiar sedan covered in black singe marks and ash was parked at the end of the path they were on.

“You’re telling me,” Clark said just loud enough for Lois to make out. She gave him a puzzled look, and he shrugged, “I mean, with some of the stories we’ve covered in the past year, it makes sense. Where do you think all the charred automobiles went after the Toasters?” he pointed to a few cars in a similar state a few feet away.

Lois nodded, uncertain what to make of Clark’s response. She turned her attention back to Detective Ryder. “So, were the police able to find anything from the remains of Mayson’s car?”

“You know I can’t comment on an ongoing investigation, Ms. Lane,” Ryder said, stopping in front of what used to be Mayson’s car.

“Can’t blame us for trying, right?” Lois flashed him a quick smile, and Ryder let out a long sigh.

“Thanks, detective,” Clark responded.

“We’ll take it from here,” Lois said as she pulled out a disposable camera and began taking pictures for reference of the damage. Detective Ryder disappeared in the direction where they had come in, and Lois turned back to the car.

“I guess we should get started,” Lois said, taking a moment to absorb the gravity of the damage that had been done to Mayson’s car. How strange it was to stare at something so insignificant and be hit with so many emotions.

It was confusing.

Relief that Mayson –someone she’d grown to tolerate over the last few months –hadn’t succumbed to the incendiary device that had been meant for her. Anger over the act of violence and yet grateful for the careless driver that had possibly saved the ADA’s life.

Her relationship with Mayson Drake had been complicated, to say the least. Her anger over Mayson’s ambivalence toward Superman and the blatant way Mayson threw herself at Clark. At the time, Lois wasn’t sure why it bothered her, but as time went on, she grew to realize why Mayson’s behavior bothered her so much was the hard truth about her feelings for Clark. She hadn’t wanted to face the change that had subtly taken place over the last few months.

Now, months later, they were in a different place. With the small exception of her lapse in judgment yesterday afternoon when she shoved Clark at Mayson in hopes of not having to face the feelings that had emerged the night before. Clark hadn’t willingly gone, and the moment they left, she found herself faced with the bitter taste of contempt for the ADA. No matter what, she couldn’t hide from the feelings she’d been forced to face.

“Hey,” Clark reached over to squeeze her shoulder. “You okay?”

Lois’ lower lip tucked itself comfortably under her upper lip and looked back at Clark, uncertain how to respond. “She was really lucky,” Lois commented quietly, not answering his question.

She stared at the melted metal on the front grill of Mayson’s car and let out a shudder. Standing here in front of the blackened metal that was once a fully operational automobile sent a shiver down her spine. This could have easily ended in tragedy, but it

didn't. Mayson hadn't been in the car when it had exploded. It was by sheer chance that the ADA's life had been spared by a drunk driver losing control of his vehicle.

"Lucky would be for her not to have had a car bomb planted in her car to begin with." Clark's hand fell from her shoulder, resting on her upper arm as he stood next to her, taking in the remnants of Mayson's car bombing with her.

Lois cleared her throat, pulling herself away from him as she pointed to the other side of the car. "I'll take this side. You take this one?"

"What exactly are we looking for?" Clark asked, walking to where she had pointed him.

"I don't know, but this is the scene of the crime, so hopefully there's a..." She stopped when she felt something beneath her foot. She bent down to pick up what appeared to be a long metal capsule of some sort.

"Find something already?" Clark asked, walking up behind her.

"I don't know," Lois frowned, "but whatever it is doesn't appear to have any damage to it despite being less than a foot away from Mayson's car." Lois reasoned aloud as she examined the capsule in her hand.

"Looks like it twists off here," Clark pointed to the center where there was a ridge in the metal. A quick twist of the metal capsule and the two pieces separated, revealing three blue pills that fell into Lois' palm.

"What do you think it is?" Lois asked, cupping the capsule in her palm protectively.

"Something someone went to a lot of trouble to keep safe," Clark observed, pointing to the blue tablets in Lois' hand.

"Maybe someone at STAR Labs can tell us why?" Lois said, tightening her fist around the tablets as she hooked her arm into his.

Mary Williams tucked a long hair behind her ear as she looked around the mostly empty parking garage for Albie. These meetings were becoming more and more frequent, which made keeping her cover at the District Attorney's office more difficult. She glanced at her watch, catching sight of the time. Albie was late...again. Just as she was about to give up on him, she spotted the familiar curly-haired man coming around the corner.

"Mary," Albie's tongue almost slithered as he breathed her name.

She felt a shiver of disgust run through her as she stared back at Albie, wondering what more could be expected of her. "The DA's starting to ask questions about these long lunches, Albie." She tapped her foot impatiently. "I can't just leave whenever you call."

"You act as if this is an inconvenience, Mary." Albie chastised, clucking his tongue. "Correct me if I'm wrong and I'm never wrong, but it was you that came to Mr. Gables for help after you were caught embezzling funds from..."

"I know! I know! It was my idea!" Mary fumed, pacing in front of him. "Just because Mr. Gables holds the purse strings doesn't mean he needs to be careless."

"We're far from careless," Albie snorted.

"Really?" Mary scoffed, setting a report down on the hood of the sedan behind her. "What would you call this?"

The report from Metropolis Penitentiary had a photo of Albie with Diego Martinez moments before his passing and another photo of Albie with Sean McCarthy who had passed away from similar circumstances.

"It seems we have a problem," Albie observed coldly.

"This can't lead back to me, Albie," Mary warned.

"Lead back to you?" Albie scoffed with a mocking laugh, "Mary, it's already in your house. You had no problem accepting Mr. Gables' money or partaking in the illegal obstruction of

justice. If I go down. You go down."

"It's not my picture on those security cameras," Mary reminded him.

"Not yet," Albie replied smoothly. "Why don't you quit worrying about a lowly prison guard and focus your attention on finding that resurrection pill Mayson Drake got her hands on."

"I told you she doesn't have it. I've searched everywhere." Mary growled back at him.

"Now we both know that's not true, Mary. If you'd searched everywhere, you would have found it." Albie grabbed the file from the hood of the sedan and walked away. "Find the pill and destroy it. Mr. Gables doesn't take failure well, Mary. You should know that by now."

Lois turned the key to the ignition, starting the engine and took a quick glance in her rearview mirror to check for any last-minute surprises before pulling out of her parking spot. She let out a long breath as she turned back to Clark, who was seated next to her in the passenger seat.

"So, I guess we wait to hear back from STAR Labs and hope for the best," she said, verbalizing the obvious as she pondered what their next move should be. Was it too soon to drop by the ADA's office and get a statement?

She stopped outside the parking garage, blaring her horn at the car that had just sped by. "Watch it, moron!"

"Lois," Clark reached his arm out to place his hand on her shoulder. "They had the right of way."

The knowledge of the driver's right to jet out in front of her like that did little to settle her current mood. "Well, they don't have to be so cocky about it."

"Cocky?" Clark raised an eyebrow at her, holding back a smirk.

"Yes!" Lois fumed, pulling out into traffic and ignoring the chuckle her partner let out. She shot him a threatening glare as she straightened up in the driver's seat.

"O-kay," Clark mumbled, turning away.

Lois turned out on Main Street and let out a long sigh. "What do you think that pill was?"

"I don't know," Clark shrugged his shoulders, looking back at her. "We're not even sure it had anything to do with Mayson's car bombing."

"It was under *her* car," Lois huffed as she jerked the wheel once more.

"Did you *see* the impound lot?" Clark chastised with a raised eyebrow. "You could barely get to Mayson's car in there."

"Fine," Lois lamented, unwilling to continue this argument further. "So if you're a bad guy and the ADA gets their hands on a pill, why would you try to destroy it rather than attempt to steal it back?"

"You don't want the ADA finding out what the pill does?" Clark guessed, reaching over to grab the dashboard as she reached the parking garage for the Daily Planet.

"Whatever that pill is, it's got to be connected to something *big*. Attempted murder on the ADA isn't something to be taken lightly." Lois reasoned aloud.

"I just wish we knew what it was."

"I guess our next step is to talk to Mayson," Lois acknowledged as she flashed her Daily Planet ID card to the parking attendant to enter the parking garage.

Mayson slammed the door to her office, tossing her purse across her desk, haphazardly as she let out a loud scream.

It was gone.

She had searched everywhere.

In her now charcoal burnt car.

In her purse.

In that sorry excuse of an impound lot.

She even checked her office and had found nothing.

Panic slowly began to rise as she paced around the room, running her hands up and down her arms as she looked to the board that was pushed up against the wall. A tremble ran through her fingers as she stared at the back of the board, recalling her late-night spiel down memory lane, reliving each and every painful rejection over the last several months.

She stopped in front of her desk, leaning over to turn the radio on, hoping the distraction would help. Unfortunately, instead of calming music, she was greeted by a breaking news story on the airwaves.

“Officials still don’t have any answers for how this happened, but this is the second inmate to fall ill and die unexplainably at Metropolis Penitentiary. More information will be released later this afternoon, but you have to wonder what’s behind something like this...”

A soft knock came from her office door, and she let out a sigh of defeat, reaching over to twist the knob of her radio off and then turned to answer the door. She really needed to have a conversation with Mary about visitors. Mayson reached for the door, jerking it open. She felt her heart lurch in her chest when she found herself staring back at the reason for her torturous evening and painful memories.

Chapter 3: Unraveling

Albie Swanson put his car in park before jumping out of the driver’s seat and heading to the entry to the Gables estate. A soft beep came from his pocket, and he paused a moment to check the handheld device. A breath escaped his throat, coupled with anxiety and relief. The Medical Examiner had finished with his part. It was only a matter of time before the shipment was made.

A soft whine from the door caught his attention, and Albie shoved his hands in his pockets and looked up, meeting the stern gaze from Stanley Gables. “You’re late, Albie.”

“Just a minor hiccup, Mr. Gables,” Albie stammered. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Let’s hope not,” Gables responded with a grunt, pointing to the short flight of steps behind him. “We have a lot of work before Mr. McCarthy’s arrival.”

“Of course, Mr. Gables.”

Mayson felt her throat go dry as she stared at the duo standing in her doorway, uncertain how to respond to the sudden presence of Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Their presence did nothing to calm her current mood as she contemplated slamming the door in both of their faces. Manners, however, kept her from indulging in such a rude gesture.

What were they doing here? Were they there to gloat? Shove their romance in her face as if last night hadn’t been bad enough?

Mayson let out a short puff and grunted as she pulled the door back to open. “Well, look who finally showed up to give their statement.”

Lois glanced toward Clark and then back at Mayson, “We heard what happened last night.”

“Are you all right?” Clark asked, following Lois into Mayson’s office.

Mayson shrugged her shoulders, uncertain how to respond to what she viewed as a false sense of concern coming from the duo. Her jaw tightened, and she sharpened her pose, “I’ll be fine once I get this case ready for the DA.” She jutted her chin out and added, “Not every day an Intergang lieutenant is brought up on charges. Would be nice if we could get them to stick.”

“We did come by last night,” Lois spoke up, attempting to excuse their absence.

“Well, obviously, we missed one another.” Mayson walked to her desk and rummaged through the desk drawer looking for a few copies of the form she was looking for. She turned to the pens in

the coffee mug on her desk and grabbed a few then thrust them in Lois Lane’s direction. “Try to write neatly and leave out any illegal activities that may have led you to Lucky Leon’s warehouse. I can only juggle so many federal investigations at a time.”

Lois finished writing up her statement, uncertain what to make of the icy tone coming from Mayson. Sure they had been a little later than they should have last night, but they had tried to find her. Surely she had to understand it wasn’t personal. There was a burning car in the middle of the street.

Lois placed the statement on the desk and pushed it toward Mayson, “Everything’s there. Jimmy’s tip to the warehouse and Superman dismantling the warheads when they went haywire.” She let out a long breath, “While we’ve got you here, would you mind answering a few questions?”

Lois felt the arctic blast coming from Mayson as she stared in her direction with daggers in her eyes. Lois stole a quick glance in Clark’s direction, wondering momentarily if he was receiving the same cold welcome from Mayson.

“Sorry, I’m out of state secrets this week.” Mayson reached over to grab the papers. “And I really don’t have time to get pulled into one of your investigations which will most likely end up with someone doing something illegal to get the scoop.”

“Now hold on a minute, Mayson,” Clark cut in. “We’re just trying to help get to the truth about what happened last night.”

“What happened last night is some drunk hit my car, and it blew up.” Mayson snorted. “I’m sure the police have everything under control.” She said, tightening her jaw as she folded her arms across her chest, challenging Lois and Clark to convince her otherwise.

Clark quickly stepped in, “We appreciate our timing isn’t great, and we’ll try not to take up too much of your time, Mayson. We just want to get to the truth.”

“Truth?” Mayson almost sneered out, and Lois exchanged a perplexed expression with Clark before jumping in.

“Your car bombing,” Lois ventured carefully.

The tension in the room was palpable. Lois tapped her thumb against her notepad, alternating her weight from one foot to another, trying to read where this uncharacteristically hard tone was coming from. For the most part, the ADA had a history of working with her, and Clark willingly on cases like this. One would think she would welcome the help, but at the moment, Mayson was anything but forthcoming with them. A trait Lois rarely found in the ADA with Clark around.

“Right,” Mayson jutted her chin out and let out a mocking laugh. “I guess the *big* story is how I happened to outsmart my car bomber. ‘How does the lowly assistant deputy District Attorney escape the jaws of death?’ There see, I even coined the front-page article for Perry.”

Lois opened her mouth to respond, but Mayson quickly cut her off. “I appreciate the friendly drop-by, but I’m fine. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to figure out who is behind this without tipping the guy off and printing it in the next edition.”

“Mayson, you have to know Lois, and I would never do that!” Clark admonished before Lois could form a response of her own.

“Maybe not, but I really can’t take any chances.” Mayson pointed to the door. “I’ll see you around.”

Not needing any further encouragement, the duo quickly exited, bewildered by the ADA’s behavior. As the door shut behind them, Lois turned to Clark, “What do you think that was about?”

“I don’t know. I guess we get to the bottom of this without Mayson’s help.” Clark said with a defeated sigh.

“So less than twelve hours later, we magically become persona non grata,” Lois mused aloud.

“She did just have her life threatened,” Clark pointed out.

“Yet is holding out on any information to help bring that

person to justice.” Lois snorted as they made their way out of the District Attorney’s office and stopping in the lobby. “She just insinuated that we were no better than the bottom-feeders that print stories about Elvis’ Love Child. I’m not going to just brush it off as stress.” Lois fumed, crossing her arms over her chest. “We might push the boundaries, but I would never ...”

The chirping of Clark’s mobile kept her from finishing her thought as Clark pulled the phone out to answer it. “Clark Kent.”

His forehead creased with anguish as he responded to the caller, “When was this?” A moment later, she nodded to Lois and whispered, pulling the phone away from his face, “Prisoner just dropped dead in the middle of the visitation room.” He then turned his attention back to the caller, “Yeah, tell Perry we’re on our way.”

Christopher Gomez buried his hands in his light-weight jacket as he jogged to the crosswalk leading him to the parking garage of his apartment. He took a quick look over his shoulder to check for traffic when the white led lights lit up on the sign to read ‘Walk’ and caught a quick glimpse of a man that looked eerily familiar. He tucked his chin down into the collar of his jacket and made his way into the crosswalk as swiftly as possible.

He didn’t even bother looking behind him to see if the familiar stranger was behind him. He knew that face. What he didn’t know was whether the mysterious man knew what he had done. He searched his pocket for his phone as he raced toward the entrance of the parking garage and dialed the speed dial for Mayson Drake’s office. Before he heard the first ring, a sharp pain bolted through him, and he let out a blood-curdling scream just before a hand clasped over his mouth.

Clark held his hand up over his brow, looking at the dreary-looking building in front of him. “Jimmy said the medical examiner already left for the day, but we can talk to the ME’s assistant.” Clark pointed to the small building connected to the prison through a short bridge a few floors up.

“I guess we should get going,” Lois said, readjusting her bag on her shoulder. “Odd timing for the M.E. to just bolt.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, following Lois up the steps. “One would think he would stick around, but ...” Clark blanched as the screams for help from across town reached his ears.

“Help Superman!”

“But what?” Lois asked, giving him a strange look as he took a few steps back from her.

“I, uh, just remembered I was supposed to...walk my neighbor’s cat this week, it’s an emergency. He has, um, allergies.” Clark said lamely, mentally kicking himself as the words escaped his mouth. It was too late to save face now. He rambled a lame, “I’m sorry” and ran for the nearest alley to tend to the distress call.

Lois watched Clark disappear, running away from their latest lead to ...walk his neighbor’s cat. The ridiculous excuse was almost laughable if he hadn’t been running away from her when he gave it. She turned on her heel, stomping up the concrete steps. Her eyes burned red with fury, daring anyone to challenge her as she tore the door leading to the lobby of the prison open and slammed her press id on the counter for the officer.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet.” She gritted out at the unsuspecting officer. “I have an appointment with the M.E.’s office.”

The officer scribbled her name down on the clipboard, and then pointed to the line for her to sign on before buzzing her through. She raised her shoulders a few times, mentally preparing the questions she planned to press the M.E.’s office for. Clark obviously had better things to do than help run down leads on this story.

He wanted to walk his neighbor’s cat?

Fine!

He could walk it all afternoon for all she cared.

She reached the end of the hallway and opened the door with a sign hanging from it that read ‘*Medical Examiner.*’

“Sir?” Clark tapped the man on the cheek, trying to stir him to consciousness. He looked up at the boy that couldn’t be more than twelve that stared on anxiously, waiting for a sign the man in front of him would be all right. ‘Maybe he was a friend or family member,’ Clark wondered to himself.

A frantic cry came from the man when his eyes flickered open, and he let out a short gasp, “Wh-where is he?”

“Where is who?” Clark asked, placing a reassuring hand on the man’s shoulder.

“He...”

“Sir, just take a breath. Everything’s going to be fine.” Clark soothed, pointing to the young boy a few feet away. “You were attacked, but thankfully, this young man was able to call for help...”

The man sat up, patting his jacket with a scowl, his eyes widened, and he turned back to Clark, “You don’t understand. They have it now. I’m not safe!”

“Who has what?” Clark asked.

“Resurrection,” the man whispered in a harsh whisper.

Mayson shifted in her chair, uneasily as she tapped her fingertips on the desk in front of her. The longer she thought about it, the more her blood boiled.

He didn’t even have the decency to apologize for running out on her yesterday. ‘Of course not. She was there.’ Mayson thought bitterly.

Lois Lane had been an annoyance that she thought could quickly brush off. But she hadn’t given her enough credit. Months of watching Clark be pushed aside and compared to Superman. Why he put up with it, she couldn’t understand. Until now. She had let her guard down around Lois. Thinking she wasn’t a threat. The investigative reporter fawned over Superman like a lovesick cheerleader. She never thought Lois would turn her attention to Clark.

But she had.

The memory of Lois Lane digging her claws into Clark last night left a bitter bile in her throat. A hard blow and an even more painful reality for her to face. Lois hadn’t played fair. She hadn’t even been playing the same game as Mayson. Now the question remained on the table of what she was going to do about it.

She stood up, pacing around her office before stopping in front of the board that had been pushed against the wall. Her hand clasped on the corner of the board, turning it on the creaky wheels to face her. The colorful images and frantic late-night scribbles latched onto her brain with a vice-like grip.

<< “Just tell me. Look, Clark, I’m a lawyer. I know you’re hiding something. Something that’s keeping us apart.”

“What is it? I can deal with it.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“If it’s Lois, just say it.”>>

Her anger simmered as she stared at the image of herself with Clark at the charity ball from earlier in the year. They had been happy. Everything had been perfect.

<< “Mayson, I like you. And I like Lois”>>

Her attention moved across the board, catching glimpses of Clark with Lois Lane. Marketing campaigns and public events that promoted the partnership pushed the duo together again and again. Mayson’s eyes glinted with icy daggers as she stared at the smiling image of Lois Lane with her hands wrapped around Clark Kent.

A cold expression washed over her, and she reached for the pen tucked neatly in the pen holder above the board. Without warning, her hand moved at a frantic pace, stabbing at the glossy

image with the tip of her pen until there was no way to tell who was in the photo. She smiled, turned her attention back to the photo of herself and Clark, and wrote below in all caps, 'FOREVER.'

"Ms. Drake?"

Mayson jumped up, pushing the board back against the wall and turning to her assistant. "Yes?"

"Sorry to bother you, Ms. Drake. You received a message from a Gordan Charlie." Mary handed her the message.

Recognition crossed Mayson's face, and she nodded. It was the code name he Christopher Gomez was supposed to use if he felt his cover had been compromised. She reached for her things, preparing to gather them up as Mary pressed for more information.

"I don't have a Gordon in your files anywhere."

Mayson shrugged, "Old friend. I'll be back later."

Resurrection.

The word played through Clark's mind as he flew through the sky on his way back from the hospital where he had helped escort Christopher Gomez. The story seemed too bizarre to be true, but if his time in Metropolis had taught him anything, it was the more outlandish the tale, the more likely it held truth to it.

He'd have to talk it over with Lois and...

Before he could finish his thought, his mind flashed back to the expression on Lois' face when he had inadvertently inserted an entire shoe store in his mouth with the excuse he had given her. Just hours before he had been talking her down from the doubts that had begun to form and then he ran off and left her to finish an interview he'd set up with a God awful excuse that rivaled his 'Cheese of the Month' fiasco a few months before. He wasn't sure how he was going to dig himself out of the hole he was sure to be in with Lois, but he knew he better think of something quick.

He landed just behind the parking garage where Lois had parked earlier, looking for her car. Unsurprisingly, he found her parking spot occupied by a teal four-door sedan. He let out a defeated sigh.

'So much for finishing the interview,' he thought to himself, heading toward the exit where he had flown in. Given he missed the interview with the M.E.'s office, he couldn't be sure where Lois would have gone afterward but if he had to guess the Planet would most likely be the next stop for her. Now if he could just come up with something to say to her.

His ability to find the right words seemed to be a trend lately. His mind wandered to earlier in the day at Mayson's office where the ADA had met them both with hostility. He knew her outward hostility was meant for him after running out on lunch the previous day. Still, her behavior seemed so out of character to him though he wasn't sure what would be considered a reasonable response given the fact that someone *had* just tried to kill her.

In retrospect, they should have gone to Mayson first thing this morning. He had every intention of reaching out to Mayson after the car bombing. Not only to check on her well-being but to address the ambiguous way things had been left between them over lunch yesterday.

Things felt unresolved, to say the least when it came to Mayson. Especially after the painfully awkward lunch he'd been forced to partake in and his abrupt exit he knew he owed her an apology. He owed her more than just that, though. He owed her the truth. The truth about where he stood. Mayson had hinted – *more than hinted* – at the possibility of a relationship beyond friendship. A few months ago, he'd actually been tempted, but when it came down to it, he knew it wouldn't be fair to Mayson.

So soon after Lois' rejection and the fallout after Lex Luthor's death, the attention he received from Mayson had been a welcome change. Yet try as he might he couldn't rationalize pursuing anything beyond friendship with Mayson. A point he found himself at impossible odds with himself in articulating to her. A

problem that seemed to multiply the longer he drew out the inevitable.

<< "I want you to know I was really humiliated when you stood me up... and I still think it was a rotten thing for you to do, but I've met your parents now, and spent some time with them, and they are such wonderful people that I'm willing to assume that any son of theirs wouldn't do what you did. And that this weekend was some kind of misunderstanding. I won't ask you for an explanation, and I won't ask you out again, but if you want to ask me, I probably won't say no." >>

The turning point for him had been when he had inadvertently agreed to a weekend away with her when his attention had been elsewhere – focused on Lois finding herself in trouble once more. His misstep had left him in the awkward situation of relying on Lois for help after being blinded by her attempted kidnapers. He had been forced to remain quiet when Jimmy and Lois had incorrectly assumed his absence meant he had left for the weekend invite he hadn't been paying attention to.

<< "Mayson, I like you. And I like Lois" >>

The invite had been a wake-up call for him. He had been kidding himself, thinking that maintaining a platonic relationship with Mayson and continuing the friendship when he knew she wanted more wouldn't end in heartache. It had been the push he needed to pull his head out of the sand. He had quietly pulled back, ensuring he wouldn't be caught in a situation that could be misconstrued as anything other than a professional relationship with Mayson.

<< "Just tell me. Look, Clark, I'm a lawyer. I know you're hiding something. Something that's keeping us apart." >>

"What is it? I can deal with it."

"It's not that easy."

"If it's Lois, just say it." >>

Yesterday he had been very close to finally setting the record straight with Mayson and making his feelings known; however, like always, timing got in his way. He had the perfect opening to finally tell Mayson he wasn't interested in anything more than friendship with her. He hated to hurt her. He cared for her, but he could never give her what she was searching for.

His mind flashed back to the conversation he'd tried to have with her over lunch, mentally reprimanding himself for allowing things to continue this long without sitting Mayson down. He had thought the distance he had put between them after her invitation for a weekend away would be enough to get his message across without having to say the words and deliver the emotional blow that he dreaded. Hurting her was the last thing he wanted to do, but it seemed it was the only way he would be able to spare Mayson any further pain.

<< "Mayson, I like you. And I like Lois" >>

Try as he might over the last few months, he couldn't deny the connection that had been there between himself and Lois. Where on the one hand, Lois had pushed Clark to the side, forever it seemed only able to see him as a friend while at the same time adoring his alter-ego with open arms. With all her faults, when it came down to it, she accepted both sides of him – even if it wasn't the way he wanted. Superman with all his abilities was just a mask – a disguise he wore to hide the faults of Clark Kent. With each of the abilities came flaws and dare he even think it, humanity, which made the pedestal the world kept his alter-ego all the more frightening. Lois saw past all of it though. She saw Superman like no one else did and she even gave him the benefit of the doubt when no one else would.

<< "You're not flying around with a big 'S' on your chest, bragging about what a hero you are..." >>

"You heard Superman brag?"

"Not in so many words..." >>

The same couldn't be said for Mayson. Though she adored Clark in the same way, he wished Lois would, she openly despised

his alter-ego. Only recently had her animosity toward him begun to soften, trusting him to help aid in the search for Dianna Stride. It wasn't exactly the foundation you sought in a relationship when hiding the fact that you are in fact, an alien from another planet.

<<“Do you love her son?”>>

Out of nowhere, it seemed, his father's words popped into his mind, reminding him of the conversation last year that had led him to confess his love for Lois. With it came the guilty conscience of still not being completely honest with Lois when they were on the cusp of something that required trust from both of them.

Dr. Jenet Klyburn, lead scientist at STAR Labs, held a report in her hand and glanced up at the lab tech with a questioning gaze. Her greenish hazel eyes glistened behind her spectacles as she ran a hand through her auburn colored locks.

“How many people worked with you on this?”

“Just myself,” the tech responded carefully.

“Good,” Dr. Klyburn replied, setting the report down. “Run the test again before you file your report. If what you say is correct, we'll need to contact the DEA.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” he nodded, taking the report from her.

Chapter 4: Code Blue

The blank page of Lois Lane's word processor blinked back at her, taunting her with the lack of progress she'd made so far on the story she was supposed to be turning into Perry by this afternoon. Of course, she wouldn't be stuck if she weren't so furious at her missing partner. It wasn't like the behavior was new. He did it all the time. Running off to return a video or check the mail at the most inopportune times.

Every time she thought she had calmed down long enough to begin writing up her notes from the interviews throughout the day, something else would remind her of Clark's lame excuse.

'Cat walking. He couldn't come up with something more original before ducking out of an interview he setup.' Lois thought to herself as she glared at her screen.

“Mail call,” Jimmy's voice pierced her inner thoughts as a manila envelope, and two-letter envelopes were laid over her keyboard before she could react to her friend's stealthy skills of maneuvering through the cloud of disparagement that hung over her.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Lois said, looking up at her friend with a half-smile in hopes that she could fake pleasantries without alerting her friend of her current mood.

Jimmy cocked an eyebrow at her, turning his head to look at her as he prompted her with a smile, “You okay?”

Lois squashed down the turbulent emotions that raced through her mind, subconsciously stealing a glance at her missing partner's desk before meeting her friend's gaze. “Fine, just got a lot on my mind is all.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “Crazy how quickly things can change in just a few hours, huh? Mayson nearly getting killed. You and CK...” Before he could finish his sentence, he quickly began to backtrack, “I mean, I just assumed. I shouldn't do that. Assuming is bad. I'm gonna...find somewhere else to be before I dig myself any deeper.” He pointed behind himself, backing away as he spoke.

Had she not felt the stress from carrying around her anger at Clark at that moment, she might have stopped him, but she wasn't sure how to respond. Jimmy was right. Things had changed between her and Clark in just one day, and now she was left wondering if things would change for the worse in the next twenty-four hours. She didn't want to think like that. It had taken what felt like an eternity to get this far, and open herself up to the idea of pursuing anything other than friendship with Clark. Now that she was here, staring at the reality, everything felt so fragile.

He knew that.

Her uncertainties had gotten the best of her that morning, and he'd helped coax her out of her anxiety. This was different, though. She ripped open the envelope, and a small 4 x 6 photo fell on her desk, staring back at her with jagged pen marks and scribbles in red ink. A hand covered her mouth in shock at Lois stared at the photo from several months ago at the Kerth Awards. It looked to be one of the promotional photos the Planet had released as a part of their marketing campaign to promote the Lane and Kent, reporting team. A glaring change was the red and black pen mark that had been scribbled all over Lois' face in the photo.

She quickly shoved the photo back into the envelope and began searching for a return address. A frown crossed her face when she saw there was no postage on the envelope. It had been hand-delivered. She looked around the newsroom with a wary expression, wondering if anyone here could have been behind the envelope's arrival to her desk.

A mug of coffee moved in front of her, and she jumped, startled by the sudden appearance of the paper cup from Joe's. She spun in her chair, ready to face the intruder, and let out a long breath of relief when she saw Clark standing behind her.

He held up his hands, displaying his surrender against her scowl and tense features. “It's just a peace offering. I know my timing could have been better earlier.”

Recalling her bitterness over being left holding the bag she snorted, “A little? You bolted from an interview you set up.”

“I know,” he hung his head, burying his hands in his pockets and then turning to her. “I lost track of time.”

“You seriously went to go walk your neighbor's cat?” she challenged, noting the white and black hairs on his jacket and pants leg.

“Uh, yeah,” he shrugged his shoulders. “It was actually a good thing too.”

“How so? You find a stray dog that needed neutering?” Lois teased, still not ready to let her anger dissolve completely.

“When I was heading back to my apartment, I ran across one of the guards that works over at the prison. He claimed to have been attacked by the person behind something called ‘Resurrection.’”

“Resurrection?” Lois echoed the word with a scrunched up nose. “What is that?”

“I don't know,” Clark admitted tapping his coat breast pocket, “but I figured we could find out when we go interview him.” He shrugged his shoulders. “He's at the hospital now being treated for his injuries from earlier.”

“You know you can't just show up with a lead on a case and assume everything is forgiven.” Lois pointed out, the curve of her lip threatening to overtake her scowl with a half-smile.

“I can't?” he asked innocently, breaking his face into a full megawatt smile that threatened to undo her right there.

A smirk curled across the curve of her lips, cracking the little resolve she still had. She crossed her arms over her chest, turning in her chair to face him, hardening her features behind her dark eyes. As tempting as it was to just jump into their investigation like nothing had changed, she had to make a point.

An uneasy expression crossed his face, and his smile melted away. His head lowered and he let out a deep breath, “I'm sorry.”

She caught a glimpse of the sincerity in his eyes. Noting the white and black hair on his jacket from a cat, she supposed it wasn't fair to be angry at him for helping out a neighbor. Even if it was at the most inopportune time, still, it wasn't the first time he'd done something like this, and if they were going to have a relationship, he couldn't just bolt on her. She had no intention of continuing down this road and finding herself pushed aside time and time again. That was a conversation for a less public location, though. They did need to follow up on this lead Clark had come across. She had no intention of letting the subject die completely, but sulking about it wouldn't do either of them any good either.

“Let’s talk to this Gomez character and find out what he knows.”

“Room 503,” Mayson flashed her federal identification to the charge nurse and followed her through the narrow hallway until she was standing in front of Officer Gomez’s room. She nodded her thanks, taking a deep breath, preparing herself for what lied ahead.

She opened the door and entered, slamming the door behind her. Officer Gomez jumped, startled by the loud clap of the door hinge hitting the door frame. Mayson crossed her arms over her chest as she stared at the distressing sight of her key witness in the undercover investigation into the Metropolis prison.

“You’re not doing a great job of laying low, Chris.”

“I wasn’t planning on getting mixed up with these characters either, Ms. Drake,” Chris Gomez snorted, motioning to his sling and bandaged leg propped up in the hospital bed. “Yet here I am.”

“You’ve got to be more careful, Chris,” Mayson scolded, sliding her hands up and down her upper arms. “We’re still building the case... The DA is not ready to file charges yet.”

“I know, I know,” Chris waved her off. “But obviously, they know something’s up, Ms. Drake.”

“I’ll talk to the DA and see what we can do about protection,” Mayson said, uncertain how she would be able to convince Michael Clemmons on the extra security for a case that was still in shambles. No evidence other than her star witness who was being threatened.

“So, I show up to my next shift with two armed guards. That’ll go over *really* well.” Gomez snorted, pointing at his forehead with a low growl. “Why don’t you just tattoo snitch on my forehead and save the penitentiary some time from sniffing me out.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Mayson promised. “Right now, it’s just the two of us that know about resurrection.” Mayson’s eyes twinkled as she added with a smirk, “On our side anyway.”

“Right,” Gomez nodded with a twinge of hesitation.

“We are the only two that know about resurrection, right?” Mayson pressed.

Gomez paused before nodding, “Of course.”

Mayson glanced at her watch, realizing the time. “I’ve got to meet with the DA before he gets pulled into court. Try to keep a low profile until then.”

“You know where to find me,” Gomez shrugged his shoulders as she left.

The long trek to the parking garage seemed to take forever as Clark followed Lois in silence. She was still stewing about his disappearance earlier. He had apologized, and she seemed to have accepted it—at least she hadn’t brought the subject up again—or any other subject for that matter. He let out a deep sigh as they reached the car, and he watched Lois fumble with her keys to unlock the car and mumble a quick “let’s go” before climbing in.

Without a word, he climbed in and resigned himself to a car ride of silence on the way to the hospital. To his surprise, they barely made it out of the parking garage before Lois broke the silence.

“You disappeared on me... *again*,” Lois said, turning the car onto Main Street. Her voice was stern as she spoke. “Then you left me to complete the interview *you* had setup without any context about what you had talked to the M.E.’s assistant about already.”

Clark let his head drop, hearing the anguish in her voice as she spoke. How he wished he could just tell her where he really was. Instead, he’d been reduced to lying and trying to salvage his reputation by searching for an alley cat, so his story hadn’t been a total lie. The words felt empty as he spoke them, but he wasn’t sure what else to say. “I’m sorry,” His head lowered, and he let out a deep breath, uncertain how long Lois would hold onto her anger at him.

“You can’t just disappear on me.” She stole a quick glance in

his direction before turning her attention back to the road.

A pained expression crossed her face, and he found himself silently nodding, unsure if he could keep such a promise. He couldn’t abandon his responsibilities as a superhero, but he certainly had to do better about balancing those responsibilities with his life. This – whatever it was that was developing between himself and Lois – was changing everything. For the better, he hoped. He momentarily wondered how long he would be able to keep up this charade without pushing Lois further and further away from him.

‘*Boring.*’

Agent Dan Scardino flipped through the incoming reports, searching for the next assignment. It had been a trying few months after losing his partner, Jenna but he was ready to get back in the field. He had been on desk duty for too long, and he was ready to prove his worth and take another shot at that promotion.

‘*More Boring*’

Unfortunately, fate wasn’t on his side with that ambition. Everything that filtered into the agency seemed to be your run of the mill drug bust. Nothing new or exciting about busting up a small-time meth lab or stopping a small-time dealer from baking mary jane in his oven.

“Pass,” he muttered, tossing the reports on the desk. The ceiling fan blew across the desk, and a slim folder opened up from the bottom of the pile and revealed a 4x6 glossy photo of a car explosion clipped to a two-page report. Curious, Dan Scardino leaned over to pick up the file and skimmed it over.

A frown crossed his face as a sense of déjà vu fell over him. He looked over the file as he wheeled himself over to the file cabinet, where an eerily familiar bombing had happened just six months prior. With precision, he pulled out the thick green folder and flipped the pages to find the initial incendiary report from ATF. “Unbelievable.”

The front desk receptionist to Metropolis General pointed to the waiting area behind Lois and Clark. “You can have a seat. I’ll have someone come out and talk with you.”

Lois scowled as she jerked her Press ID back from the counter and turned on her heel to the waiting area. Clark was a few steps behind her, tucking his own press badge back into his inner pocket. “This is a waste of time,” Lois muttered, pacing by the front door of the lobby. She gestured to the receptionist with a nod of her head and added, “Look at her. She’s probably telling whoever it is on the other end to take their good old sweet time so they can wait us out.”

“You don’t know that,” Clark reassured, placing a hand on her shoulder. “She could genuinely be asking someone to come out here.” A reassuring smile peeked through the corners of his mouth.

She felt her insides flip flop as a warmth spread through her, staring back at Clark as a small smile peeked across the corners of her mouth. Clark had a way of looking at the world through this lens that always saw the good in everyone despite the signs that told her otherwise. Though it was tempting to think the worst and insist the receptionist was conspiring against her Lois found herself almost convinced of Clark’s version of events.

“I’ll bet she’s on the phone right now with the head nurse, asking someone to come up front.” Clark grinned back at her, reaching over to cup her cheek like he had a thousand times before. This felt different somehow. She stared back at him, wondering if he felt the electrical spark that had just coursed through her from his simple touch.

“I guess we’ll have to see, won’t we?” Lois replied playfully, leaning a little closer before turning to look back at the reception desk. Sure enough, the woman was still on the phone, but what was being said seemed to be anyone’s guess at this point.

“They can’t just let anyone in.” Clark reminded her, looping his arm across her shoulders.

Lois nodded, letting out a long huff. She knew he was right. She just hated the suspense of going through the bureaucratic red tape just to get answers on something she was sure would open the floodgates of their investigation. This was the thrill of the chase that she lived for, and like it or not, this receptionist held the keys to blowing this case wide open. So, for now, she would play nice and bide her time.

“We’re not leaving,” Lois said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Mayson tucked her head down as she made her way to the elevator, hoping not to draw any attention to herself. Christopher Gomez was right. Providing protection would only further put a target on his back, but right now, she wasn’t sure how else to keep him safe. The police had been less than forthcoming when she had requested they remain outside his room. Whoever she was dealing with here had connections. She just wished she knew who she was up against before it was too late.

The threatening notes and attempts on not only her life but her witness made her even more determined to get to the truth. Project resurrection was big and sure to make a lot of heads roll when the ringleader was revealed.

The elevator arrived, and she ran into a man with dark curly hair. “Oh, excuse me,” she said stepping aside for him and his companion. She noted the man’s demeanor seemed nervous as he pushed past her. She brushed it off, watching as the two men disappeared behind the elevator doors.

Protecting Chris Gomez pushed its way back to the forefront of her mind, and she pulled out her mobile phone, preparing to dial once she was out of the elevator. It wasn’t like she had plentiful resources at her disposal. Though she wasn’t a huge fan, the recent help from Superman had been instrumental in stopping assassin Dianna Stride from taking her witness out. That help came with the help of Lois Lane though. And she would be damned if she ever put herself in a position to owe Lois Lane a favor again.

The elevator doors opened, and she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the double doors leading to the hospital. Thinking too long about Lois Lane would only stir up her anger, and right now she had to focus on getting Chris Gomez to safety. She pulled the antenna to her mobile out, dialing the number by heart and her heels clicked on the black and white tile floor. Before she could finish making the call, she found herself faced with the subject that was determined to torture her today.

There in the lobby, Lois Lane stood barely inches away from Clark Kent, wrapped up in what appeared to be a private conversation between the two. She couldn’t go even a few hours without the duo crashing into her life and subjecting her to their — whatever it was. She refused to acknowledge what had formed between the duo as anything other than *‘that night.’* Giving it a status would only further torment her.

Lois Lane seemed hell-bent on doing that for her.

She ducked her head down, hoping to avoid being recognized by either Lois Lane or Clark Kent but failed miserably as she collided with the duo a few feet away from the front door, causing her purse and files to slide across the slick tile floor with speed that rivaled a fighter jet taking off. Every second she sat on the floor scrambling for the files and contents of her purse only further amplified the humiliation and anger that simmered beneath the surface.

Had today not been enough of a nightmare?

“Mayson, are you all right?” Clark knelt down to hand her her purse, and she found herself drowning in her self-loathing, staring back at the dark eyes that had captured her heart so completely. Before she could succumb to the painful waterfall of emotions that threatened to overtake her she quickly grabbed her purse from him and turned away.

It wouldn’t do to come undone here for all to see. She wouldn’t give Lois Lane that satisfaction.

To her dismay, Clark seemed unfazed by the cold shoulder reaction she gave him and stood up, placing his arm around Lois Lane as Mayson finished gathering her things. How quickly things had changed between them.

She had to get out of here.

She reached for the door and found her eardrums welcomed with a blaring alarm. She looked back to see the red and white lights above the emergency room, leading to the hospital rooms lit up. A voice shouted, “Code Blue! Room 503!”

The blood drained from her face, and she went weak in her knees as she realized what was happening. The room began to spin, and she could hear Clark’s voice in a muffled tone calling her name, asking if she was all right. Her mind began to race as she processed what had happened.

Room 503. Officer Gomez’s room had a code blue. Chris Gomez had been awake and alert moments ago. How could there be a code blue on an assault? There was only one explanation. Foul play. She had failed him.

She looked around the room, increasingly suspicious of those around her. She then zeroed in on Lois Lane, wondering just what the duo had been doing here. The last thing she recalled was the image of Clark’s spectacles glinting in the fluorescent lights before her head hit the tile with a hard clunk.

Chapter 5: Crazy For Feeling So Lonely

The hospital triage room was bustling with activity as medical staff swarmed around the nurses’ station reviewing the catastrophic loss.

“How did this happen?”

“You don’t just die from nothing!”

“Where was security?”

“Who was watching the floor?”

Lois blanched as she tightened her hand around the Styrofoam cups in her hand. It had all happened so fast. The piercing sound of the alarms blaring in her ears. Mayson collapsing in front of them and the news that had been on every nurses tongue.

“Did you hear what happened to Christopher Gomez?”

Despite her attempts though she had been hard-pressed to get a statement from the charge nurse on the suspicious death of Officer Christopher Gomez. She took a sip of the warm fluid, letting the sweet aroma of coffee overtake her senses as she looked around the corner where the row of triage beds was.

Mayson has been taken to one of the open beds to recover. She had been in and out of consciousness when the nurses had been looking over her in the lobby. It had only been twenty minutes, but it felt like so much longer. She let out a deep sigh as she took another sip of her coffee, wondering how long it would be for Mayson to wake up.

She wasn’t sure how she felt about the ADA at this point. On one hand, she considered her a colleague and a close acquaintance she and Clark worked closely with but on the other hand there always remained a rift between herself and Mayson. She always felt she had to prove something with Mayson. Part of that came from her uneasiness with the blatant way Mayson threw herself at Clark, but the other came from the open hostility Mayson had toward her. They had talked it through a few weeks ago, and she had thought they had moved past it, but her behavior today left her wondering if there would always be a wall there preventing her and Mayson from having a cordial relationship with one another.

No matter how much she tried to eradicate the image, she found herself looking at Mayson like she was a moony-eyed cheerleader that saw Clark as another conquest. Mayson herself had done little to show any different side to herself in the last few weeks. Showing up at the Planet to make it harder for Clark to say “no” to invitations to lunch.

Though in hindsight she supposed it had been a blessing in disguise. Had it not been for Mayson, she and Clark would probably still be navigating their busy schedules to find a free evening for their first date.

She let out a long sigh as she looked back toward the triage beds a few feet away. Praying for the patience she didn't feel in that moment, she approached, hoping Mayson would be feeling more herself by now.

Albie Swanson tapped his foot on the gas, looking over his shoulder as he put the car in reverse to escape the parking lot of the Metropolis General Hospital as quickly as possible. He and Sean McCarthy had barely made it out of the building before the exits had been closed off. He glanced at the clock, spotting the late hour.

"It's about time for Mr. Gables' next dose. We'll stop at the bistro on Fifth to pick up his usual." Albie said with a nod of his head.

"You didn't tell me Ms. Drake was still alive," Sean McCarthy growled out bitterly.

"We're taking care of it. She won't get in the way." Albie shrugged it off. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is I have a certain reputation. If it gets out that I had someone just walk away from one of my bombs well, there goes the market value." McCarthy sneered as his eyes went dark.

"She won't be a problem," Albie responded shakily. "Trust me."

"I don't leave *any* loose ends." McCarthy hissed out with a glaring warning. "Mr. Gables knows that."

Clark ran a hand over his forehead, glancing over at Mayson Drake a few feet away from him in the hospital triage bed. Not only had someone he considered a friend been hurt, but the young man that had turned to him for help had died. He was sure foul play was at work here, and if it was the last thing he did he would get justice for Christopher Gomez. He had promised him safety. He had promised to look after him. He had failed.

Everything had happened so fast he had barely had a chance to react when Mayson hit the tile floor. The hospital staff had been quick to get help and set her up in triage. A doctor had looked her over and checked her vitals a few minutes ago. Now they were just waiting for her to wake up. If he had been paying attention, he might have been able to catch her before she'd hurt her head, but then he might have been explaining himself to Lois once more.

He let out an aggravated sigh. It seemed the closer he and Lois got the more he seemed to stick his foot in his mouth and dig himself even deeper. Lois seemed to accept his apology earlier, but how long before another disaster pulled him away at the wrong time? It felt like the universe was determined to tear him away from happiness. Every time his life felt like it was finally going where he wanted it to, something spurred its ugly head and tore everything apart.

Superman had been created so he could help people, but in doing so he had inadvertently built a glass house around himself that could easily break around him. He knew what he needed to do. The thought had been there from the moment Lois Lane's lips had touched his last night. He knew how he felt and though it came across in a different way – he knew Lois felt the same way. The problem was mustering up the courage to say the scary words.

A soft moan came from the bed, and Clark looked up to see Mayson's eyes flutter open.

"Easy," Clark murmured, placing a hand over her shoulder as she tried to sit up.

"Clark?" Mayson reached up to rub the back of her head. "What happened?"

"Don't panic," Clark said calmly, pointing to the bed she was in. "You had a fall in the hospital lobby. The doctor should be here shortly to look you over."

"Great," Mayson let out a self-defeating sigh. "As if last night wasn't bad enough."

Clark looked at her in dismay, recalling the events from last night combined with today. She'd certainly been through the wringer. He could only imagine what it must feel like to go through it all, being vulnerable. "You've been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours."

"Yeah," Mayson stared down at her lap, seeming to think of something.

"You had us worried there." Clark continued, squeezing her shoulder lightly as he straightened up in his chair. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Us?" Mayson's eyebrow arched up.

Clark wasn't sure why her tone mimicked a vulture's hiss as she spoke. He covered with a quick half-smile and elaborated with Lois' name. That didn't seem to calm Mayson at all, unfortunately.

"Oh," Mayson's tone was cold as she looked away.

Clark let out a long sigh, recalling how things had been left unresolved when he'd been called away yesterday. As painful as it was, he needed to finish the conversation and set the record straight with her once and for all.

There. He'd done it. The agonizing truth was out there. He hated to hurt her but continuing to let her believe there was hope for something more when his heart was elsewhere was just cruel. Though he hadn't encouraged anything more than friendship with Mayson, he hadn't been direct regarding his feelings either.

"And Lois?" Mayson's voice interrupted his thoughts.

Clark wasn't sure how much he was comfortable divulging given he and Lois had yet to have that conversation themselves. He opted to be honest without giving too much detail to his blossoming relationship with Lois.

"Is someone I care deeply about," Clark said gently. It felt like a weight had been lifted as he heard the words escape his lips.

"So much for *just friends*," Mayson's tone was full of ice as she spoke.

Clark looked back at her in surprise. He knew this couldn't be easy for Mayson, but the icy tone and sharp dig at him and Lois was a bridge too far. It wasn't as if he and Mayson had been dating. They were friends.

Taking the cue from Mayson's demeanor, he opted to excuse himself and head back to the Planet with Lois. Now that he knew Mayson was all right there was no reason to linger at the hospital. Especially given the news that the witness he'd uncovered was now dead.

"I'm glad you're okay, Mayson, but this is a conversation I'm uncomfortable having. There are certain parts of my life that I choose to remain private...even from friends." Clark explained gently.

"Except Lois, right?" Mayson quipped, giving him a dark glare.

"The staff here is more than equipped to make sure you're all right, Mayson. I'm glad you're okay, but I think it's best if I leave now before we say something we both will regret." Clark said, not willing to entertain Mayson's attempts at starting a fight.

The curtain rustled and to his relief he saw Lois with two Styrofoam cups of coffee in her hand. He smiled, grateful for the rescue.

"Everything okay in here?" Lois asked, looking between the two of them as she handed Clark a styrofoam cup. He took it gratefully, placing an arm over Lois' shoulder as Mayson seethed.

Clark shook his head, pointing toward the open curtain. "Mayson should be fine. I think we need to give her her space and head back to the Planet."

Lois nodded and turned to Clark. "Yeah, we should get going then. I'm sure Perry is chomping at the bit for the first draft of all this."

Mayson began to stir, hearing a monotone beep and feeling a pulsing pain in the back of her head. She winced as she lifted her head up, feeling a large knot at the base of her skull. Her eyes fluttered open and her eyes were flooded with fluorescent white light.

“Easy,” she heard Clark Kent murmur as a hand cupped her shoulder as she tried to sit up. She turned toward the sound of his voice, surprised to find herself in a triage room with Clark Kent seated a foot away from her.

“Clark?” Mayson reached up to rub the bump on the back of her head she knew was already there, looking around the light blue curtains that were drawn as a divider from the other patients in triage. “What happened?”

“Don’t panic,” Clark said calmly, pointing to the bed she was in. “You had a fall in the hospital lobby. Doctor should be here shortly to look you over.”

“Great,” Mayson let out a self-defeating sigh. “As if last night wasn’t bad enough.”

Clark’s eyes softened as he looked back at her with dismay, “You’ve been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours.”

“Yeah,” Mayson stared down at her lap, unsure if she should continue this conversation or put a stop to it. But who was she kidding? She was a goner when it came to Clark. She knew it.

“You had us worried there.” Clark continued, squeezing her shoulder lightly as he straightened up in his chair. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Us?” Mayson’s eyebrow arched up with precision as she stared back at him, daring him to say the name she knew was just on the tip of his tongue.

“Lois.” Clark said with a half-smile.

“Oh,” Mayson felt her whole body turn to ice as she turned away from Clark, looking to the curtain where she was sure a doctor would come in at any moment to rescue her from this torture.

“Mayson, yesterday at lunch...” Clark began carefully. “I shouldn’t have left things unresolved like that. I’m sorry. The truth is ... you’re right. There is something I haven’t been honest with you about...or really myself. I care about you as a friend, but not as anything more.”

Mayson felt her blood ice over as his words reached her ears, slowly processing each word carefully. He was at least being honest with her. That was something, wasn’t it?

“*Not completely,*” she reminded herself as she jerked her head up and prompted him with an icy tone, “And Lois?”

“Is someone I care deeply about and that’s about all I’m comfortable divulging.” Clark stonewalled her question with a stern expression. She had her answer.

“So much for *just friends,*” Mayson quipped, hearing the ice in her tone as Clark stood to his feet.

Anger flashed across Clark’s face, and he quickly covered. His lips thinned to a line, and his eyes narrowed as he responded, “I’m glad you’re okay, Mayson, but there are certain parts of my life that remain private. Even to someone I consider a friend.”

“Except Lois, right?” Mayson scoffed bitterly.

Clark shook his head in dismay. “I think the staff here is more than equipped to make sure you’re all right, Mayson. I’m glad you’re okay, but I think it’s best if I leave now before we say something we both will regret.” His eyes pierced down on her, hinting that it wasn’t he that would be saying the wrong thing.

She was about to protest when she saw the curtain move, revealing Lois Lane with two paper cups in her hands. “Speak of the devil,” she muttered under her breath.

“Something wrong?” Lois asked, looking between the two of them, trying to read their thoughts as she handed Clark a Styrofoam cup. He took it gratefully, placing an arm over Lois’ shoulder as Mayson seethed. Lois stole a glance at Mayson before turning her attention back at Mayson and looping her arms around

Clark Kent, indulging in a passionate embrace.

When would her torture end?

Mayson felt the fury within her burst as she watched the duo separate and caught Lois Lane sending a conniving wink in her direction before placing a possessive hand over Clark’s chest. A look of daggers was then directed in Mayson’s direction as she heard Clark clear his throat.

“We should get going,” Clark murmured, running his hands up and down Lois’ side, not giving Mayson a second glance as the duo made their way for the exit.

Lois looked at Mayson with what looked like relief. She was relieved for an excuse to leave. Of course, she was. The sooner she and Clark were gone the sooner she could sink her traitorous claws into him.

Mayson stole a glance at Clark, uncertain what to make of the complete change in his demeanor. This wasn’t the Clark Kent she knew. The Clark she knew never would have chosen to leave over helping a friend in need. A dark expression crossed her face as Lois nodded and looped her arms around Clark, staking her claim on him with no protest it seemed from Clark.

The duo exchanged quick pleasantries with her before exiting, leaving Mayson alone with her thoughts. A dangerous place to be in that moment. She stared at the pale blue curtain, feeling red hot anger flood through her.

She’d lost him.

She’d completely lost him to Lois Lane.

No explanation or even the decency to tell her he was moving on with Lois. He acted like it was none of her business.

How was it none of her business when he changed his intentions with her? He had kissed her. He had danced with her at the Charity ball. He had agreed to a weekend away with her.

True he hadn’t shown up and she had been the one to initiate all movements in their relationship but they had a relationship. She had hoped by stepping to the side he would see how important she was to him. Now she realized it only opened the door for Lois Lane to swoop in and dig her claws into what belonged to Mayson.

“Ms. Drake?”

Mayson looked to the corner where the doctor was waiting to see her. “Yes?”

“I’m Dr. Thompson. I’m here to do your exam so we can discharge you.”

“Discharge me?” Mayson scoffed. “I’m not a patient.”

“You were when you injured yourself in the lobby.” The nurse behind Dr. Thompson spoke up.

“Just lie down. It’ll only take a minute.” Dr. Thompson reassured.

Clark’s jaw clenched tightly as he followed Lois through the hallway, leading to the elevator. His mind replayed his conversation with Mayson earlier. It seemed no matter how gently he tried to let Mayson down and have the direct conversation about how he felt she was determined to pick a fight, making snide remarks regarding his and Lois’ friendship.

<< “*Mayson, yesterday at lunch...I shouldn’t have left things unresolved like that. I’m sorry. The truth is ... you’re right. There is something I haven’t been honest with you about...or really myself. I care about you as a friend, but not as anything more. I’m sorry.*”

“And Lois?”

“*Is someone I care deeply about.*”

“*So much for just friends.*”>>

He couldn’t understand Mayson’s hostile tone or insistence on blaming Lois for how he felt. Truth of the matter was the only feelings he had ever had for Mayson were friendship and nothing more. Though he could have been more direct he had been careful not to agree to anything that could be misconstrued as a date or

anything leading to romantic entanglements. After the misunderstanding a few months ago about the invitation to the mountains he had decided to finally try once more to put his heart on the line with Lois. This time he opted not to begin with a confession of undying love.

Though it had been slow going, the choice to take things a step at a time with Lois had moved the odds in his favor. Though he knew a full confession of how he felt about her wasn't in the cards so soon after the start of their budding relationship, it was promising to know Lois hadn't closed the door completely on him. Despite how things had ended on their first date.

Try as he might to gently let Mayson down she insisted on bringing Lois into the middle of things. A move which angered and shocked him. The Mayson Drake he had come to know as a friend didn't act like this. He had thought Lois and Mayson had put their differences aside but possibly that was a ruse on Mayson's part?

<< "I'm glad you're okay, Mayson, but this is a conversation I'm uncomfortable having. There are certain parts of my life that I choose to remain private...even from friends."

"Except Lois, right?"

"The staff here is more than equipped to make sure you're all right, Mayson. I'm glad you're okay, but I think it's best if I leave now before we say something we both will regret." >>

"Hey, you okay?" Lois placed a hand on his shoulder as they reached the elevator, leading to the parking deck below.

"Fine," Clark responded, forcing a smile as he looked back at her. She cocked an eyebrow with a knowing look and he sighed, "I guess I'm a little frustrated with Mayson."

"It's been a rough twenty-four hours," Lois reminded him, moving her hand to his chest.

"I know," Clark said, reaching over to cup her cheek. He wanted so badly to take her in his arms and never let go. Forget his guilt over letting down Christopher Gomez. Forget his frustration over the whole situation with Mayson and just take solace in the knowledge that finally he – Clark Kent – had everything he ever wanted. Lois was everything he ever wanted and more but he knew all too well that nothing worthwhile was easy. As exhilarating as it was to finally have Lois see him as a romantic partner it also terrified him to know one wrong move could bring everything shattering down around him.

She looped her arm around his neck, pulling him to her so his face was a mere two inches from hers. Close enough to smell the stale hospital coffee on her breath. He let out an inaudible sigh as she leaned in to kiss him. And just like that every fear and uncertainty that had consumed his mind just seconds ago disappeared like a puff of smoke.

"Come on," Lois whispered against his lips, "let's get out of here."

He silently nodded, uncertain if he could trust his voice at that moment.

Detective Ryder looked up from the file laid out on his desk to the gentleman sitting in the chair across from him. He met the man's stern gaze, sizing him up to determine how much trouble he would be. The Washington bureaucrats had a tendency of poking their noses where they didn't belong.

He didn't mind the help. Most of the time the bigger badge got him access where he and the rest of the department were left chasing their tails looking for the cracks in iron-clad doors shut in their faces. It was when Washington tried to overreach into local affairs that he and the rest of the department got antsy.

"Agent Scardino, is it?" Ryder decided to finally break the silence between them and address the issue at hand. "We have an open investigation into our ADA's car bombing. I'm not sure what help the DEA can offer."

"I'm sure you've got your best man on it, detective," Agent

Scardino responded with a shrug. "But I doubt your department is staffed to handle who...or what is responsible for the car bombing."

"I'm not following," Ryder's face scrunched up as he tried to understand what Agent Scardino was insinuating. "Are you saying you know who bombed ADA Drake's car?"

"Not that you'd believe me," Scardino muttered, smoothing an invisible wrinkle out of his jacket.

"Try me!" Ryder challenged, leaning back in his desk chair.

"Feel like a trip to the Metropolis Penitentiary morgue?"

Scardino asked.

"Morgue?" Ryder asked, caught off guard.

"According to you guys' records your suspect is dead."

Scardino explained.

Clark set his coffee mug down on the table in front of him, looking up at his dad who wore a half-smile at the bombshell Clark had just dropped. He looked to his mom whose expression was more of bemusement rather than surprise. Both reactions were not what he was expecting.

"So?" Clark prodded, shrugging his shoulders up as he looked between them.

"So, what?" his mom asked, her eyes danced with excitement, not picking up on the distressed condition he was in.

"So, what do I do?" Clark asked, letting out a gruff breath of frustration.

"Oh, that's simple," his dad spoke up, reaching over to cut another piece of pie before having his hand swatted.

"You have your physical in the morning, Jonathan," his mom scolded his dad like a child and Clark chuckled turning back to his dad.

"Simple, huh?"

"Well, at least you don't have to get bloodwork in the morning." His dad chuckled. "No, the problem is you don't want to have to lie to Lois about where you're going. So, don't."

Clark blinked back at his dad, unsure he had heard him right. "Then what am I supposed to do, tell her I'm Superman in the middle of tending to a rescue? 'Gee, sorry, didn't I mention I had this other job...'" He rolled his eyes. "That'll go over real well."

"You don't give that girl enough credit," his mom scolded, taking away the slice of pie she'd handed him.

"You don't know Lois like I do," Clark amended. "She's going to be furious..."

"Hurt." His dad corrected.

"And hurt." Clark sighed, running a weary hand through his hair. "Scared. Disappointed. Betrayed and just plain mad for a very long time."

"Well, if you wait till you're running out the door to tell her, then yes." His mom lamented. "But you also thought lying about your feelings for her was a good idea and look where that got you."

Clark chuckled, recalling the long lectures he'd had to endure for the last few months regarding that decision. Never in his wildest dreams would he have envisioned being in this situation last summer. He had been so desperate to mend the fragments of his life after everything had been destroyed by Luthor. He didn't care at that moment how heart-wrenching it would be to continue this charade of just being friends with Lois.

Now here was, faced with the reality of moving out of what had been comfortable for both him and Lois and venturing into uncharted territory and possibly forging a relationship together. That relationship would shatter into nothingness if he didn't make a drastic decision soon.

"It's a lot to come back from," Clark said cautiously. "If I tell her now..."

"But, son, what happens if you don't tell her now?" his dad reminded him.

“Just be honest with her,” his mom added. “You two go head to head with a lot bigger issues on almost a weekly basis. I’m sure you can figure out how to talk to one another.”

“I guess,” Clark relented, still not so sure but trusting his mother’s advice at that moment.

Chapter 6: The Rules

The musty smell of metal and decomp tickled Detective Ryder’s nostrils as he walked through the long line of coolers where the Medical Examiner kept the corpses. The Assistant Medical Examiner stopped in front of one of the coolers, checking the number against the chart in her hand before unlatching the hinge and opening the door. A whiff of decomp and formaldehyde reached Ryder’s nostrils as the assistant pulled out the empty slab.

Ryder looked back at his companion then down at the empty slab before turning back to the assistant. “I don’t understand. I thought you had McCarthy’s body here.”

“According to our records, this is where it should be.” She stammered, flipping through the clipboard anxiously.

“Then where the hell is he?” Agent Scardino snorted, gesturing to the empty slab.

Lois dropped her keys in the ceramic bowl by the front door, blindly locking the seven locks to her apartment on auto-pilot as she set her things down. The paper had been put to bed and, thankfully, she didn’t have to come in too early for the weekend shift tomorrow. Perry’s poker game did nothing to boost her current mood.

It felt like everything that could happen in the last twenty-four hours had been thrust at her like a freight train, barreling down the tracks at full speed. Between the chaos surrounding Mayson’s car bombing, her uncertainty regarding Clark’s disappearance today, and the cagey behavior of the Medical Examiner she felt like the sky was imploding around her. Even on a good week she wasn’t expected to juggle this much at once.

Her mind drifted to the previous evening when the world seemed so much more at peace. How quickly a day changed things. The new, exhilarating feeling of being in—whatever it was she and Clark were and not caring about anything in that moment. What she wouldn’t give to go back to that night and just savor the peace of mind that came with it. No police investigations. No openly hostile ADA thwarting her investigation.

She let out a low groan as she turned her attention to the stack of mail in her hand. Unfortunately, she couldn’t just set it aside with the way things were going. It was nearly the first and waking up to the power being shut off because she forgot was not something she wanted to relive. Especially given how long it took them to turn it on the last time. She made her way to the kitchen, preparing to brew a cup of coffee to help stir her brain awake long enough to organize her bills for the month.

She flipped through the envelopes, mentally categorizing each one by priority until she found an envelope she didn’t recognize. Her eyes arched into a sharp slant as she stared at the blank envelope. No name. No return address. Just a blank white letter envelope mixed in with her mail.

She could discard it and forget about it easily but given the strange letter she’d received earlier at the Planet, her interest in the mysterious envelope was piqued. Setting the other envelopes down on the counter, she held the blank envelope in her hand, staring at it for a long moment as if she expected it to respond to her. Finally, she found the nerve and ripped the seal open, revealing the letter inside.

Her hand went to her mouth in shock and she let out a sharp yell as the contents fell to the ground.

Clark’s conversation over dinner with his parents ran through his mind as he flew back to Metropolis. There seemed to be every

reason in the world to tell Lois the truth and come clean. His parents acted like it should be second nature to him despite every warning and inclination to do just the opposite over the years.

He knew he couldn’t keep lying.

It was already beginning to disrupt the budding relationship he and Lois had, and continuing this charade would only amplify her focus on where he was when he disappeared for rescues.

<< “The problem is you don’t want to have to lie to Lois about where you’re going. So, don’t.” >>

<< “Well, if you wait till you’re running out the door to tell her, then yes, but you also thought lying about your feelings for her was a good idea and look where that got you.” >>

<< “If I tell her now...”

“But, son, what happens if you don’t tell her now?”

“Just be honest with her. You two go head to head with a lot bigger issues on almost a weekly basis. I’m sure you can figure out how to talk to one another.” >>

If only it was that easy.

His mind was clouded with the weight of what-ifs that held his thoughts captive as he continued his flight to Metropolis. After what seemed like a blink of an eye, he found himself hovering above Carter avenue, wondering just how long it had been since he had felt comfortable visiting her as Superman.

It had been months.

Not long after he had stopped the nightly check-ins, he had taken a leap of faith and asked Lois out. Even now, hovering high above from everyone and everything it felt strange to be here. Almost as if he was invading a private moment by being here.

Clark quickly turned back toward the bay, opting to finish his patrol and head home. A decision it seemed wouldn’t come to him tonight. ‘Later,’ he told himself. When he wasn’t riddled with mental and physical exhaustion.

He reached the corner of Clinton Street and Tesla Avenue when his super-hearing tuned into a familiar heartbeat. He felt his heart lurch in his chest when he spotted Lois pacing the street in front of his apartment, clutching something in her hand. Whatever her reason for being there it was clear she was upset.

He barely remembered landing in the alley behind his apartment and changing before he turned the corner, preparing to discover just what brought Lois to his doorstep this late. Momentarily he wondered what excuse he would have to sum up to explain his absence. Though given how distressed she appeared he quickly dismissed the anxious thought as he reached the corner where Lois was pacing.

“Lois?”

A muffled whisper escaped her throat and he felt his heart lurch in his chest when he saw the pale expression on her face. He quickly wrapped her in his arms, ushering her inside, hoping to get to the bottom of whatever it was that was troubling her.

Mayson Drake ran her hands through her hair, yanking at the roots with her fingernails as she stared up at the ceiling fan that refused to quit creaking. Her head continued to spin, reminding her over and over again of how badly she had lost everything she cared about. Not only was she alone and forced to watch the man she loved move on with someone else, but it seemed everything she touched blew up in flames.

Her lead on the Resurrection case was gone.

Her witness gone.

Everything she had seemed to blow up in smoke and now she was left with nothing but loneliness and isolation.

Clark paced around the living room, phone in hand as he wrapped up his conversation with Inspector Henderson. After getting transferred to three different people at the Metropolis P.D. who seemed less than motivated to make a trip down to Clinton Street if there was no eminent threat to Lois’ life at that moment, he finally found Bill Henderson’s number and pleaded his case to the detective. It wasn’t much but Henderson had been able to talk

the dispatcher into sending a car to Lois' apartment to look for suspicious activity.

"Two." Clark let out a shuddered breath as he answered the detective's question. He stole a glance at the crumpled letter that had been sent to Lois in creepy serial killer cut out letters that lay on his coffee table, taunting him with its presence.

Two.

She had received *two* of these in less than twelve hours. A part of him wondered what her reasoning was for not telling him about the first letter but given how eventful the circumstances weren't so frightening, he might even take a moment to savor the fact that she had turned to Clark instead of Superman once more when she felt her life was in danger.

"Thankfully there was nothing found at her apartment," Henderson's gruff response came. "I know it's not what you want to hear but unfortunately without a physical threat there's nothing we can do tonight. Come by the station in the morning and file a report. I'll make sure I'm the investigator on it and see what I can do to expedite things for you."

A heavy sigh escaped his lips and Clark nodded, knowing Henderson was doing everything he could. He tried not to let his frustration of the situation seep out into his words. Bill Henderson had no obligation to even answer his phone call let alone reach out to his fellow officers at the Metropolis P.D. Yet he did.

"Whatever you can do, Bill. I really appreciate your help," Clark said, feeling his hand tighten around the handset as he heard Bill Henderson say goodnight. A low breath escaped his lips as he hit the end button to the handset and turned his attention to Lois who was sitting comfortably on the couch in the oversized Met-U sweatshirt she had shown up on his doorstep in.

Lois looked up at him with a sympathetic smile, "Let me guess, they didn't find anything."

"Henderson said you can come by and file a report in the morning. I think that's all they can do at this point." Clark reassured her. His gaze shifted to the letters leaping off the page in front of him. *'Die Lois Die'* as he took a seat next to her.

"No eminent threat," Lois stared at the mug of hot tea in her hand. Her face was tense and her tone shallow and subdued. As much as she tried to put on a brave front for him, he knew she was scared.

Her life had been threatened countless times before, but this was different. This wasn't a bad guy being chased or a story she was trying to break. It was a mysterious threat lurking in the shadows that had scared her so much she couldn't even stay in her own apartment.

"You can stay here or if you want, I can call Jimmy...." He flashed her a teasing grin, recalling how horribly her hiding out at Jimmy's apartment had gone when the Prankster had returned to Metropolis.

"I think I'll pass on Jimmy's place." Lois giggled, flashing him a half-smile. "I don't think he'd survive it a second time."

A warm smile crossed his face and he let out a light chuckle, relieved to hear her joking. A far cry from the state he found her in an hour ago. "Well, you're always welcome here, Lois." Clark continued his thought from earlier, doing his best to balance himself on the line between friendship and where he desperately wanted to be.

Though their relationship at the moment was complicated to say the least, it was reassuring to know she could still come to him when she needed to, unlike a few weeks back when she stayed at Jimmy's for fear of further complicating things just before their date.

Lois smiled back at him, "I know." The room fell silent as they both seemed to be searching for what to say next. She reached over to set her mug down and turned to face him. "Is it weird that I showed up here though? I mean, I totally get it if it is. A few weeks ago, I was staying with Jimmy...going out of my mind and

turning into that crazy old lady that calls the cops on the kids a few apartments down. I still can't believe I did that. It was weird then...before we went out and yet here, I am making everything even more complicated and I..."

He couldn't help it. He knew she was just as worried about complicating things between them as he was. They had had one great date which had resulted in him having a door slammed in his face. Not the best track record but then again nothing ever went according to plan. Why should it now? He let out a low chuckle, unable to help himself as she continued to babble about neighbors and teenagers.

She stopped mid-babble, seeming to realize she had veered off track. A slight pink blush crossed her cheeks and an uneven snort escaped her throat. "I'm babbling, aren't I?"

"Just a little bit," he held his index finger and thumb up to illustrate the point for her.

She smiled, toying with a loose strand of hair as she gazed into his eyes, and sent an electrical storm through him as he contemplated what to do or say next. Her eyes softened and her smile broadened, "I'm not good at this."

They had had this conversation earlier in the elevator this morning. The nervousness she had confessed and fears of losing the friendship they had worked to build over the last year ran through his mind. It wasn't that he didn't have the same fears. He did. He also had another fear. A fear that once Lois knew the truth, he would lose her and everything he had worked for over the last year and a half. It was what kept him from taking that final leap of faith no matter how many times the opportunity presented itself time and time again.

This morning when presented with Lois' anxiousness over being on the cusp of everything changing, he had done his best to brush it off with humor in hopes of helping ease her into the normal routine they always shared. It had worked for the most part but given the weight of the tremor that escaped her lips married with insecurity and indecisiveness, he opted to try a different approach.

He reached his hand over to cup her cheek, "Lois, for tonight just forget about the hidden meaning behind everything. First and foremost, you're my friend. You need somewhere to go to blow off steam or hide out from a psycho, I'm there." A grin crossed his face as he realized just how many times, she had done just that over the years. "I don't want our changing relationship to make you feel like you can't come to me like you always have."

"I don't want that either," she admitted. Her shoulders relaxed and she leaned a little closer. "You know, it's like when you're chasing a story and you know there's this big part that's missing. You have the 'who' and you have the 'why' and you just don't know the 'how'. There's everything we know about each other as friends but it's like..."

"...starting a relationship at the seventeenth date." Clark guessed for her, seeing where this was going.

"Well, yeah," Lois said sheepishly. "I'm already terrible enough as it is at relationships and trying to skip ahead and figure things out."

"I'm not exactly an expert here either, Lois." Clark admitted, feeling the dread tingle in the back of his mind as the fears of what could happen if this conversation went the wrong way taunted him.

That caught Lois off guard as she looked back at him in surprise, "You're not?"

"No," he shrugged his shoulders. "I'm trying to figure this out just as much as you are."

"So, I guess we're both in uncharted territory here?" Lois summarized, leaning her head against the couch cushion. He nodded his agreement, not trusting his voice at that moment. She leaned closer, "Rules out the window?"

"Last I checked you weren't one for rules unless you were

trying to school the new guy for putting his foot in his mouth.” He chuckled, recalling the awkward speech Lois had given him on her three rules that she later admitted to have broken.

“They are good rules.” Lois grinned back at him and then flushed slightly. “For someone else to follow.”

“Like who?” he raised an eyebrow at her.

“Jimmy?” Lois guessed.

Clark shook his head, “I know he’s broken at least two of those rules this week.”

“What about that new intern?” Lois replied thoughtfully.

“What was his name? Skip?”

“I don’t think he’ll have any stories to chase anytime soon if Perry has his way,” Clark remarked, blanching at the uncomfortable scolding he’d overheard a few weeks prior.

“Okay, they were good rules.” Lois corrected, leaning her head back to rest on his shoulder.

“So, no rules?” Clark grinned.

“We need *new* rules.” Lois shook her head, unwilling to give up on her three rules just yet.

“Like?” Clark cocked an eyebrow at her, giving her an amused expression.

“No relationship stuff at the Planet,” Lois replied, ticking her hand off as she counted. “PDA, kissing, hand-holding...”

“I *strenuously* object to that one,” Clark chuckled.

“No sense in advertising our personal business at the Planet,” Lois argued with a huff. “That caused a lot of issues in the past.”

Clark moved his hand to stroke her cheek, tilting her chin to look at him, “But then it feels like we’re trying to hide how we feel about one another. I’m not going to pretend you’re just another colleague.”

“You got a better one?” she smirked back at him.

“I do,” Clark grinned back at her.

“Let’s hear it.” Lois challenged.

“Arguments at the Planet stay there and vice versa. No trying to pull Jimmy or Perry into our personal lives.”

“We already need to get an escort to show them both where the line is,” Lois pointed out.

“All the more reason to keep them out of our business,” Clark stressed.

“Agreed,” Lois nodded. Clark let out a sigh of relief. Keeping their work-life separate would be difficult but keeping Perry and Jimmy out of their relationship could be managed more easily. As much as he loved his friends, he didn’t want to have the duo butting their noses in his and Lois’ relationship. Perry was notorious for butting in when he felt it was needed, but given the gravity of the secret, he was tempted to reveal to Lois he wasn’t leaving anything up to chance.

“No dating other people.” Lois supplied firmly. “We’re both already putting everything on the line. No need in complicating things.”

“Unnecessary, but okay,” Clark agreed with a nod of his head. He smiled at the quick victory, relieved to know at least, for now, there was no fear of competing with someone else as he and Lois navigated through these uncharted waters together.

“No flirting in the newsroom,” Lois added. Her voice was low, and he could hear a slight quiver as she spoke.

“What?” Clark chuckled.

“No flirting,” Lois repeated.

“Um, no.” Clark quickly shot the request down. “That totally contradicts my entire plan to sweep you off of your feet. If I can’t do it at the Planet where am I supposed to flirt?”

“On dates.”

“But see then you’d have to actually agree to said dates. That requires flirting,” Clark grinned back at her, wiggling his eyebrows at her flirtatiously.

“You’re being difficult.” Lois snorted.

“I prefer thorough,” Clark responded, looping his arm around

her shoulders.

“Fine, flirting is allowed, but let’s try not to make a big deal about it.” Lois let out a resigned sigh. “I don’t want Perry making a no office romance rule or something of the kind because you just had to flirt during office hours.”

“I can multi-task.” He chuckled.

“Uh-huh,” Lois grinned back at him.

“No running,” Clark said carefully. “Even if it’s from an argument.”

Lois’ grin broadened, and she nodded, “No running.”

“And that means no leaving the other behind. We’re a team no matter what.”

“Friendship first,” Lois amended.

“Always,” Clark agreed.

Lois giggled, placing her hand on his chest. “Now that we have a couple of established rules I guess we don’t have any more excuses, huh?”

“Nope,” Clark shrugged his shoulders dramatically. “Flirting and PDA and no running away from it either. It’s apparently a rule now.”

“I suck at flirting,” she admitted sheepishly.

“I don’t know,” Clark murmured thoughtfully. “You held your own on our date.”

She smiled back at him shyly. “I owe you a re-do on that night.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s another thing,” Clark added, snapping his fingers.

“What? Did you think of another rule?” she asked.

“No one owes anyone anything,” Clark said softly, reaching over to cup her cheek.

“Never?” Lois challenged, raising her eyebrow as she stared back at him.

“Never,” he whispered, leaning closer, so he was a few inches away from her.

An inaudible moan escaped his throat when the distance between them became too much to bear. He wasn’t sure who had caved first. He wasn’t sure he cared at that point either. He let out a long hiss as Lois’ hands buried themselves in his hair, nibbling on his lower lip possessively. She whispered his name as he lost himself in the art of kissing her.

‘*Stop!*’ his mind screamed as the aching in the pit of his stomach began to pulse, reminding him of just how ‘not ready’ they were to continue the heated embrace that had been started just seconds ago.

“We should stop,” he murmured against her lips.

The expression on her face told him she wanted to do anything but stop but despite her obvious misgivings, she relented, pulling away and nodding her head. “Okay.”

He wanted to explain.

Every fiber of his being was screaming at him to just tell her already but despite everything he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. Not after the torturous day they had had. Lois had come to him for help. She had been skeptical about coming here in the first place. Giving her a reason not to turn to him wasn’t what he wanted.

He needed to tell her the truth, but surely it could wait a few days, right?

“Tomorrow,” Clark spoke up, finding his voice.

“Sorry?” Lois asked.

“You said you wanted a do-over,” Clark prompted her. “How about tomorrow night?” He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s a Saturday. So we don’t have to be in at the crack of dawn and Jimmy will probably be holed away combing through the records we pulled on Chris Gomez for the most of the weekend anyway.”

“I guess it would be perfect timing.”

“No door slamming,” Clark grinned.

“No door slamming,” Lois promised, leaning in to kiss him

once more. Before he could respond she pulled away, and Lois' face fell to a solemn expression. She let out a sigh as she reached her hand over his, gently squeezing it. "You think Jimmy will find anything?"

"It *is* Jimmy," Clark shrugged, trying to be as optimistic as he could. "If there's anything to find on Chris Gomez Jimmy will."

"Yeah," Lois leaned back against him, pulling her hand back and folding her arms over her chest. "Still, stuff like this..." she pointed at the paper on the table and let out a long breath. "You never know what tomorrow will bring."

"Or the next hour," Clark added, recalling just how short the time between Gomez being placed in the care of Metropolis General doctors only to be found dead an hour later. Guilt continued to nag at him with an onslaught of what-ifs. In his head he knew he wasn't responsible for the officer's death but carrying the weight of the world and with it the responsibility to do the right thing and protect the people of Metropolis came the overbearing weight with every loss – whether he was to blame or not. He couldn't do anything to bring Gomez back, but he could get him justice.

Lois seemed to be reading his thoughts, reaching over to take his hand in hers, "I hate that we didn't get there in time to talk to officer Gomez, but all we can do is find who is responsible for his death and bring them to justice."

"Do you know how many thousands of officers die in the line of duty each year without having their killer caught, Lois?" Clark could hear the dejected tone in his own voice as he spoke. He knew she meant well and with Lois' help he knew they had a fighting chance of getting Gomez's family justice. He also knew the realities of officer-related deaths. The odds weren't in their favor. "We don't even know where to start."

"We know he was transferred to the prison after a stint with IAB," Lois reminded him. "We start there and see where it takes us." She let out a yawn as she spoke.

Clark smiled, "It's late. Why don't you turn in? We can pick this up in the morning when we're not both running on fumes."

Lois shook her head, "I'm fine." Her eyelashes fluttered, and her face squinted, trying to hide the obvious signs of fatigue. She frowned when the yawn escaped her lips. "Okay, maybe I'm a little tired."

"You take the bedroom," He pointed toward the bedroom that was closed by a pocket door.

"Where are you going to sleep?" Lois asked sleepily, not even fighting the fatigue anymore as her neck rolled back, and she rested her head on his chest.

"Lois?" he tapped her cheek, checking to see if she was still awake.

"Hmm?" Lois' barely audible response came, and he let out a sigh.

"Come on, time for bed." He coaxed her, scooping her in his arms and carrying her to the bedroom. She sleepily agreed, and he laid her on the bed, covering her up and then turning back to the living room to make up the couch. A small smile spread across his face as his head hit the pillow, recalling the many rules for their relationship Lois had agreed to.

'Tomorrow.' He told himself.

Tomorrow was going to be a great day.

Chapter 7: Click Click Boom

The sweet aroma of coffee brewing teased Lois Lane's nostrils and she began to stir. A soft sigh escaped her lips and her eyelashes fluttered open before squinting closed once more to protect themselves from the intrusion of sunlight into her eyes. She felt the weight of last night's fatigue hanging over her as her arm rested across her face to protect her sensitive eyes from the intrusion of the sun's rays. The colors and shapes in the room began to come together and her gaze shifted to the light blue

ceiling.

She rolled her torso to the side, turning her back to the window as she took in the familiar decor of Clark's bedroom and a slow smile spread across her face, recalling the conversation regarding the rules they had agreed upon for their relationship. She wasn't used to seeing this side of Clark. Confident and flirtatious but it was definitely a side of him she wanted to get to know more.

She lifted her head from the pillow and swung her legs over the side of the bed, reaching her arms up to stretch over her head. The air filled with the aroma of coffee mixed with a hint of vanilla as she stood to her feet, feeling her body begin to awaken from the overwhelming senses of the pot brewing in the next room.

A knock came from the other side of the door and she heard Clark's voice through the pocket door, "Lois?"

"I'm up," her reply came, less convinced at that moment as she hobbled to the door, running a quick hand through her hair to comb out the stray hairs she was sure were sticking up. She hadn't thought this through. Barely a whole date and she was already spending the night at his place. Though he had done a thorough job of convincing and reassuring her it didn't mean anything more than it had months ago when she'd slept on his couch after the Griffin fiasco, she knew on some level it did. It wasn't just her partner and friend on the other side of that door. Clark was now a potential boyfriend, lover.

A ripple of shock ran through her as that last word ran through her mind. That was the first time she'd used that word to describe Clark. While on some level she knew there was always the potential to move from electrical gazes across the newsroom to nights of passion it still felt unnerving to describe the man she'd come to know as her best friend as a potential lover. Surprisingly the shock of it hadn't sent her retreating. More or less mulling over the possibility.

<<"So, I guess we're both in uncharted territory here?">>

<<"So, no rules?">>

"We need new rules.">>

<<"No flirting in the newsroom.">>

"What?">>

"No flirting.">>

"Um, no.">>

It had taken everything in her to retreat back after throwing caution to the wind and indulging in the soul-shattering embrace as soon as his lips had touched hers. The day had been awful and the evening hadn't fared much better. Clark still managed to salvage it by just being Clark. No matter what, he always came through for her when she needed him. It had taken him dying for her to realize just how big of a part Clark played in her life. A mistake she wouldn't allow herself to repeat if she could help it.

Their relationship meant too much to her. He meant too much to her.

She let out a shuddered breath and tugged on the smooth groove in the door to slide it open. A smile spread across her face when she saw Clark standing with a mug of coffee for her.

"Morning," she smiled at him, taking the mug he offered to her.

"Morning," Clark smiled back at her, following her into the living room as she sipped on her coffee. "We should probably get going pretty soon. Henderson said to be at the station by seven and it's nearly six now. We still have to stop by your apartment so you can get changed first." Clark said, taking a sip from his mug.

Lois groaned, stealing a glance at the clock on the wall. "Remind me to pay back this psycho whenever we catch them for ruining my weekend."

"Well, you did draw the short straw this weekend," Clark reminded her as he pulled a travel mug out of the cabinet in the kitchen.

"Don't remind me," Lois groaned recalling the long morning and afternoon she had ahead of her.

A short gasp escaped from the prisoner's throat followed by a sharp cough. A sinister snicker came from across the room where Sean McCarthy was seated comfortably in the plush cushioned chair, toying with a sharp blade in his right hand. The Irish accent in his tone mixed with his cold black stare made his captive jump back in fright.

"Welcome to the world of the living, Mr. Gomez."

His wide-eyed victim let out a harsh whisper, "Who the hell are you? How did I get here?"

"You ask so many questions for someone in such a precarious position, Christopher." McCarthy hissed out, standing to his feet.

The door behind him opened and he turned to see Stanley Gables, red-faced with Albie Swanson standing behind him. Gables snarled at McCarthy, "What are you still doing here, McCarthy? Don't you have some unfinished business to handle?"

A smile crossed his face, "I was just welcoming our new guest, Mr. Gables."

Gables let out a tempered growl, "I don't think welcoming Mr. Gomez to his new living quarters will get you any closer to putting a stop to that District Attorney with an axe to grind."

"Consider your problems with Ms. Drake handled." McCarthy let out a cackle as he walked past Gables.

A light chuckle escaped his lips and he heard Albie hiss at Gables, "I don't trust him."

The Metropolis P.D. was uncharacteristically quiet as Clark followed Lois into the station to where Inspector Henderson's office was. The usual hustle and bustle of Metropolis City's finest working hard to protect the city was replaced with an eerie calm Clark wasn't used to seeing. Usually when he made visits to the police station – especially as Superman – it was filled with activity.

They reached the second office where the door was slightly ajar and the room was filled with the noticeable scent of aged coffee wavering on the edge of charred from the coffee pot sitting in the corner. The weary-eyed Bill Henderson sat behind his desk with his nose buried in the file laid out on his desk.

Lois tapped her hand on the door frame, drawing attention to her and Clark's presence. Bill Henderson looked up from the page he was engrossed in and pointed to the two chairs in front of him. "Come on in."

Lois took her seat and Clark stood behind her as Henderson closed the file in front of him and turned his attention to Lois. The usual sarcastic wit that Henderson offered Lois was missing as he cleared his throat and passed her a form to file a police report.

"We'll file the report and put a patrol car outside your residence and place of business." Henderson said carefully as Lois began filling out the form. "Given there's no actual suspect for us to focus on..." Henderson's face tightened with a look of dismay, shaking his head as he continued, "...well, I don't have to tell you how difficult it is to find an invisible suspect. Let alone have them indicted in a court of law."

Clark rested his hand on Lois' shoulder, feeling her relax slightly beneath his touch. A frown crossed his face as he looked back at Henderson, frustrated at the current dilemma and then to Lois. As frustrating as it was for him, he knew it had to be ten times worse for Lois. She had dealt with criminals before and single handedly put them behind bars, but handling the stress of a potential stalker was new to both of them. As much as he wanted to hunt down the soul responsible, he was just as handicapped as Henderson was. Without a name or face to match the anonymous gifts Lois was receiving, there was no one to hold accountable.

Dan Scardino poured the dark liquid from the simmering coffee pot in his hotel room, bleary eyed and heavy with fatigue. He had spent most of the evening riddled with nightmarish memories that continued to haunt him. The timing seemed ironic

to him. Nearly a year since he had lost Jenna and caught McCarthy and his gang yet here he was chasing him again.

He wasn't sure how McCarthy had pulled an escape from prison this intricate but he knew where to start. He took a swig of his coffee, wincing at the grounds that had slipped in the brew. He glanced over at the newspaper on the side table. The front page held an image of a car in flames with the headline '*ADA Drake Safe After Car Bomb!*'

"Time to get to work." He muttered to himself.

Lois Lane pushed through the glass doors leading to the lobby of the Daily Planet, gripping her coffee cup in one hand and tucking her satchel under her right arm. The empty lobby was a welcome sight after the early morning visit to the Metropolis P.D. to meet with Bill Henderson.

Bill Henderson had taken her statement and made copies of the notes she'd received from the anonymous sender. She felt less than enthusiastic about the hopes of actually catching whoever was behind the anonymous notes, but it seemed to make Clark feel better. She stole a quick glance behind her where Clark stood, following her through the lobby doors. She glanced around the dimly lit lobby, taking solace in the familiarity and calmness that came with it.

One of the many things she enjoyed about working on Saturdays was the late start she was able to have in the mornings. Most of the weekend edition was already laid out with space for stories that broke over the weekend. All of which made for an easy half-day of work for her when she ended up on the rotation for the weekend city beat.

'ADA Drake Safe After Car Bomb!'

The front-page headline of the Daily Planet's morning edition caught Lois' attention as she strolled past the newsstand just before she reached the elevator doors. She took a moment to glance at the headline and sipped at her own coffee cup in hand. An uneasy feeling washed over her as she stared at the glossy photo of Mayson's car from the day before.

'Officer Death Unexplained!'

She had been skeptical about printing her suspicions regarding Gomez's death. Though they had left him unnamed in the article it wouldn't be hard for the killer to put two and two together. Though that was the point, wasn't it? To draw the killer out and hopefully get justice for Gomez and his family.

No matter how many times she ventured into dangerous plots like this it still left her apprehensive. True, she tried to put up the brave front and act as if the risks she took were just another day at the office but last night and many close calls told her differently. The regular threats from her anonymous pen pal weren't helping things either.

She reached over to press the call button for the elevator, hoping whatever work awaited her would help distract her from the impending doom that loomed over her.

"Hey," Clark Kent's warm smile sent a flutter through her abdomen as he placed a hand on her shoulder, turning her to him. "You okay?"

"Fine," Lois nodded, trying to put her best false bravado face forward even though she knew he could see right through her. He always did. Still, admitting to the sinking pit in her stomach meant allowing the carefully carved out walls she had built around her to crack and, right now, those walls were what kept her going.

"I know Henderson didn't give a whole lot of confidence in finding the person behind..."

Lois quickly cut Clark off, not wanting to dwell on the dark cloud that seemed intent on looming over her since the first arrival of her unwanted notes from an unknown sender she still couldn't finger. "I'm *fine*." She placed a hand on his chest, sending the silent message she didn't want to discuss the threat any longer.

The doors opened to the elevator and she stepped inside, determined not to let the recent threat against her get the better of

her. A breath escaped her lips and she looked to Clark with a renewed determination. “A man is dead. Let’s focus on finding his killer and getting him justice.”

Jimmy Olsen tapped his hand on the table in front of him, biting the highlighter between his teeth as he flipped through the file in front of him, hoping to find something of interest that could help connect the disarrayed events that had taken place over the last few days. The security guard’s suspicious death coupled with the recent deaths at the prison were a mystery that left him perplexed. That, coupled with the threat on ADA Drake’s life and the mysterious pill found by the remnants of her car, left nothing but missing pieces and questions for him to try and help Lois and Clark put together.

He glanced at the clock, spotting the time. Clark had called earlier and mentioned the impromptu trip to the Metropolis P.D. He hadn’t pressed for information, but given Clark’s distressed tone he knew something had happened. What exactly— he wasn’t sure.

The phone on his desk rang and he lurched for it, dropping the highlighter and paper in his hand. “James Olsen, Daily Planet.”

“Please hold for S.T.A.R. Labs Research and Development,” a female voice crackled through the earpiece of his phone.

“Research and Development?” Jimmy echoed the name dumbfounded as the elevator doors opened and he spotted Lois and Clark heading his way. “Hello?”

“Hello, this is Dr. Klyburn with S.T.A.R. Labs Research and Development,” came a different voice in Jimmy’s ear.

“Uh…”

“I’m trying to reach a Lois Lane.”

“She just walked in,” Jimmy said, motioning for Lois to come closer.

Lois frowned, giving him a questioning gaze as he handed her the phone. ‘*Who is it?*’ she mouthed to him before answering the phone, “Lois Lane.”

“S.T.A.R. Labs,” Jimmy shrugged as he stood up and turned his attention to Clark. “Everything go okay?”

Clark shrugged his shoulders and placed a hand on Jimmy’s shoulder. “Undecided.” He motioned to the files on Jimmy’s desk. “How are you coming with that research on Gomez?”

“Well, it’s been a challenge,” Jimmy let out a heavy sigh as he grabbed the file he’d been reviewing when they had entered. “Your officer Gomez had a healthy physical less than a month ago and no signs of heart problems. He did have something in his file at the prison though.”

“Like what?” Clark asked, leaning over Jimmy’s shoulder as he flipped through the pages to find what he was looking for.

“Right here,” Jimmy pointed at the page. “Personnel file reports Gomez found a prisoner unresponsive in the prison visitor’s room under similar conditions. Healthy as a horse prisoner just drops dead out of nowhere. No explanation.”

“What’s the connection?” Clark asked, arching an eyebrow at Jimmy.

“I don’t know yet,” Jimmy admitted sheepishly, “but two guys dropping dead out of nowhere seems at least a little suspicious, don’t you think?”

“It’s a start for sure,” Clark agreed just as Lois was hanging up the phone. “Everything okay?”

Lois’ mouth tightened into a tight line as she folded her arms across her chest and looked back at them. “I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” Clark pressed.

“That pill we found by Mayson’s car?” Lois prompted as she walked toward her desk to gather her things.

“They analyzed it already?” Clark asked, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

“Completed initial testing, yes,” Lois answered, picking up her things from her desk. “The doctor that analyzed it — Dr. Klyburn

— She said they want to review the results in person.” She looked at Jimmy, “Can you hold down the fort for an hour?”

“Consider it held,” Jimmy lifted both hands in the air, holding up an imaginary object over his head as the duo laughed and made their way to the elevator.

Bill Henderson leaned back in his chair, sizing up the stranger that sat across from him, trying to make heads or tails of the man. “So…Mr. Scardino, is it?”

“Agent Scardino,” A grin crossed the man’s face. “Please, call me Daniel.”

“Right,” Bill chewed on his lower-lip, “I’m not sure what exactly it is you’re looking for here…”

Scardino ran a weary hand across his face, “I know it’s strange, Inspector, and I wish I had a good explanation, but despite what the Medical Examiner’s report said, I’m telling you – Sean McCarthy is *alive*.”

“You don’t *know* that, Agent Scardino.” Henderson shook his head. “It could have just been a clerical error or…”

“There are countless explanations. I know. I know.” Scardino waved Henderson off. “You don’t know Sean McCarthy like I do, Inspector. I know his handiwork. I know the way he thinks. I don’t know how, but he is out there again.” He tossed the headline from the Daily Planet on Henderson’s desk. “And he’s just as deadly as he was before.”

Henderson looked at the image from Mayson Drake’s car bombing then looked at Scardino, “We’re investigating the attempt on ADA Drake’s life. What does that have to do with the DEA?”

“McCarthy is a scum-sucking animal responsible for all the drug-related bombings that nearly took out D.C. If he’s out – and I believe he is. Everyone is in danger. This isn’t a Fed’s versus Local P.D. pissing match. This is bigger than that.” Scardino let out an aggravated growl, “You don’t know what he’s capable of. If there’s even a chance…”

Henderson let out a deep sigh. He still wasn’t sure that McCarthy was alive but stranger things had happened here in Metropolis. Invisible Men. Criminals coming back from the dead. Superheroes that defied the laws of physics. Metropolis had seen it all. Right now, Lex Luthor sat in a 4x4 cell, proving it was possible for a criminal to come back to life. Whether he believed Scardino’s theory on McCarthy or not he knew it was at least possible.

“What do you need from me, Agent Scardino?” Henderson finally asked, relenting to his less doubtful side.

“So, you believe me?” Scardino inquired, hope glimmering in his eyes as he leaned forward.

“I’m not saying I believe McCarthy is alive, Agent Scardino, but I’ve seen enough unexplainable events over the last year or so to not dismiss the possibility.” Henderson pushed his glasses down the bridge of his nose to meet Scardino’s gaze. “So, you’ve got my attention, Scardino. What do you need from me?”

“I need you to open an investigation into Sean McCarthy’s disappearance… and I need to talk to whoever is in charge of the investigation into ADA Drake’s car bombing.”

“The DEA is not running this investigation, Agent Scardino,” Henderson replied firmly. “I’ll help you where I can but this is a Metropolis P.D. investigation.”

“I understand,” Scardino said, leaning back in his seat.

Henderson nodded, folding his hands in front of him. “I’ll open an investigation into Sean McCarthy’s disappearance.”

“Great!”

“But *I’m* the one leading this investigation.” Henderson pointed at his chest. “Not the DEA. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Scardino responded, leaning forward. “And ADA Drake’s car bombing?”

Henderson lifted up a file from his desk and curled his index finger at Scardino, motioning for him to come with him. “Follow

me.”

Lois looked around the spacious lab as she paced around the room, waiting for Dr. Klyburn to appear with the lab results. The doctor had been so cryptic on the phone which only made her thirst for answers to the burning questions around the mysterious pill and Mayson Drake’s car bombing all the more insistent.

She glanced in Clark’s direction, stealing a glimpse of her well-defined partner who appeared happy to wait the doctor out, gazing out the window of Dr. Klyburn’s lab that looked over the waterfront of Metropolis. “It’s been twenty minutes,” Lois said aloud.

“I’m sure she’ll be here soon.” Clark reassured her, turning to face her.

“I hope so,” Lois breathed, taking a step toward him. He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder and she felt a nervous thrill run through her as he smiled back at her. It seemed like eons ago she was arguing with Perry over partnering her up with a hack from Nowheresville and now here she was unable to imagine spending a single second with anyone but him. How quickly things had changed.

<<“No running. Even if it’s from an argument.”

“No running.”

“And that means no leaving the other behind. We’re a team no matter what.”

“Friendship first,”

“Always.”>>

Lois felt a quiver run through her as she recalled their conversation from the previous evening. It was endearing to see how quickly Clark had put her fears to rest and reassured her of his commitment to their friendship. The doubts that had eaten away at her for the last few months — ever since Clark’s initial date invitation — evaporated in an instant. She couldn’t say for certain the insecurities and doubts surrounding her relationship were completely gone. Nearly ten years of bad relationships and mistrust were a lot to overcome but she no longer felt like she had one foot in and one foot out.

<<“You said you wanted a do-over: How about tomorrow night?”>>

Lois did her best to fight the smile that threatened to give herself away as she recalled the plans for tonight’s date. He still hadn’t told her where they were going. Though, she had been careful not to bring it up for fear that the doubts and apprehension she’d been feeling before would return.

<<“No door slamming.”

“No door slamming.”>>

There would be no slamming of doors. There would be no crying behind a closed door, regretting every second as she listened to Clark call her name and eventually walk away.

‘A do-over.’ She told herself.

“What are you grinning about?” Clark asked, stroking her cheek with his index finger.

“I was just thinking I’m probably going to have to leave early so I can make sure the patrol car is making their rounds this afternoon that way I can get ready for tonight.” Lois gazed back at him through her eyelashes. “I mean, I’m assuming I’m supposed to dress up that is.”

A half-smile crossed Clark’s face. “You can wear whatever you want.”

“Really?” Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “So, my old Met U sweatshirt and gym shorts?”

Clark chuckled, “I don’t make the rules at Fouquet. You can wear whatever you want, but whether you make it through the door is another story.” Lois swatted his arm playfully and he shrugged. “You said you wanted a do-over.”

“Just so long as it’s not exactly the same.” Lois grinned back at him, teasing the lapels of his jacket with her hand. A flutter ran

through her as he leaned closer. The intoxicating freshness from the mixture of his shampoo and cologne teased her nostrils and it took everything in her not to close the distance between them and allow herself to become swept up in the moment.

A soft hum filled the room and they both turned to where the steel door to the lab had opened, revealing a middle-aged woman with blonde hair pulled back into a tight bun and small frame spectacles were pushed to the end of her nose. She looked to Lois prompting her with a wry smile, “Ms. Lane I take it?”

Lois took a step back from Clark and crossed the room to meet the woman. “You must be Dr. Klyburn.” She motioned to Clark, “This is my partner, Clark Kent.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Dr. Klyburn motioned to the small table in the corner of the room. “Please, sit.”

“You said you had completed initial testing on the pill we submitted for testing?” Lois prompted as she took a seat next to Clark.

“S.T.A.R. Labs completed the initial analysis on the unidentified pill, Ms. Lane.” Dr. Klyburn’s face tightened as she continued. “I’m afraid it’s like nothing we’ve ever seen before. It’s a form of synthetic barbiturate. My team at STAR Labs ran it through a half a dozen times to make sure, but came to the same conclusion each time. The synthetic barbiturate produced a temporary state of suspended animation. The larger the dose, the longer the suspended animation spanned.”

“Suspended animation?” Clark echoed, shaking his head in dismay.

“Yes, but with an inability to detect life in the subject.” Dr. Klyburn continued. “If I hadn’t known the test subjects had this substance introduced to them I would have easily mistaken the suspended animation for...”

“Death?” Lois guessed.

“Yes.”

Jimmy ran a weary hand through his hair as he skimmed through the video footage of the Metropolis Penitentiary’s visiting room in hopes of finding something to explain how the perfectly healthy Sean McCarthy had dropped dead. This was the last place he’d been outside of his cell before his death.

He was about to change tapes when the red ticker running across his screen caught his attention. He turned his attention to the television set where the warden of the Metropolis Penitentiary and the Governor were standing side by side with grim expressions on their faces.

“This is the second death in less than a month at the Metropolis Penitentiary and we are cooperating with authorities to find the cause for these unexplained occurrences. Diego Martinez was of perfect health at his last physical and...”

Jimmy let out a disgusted snort and he turned the volume off, unable to listen to the warden any longer. Something was going on at that prison. Healthy people didn’t just die. He reached for the next tape, pushing it into the VCR to play the next six hours of footage. He spotted Sean McCarthy’s mug appear on the screen on one side of the vantage point of the camera and on the other he saw a man with dark curly hair with his hand tucked into his jacket. The man eyed the camera suspiciously before it flickered and the screen changed to static. The next footage of film that appeared was an hour later where guards were standing around Sean McCarthy’s body.

Jimmy let out a low whistle, “Well, Mr. Mystery what did you do?”

Sean McCarthy stood behind the wall of the alley pointing directly at Metropolis’ City Hall building. He held the long-range rifle in his hands, checking the aim before he looked behind him to check the car. He had enough fuel to get him out of the area fast and enough bullets to ensure bloodshed for anyone unlucky enough to be in the same room as Mayson Drake.

Clark followed Lois to the elevator doors, still dumbstruck from the information they had learned. He had gone over it time and time again in the last thirty minutes they had met with Dr. Klyburn but he couldn't rationalize it. Every scenario that would explain why someone would need to fake their own death were of malicious intent.

Lois jabbed the call button to take them to the parking garage and turned to him with her arms crossed over her chest. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Why would someone want a pill to cheat death unless they had something to hide?" Clark guessed, running a hand through his hair in hopes that he could force the agitation he felt out.

"Something like that," Lois placed a hand on his shoulder. "And how much did Mayson know before someone tried to take her out?"

"I don't know," Clark sighed, "but I think Jimmy's right. The mysterious deaths are connected."

"You think Christopher Gomez is really dead?" Lois wondered aloud.

"If he isn't he's in a lot of danger." Clark said solemnly.

The elevator doors opened as an alarm sounded throughout the wing they were on. "Attention all staff and visitors, STAR Labs is now on lockdown. Please find the nearest safe zone."

"You have got to be kidding me!" Lois muttered under her breath as the sound of gunshots filled Clark's super-senses. The lights went pitch black, giving Clark the cover he needed to tend to the source of the disruption.

Another opportunity wasted.

He sped down the stairwell in hopes that he would return before his absence could be noticed.

Mayson eyed the long steps leading into the District Attorney's office at City Hall. She should probably just turn around and go home but she found herself unable to sit still. As painful as it was to relive each and every agonizing moment it felt almost like a drug. A drug she couldn't get enough of. As painful as Clark's last words to her were she knew they weren't his words.

She had put them there.

Mayson knew deep down Clark hadn't meant it.

She just had to make him see ... how dangerous Lois Lane was.

<< "Mayson, yesterday at lunch...I shouldn't have left things unresolved like that. I'm sorry. The truth is ... you're right. There is something I haven't been honest with you about...or really myself. I care about you as a friend, but not as anything more."

"And Lois?"

"Is someone I care deeply about and that's about all I'm comfortable divulging."

"So much for just friends.">>

Mayson reached the top of her stairs, feeling a sigh of relief as she got closer to her office. The box of photos and articles that she had painstakingly put together was within reach. She just had to get it and then everything would be fine. Mayson let out an aggravated growl when she opened the door to her office and found Mary tapping away at her keyboard. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Uh, Ms. Drake!" Mary jumped up with a start. "I was just..."

"Out!" Mayson pointed to the door.

"Well, aren't you all roses and sunshine this morning." An unfamiliar voice spoke up and she turned to the doorway where a man with dark curly hair stood in a bright red and green Hawaiian shirt and khakis, donning a badge on his belt clip.

"I've had my fill of the Metropolis P.D. I've given my statement. I'm done." Mayson growled as Mary scurried out of her office.

"Just as charming as Bill Henderson said." The man grinned back at her before extending his hand to her. "Name's Scardino.

Dan Scardino, but you can call me Daniel."

"Or I can call you security given you don't know how to take a hint, Officer." Mayson growled under her breath, reaching for her phone.

"Actually, it's Agent Scardino," the man corrected. "I'm not with the Metropolis P.D. I'm with the DEA."

"The DEA?" Mayson arched an eyebrow at him. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Afraid not," he waltzed into the office, making himself comfortable on her couch. Inches away from where she had stuffed the articles and photos of Clark. Her adrenaline began to pulse through her as she thought of how to get him out of there. "So, where do you want to start?" he asked, pulling a notepad out from his pocket.

"Start?" Mayson practically squeaked out.

"About the car bombing?" He prompted.

She felt her throat go dry as she fought valiantly to keep her composure and try to hold up her conversation with this Agent Scardino. All she could think of in that moment were the photos and print-outs she had shoved into the corner the previous evening. She didn't want to talk about the threat on her life. She didn't want to talk about her car. Or what almost happened... or even how crushing it had been to watch Lois Lane snake her claws into Clark Kent and shatter every chance Mayson had with him. She just wanted Scardino and anyone else gone.

"I'm really not ready to talk about it, Agent Scardino."

Mayson quipped through gritted teeth.

'Just get out.'

He cocked an eyebrow at her, "And exactly when will you be ready to talk about it, Ms. Drake?"

She opened her mouth to respond when she heard tires squealing and the sound of glass shattering. She gasped in surprise as Agent Scardino lunged forward, knocking her down and pushing her behind the sofa.

"Get down!"

She gasped, looking up to see Agent Scardino with a rifle in hand and her couch propped up on its side, offering her cover as he fired back at the gunman. The sound of glass shattering around her sent a rush of adrenaline through her as she looked around, desperate to find a way out of there. 'Not without the photos,' her mind screamed.

"Stop!"

She heard Scardino shout at her as she reached for the large box pushed to the side that was now riddled with bullet holes.

She heard a sonic boom from the distance and let out a sigh of relief. 'Just in the nick of time,' she thought to herself.

"Mayson?"

Chapter 8: Home is Where the Hurt Is

The crunch below Clark's boots made a gut-wrenching echo as Clark moved into the room. The sound of tires squealing from a block away echoed in his eardrums, but his attention was focused on the small pool of blood coming from behind the make-shift barrier that had at one time been a sofa. Cotton stuffing was strung on the floor from where the bullets had struck the cushions.

He reached the side of the sofa and knelt down, finding Mayson on the ground with an unfamiliar man hovering over her, wrapping her knee where she had been struck.

"Mayson?" Clark did his best to hide the wavering emotion as he spoke.

"Nice timing there, Superman," Mayson quipped with a shaky breath. "I don't suppose there were any witnesses?"

"I wasn't really paying attention, Ms. Drake," Clark apologized, kneeling down to look her in the eye. "Are you going to be all right?"

"She'll need to have that leg looked at, but she's better off than what it could have been." The man tending to her wounds

answered, turning to introduce himself. “Thanks for trying to help, Superman.”

Clark blinked, unsure how to respond to the half compliment he’d just been given. “Uh, are you sure you’ll be all right, Ms. Drake?”

“Fine,” Mayson said between gritted teeth as she stood to her feet with the help of the mysterious man. “Just find who did this, Superman. That is what you do, right?”

“Right,” Clark responded, not wasting another second. He quickly disappeared, checking the ground for any sign of the gunmen that had most likely disappeared by now. He mentally kicked himself for not going after him when he had the chance before heading back to S.T.A.R. Labs to hopefully explain away his departure without drawing too much attention to himself.

The alarms continued to blare as Lois paced in the small dark room she had been scurried into by one of S.T.A.R. Labs’ lab technicians. No matter how many times she tried to argue with the tech that her partner was still out there, her pleas fell on deaf ears. What had caused the lockdown, to begin with, was anyone’s guess.

“How much longer do we have to stay in here?” Lois demanded, looking over her shoulder at the lab tech.

“Until the alarm stops,” He answered with a shrug of his shoulders. “I’m sorry, Ms. Lane.”

Just as those words were spoken, the lights flickered on, and the blaring alarm came to a stop. Lois let out a sigh of relief and jerked the doorknob open in hopes of finding where Clark had been rushed to during the confusion.

“Clark?” Lois poked her head out into the hallway, searching for her missing partner.

“Right here,” Clark’s voice came from the corner by where the elevator was.

“Hey,” Lois sighed in relief when she saw him. “Never a dull moment.” She shrugged her shoulders, looking around the newly lit hallway leading to the elevator doors that had closed during the chaos. She motioned toward the stairwell a few feet away. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going to take the stairs.”

“After you,” Clark motioned to the door leading to the stairwell.

“Any idea what caused the lockdown?” Lois asked as Clark opened the door for her.

“Someone said there was gunfire coming from around the block,” Clark said, following her down the stairs.

“Gunfire?” Lois scrunched her nose as she reached the last step leading to the parking garage. “The only thing nearby is City Hall.”

“You want to go check it out?” Clark asked, following her to where she had parked earlier.

Lois contemplated it for a moment. It could be a big story, or it could be just another gang driveby, or it could be something bigger. Given what she and Clark had just learned from Dr. Klyburn she didn’t want to risk slowing down their investigation by something that could end up being a non-story.

She turned to face him, holding both hands up, seeming to weigh her options. “Continue with an investigation that could lead to a *huge* scandal being exposed or check on a possible gang-related shooting?” She propped her hands up and down again. “Guaranteed lead or possible dud?”

“So, I take it we’re headed back to the Planet?” Clark guessed, taking the hand she had been using to illustrate ‘guaranteed lead’ in his.

She grinned back at him, “See, I knew there was a reason I kept you around.”

McCarthy fiddled with the volume button on the car radio as he turned the corner leading to the Gables estate. The newscaster

on the radio continued to narrate breaking news he hoped would lead to confirmation that his target had been hit.

“Police are now investigating a drive-by shooting that took place outside City Hall this morning. No fatalities have been reported, but injuries were sustained by an unnamed official. We’re unclear how severe those injuries were or who was injured.”

Fury fueled through McCarthy as realization dawned on him that he had missed taking out Mayson Drake not once but twice now. He tightened his hand on the steering wheel and jabbed his other fist against the steering wheel in a fit of rage.

Clark watched Jimmy’s expression go from amusement to disbelief as he finished sharing what he and Lois had discovered at S.T.A.R. Labs. If he hadn’t heard it from the doctor’s mouth himself, he probably wouldn’t have believed it. He leaned back in his chair, looking around the conference room table that was littered with stacks of files Jimmy had been pouring through over the last few hours.

“So, you think... whoever created this pill is using it to fake the death of prisoners to ... what?” Jimmy’s face scrunched up, staring back at Clark in surprise.

“We don’t know,” Lois answered, leaning back in her chair. “And we’re not entirely certain it’s just criminals.”

“You think that officer’s death is linked to this?” Jimmy guessed, following the underlying meaning behind Lois’ words.

“So far, we have nothing but questions leading to more questions,” Clark explained, gesturing toward the littered conference room table.

“So mystery chemist of sorts creates a pill and uses it to free criminals.” Lois summarized with a frown. “Yet said criminals have yet to do anything.”

“Yet,” Jimmy added.

“And we’re not entirely sure it’s just criminals,” Clark added. “The circumstances around Christopher Gomez’s death are questionable at best.”

“So, what do a bunch of low-key criminals and a security officer have in common?” Lois wondered aloud.

Jimmy reached for his laptop and let out a sigh, “I guess that’s my cue to keep digging.”

“Sounds like we might have something in common,” a male voice came from the doorway, and they all turned to see Mayson Drake, nursing an injured leg with the dark-haired man that Clark had seen with her from earlier.

Jimmy was the first one to speak up, “Uh, how did you two get in here?”

Mayson shrugged her shoulders, “My name is still on the authorized visitors’ list.” A cold stare was aimed in Lois’ direction as Mayson limped into the room with the dark-haired stranger.

The man pointed to Mayson, “I’m with her.”

Lois frowned, looking at Mayson’s bandaged leg, “Mayson, shouldn’t you be at a hospital?”

“See?” the stranger raised an eyebrow and puffed his chest out as if to claim an invisible victory with a point he appeared to be making with Mayson.

“What is with you people and hospitals?” Mayson growled irritably, ripping the gauze from her leg and throwing it to the ground in a childish temper tantrum. “There! See? I’m *fine!*” She stomped her leg to emphasize the point and growled back at the room with a high-pitched shriek that made Clark wince.

Clark felt his super-powered senses go on high alert as he stared back at the very unstable Mayson Drake, who had what appeared to be staples from a staple gun poking out of her skin as she insisted she was fine. Though he knew he could physically force her out of the building and into a hospital to seek medical attention he also knew without her willingness to be treated or an imminent threat there was nothing that could be done to force her

to get the care she obviously needed. He inched his chair closer to Lois, straightening himself up in the chair as he eyed Mayson cautiously. It appeared as if she hadn't slept in days. Her eyes were bloodshot, and the bags under her eyes made the number of bags his mom typically packed for a weekend visit to Metropolis look tame.

Clark turned his head to catch Lois' wide-eyed gaze before turning back to where Mayson stood. Lois broke the eerie silence with the clearing of her throat. "Mayson, you're bleeding, and you have staples sticking out of your leg."

"She took a staple gun to herself to avoid me hauling her off to the hospital earlier." The man that had escorted Mayson inside the Planet interrupted.

"And you are?" Clark finally asked, realizing he still hadn't gotten a name from the man.

The man pulled out a badge and tossed it on the table for them to inspect. "You can call me Daniel."

"Daniel Scardino?" Jimmy looked at the badge and then back to Scardino in surprise. "DEA?"

Lois raised an eyebrow, seeing the connection.

Mayson paced in front of them, "Thorn in the side is more like it. Impeding an investigation."

Before the agent could respond, Lois turned her attention back to Mayson, "If he's hindering your investigation then why are you working with him?"

"Her boss didn't give her a choice," Scardino grinned ear-to-ear before scowling at Mayson, "As of right now, I'm not sure who is being punished."

"So..." Jimmy looked between Scardino and Mayson, "what are you two expecting us to do?"

"Someone insisted that you two might be behind some missing evidence, so I figured I'd humor her," Scardino sauntered into the room, making himself comfortable in the end chair of the table.

"Missing evidence?" Lois practically choked out.

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time you helped yourself to evidence in a federal investigation," Mayson smirked, hobbling toward the table and slamming her palms down on the wood table.

"I'm gonna go...copy something." Jimmy grumbled, grabbing a random file from the stack on the table and bolting for the exit before anyone could stop him.

"I seem to recall a witness' life being put in danger the last time I helped the two of you." Mayson continued her monologue as she stared Lois down.

"I seem to recall us getting Superman involved to help protect your witness...and helping save your life." Lois spat back at her.

"Am I missing something here?" Scardino looked between the two of them and leaned toward Clark, hoping to get an answer.

Clark remained quiet, unwilling to divulge the complicated history between the three of them. "Mayson, I'm sorry you've misplaced something in your investigation, but Lois and I had nothing to do with it."

"We've been too busy conducting our own investigation," Lois grumbled smugly.

"Really, about what?" Mayson inquired with a sharp glare.

"Car bombing. Mysterious death at the hospital..." Lois ticked each item off on her hand.

"No drug smuggling?" Mayson challenged, moving her gaze between Lois and Clark.

Clark felt his grip on the table tighten as he prepared himself to leap into action if needed. Something felt off with Mayson. He couldn't put his finger on it, but her tone, her mannerism, the erratic way she kept pouncing on Lois unnerved him.

"No," Clark replied coolly. "Maybe if you start by telling us exactly what it is you're looking for?"

Mayson let out a disbelieving huff, not willing to dignify his plea with a response as she stood up, crossing her arms over her chest in defiance. Scardino, thankfully, felt more forthcoming and

offered them an explanation. "Small blue capsule was the last description we had on the missing evidence." He held his index finger and thumb up to illustrate the size.

Clark watched Lois cautiously, uncertain if he should respond. The evidence Mayson was looking for could be the pill they had found outside her car, or it could be something entirely different. Though he knew the chances of finding a pill that resembled the drug she was investigating and it not be involved was anything but coincidental.

"You know something, don't you?" Mayson growled accusingly, jabbing her finger in the air toward Lois.

"I found a small capsule a few feet away from your car." Clark interrupted before Lois could.

The animosity in Mayson's stature seemed to disappear as she turned to him. "And?"

"And what?" Clark asked.

"What did you do with it?" Mayson demanded.

"We submitted it to S.T.A.R. Labs for testing," Lois answered curtly.

"I'm assuming one of these is the report?" Scardino pointed to the array of folders spread across the table.

Clark reached over to grab a copy of the report they had been given, knowing he had another copy if needed and handed it to Dan Scardino. "Initial testing was completed today."

"This can't be right," Scardino scowled as he skimmed the report in his hands.

"So, what?" Mayson glared back at Lois. "You two just helped yourself to evidence sitting by my crime scene!"

"It's not like you were the one investigating it." Lois spat back. "You were the victim. We were trying to help figure out who tried to kill you, Mayson."

"And in the process compromised a federal investigation." Mayson huffed.

"We didn't know that at the time," Clark responded sharply, standing to his feet. "Look, I'm sorry if this put you in a hard spot, Mayson, really I am. But I'm not going to sit here and listen to you try and give Lois and me the riot act over something that was an honest mistake."

"Look, what's done is done," Scardino shrugged his shoulders. "In all honesty, they've actually helped."

"You cannot be serious," Mayson scowled at him, shooting daggers at him as he stood to his feet.

"We've got a psychopath out there with access to a drug that could smuggle out the world's worst criminals from the most secure prison," Scardino responded, shaking his head. "Who's leading what investigation is secondary. Let's put our heads together and try and stop these lunatics before someone gets hurt."

"I'm game," Lois replied, crossing her arms over her chest and eyeing Mayson with a critical eye, "I mean unless you don't want to work together." She reached for the report a few inches away from where Mayson was standing. "In that case, Clark and I'll just finish this up ourselves."

"I'm fine," Mayson said between gritted teeth.

"Great," Lois said smugly, pushing the report back to her.

"I'll go tell Jimmy it's safe to come back in here," Clark said, eyeing the bewildered Jimmy Olsen standing by the coffee maker a few feet away, trying to pretend like he wasn't spying.

McCarthy made his way through the Gables mansion, silently fuming at his missed target once more. A hand slapped across his back, and he turned to see Albie Swanson standing behind him. "Nice of you to join us. Mr. McCarthy." He raised an eyebrow as he stared back at McCarthy with an unamused expression. "Professional my foot! I thought you knew what the hell you were doing!"

"You miserable little weasel!" McCarthy snapped back, reaching out to grab Albie by the throat. "You think you can do

much better? Take away that magic drug of yours, and you're nothing but a worthless waste of air."

"If it weren't for me and my supposed worthless drug, you'd still be eating chow from a four-by-four cell." Albie spat back viciously, jabbing his index finger into Sean McCarthy's chest. "Albie!"

The echo of Stanley Gables' bellow reached McCarthy's ears, and he snickered, "Your master's calling, weasel."

Dan Scardino watched Clark Kent leave the Daily Planet newsroom, turning his careful attention to the research assistant, Jimmy Olsen, who had been mostly quiet during the afternoon of theatrics. Mayson Drake hadn't lasted even an hour before she had stormed out and chastised them all for wasting her time with a fruitless endeavor of looking into the history of the mysterious drug she had claimed mere hours ago had been the key to her investigation into McCarthy's prison break.

Nevermind the fact that Mayson had been screaming to anyone who would listen that the pill was the key, but the second they started looking into it, she lost interest and threw another tantrum.

Nevermind the fact that her direction had led them absolutely nowhere.

Dan cleared his throat to draw attention to himself and get Olsen to look up from the screen he was engrossed in. "So, you know what the deal is with the ADA and those two?" He gestured to the seats that Lois Lane and Clark Kent had vacated earlier.

Jimmy smirked, shaking his head. "Let's just say rejection doesn't look good on Mayson." He let out a snort and added. "And neither does the green-eyed monster."

"Rejection." Dan Scardino repeated, hearing the venom dripping from his tone. "As in...?"

"I would have thought she'd have taken it a lot better than she has been," Jimmy mentioned causally. "I mean, it's not like they were ever anything serious – from what I can tell anyway. But you think you know someone, right?"

"Right," Scardino practically growled as he stood up from his seat, finally making sense out of the erratic behavior from today.

Lois nodded to the patrol officer as she watched him turn to leave the hallway where she had been escorted to her apartment. As unnerving as it was to need the protection, she felt the warm blanket of reassurance wash over her as she watched the officer leave. Just knowing someone was keeping a watchful eye out for her made her feel somewhat at ease.

She closed the door, blindly turning each of her seven locks and checking the door to ensure it was indeed locked. She let out a deep sigh and turned toward her apartment, preparing to spend the next two hours she had before her date with Clark thinking of anything but the threatening letters she had been receiving.

Clark had still been at the Planet with Jimmy and Dan Scardino when she had left. Mayson had disappeared on them a few hours ago, insisting they were following a dead end. Try as she might, she could not figure out what had triggered Mayson to have what felt like a complete personality change. Mayson had been obnoxious at times but never openly hostile.

She made her way toward the bathroom, pulling out a towel from the linen closet. There still remained a million questions it felt like, but continuing to think about it would only pull her deeper into the dark corners of her mind where the questions of who was behind the anonymous threats lingered.

She opened the shower door and reached her arm in to turn the water on, hanging her towel over the door as she began to undress. She still had a few hours before Clark was supposed to pick her up for their date. Hopefully, after a relaxing shower she could forget about Mayson and this pill for the rest of the evening and focus on not having a repeat of the events that had occurred a few nights

ago.

<< "Everything seemed to just... 'work.' I really liked it. That's why I can never see you again."

"Lois?">>

Her mind drifted back to the night of their date when she had taken a beautiful evening and ruined it by giving into her fears and doing what she did best. Despite every instinct inside her that was pleading for her to take a chance and open the door after she had so painfully slammed the door on Clark and in her mind any chance of salvaging their budding relationship, she continued to hide. Hide from herself – how she really felt. Hide behind the façade of not needing anyone in her life. Hide the fact that despite the history of telling him just a year ago she loved him like a brother she knew her feelings for Clark ran deep – even back then. She had made the irreversible mistake of committing a cardinal sin. She had let herself succumb to a workplace relationship again.

<< "So, I guess we're both in uncharted territory here?">>

<< "No flirting in the newsroom."

"What?"

"No flirting."

"Um, no.">>

She had let herself open up to Clark and eventually even allowed herself to depend on him. Her mind drifted back to the evening before. She had turned to Clark for help like she had time and time again it seemed. She wasn't prepared for this. She wasn't ready to face the gravity of how much Clark meant to her. She still wasn't entirely sure she was ready for this, but facing the possibility of losing Clark wasn't something she was ready for either.

<< "Friendship first,"

"Always.">>

Thankfully it was a quiet in the city as Clark finished up his patrol. He was cutting it close with time, but having the reassurance that he wouldn't be called away in the middle of dinner with Lois was a necessary step he needed to take tonight. After the incident at the Planet this afternoon he had offered to reschedule their date, seeing the frightened expression on Lois' face after Mayson had stormed out in a fit. He wouldn't have blamed her. Between the threatening letters she continued to receive and the intense confrontation between herself and Mayson, canceling probably was the better option. But Lois had insisted she was fine, and he wasn't about to be the reason things didn't go as planned.

A lot was riding on tonight. He wanted more than anything to put a stop to the lies and just tell her the truth, but at the same time he dreaded how she would react when she discovered how long he had been masquerading as two different people to her. Trust was something Lois rarely gave to anyone. Dashing that would have to be done with the utmost care.

Tonight was supposed to be a re-do of their date after their last one had ended so abruptly. Turning it into a revelation and possibly tainting it with a pinhole in everything they had shared up until now would only further isolate Lois. As quickly as the thought of putting an end to the secrets between him and Lois came he dismissed it just as easily with the intent of making tonight about anything but the chaos that continued to loom around them.

<< "Everything seemed to just... 'work.' I really liked it. That's why I can never see you again."

"Lois?">>

Clark felt a pang in his chest as he landed on the balcony of his apartment and quickly sped inside before he could be seen by the naked eye. A quick shower and change into a charcoal suit later, he was ready to leave again.

Dan Scardino tossed his keys on the dresser of his hotel room,

letting out a muffled curse as he paced around the room. He had wasted nearly an entire day getting sucked into the ramblings of a bitter, vindictive, jilted ADA, hell-bent on casting blame at her ex – Correction. Wannabe ex. From the way, Olsen had told it anyway.

He slammed his fist on the wooden dresser and let out a muttered growl. A whole day wasted. He couldn't get the time back, but he could ensure he wouldn't get pulled into the ravings of an ADA caught up in her unrequited love fantasy. McCarthy, out on the streets, was dangerous, but combined with his old gang, he would become even more deadly.

He knew he had to stop him, but as of right now the attempts on Mayson Drake's life were all he had to go on. If he knew anything for sure, it was how McCarthy loathed unfinished business.

Lois stepped out of the shower, wrapping the oversized terrycloth towel around her as her feet hit the plush bath rug sitting outside the shower stall. She hummed a soft tune to herself as she made her way to her closet, fishing for the black dress she'd worn a few nights before. Her hand reached for the back of the closet to pull the dress out. Her heart lurched in her chest when she saw the shredded black material that had once been a tasteful black dress. She let out a sharp yelp and dropped the hanger of shredded material.

She reached in the back of her closet, pulling dress after dress out. Each one had been slashed or torn in some manner or another. Panic began to rise within her as she stared at the hundreds of dollars worth of clothing sitting in fabric scraps at her feet. She could feel her legs begin to shake, and her arms begin to tremble as she fell to the ground in tears.

When?

How?

Why?

The questions raced through her mind as she fisted the mixture of reds, violets, and elegant black fabric that had been reduced to nothing more than fabric scraps. Her eyes burned with rage as the tears fell at their own accord. She stole a glance at the clock, reminding herself that despite her newly discovered adjustments to her wardrobe, she still had to get ready for her date with Clark, who would be here any minute to pick her up.

She reached her hands up, rubbing her palms against her face as she racked her brain to think of something to do. She stood up and began sifting through her closet until she had found a blouse and skirt she could make work for the evening. Whoever was behind the vandalism of her closet had targeted her evening wear attire. As much as she would love to dive into why someone would only target her evening dresses and leave everything else in her closet intact, she knew time was not on her side. She quickly slipped into the sleeveless, violet blouse and long, black skirt. It wasn't exactly what she'd imagined for tonight, but it would do the job until she had time to drop in at Niemen's to replace her evening wear.

She dabbed her favorite perfume on her wrist and placed a drop on her neck and then leaned toward the mirror to finish applying her eyeshadow. A light knock came from the front door, and she let out a nervous sigh, running a hand through her freshly dried hair then made her way to the door to answer it.

She stole a glance in the mirror between the door and her bedroom, checking once more that her breakdown from earlier wasn't noticeable. The rollercoaster of emotions that had gone through her over the last few hours. From anxiety over her newly realized feelings toward Clark to her anguish over being victimized by way of her wardrobe. Her heart felt like it was panging against a steel drum as she reached the front door.

She managed to flash a half-smile at Clark, who stood at the door in a charcoal suit. "Eight o'clock on the dot."

Her mind flashed back to the evening of their first date when

she had rambled about finding something else to change into. How quickly things had changed.

<< "Eight o'clock. On the dot."

"Would you like more time?"

"Do I need it?!"

"No, you look great."

"I know you said burgundy, but I thought, 'why be a slave to expectations?' That's a charcoal suit, isn't it? You know, I can change. It'll only take a minute and I have some really cute things in burgundy and —"

"Lois. It's fine. I like what you're wearing. Let's just ... go." >>

She watched as the corners of his lips turned into a broad smile. She couldn't help but smile back at him. His smile was always contagious. It was a small gesture, but it still managed to melt her heart.

"You ready?" Clark asked, holding his arm out for her to take.

She could feel her hand tremble as she reached out to take his arm. She nodded, gripping his arm with all her might, hoping to bury the anxious turmoil that was swirling within her. She caught a glimpse of Clark's concerned expression as he placed a hand over hers. The silent question on his face.

It should have been that easy. Throw on some makeup and a nice outfit and hide how scared she really was for a few hours then possibly check into a hotel until the vandal was caught. She had been kidding herself, and she knew it the second Clark reached his hand over to look her in the eye.

"Lois, what's wrong?"

Her front teeth bit into her lower lip as she did her best to hide the thunderstorm of emotions that were raging within her. Tonight was not supposed to be like this. It was supposed to be a chance to take a step forward and allow herself to not give in to the fears that continued to torture her.

She felt his hand slip to her shoulder, cupping the curve of her shoulder blade with his palm as her eyes clamped shut, willing the fear within her to leave from where it had come. "I, uh, got another...present." She heard the venom in her tone as she let out a sigh of defeat.

Clark's jaw tightened, and he gestured to the phone sitting on the side table by her loveseat. "Lois, you need to call Henderson."

"It's fine." Lois insisted. "I can call him later. He's probably trying to have dinner with his family right now. I can wait."

Clark shook his head in dismay, "Lois, you're trembling." He reached his hand up to cup her cheek, swiping at the stray tear that had trickled down her cheek, "Come on, what is it?"

One by one, the tears made their way down her cheeks as she let out a hoarse whisper, "They're ruined. Completely and utterly destroyed."

"What?" he asked, tracing the frame of her face with his palm.

Unable to find the words to articulate what she was trying to say properly, she pulled away from him, opting to show him what had been done. After all, a picture was worth a thousand words. She mumbled a quick, "Just a minute" and disappeared into the bedroom and quickly grabbed a handful of the cotton, satin, and tulle material sitting on the floor of her closet then brought it back to Clark to show him.

She tossed the fabric on the coffee table where Clark was standing. "This!" She let out a bitter snort, "This was my latest gift from whoever is behind these threats." Her arms crossed over her chest. Clark ran a hand across his face, shaking his head in dismay. She let out a long sigh and stared back at him.

Something seemed to click within Clark, and he straightened up, "You can't stay here, Lois. It's not safe." He gestured to the bedroom door. "I'll call Henderson. Why don't you pack a bag and..."

"I'm sorry. I'm batting zero out of two as far as dates go."

Lois let out a defeated sigh.

Clark reached out to cup her cheek, “First, we’ll get you somewhere safe, and then we’ll have our date. This doesn’t have to ruin anything.”

“The giant pile of shredded fabric in my closet says differently,” Lois raised an eyebrow at him, and he reached for the phone.

“Trust me,” he smiled back at her.

“We’ll see,” Lois said, unconvinced, but she still did as he requested and made her way into the bedroom to pack a bag that would get her through at least a few nights at a hotel until they had caught whoever was behind the threats. *‘If they catch them,’* she reminded herself. *‘When.’* She corrected herself. She wouldn’t rest until she had put a stop to whoever was behind this and make them pay for robbing her of the simple comfort of being able to live her life. That day was coming, but for now, she was content to follow Clark’s request and see exactly how he planned to turn the evening around.

Chapter 9: Accidental Revelations

Mayson Drake sat in the corner of the Metro hotel bar where she had the perfect view of the front desk. She had spent the last hour sipping one too many mojitos while drowning her sorrows over her current predicament. Not only did she have to deal with the insufferable agent that had been thrust on her – Scardino something or other – but she also had to sit back and watch that conniving witch throw herself at Clark.

She had seen the way that little tramp had kept weaseling her way toward Clark – practically pawing at him mercilessly – in public for that matter. She reached for her empty glass and let out a groan as the glass clinked on the table. She was supposed to be following up on the tip she’d received that Sean McCarthy was holed up in this hotel but so far she’d seen zero sign of him. She was just about to give up when she spotted a familiar figure enter through the double doors of the hotel.

Her hand clenched around the glass in her hand and she heard the bartender call out, “Hey, that’s it you’re cut off!”

She looked down and saw the blood dripping from the open cut on her hand. “I’m fine!” she insisted as the bartender wrapped a towel around her injured hand. “I just lost my grip.”

He didn’t say anything as he picked up the shards of glass from the table and then disappeared behind the bar once more. She held the washcloth to her palm, applying pressure to it as she stole a glance at the front desk.

Lois Lane stood by the lobby desk with an unfamiliar man dressed in a dark suit. She frowned, recognizing him as an undercover officer she had worked with. She spotted the nervous look on Lois’ face as she continued to fill out the paperwork before her – almost as if she was trying to hide. A scowl crossed her face as she began to put the pieces together.

“That little two-timing... *slut.*”

Lois fell back on the hotel bed, feeling it out as she kicked her shoes off. She had long since changed into something more comfortable after it became apparent the date she and Clark had been looking forward to would not be happening tonight. She had packed enough for a few days. Hopefully, within that time the police would have a lead on who was behind the threats. She was tired – exhausted really. Disappointed and famished. Right now, she’d even go for whatever overpriced snacks were in the room’s sampling of stock snacks.

Clark had promised that he would catch up with her after the police had finished up at her apartment. It was the only way they would have been able to get her to leave. It had taken an hour and a half to finish giving her statement repeatedly to what felt like the entire police force. Henderson had provided her with an escort to check into a hotel for the night while the police finished surveying the crime scene. She let out an involuntary shudder at that thought.

Her apartment – her home of eight years – was considered a crime scene.

Clark had of course offered his apartment as a safe haven but with how complicated their relationship was right now – and the fact that this had happened right before their date – she had turned him down. It wasn’t that she didn’t feel safe there. It was quite the opposite actually. She felt safer with Clark than she did with anyone. Even Superman.

That was the problem.

Well, partly anyway. She felt safe with him in a way she never had with anyone, but at the same time she was terrified. This feeling – the deep yearning in the pit of her stomach that continued to grow with each passing day – it scared her. Denial had been second nature to her for years. Bury down her feelings and ignore the pull and spark for fear that she would find herself on the losing end of a relationship once more.

She had lived so comfortably in denial she hadn’t even realized how serious things had become between her and Lex. So much so that it had completely caught her off guard when he had proposed. Looking back, she couldn’t understand how she had been persuaded to say ‘yes’ let alone planning a wedding and life with him.

It seemed as if that had been someone else – a shell of her former self – living in denial. It wasn’t until she had been staring at her reflection, preparing to walk down the aisle that reality sank in and she realized how very wrong everything felt. She had lost nearly everyone and everything she cared about all around the same time which she had an inkling had a lot to do with her decision to agree to a proposal, a marriage, and life without much time to contemplate the consequences.

There, staring at her reflection the gravity of how much she had lost hit her like a ton of bricks. The denial was gone. All she could think of in that moment was what she wouldn’t give to try and make things right with Clark. His declaration of love had caught her off guard just as much as Lex’s proposal but, looking back, she knew there had always been something. An irresistible pull that drew her to Clark from the beginning – no matter how long she tried to deny it.

Deny it she had tried.

Deny it when she felt her defenses begin to slip.

Deny it when she found herself alone and the first person she wanted to reach out to was Clark.

Deny it when she was faced with the end of the world – literally – and the one person she wanted to hold onto was Clark.

Deny it when she was faced with the possibility of losing Clark to someone else.

Now, here she was faced with the reality of facing her demons and coming to terms with the feelings she had long denied. She had been so close to confessing her feelings that day in front of the Planet, but the moment was lost when Clark had taken back his declaration of love. She had suspected for some time he had been lying to save face. A kind gesture to help her salvage her dignity at the time and their friendship.

A light knock came from the door and pulled her away from her internal musings. She stole a glance at the time, seeing the hour hand inch its way closer to the twelve, wondering who could be at the door at this hour. It was well past the hour of getting room service or deliveries. She approached the door cautiously, looking through the peephole. Through the peephole, she saw Clark standing outside her door.

“Lois?”

Lois reached for the door handle to open it. She cracked the door just enough to poke her head out and eyed the brown boxes in Clark’s hands, “Is that pizza?”

Jimmy ran a weary hand across his face as he finished making the last of the notes on the research he had completed. Thankfully

he had tomorrow off and would have a chance to sleep in. The late hours were killing him but the overtime was something he was in desperate need of. Even with the raise he'd been given a few months ago he was barely making it with the price bump to his rent. He knew he'd have to bite the bullet soon and either get himself a roommate or find himself another place, but for now he was putting in the extra hours in hopes of making do.

He had found quite a bit out about Albie Swanson. A drop out at Metropolis State's Chemistry program. He had been hired by LexCorp to complete drug trials and disappeared without a trace until recently when he had been hired by the Gables estate as a personal assistant. He wasn't sure what that had to do with the mysterious drug or the prison breaks that had been occurring but he was sure Lois and Clark could take it from there. He grabbed his things and made his way out the door with his keys in his hand.

Officers searched the apartment while Bill Henderson spoke with the officer on duty who had been tasked with keeping watch of Lois Lane's apartment. "You're sure?" Henderson barked at the officer in front of him, running a weary hand across his face.

"We canvased the area but no one went digging in Ms. Lane's closet so it very well could have happened before we arrived." The officer responded with a frown. "We were trying to respect her privacy as best as we could."

"I just wish someone would take a hint and do the same thing," Henderson let out a grunt.

He looked around the apartment and let out a defeated sigh before barking out the orders to keep looking for any signs of a break-in. Thankfully Lane had found other sleeping arrangements for the night but she still would have to come back here at some point. When she did, he wanted to make sure there was no residual leftovers from her stalker.

Clark let out a long breath, looking over the balcony connected to Lois' room. He watched as Lois reached for another slice of the pizza he had brought from one of his favorite pizzerias in Florence. The bright lights of Metropolis reflected below as he watched Lois lean over the balcony. The curve of the corner of her lips whispered a hidden smile as she turned back to look at him.

"It's gorgeous up here."

"You can almost see into Gotham from here." He pointed to the misty lights off into the distance just past Hobb's Bay and then turned his attention to Lois who was watching him with a bemused expression.

Lois let out a satisfied sigh, taking another bite of her pizza, "This is amazing." She closed her eyes, seeming to savor the sensation of the pizza marinating with her taste buds.

"Best pizza in the world," Clark grinned, reaching over to take his own slice, sinking down on the bench next to Lois. It wasn't *Fouquet*, but hopefully it would make up for their ruined plans and, at the very least, end the evening on a positive note.

It had taken everything in him not to give into his impulse to scour the city and begin his own search for the stalker that had the gall to invade Lois' privacy and go so far as to destroy the clothes hanging in her closet. It had taken everything in him not to give into the temptation. He knew it was a fruitless pursuit until they were finally able to put a face to the predator that was hell bent on making Lois' life hell these last few days.

As much as he wished he could take her for a flight around the city to forget her troubles he knew that dropping that bomb on Lois tonight of all nights wouldn't be fair to her. She was mentally spent and he had no intention of adding to her emotional turmoil. Still, he knew he couldn't continue leading this double life with Lois. He had to tell her the truth. The sooner the better of course, but it would also require him not being pulled away to tend to a rescue and Lois' life not being put in danger. A rare instance as of late.

He let out a defeated sigh. At this rate, they would both be old

and gray when he finally summed up the strength to tell her the truth.

'Just tell her.'

'Not tonight.'

'But she has to know.'

'Not at the expense of her mental health.'

He reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, realizing this internal battle would continue until he found a way to follow through with what his parents had practically ordered him to do. He knew he needed to tell her. Making that decision wasn't the hard part. It was figuring out how to tell her and when. It wasn't something he could just blurt out.

The white and blue lights from the starlit sky glowed against Lois' face. He mused momentarily what she would look like on a flight above the clouds, close enough to touch the stars. As quickly as the thought crossed his mind, with it came the fears of what would happen when she realized just how long he had been lying to her.

'Stop.' He chided himself, intent on squashing the doubts seeping into the forefront of his mind.

"Sorry about tonight," Lois apologized for what felt like the umpteenth time.

Clark shrugged his shoulders, "Things happen. We'll go out another time."

Lois sighed, leaning her head back, "Not exactly scoring points with stalker and door slammer being added to the list of reasons *not* to date."

Clark shook his head, "Lois, you have nothing to apologize for. I'm still amazed you thought you could go out after what happened."

"I didn't want to let the person behind all this to win." She looked up at him with a remorseful expression. "Kind of a bad habit I picked up having my life in jeopardy on a regular basis."

"It's okay to *not* be okay," Clark said. His tone remained hesitant as he gazed back at her.

"I'm starting to learn that," Lois admitted sheepishly.

"I think it's something we both have been guilty of a time or two." Clark admitted sheepishly, recalling a time or two he had jumped in without looking and often times he would try to carry the burden of the world on his shoulders—quite literally.

"Occupational hazard," Lois mused leaning her head against his shoulder as she looked up at the stars. She gave him a remorseful expression and sighed, "I know this isn't exactly how either of us planned for tonight to go, but thanks for still hanging around."

"Always," Clark said, taking a sip from his glass. "I wouldn't be anywhere else."

"It's a shame. I was kinda looking forward to that chocolate mousse again." Lois mused playfully. "I may have to swing by there for lunch..." she looked at her watch and grimaced. "... today."

"You and your chocolate." Clark chuckled and then reached his hand over to take her hand in his, trying to find the right way to ask what he'd been wondering for the last few hours. She put up a good front but he could see the cracks behind the façade. "How are you...really?"

"Honestly, I'm frustrated. I'm exhausted. I'm angry...and I can't decide which emotion to focus on." She reached her hand up to stroke his cheek. "I'll be fine. I always land on my feet."

"Doesn't mean you should have to." He reminded her gently.

Lois' eyes shimmered as she stared into his eyes, seeming to be searching for the right words. "I shouldn't have to, but that's how it's always been. It's gotten me where I am today and I'm still standing. I'm fine, really." She reached over to take his hand in hers. "I just hate that I killed the evening with all this stalker business."

"You didn't kill anything," Clark reached up to stroke her

cheek with his palm. “This is one of my favorite places in Flor...” he caught himself mid-sentence, about to reveal where he had picked up the pizza and backtracked quickly. Maybe too quickly. “Flora’s. My, uh, neighbor’s daughter recommended the place when I moved in.”

A bemused expression crossed Lois’ face and he sat there, wondering if he shouldn’t just bite the bullet and put it all on the line right then and there. But he knew it wouldn’t be fair to her. Not with everything else Lois was working through tonight.

‘Just tell her.’

“Maybe, sometime you could take me to this ‘Flora’s’?” Lois ventured, turning so she was facing him. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it.”

“Oh, it’s an out of the way place.” Clark let out a sigh, hoping she would change the subject before he really did accidentally slip up. He looked around the rooftop and pointed to the block of buildings just below them. “You should really try out ‘Tony’s Steaks.’ Best sandwich place around.”

“That run down little shop on Third? *That’s* a sandwich shop?” Lois looked back at him with an amused expression.

“They’ve got a great Philly cheesesteak and they make their own bread in house. It may not look like much, but it’s great food.”

Lois let out a soft giggle, “Where do you find these places?”

He shrugged his shoulders, contemplating how to respond.

‘Just tell her.’

His face tensed, and he shrugged his shoulders, doing his best to remain calm as he responded with the truth, praying it wouldn’t put a sour end to the evening. “I ...traveled around the world and got a good idea of where to find the best food, so I stop in from time to time when I need to.”

Lois stared back at him for a moment and then asked, “Since when is Metropolis considered ‘around the world’?”

Clark groaned internally, wondering what he should do. Should he just blurt it out or continue to be evasive and pray he could make do until tomorrow when he could plan out his revelation and hopefully not send Lois running for the hills. He bit his lower lip, mentally kicking himself as he pointed to the shop once more. “So, what do you think?”

“What do I think about what?” she asked, blinking back at him in surprise.

“Tony’s,” He grinned back at her. “Barring any world-ending disasters that might rear their ugly head, we can go there for lunch in...” he looked at his watch and grimaced, “Eight hours.” Then he added with a grin. “And Muriel’s coffee is right outside too.”

“Well, assuming the world has not ended by the time lunchtime comes around, I think I’ll be open to trying it out...but I’m not making any promises. I may not like it.”

“Of course not,” Clark responded confidently. “You’ll love it.”

“We’ll see,” Lois giggled and he looped his arm across her shoulder, enjoying the momentary closeness between them. She leaned her head up, propping it on his shoulder and let out a long breath, “So, I take it you’re not hightailing it after...two disastrous dates?”

“One,” Clark corrected and then added, “but it wasn’t a disaster.” Before she could argue he added, “I’m not going anywhere. Way too much work. I’m already invested. Then I’d have to go find someone else to challenge me on everything...”

“I do not challenge you on *everything*...” Lois sputtered out.

“And then I got to go through all the trouble of *pretending* to lose an argument...”

“Since when do you *pretend* to lose anything?” She challenged, crossing her arms over her chest in mock indignation.

It would be so easy to say it. Right then and there – reveal everything to her and come clean about Superman. It was the perfect opening. But the tired lines on her face reminded him why he couldn’t. He wouldn’t do that to her.

Not tonight.

He ignored the question and continued with his teasing.

“Seriously though. Way too much trouble to run for the hills.”

Lois swatted him playfully on the arm. “You never answered my question.”

“And I’m not going to.” He responded matter-of-factly.

“You *let* me win arguments?” she arched an eyebrow at him.

“Sometimes,” he chuckled, enjoying the curious expression on her face.

“Anything else I should know?” she ventured cautiously, arching her neck to turn toward him.

“Yes,” he responded, his eyes twinkled with mischief, knowing full well how much she hated to be in the dark on something.

‘Just tell her.’

He stared back at her, preparing mentally to change the subject once more. He had all the reasons to stay quiet and continue with this pretense.

“Well?” she prompted, tapping his jaw with her index finger.

“Well, Lois, the truth is...” A smile crossed his face and he mentally prepared to lay it out on the line. No more hiding behind the lies or secrets. Just the truth. As painful as it was. “I disguise myself as Superman so I can save people from danger without putting those I care about in danger.”

Lois stared back at him for what felt like an eternity, and then to his surprise she started laughing, “Very funny. You almost had me.”

“I should get going.” He opted to cut the conversation short rather than insist he was being serious, he let out a short breath and responded. “It’s nearly two in the morning.”

“I know,” Lois smiled back at him. “I’m not tired.” A yawn escaped her throat.

“I think you’ll be singing a different tune in a few hours.” he cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Maybe,” Lois replied with a sigh. “but that’s what they make coffee for.” A silent pause fell between them as he stared back at her, wondering how to steer her away from where her focus appeared to be centered at the moment. “So, I take it I’m not getting an answer tonight?”

“I gave you an answer.” He raised his already arched eyebrow further up.

“Are you ever going to tell me?” she prompted him, playfully teasing his forearm with her index finger.

He held her hand in his palm and reached over to grab the empty pizza box to clean up as they re-entered the hotel room. He motioned to the door, “I should get going.”

Lois nodded, following him to the door as a yawn escaped her lips. “So...goodnight.” A smile peeked across her lips, and she sighed. “Thanks for dinner.”

“Anytime,” he reached over to cup her cheek, leaning toward her as he stared into the deep pools of her eyes that held his attention. Her hand looped around his index finger, gripping him with her hand. He could feel the heat from her breath a few millimeters away from his as the world around them disappeared into the distance behind them, and she tilted her head up, closing the distance between them and finding his mouth with hers.

A waste.

That was all tonight had been.

A complete and utter waste of Mayson Drake’s time.

Mayson reached her bandaged hand out to grip the strap to her purse, wincing at the reminder of her wound. Her bleary eyes teared up as the piercing pain throbbed behind her eyes. She placed her palm against her forehead, applying pressure to her temples.

“Cab should be here any minute, Ms. Drake.” The manager at the bar said, offering his hand to help her to her feet.

She gave what felt like an awkward smile as she found her footing and wobbled toward the door. She felt her breath catch in her throat when she spotted *her* by the elevator. A bitter scowl took over her facial features as she stared at the unwelcome sight of Lois Lane by the elevator wrapped in a clinch with Clark Kent.

“Ms. Drake?” the manager tapped her on the arm, pulling Mayson’s attention to him. “Everything all right?”

“Fine,” Mayson said with a curt whisper. “You said something about a cab?” The bar manager helped her to the exit as her eyes narrowed, focusing on the couple that seemed oblivious to the attention they were drawing.

‘Tramp.’

Chapter 10: Second Chances

Images swirled around in an almost tango with one another. It was Clark’s voice and Superman’s face as she walked through EPRAD with the familiar man in blue spandex. His red cape billowed in the wind as he turned to her with an almost teasing smile.

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

There again, in the doorway of the Apollo, Lois saw him standing before her, fresh out of the shower. She stared back at him, seeing the droplets of water trickling down his shoulders from where he hadn’t quite finished drying off yet. He looked down at his bare chest in surprise then back at her, but something was missing.

‘Glasses. Where are his glasses?’

<<“I said nine. I thought you’d be...naked...um, ready.”>>

Lois stared back at him. The crowd of reporters and cameras surrounded them. Clark was about to fly into space and save the day. Just as he always did. She stared into his eyes, seeing the worry in his eyes as he reached back to cup her cheek.

<<“I’ll be back, Lois. We’ll go flying.”>>

‘Wait, what?’

The red cape billowed through the air behind him as he stared back at her. His eyes pierced through her, looking into her soul with an intensity she’d never seen from him before. She felt her heart patter against her chest as he dropped the unexpected bombshell on her.

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

‘This isn’t how this happened....What is this?’

Lois stared back at Clark as she proclaimed her heartfelt plea, hoping to sway him.

<<“If you had no powers, if you were just an ordinary man leading an ordinary life, I’d love you just the same. Can’t you believe that?”

“I wish I could Lois, but under the circumstances, I don’t see how I can.”>>

One by one, the images seemed to meld into one. The two faces became one, and Lois shot up in bed, wiping the sweat beads from her forehead as she looked around the room, trying to place her unfamiliar surroundings.

The events from the previous evening came flooding back.

The hotel.

The destruction of her evening wear.

The police.

Everything.

<<“Anything else I should know?”

“Yes,”

“Well?”

“Well, Lois, the truth is...I disguise myself as Superman so I can save people from danger without putting those I care about in danger.”

“Very funny. You almost had me.”>>

Panic began to rise within her as the memories from the night before flashed back, and she recalled the ‘admission’ with

scrutiny. This was insanity. It had to be a joke, right?

<<“Sometimes what it seems people are doing isn’t what they’re actually doing.”>>

<<“Oh, Clark, I don’t care if he used Crazy Glue! You’re back!”>>

<<“We need to talk to Superman and the only way I can get his attention is to fall out of a window which I’d rather not do right now or tell you. So, here I am.”

“I, uh, forgot my mail downstairs.”

“Clark, this is important. You can get your mail later.”

“I’m expecting my, uh, Cheese-of-the-Month shipment. I’ll be right back.”>>

Thousands of unexplained absences and excuses ran through her mind. Had she ever seen the two of them together?

<<“...and here in this apartment, we find the final piece of the puzzle which tells us that Superman is none other than Clark Kent.”>>

The supposed revelation Dianna Stride had uncovered on Top Copy resulted in a press conference being called by Clark and Superman. They had both been there. Superman had done most of the talking. Though, looking back on it, the superhero had seemed different. He hadn’t landed on the podium and addressed the press as per his usual behavior. He floated above them and sold them all a story about needing a place to hang his cape.

‘This is insanity.’ She told herself, feeling her insides tremble as the implications of what this all could mean hit her. Her eyes burned red and tears of anger stung their way through her tear ducts as she recalled each and every moment over the last year and a half through a different lens.

<<“Where’s Clark?”

“Right here.”>>

<<“I don’t want to die.”

“Lois, I would never let that happen.”>>

She recalled the countless times Clark and Superman had been there, saving her from both herself and the nefarious criminals they came up against time after time. Looking back, she couldn’t understand how she didn’t see it before. Superman remained aloof and distant in public, but he had a tendency of letting his guard down around her. As she did him.

<<“I know our relationship has always been ...difficult to define. But, when I thought about how much I missed you, how much I was going to miss you for the rest of my life...well, I started to think maybe there’s more to our relationship than just friendship.”>>

Flashes of shredded memories overlapping one another and submerging her mind into this new reality flooded her consciousness, and she felt the tears trickle down her cheeks. A sick feeling of dread, anguish, and anger overtook her as she recalled the grief she had suffered through thinking she had lost her best friend only to find out he’d been ‘saved’ by his alter-ego using a cloning treatment on him.

<<“Did you lie to me?”

“What makes you say that?”>>

Anger coursed through her veins as she swiped the tears from her cheeks, trying to reconcile the Clark and Superman in her mind. A part of her wanted to deny it. Push the revelation out and cling to the truth she had known for so long. It would have been far easier than the current hand she’d been dealt.

He had lied to her.

Superman.

Clark.

Whoever he was.

<<“Well, Lois, the truth is...”>>

The words cut like a knife, delivering a deadly blow to the foundation of trust, friendship, and so much more that had been built up over the last year and a half. She tried to rationalize it in her mind, making sense out of the confession she didn’t even

realize she'd been receiving up until now.

<<“*The truth is...*”>>

He had let her make a fool of herself for over a year.

He made her think he was dead.

He *lied*.

<<“*The truth is...*”>>

The list of crimes he had committed raced through her mind as she flashed back to the previous evening. She ran through every conversation she had had with him – both versions of him. Was any of it even real? Which version was the real one? Clark Kent or Superman?

He had lied about *everything*.

<<“*Well, Lois, the truth is...I disguise myself as Superman so I can save people from danger without putting those I care about in danger.*”

“*Very funny. You almost had me.*”>>

A knock came from her hotel door, pulling her attention back to the present. She checked the peephole, noting the officer outside the door with his badge held up for her inspection. She sighed and opened the door for him. “I take it you have some news?”

“Henderson wanted to deliver himself,” the officer replied with a shrug. “He’ll meet us downstairs in twenty.”

Lois nodded, grateful for the momentary distraction as she looked back in the hotel room. “Just give me a minute, and I’ll be ready.”

“I’ll be here.”

Dan Scardino took a sip of his coffee, running a hand over his wounded hand as he looked around the semi-crowded dining room where the hotel’s breakfast buffet was being served. His hand was still aching from the cuts he’d earned breaking into the emergency firearm case to return fire from yesterday’s shoot out. He couldn’t prove anything as of yet, but every fiber in his being shouted at him that this was the work of Sean McCarthy.

Bombings were typically his style. A quick in and out to cause maximum damage, but he wasn’t above using serious firepower to take out a target. Scardino flashed back momentarily to the last shoot out he had been involved in with McCarthy. The one that had taken Jenna from him and every hope he’d ever had for a future outside of Washington and the DEA.

‘*Never again*,’ Scardino promised himself. He may not like being jerked around by the jilted ADA, but he knew he had a job to do. The sooner he tracked down McCarthy and put him back behind bars the better. He was better off alone anyway.

He set his mug down on the table he was approaching and scooted into the long booth that was lined against the half wall with an array of individual two-seater tables against it. He then set his plate down and sighed, preparing to dig into the stack of French toast on his plate when he spotted a familiar brunette sitting a table away from him.

“You stalking me, Lane?” Scardino teased, peering over his plate to where Lois Lane was seated in front of her own breakfast plate, stirring the contents with her fork, oblivious it appeared to the world around her.

She looked up from her plate and threw him an annoyed scowl but the officer sitting across from her answered with a disapproving tone thrown in Scardino’s way, “Why don’t you just keep your eyes on your own plate, Scardino.”

“Tough crowd,” Scardino muttered to himself, sticking his fork into the bite he’d cut on his toast.

“Aren’t you supposed to be looking for McCarthy?” Lois asked, taking a sip of her coffee, not looking up from her mug.

Scardino gestured around the room. “I *do* have to eat.” He let out a sigh, “Mayson and I split up the list of possible locations last night. One of them being here.”

“Dead end?” Lois guessed, taking a sip of her coffee.

“More or less,” He sighed, looking back at her with a cocked eyebrow, “And I’m guessing you either don’t trust me to hold up my end of the bargain or got some seriously questionable spending habits?”

“Or maybe she’s staying here while the local police complete an investigation on a separate issue.” Scardino looked up, following where the voice had come from and spotted Bill Henderson standing at the end of the booth with a file jacket in his hand. Henderson cocked an eyebrow at Lois, “You two working together or this just a coincidence?”

“Depends,” Scardino piped in, looking at Henderson with a curious expression. “You got information on McCarthy?”

Henderson looked at Lois before continuing, seeming to silently be asking for permission to continue. She nodded and responded with a sigh. “It’s fine.” Henderson set a plastic bag on the table, and Lois frowned at the sight of the bagged evidence, “You find anything?”

“No,” Henderson pointed to the letter in the bag, “But we did match prints on this one to someone in our database.”

“Why do I get a feeling there’s a ‘*but*’ in there?” Lois asked.

Henderson set the black and white rap sheet of Sean McCarthy down on the table in front of her. “Only problem is he’s technically dead.” He turned to Scardino, “I guess you were right, Scardino.”

Scardino reached over to examine the evidence on the table. “McCarthy sent this to you?”

“A few days ago, so it would seem,” Lois responded with a shrug before turning back to Henderson, “And my apartment? Do you think it was him?”

“No,” Henderson shook his head. “Nothing leads us to believe the attack last night was connected to the letters sent by McCarthy.”

“If it wasn’t McCarthy, then who the hell was it?” Lois demanded.

The officer who had been sitting quietly with Lois for most of Henderson’s visit spoke up, clearing his throat as he added. “We think what happened in your apartment was completed by a *different* stalker.”

“You have two different stalkers, Lois,” Henderson warned.

Diego Martinez lingered around the Metropolis impound, keeping an eye out for any officers that might recognize him. He tucked his chin down into the collar of his jacket as he made his way through the maze of broken car parts and pieces. The curl of his lip spread into a grin when he spotted the car wreckage he had been looking for. He checked the license plate hanging by one lowly screw at the end of the charcoaled sedan. It was definitely a match for Mayson Drake’s car.

He placed a hand on the passenger door, peering inside the burnt automobile. Nothing jumped out at him as out of the ordinary, but that didn’t mean the missing resurrection pill wasn’t hiding in a slot or console. He tightened his grip on the handle to the passenger door, preparing to begin his search when he heard a scuffle from a few feet away.

“Why in the world do you want to pull the DA’s car again?”

Diego fell back to the ground, crawling his way to cover as he heard the footsteps approaching. He could feel his heart jump into his throat as he reached the end of an old pickup truck, seeking solace behind the rusted metal as he attempted to exit the impound lot without being caught. Gables wouldn’t be happy, but there was no way he was going to get thrown back in prison over a measly pill that had been lost due to that weasel Albie’s screw up.

‘*Two*.’ Lois felt her body involuntarily recoil at the thought of not one, but two sickos sitting in a basement somewhere dreaming up their next act of chaos to disrupt her life with. She felt her insides shudder as she ran her hands up and down the sleeves of her jacket, trying to disburse the cold chill that had run down her

spine.

It was almost too much.

Almost.

Right now, she had even bigger problems to tackle. She looked up at the staircase leading to the three-hundred building on Clinton Street, wondering just how long she would sit out here, delaying the inevitable. It wasn't like she could just run away from the bombshell Clark had dropped on her last night.

He had said it.

She had heard it.

She hadn't taken him seriously at the time.

'*Why now?*' she wondered, staring at the dark red door a few feet away. After nearly two years, why choose now to put an end to the lies?

Clark was Superman.

It wasn't a question.

It wasn't a theory.

It was a confession Clark had entrusted to her.

Inner doubts plagued her mind as she tried to rationalize the last year and a half with this revelation. How had she missed something so huge?

Lois drummed her fingers against the console of her Jeep, running through the emotions that came with the revelation. Anger. Distrust. Confusion. Dismay. She felt each emotion rise up within her and then settle back down like tidal waves beating against the shore.

Her mind ran through the facts once more, recalling one by one the memories of strange occurrences over the last year that now made logical sense. Each disappearance. Each unexplainable and peculiar behavior. All of them could be explained by Clark's revelation.

Her hand gripped the steering wheel as she contemplated her next move carefully. He had entrusted something to her. Whatever his reason for divulging his dual identities to her had been, she knew it had been a risk on his part. As angry and hurt as she was, she couldn't rationally hold onto her fury with that knowledge. There had been no gun to his head forcing him to reveal himself. There had been no cornering. He had the choice of gracefully declining an answer and leaving her in the dark, but he hadn't.

Why?

'*Only one way to find out,*' she told herself silently as her hand fell to the handle on the driver's side door panel.

Reconciling the two sides of him felt like an impossible feat. Each time she felt like she had a good handle on the revelation, another memory would pop up, and all the emotions would rush through her once again, repeating the cycle.

Deciding she had put her decision off long enough, she gripped the door handle and opened the door, preparing to hash this out once and for all. She needed answers. The only way she would get them was if she talked to Clark.

Each step up the brick steps felt like a battle won as she pushed back every doubt that plagued her. She finally reached the top step and lifted her hand to knock on the door, feeling as if her arm held the weight of an anvil. She barely had a chance to bring her arm back down when the door opened up, and she saw Clark - appearing to have just rolled out of bed - minus the glasses.

"Lois?" he squinted back at her in disbelief. "It's six in the morning."

"Well some of us didn't get the luxury of unloading our conscience so we could sleep like a baby," Lois snipped careful to not let the name '*Superman*' escape her lips as she pushed her way inside. She closed the door behind her and crossed her arms over her chest, staring him down. "What's wrong? Not chatty anymore, *Superman*?"

Mayson hobbled her way through the impound lot, making her way to the back lot where Scardino had asked her to meet him—at seven in the morning. She muttered several profanities along the

way as she caught herself from falling for the umpteenth time. She reached the end of the backlot where Agent Dan Scardino was chatting up Detective Ryder and one of the impound workers.

"Well, look who finally decided to grace us with her presence," Dan Scardino smirked at her, crossing the few feet to where she was.

"It's seven in the morning," she responded through gritted teeth.

"You have something better to do?" Scardino asked with a wink.

"That's not the point," Mayson huffed as she reached the end of the lot where Ryder was. "What could you possibly need me down here for at this insane hour?"

"We want to search your car again and see if there's anything we missed the first time," Detective Ryder explained, pointing to where her formerly prized immaculate car was hoisted up on the lift.

Scardino added with a shrug, "Your car bomber may have left a print of some sort. If we can connect the car bombing to McCarthy, then that will go a long way in building a federal case against him."

"What good is that going to do if you still can't find McCarthy?" Mayson shot back bitterly. Scardino gave her a look, and she sighed. "Fine, do what you have to do."

"They're doing *what*?"

The shout from Stanley Gables' throat shook the room to a dead silence as the ailing man pounded his fist on the table where Albie had just set a mug of hot tea, resulting in the hot liquid to splash over the blueprints they had been pouring over.

Diego ran an uneasy hand across the back of his neck and paced in front of the table. "I don't know, Mr. Gables. The DA's car got pulled up on the flatbed, and a whole lot of badges were following 'em." Diego pointed a finger at his chest. "I just got out of the joint. I ain't going back."

"No, you just left the key to our plans in the hands of those yellow-bellied pigs!" Gables shouted back at him in disgust.

"Hey, at least I can keep my trap shut!" Diego snorted back smugly.

"What the devil are you going on about?" Gables demanded with a glare.

Diego let out a mocking chuckle as he jutted his chin out smugly, "You're going on about me not grabbing a pill that may or may not have been in the DA's car, but McCarthy over there has been spilling the beans to dear old mom for weeks."

The sound of ceramic shattering against the wall could be heard as Gables roared into a rage. Diego fell to the ground taking cover as he watched the fury-filled Gables stalk out of the room and focus his attention on McCarthy.

Albie tapped his foot at Diego and squatted down to stare him down. "If you think you're out of the woods you're sadly mistaken." He pointed to the doorway. "I suggest you start packing."

"Packing?"

"You know McCarthy better than anyone." Albie hissed back at him. "Find whatever evidence he sloppily left out there to lead anyone that wants to look hard enough right back to us." His eyes grew dark. "Take care of it."

Clark focused his attention on pouring the freshly brewed coffee into the two mugs in front of him. He stole a quick glance at the living room where Lois was pacing in front of the couch, nervously toying with one of the buttons on her jacket.

He shouldn't have been surprised to find her on his doorstep this morning. He hadn't expected her to show up before the sun had finished rising, but he had expected some sort of reaction once the shock of his revelation wore off, and she processed everything.

He had been dumbfounded last night when she had laughed him off, not taking him seriously. He still wasn't entirely sure what had made him do it. But there was no backtracking now. All that was left to do was work through what this meant for his relationship with Lois.

She was *here*.

That had to mean something, right?

He let out a sigh as he finished pouring the coffee into the mugs and turned to set the half-empty pot back on the coffeemaker. '*Here goes nothing*,' he thought to himself as he carried the two cups into the living room where Lois continued to pace.

"Coffee?" He handed her a mug.

"Thanks," Lois took the mug from him and then met his gaze briefly before making her way to the couch. Her gaze remained on the inside of her mug as she took her seat on the far end of the sofa.

Clark set his mug down on the coffee table and then turned to Lois, who was looking everywhere but at him. "I'm guessing you're not into the whole talking thing right now?"

"I'm thinking," Lois answered softly, reaching over to set her own mug down on the table.

"About?" Clark prompted, catching her gaze for a half-minute before she turned away. He let out a deep breath, "Superman was only meant to be a disguise. I never expected..." he caught himself, unable to finish the thought because he knew to Lois, Superman had been *much* more than hair gel and spandex.

"Never expected...me to figure it out?" Lois arched an eyebrow at him. "Or never expected to tell me?"

"Lois, it wasn't like that," Clark admonished, shaking his head.

"Then, what was it?" Lois demanded, running her hand against her forehead. "I've gone over and over it in my head, trying to rationalize how I could have missed something so huge and why someone I thought I knew better than anyone would spend the better part of almost two years lying to me and making me believe he was two different people." She shrugged her shoulders and stammered, "Cl...I mean, what do I even call you?"

"Same thing you've always called me..." Clark shook his head in dismay. "I'm still Clark. The suit...Superman was just a disguise I wore so I could help people in need." He lowered his head in his hands, "I never meant for things to get so complicated."

Lois folded her arms over her chest, "Like faking your death for two days?"

"I panicked," Clark looked back up at her. "I didn't know what to do. I heard the shot, and then the next thing I knew, I just froze and played dead. I'm sorry. Everything – my whole life was over in an instant. I spent the next two days trying to find a way out of that mess." He held up his index finger and thumb, "I was this close to telling you before I found Dr. Hamilton's research."

"Lucky for Professor Hamilton," Lois mused for a moment. He wasn't sure if she was being genuine or not but chose not to question it. To his relief, she didn't push the issue with him, instead choosing to dredge up another of his deceptions, "And I'm guessing the pheromone didn't *really* affect you?"

Clark blushed, recalling the time he'd taken advantage of the opportunity presented to him after being tortured by Lois for two days. "No," was all he could manage to respond with before Lois changed direction.

"What about the press conference?"

"Press conference?" Clark's brows furrowed, and he looked back at her with a questioning gaze.

"The one you called after the Diana Stride fiasco?" Lois prompted him.

"Oh, *that* press conference," he let out a soft chuckle.

"Both you and Superman were at the conference," her

eyebrow arched as she stared him down, "or were you?"

"Mom's 3-D laser and a recorded speech," Clark answered with the slump of his shoulders. "I honestly had no idea what to do at the time. That was all mom's idea."

"Your mom's a pretty smart woman," Lois mused, seeming to relax for a moment. She took a long pause for what felt like an eternity and then turned back to him, "So, the weird errands in the middle of a conversation, disappearing without any notice..."

"I'm not very good at coming up with excuses to leave. I hate lying. Never was any good at it,"

"And why you had Superman's globe," She contemplated aloud. "I never could understand why you would steal something like that."

He hung his head, "I wasn't sure how to tell you...everything...back then."

"I'm trying to wrap my head around this...every conversation I've had about you...with you..." He smiled at her, and she glared at him, "It's not funny,"

"I didn't say anything," He blushed, knowing full-well his face was already speaking for him.

"You smirked," She challenged, crossing her arms over her chest as she let out a light huff. He wasn't sure how many more questions she would come up with, but so far, none of his responses had resulted in her running out the door. That had to count for something, right?

"So, why now?" Lois finally asked.

Clark shrugged his shoulders, "I was tired of lying." He scooted himself toward the middle of the couch and placed a hand on hers. "I've been going over this for months...trying to find the right way to tell you." He let out an aggravated sigh, "I have *hated* lying to you, Lois."

Lois toyed with the lint on her lap and then looked up at him with a troubled expression, "So, where do we go from here?"

"I don't know," He responded softly. "How mad are you?"

She seemed to think about it for a moment, "I don't know,"

"You don't know?" He asked in confusion.

"No, I don't," She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm mad one minute, and then I'm curious the next. It's just a lot. I get why you lied at first, and I understand why you probably felt like you had to keep the secret last year what with Lex and Trask but... for almost two years? Everything I thought was one way is..."

"...different," He finished her thought for her.

"Yes," She reached up and took his glasses off, folding them in her palm.

"What?" He asked.

She reached up and mussed with his hair for a moment, "Just trying to see what I missed...for a year."

"Well, I was trying to hide..." He said softly.

"So was I..." She said softly. A silence fell between them, and then Lois spoke up with a crack in her voice. "I won't tell anyone. I... You can trust me."

"I know, Lois," he reached his hand over to caress her cheek. "I never thought you'd do something like that."

"Then what was it?" she asked, looking back at him. "I mean, why...for two years?"

"I have always kept this part of my life hidden, Lois. *Always*," he answered cautiously. "Especially after everything that happened with Trask...and Luthor." His hand fell, and he let out a deep sigh, "I was afraid of making you a target."

"I'm already a target," Lois acknowledged.

"I know," he buried his head in his hands. "I never wanted this. I just...I wanted to help. That's all." His brow furrowed. "Unfortunately, by helping, I've put a target on my back. Every criminal or wannabe criminal is hell-bent on proving themselves by drawing Superman out – usually by hurting you or someone I care about."

The guarded look she'd had on her face earlier had

disappeared, and her features softened as she looked back at him. “But you stopped them.”

“Yeah,” he nodded his head, “But not without risk. Everyone I care about. Everyone I love is a target. This secret—It’s not something I could share with just anyone.”

“But, you shared it with me?” Lois prompted, tightening her hand around his.

“Of course,” Clark turned to her, brushing his hand against her cheek. “After how close we’ve gotten... Being Superman has cost me a lot over the last few years. I couldn’t take the risk of losing you too.”

“This secret—It’s not something I could share with just anyone,” Clark explained gently. Lois could hear the heartbreak behind his voice.

“But, you shared it with me?” Lois reached her hand over to take his in her palm.

“Of course,” Clark turned to her, brushing his hand against her cheek. “After how close we’ve gotten... Being Superman has cost me a lot over the last few years. I couldn’t take the risk of losing you too.”

“What?” She squeezed his hand, silently willing him to continue.

“I love you,” he whispered hoarsely before closing the remaining distance between them. He released her hand with his and then moved both hands to cup her face, and his lips found hers. A whisper of a kiss brushed against her lips, and she heard a moan escape her throat. He pulled back, trying to break off the kiss, and she snaked her hand around the back of his head, pulling him back to her.

One kiss became four then eight until she lost count, sinking back against the soft cushions of the couch as his solid frame pressed against hers. Her insides went numb, forgetting the hundred thousand reasons she had given herself to keep her guard up.

It didn’t matter.

She was a goner, and she knew it.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him toward her as she felt her way up his broad shoulders. His hands moved down the side of her face, outlining the frame of her face with her hands as his lips devoured hers. The passion she’d felt from the time their lips first met multiplied ten-fold as he poured his soul into the act of kissing her.

“I love you, Lois,” He murmured against her lips. His hand cupped her cheek, running his hand through her hair. “I’ve always loved you.”

The confession reached Lois Lane’s ears, and she stilled in his arms, suddenly unconvinced of how to react. Her mind flashed back to the last time he had made such a declaration to her. She felt her mind go blank as she recalled the painful lie she had used to push him away for fear she would be forced to confront the truth she had buried for so long. A tear escaped the corner of her eyes, and she let out a muffled sob, tearing herself away from him for fear she would repeat her mistakes if she wasn’t careful.

Reconciling that at the time she had been crushing Clark’s heart with a brutal blow, she had been simultaneously doing the same to Superman felt like a sharp stab in the heart. Not only had she lied and dashed his heart into two, but then she’d turned around and begged his alter-ego for a chance with him as an ‘ordinary man’ – unbeknownst to her she had just turned down that ordinary man.

Would it always be like this? A bitter pill of reality, she would be forced to face when she realized the depth of her own arrogance and his deception? There had been a time she would have welcomed the declaration of love with open arms and ridden off into the sunset with him without a care in the world. But that had been before she had not only come to terms with the torch she

had carried for the caped hero but also discovered her very real feelings for her partner.

Merging the two as one felt like an impossible feat. Could she even declare such a deep devotion when there was still so much she didn’t know about him? On the one hand, she felt like she knew him better than anyone, but on the other, she felt as if he was a stranger.

“Lois?”

She held a hand up and backed away from him, unshed tears filling her eyes as she turned to leave. She felt the brisk cold tingle against her face as she held back the tears that threatened to become too much for her. She reached the end of the stairs and rushed to her Jeep, keys in hand, and ready to jump into the solace of her vehicle and drive away as fast as she could.

It wasn’t that easy. It was never that easy. Lois let out a choked out sob as she thrust her key towards the locked door of her Jeep, searching desperately for the small opening which would allow her to climb inside and escape the intensity of the hard truth she was struggling to swallow. Her body ached in agony, flashing the heated memory through her mind as she struggled to hold her hand steady. The heat of Clark’s breath against hers and her body pressed against his lingered in the forefront of her mind. She clamped her eyes closed, banishing the irrational pleas from her.

She wanted to be with him—almost desperately. No, she *needed* to be with him. It was like breathing. Something — someone she had become so reliant on she couldn’t imagine not having him here with her. He was her best friend, her partner—and now maybe so much more. Yet, as much as she yearned for that closeness, a part of him – a huge part - was a stranger to her. Reconciling the superpowered hero that leaped tall buildings in a single bound and lifted rockets into space with the naïve farm boy from Kansas that challenged her on all fronts proved to be more difficult than she could have ever imagined.

Everything felt so overwhelming as she worked through the intensity at which the spark between her and Clark ignited almost instinctually. It had been intoxicating. Almost like a drug she so desperately needed to get a fix of. It all swirled within her like a hurricane. The breathtaking joy mixed with the gut-wrenching pain of allowing herself to be that vulnerable.

Trusting herself to be that vulnerable brought back the painful memories of the mistakes from her past and the bitter reminder of just how hard it was to trust someone with her most vulnerable moments. The last time she gave into such emotions, she had been met with betrayal and the agonizing humiliation of having to endure the heart-wrenching pain after her trust had been broken so completely.

Lois finally fit the key into the keyhole, and she felt a sigh of relief wash over her as the key slipped inside its home with ease. There. She could finally get out of here and... ‘*And what?*’ her internal musings demanded as she let out a frustrated whimper. Just then, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her from behind, holding her tightly in their embrace. An involuntarily shudder escaped her throat as she felt the warmth encircle her and she began to cry.

“Lois ...” Clark called softly, bending toward her ear as he turned her around. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry.” The words escaped her throat in between the uncontrollable sobs. She pulled back and looked into his face. She started to cry harder. She let him hold her, but couldn’t bring herself to use her voice again, for fear that once her voice escaped her lips, there would be no stopping herself. The thunderstorm of emotions would finally escape, and there would be nothing left unscathed and exposed from the raw emotions that were threatening to overtake her at that moment.

Lois leaned into him, reaching up to grip the collar to his shirt with her hand as if it would save her from the raw emotions tumbling from within.

As the tears fell, all of the emotion that she'd been holding inside spilled out, and before she knew it, she had laid it all out for him. "I lied." She repeated the confession again. This time with more strength in her voice. "That day in the park when you ... I had been lying to myself for months and trying to pretend it wasn't there."

Clark attempted to cut her off, shaking his head, "Lois, that was nearly a year ago. I told you then..."

"No, no, no..." The words continued to flow out of Lois's mouth, ignoring his attempt to offer her an out. "I nearly ruined everything, and I keep doing it. I keep running, and I don't know why. I just can't bear the thought of not having you in my life because you mean too much to me and..."

Clark cupped her face with his hand, holding her close to him and brushing at her tears with his thumbs. "Please don't cry. I'm not going anywhere." A smirk crossed his face, "No matter how many times you slam the door in my face."

Lois let out a soft chuckle, wiping the tears from her face, "That's not funny."

"Look, I know this is a lot to take in," Clark whispered, brushing his hand against her cheek. "for both of us."

"You could say that," Lois reasoned aloud, taking a step back. "I just don't know how to reconcile everything I thought was real with...this new version of everything."

"I'm still the same person, Lois. I've never been anyone else with you." Clark explained, taking her hand in his.

"But I still saw you as two different people," she reminded him.

"So, where does that leave us?" Clark asked, looking down at her hand in his.

"I just need some time...to sort through all this." Lois responded with a tortured expression.

"I understand," he responded with a sigh.

"Do you?" She eyed him cautiously, feeling as if she had crushed his heart in two with her plea for time to think.

"Lois, I'm not naïve enough to think you wouldn't need to take a step back after something this big." He reached out to cup her cheek. "I get it. Take as much time as you need."

"Okay," she relaxed, feeling a small smile crept across her face, "So, I'll see you at Tony's later?"

His eyebrows rose, and his forehead creased as he looked back at her in surprise, "Tony's?"

She gave a noncommittal shrug and nodded, "You promised me lunch at that...supposedly best sandwich shop around, remember?" She arched an eyebrow at him and asked, "You're not backing out, are you?"

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Dan Scardino took a sip from his mug of coffee, watching as the team Detective Ryder had put together were combing through Mayson's automobile. He turned to where Mayson was sitting in the corner, tapping her hand nervously against the table in front of her.

He let out a chuckle and asked, "You act like you've got drugs in there or something. You okay?"

Mayson looked up, shaking her head as she turned back to him. "No, nothing like that. It's silly, really."

"Try me," he extended his arms and pointed at himself, gesturing that he was open to the challenge.

"I've had that car since I got my promotion here in Metropolis. I did everything like I was supposed to. Check the oil, rotate the tires... It was my pride and joy, and yet here we are watching it be taken apart after having its insides melted and charred by some punk with no hobby." Mayson explained, her voice grew more and more agitated by the second.

"I know this can't be easy, Mayson. I mean, I know they say you're lucky you weren't hurt or weren't in the car and that's

supposed to make you feel better, but it really doesn't. It was an attack on you and your possessions, and it's okay to not be okay with that."

"I wasn't asking for permission," Mayson quipped, leaning back in her chair.

"I know," Scardino nodded. "I wasn't giving it." A silent lull fell between them, and Scardino cleared his throat, "So, I may be totally off base here, and if I am, I apologize profusely, but I couldn't help but tell there was quite the bit of tension going on between you and those reporters last night. Is there something going on there I need to be aware of?"

Mayson shrugged her shoulders, "I honestly don't know,"

"You don't know?" Scardino frowned.

"Look, Clark and I used to be involved. Lois was obviously jealous and found a way to wedge herself between us. It's in the past." Mayson's voice cracked as she spoke. "Now, we're trying to put the pieces back together."

"I, uh, I'm sorry," Scardino apologized. "I had no idea."

"It's no big deal." Mayson shrugged. "I mean, I guess I always knew she would be a problem, but I was kidding myself thinking we could be friends." Mayson tapped her hand against the table. "She's an okay person, and I guess she's good enough at her job. Clark and I are working through it, though."

Scardino's eyebrows furrowed at that comment, trying to follow what Mayson was saying. "Wait, I thought Clark was with Lois?"

"Oh, God, no," Mayson chuckled with the shake of her head. "Clark and Lois would never work together. She's always jumping into disaster after disaster and way too high maintenance for him."

Scardino smiled, leaning back in his seat, "Sounds like a woman after my own heart."

"Well, you know, two peas in a pod and all that," Mayson said with a smile.

Chapter 11: Fall to Pieces

Lois Lane felt as if she was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders as she made her way through the corridor leading to her apartment with Bill Henderson leading the way. She did her best to put on a strong front – not daring to let Metropolis' finest see her at her weakest. Despite the personal turmoil she had been struggling through with Clark this morning she still had not one but *two* stalkers to deal with on top of the investigation she was working on. She didn't have time not to be okay.

"Are you sure you're okay doing this now?" Bill Henderson stopped outside the door to her apartment. "We don't have to..."

He was cut off by her quick response and a shake of the head, "I'm *fine*. Let's just get this over with."

He sighed and handed her the key she had lent him the night before and then stepped aside while she worked her way through the seven locks on her front door. She released the last lock and then took a breath, preparing herself for what faced her on the other side, twisting the knob of her front door and pushing the door open.

She hadn't really been expecting anything. Maybe some yellow tape or a big sign that marked the area as 'safe from stalker' but there was nothing. No sign that her life had been turned upside down over the last twelve hours or even any sign her apartment had been filled by Henderson and his men, rummaging through her most private possessions attempting to find the culprits behind the unwanted 'gifts' that kept showing up.

"Everything should be back where it belongs," Henderson said, gesturing to the open apartment in front of them. "If not, please let me know. I do try to have these guys be as conscientious as they can with what they're doing in these situations.

"I'm sure everything's fine," Lois responded with a non-committal shrug. She offered Bill Henderson and quick half-smile. "Now what am I supposed to sign?"

He pointed to the clipboard on her countertop. “Don’t sign until you’ve had a chance to go over everything. You can either bring it by the station or I can swing by and pick it up.”

“Thanks,” Lois nodded, looking around the room.

“You sure you’re okay?” Henderson asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Just tired,” Lois explained, offering him a fake yawn to hold off any further questions.

He nodded and pointed to the window. “Well, I’ve got a patrol out front. If you’re going anywhere out of the ordinary, go ahead and give the guys a heads up so they can make arrangements with their rotation.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” Lois offered him a warm smile. “But thank you.”

“Try to stay out of trouble,” Henderson smirked and then turned to leave.

Lois let out a heavy sigh as she locked the door behind him. She had been fighting against her inner musings all morning trying to decide what to make of the royal mess she had uncovered. It felt as if her entire world had been tilted on its axis in one moment.

Not only had she been dealt the double-sided card of juggling the threat of two stalkers but she also found herself unable to turn to the one person she always went to. Her emotions had sent her through a tidal wave of ups and downs throughout the morning as she tried to figure out where she stood on everything. On the one hand, she still had so many emotions to work through when it came to Clark’s revelations – both of them. On the other, a part of her wanted to throw caution to the wind and dive headfirst into whatever this was between them – lies and misdirection be damned.

He asked her where they stood and the truth was she really didn’t know. It was like dating a stranger and her best friend in one. All of a sudden everything she had taken for granted in knowing Clark better than anyone had been shattered.

Could she work through it?

Yes.

Did she want to?

Yes.

Would they ever be able to rebuild the trust they had once had between them?

She couldn’t come up with an answer for that one.

So now here she was in this weird sense of limbo uncertain which way to turn or how to feel about the one part of her life she had felt so certain about just a few hours ago. Thankfully, he appeared to be okay with her request for time to process everything. Still, she had to wonder just how much time he would be willing to give her.

She let out an aggravated sigh as she moved through the apartment, turning on the television in order to have some background noise to help drown out her thoughts. She had been okay earlier – asking questions and getting answers to the events that popped in her brain that she could now obtain the truth behind each strange occurrence that never quite added up. It had been refreshing to see him open up so completely and be willing to answer each question.

Then came the second revelation.

It shouldn’t have caught her by surprise. She had suspected it for at least a few months. Ever since he’d asked her out. She’d wondered if the speech he’d given after her almost-wedding to Lex hadn’t been an attempt to allow things to go back to the status quo. Still, the declaration of love never came with the request for a date or even in the more intimate settings they had found themselves in.

A declaration of love was never easy for Lois to handle. Her history with relationships both platonic and romantic had been marred with broken promises and betrayal which left her guarded when it came to romantic liaisons. Add to that the fact that she had

very real feelings for both his dual identities as separate men and now had to find a way to merge the two into one while navigating through what she already knew to be uncharted territory, she found herself at odds with herself.

Mixed beneath the hurt and anger she had first felt upon her discovery of his dual identities was the rational part of herself that continued to call out to her chaotic thoughts that opted to linger on thoughts of betrayal and hurt and instead try to rationalize it all. It wasn’t as if Clark had sought out to deceive her. He himself had admitted he never intended for Superman to become more than anything but a suit and hair gel that showed up to save the day. But which version of himself was the real Clark Kent? The farmboy from Kansas that wormed his way into her heart and challenged her every step of the way or the super-powered being that had saved her life more times than she could care to recall. Neither one seemed really complete without the other.

<<“I’m still the same person, Lois. I’ve never been anyone else with you.”

“But I still saw you as two different people.” >>

<<“I love you, Lois. I’ve always loved you.”>>

“Superman has been on the scene with first responders helping assess a mudslide that has buried the Metropolis Bridge. Residents are cautioned to take alternate routes as authorities assess the situation. An emergency call has been placed with...”

Lois reached for the remote and muted the newscaster’s monologue mid-sentence with the click of a button. She let out a long breath, staring at the image of Superman – ‘No Clark’ she reminded herself – covered in red and orange clay from the waist down, rummaging through the piles of clay and mud to help dig out drivers and passengers from the mudslides. The image cut to an 18-wheeler on its side with its front-end dented in. She said a silent prayer as she watched the scene unfold, forgetting her own personal issues for the moment as she watched the superhero work through a different set of eyes for the first time.

A trickle of tears began to fall down her cheeks and she let out a soft whimper, unsure what to make of the sudden rush of emotions that had overtaken her.

<<“I love you, Lois. I’ve always loved you.”>>

<<“I’m still the same person, Lois. I’ve never been anyone else with you.”

“But I still saw you as two different people.” >>

She looked to the footage once more, watching the tender expression crossing Clark’s face as he cradled a young toddler that couldn’t be more than four. Lois stared in awe at the image she had to have seen a thousand times before. Superman coming to the rescue and dropping the public façade of aloof hero and showing glimpses into his personality and self – glimpses of Clark. Lois watched as Clark’s eyes soften, focusing on the young child in his arms as he flew them out of the wreckage.

He was wrong.

He wasn’t just himself with her.

He had always been Clark. She had just been too blind to see past flashy costume and realize the connection. She had observed the similarities in passing but never connected the two. Not really. Perhaps that had been the beauty of the disguise?

She watched the footage in rapt attention, searching Clark’s features for a sign that would hint to her what it had been she had missed for so long, but she found nothing. She continued to watch the footage in silence, contemplating her next move as she watched Clark move each passenger to safety.

Clark let out a deep sigh as he felt the water from the shower wash over him, shedding the remaining residue from the mud avalanche that had nearly taken out the Metropolis bridge. The eighteen-wheeler that had collided with the rough terrain – resulting in the avalanche of mud, clay and gravel burying the drivers on the bridge – had been quick enough to rescue. The

remaining vehicles and bridge structure were another story.

He watched as the mixture of red and brown residue swirled around the drain before reaching again for the soap to help rid himself of the remaining mud residue. He'd spent nearly two hours with the first responders, helping unbury the unsuspecting drivers from the mud and clay that had invaded their vehicles. Then he'd spent another two hours with the engineering team that had been called out to help remove the mud avalanche from the bridge without putting undue stress on the support beams.

Now he had just under half an hour to get changed and meet Lois at Tony's and hopefully figure out where their very fragile relationship stood.

<<“*I just don't know how to reconcile everything I thought was real with...this new version of everything.*”

“*I'm still the same person, Lois. I've never been anyone else with you.*”

“*But I still saw you as two different people.*” >>

<<“*I just need some time...to sort through all this.*”>>

The conversation from this morning replayed in the back of Clark Kent's mind as he finished drying off from the shower. He let out a deep-hearted sigh as he recalled the conversation from earlier. In one impulsive moment, he had succeeded in dashing his fragile relationship with Lois and now everything felt as if it were hanging by a single thread, ready to break at any moment.

He knew it had been the right thing to do. Continuing their relationship without telling her everything would be foolhardy at best. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if his timing could have been planned out better. Dropping a bombshell on her like this after the turbulent events that had transpired couldn't have helped him any.

He knew she would need time.

He knew he couldn't expect to just pick up as if nothing had changed – because everything had changed.

Still, he found himself battling the inner doubts on whether he had just pushed the envelope too far by admitting how he *really* felt – had *always* felt – on top of his revelation of keeping dual identities. The last time he had put himself out there like that she had pushed him away. It seemed to be the pattern in their relationship that was as consistent as Lois' tendency to find danger wherever she went. Every time they got closer he would find himself having to save her from her impulse to run and hide. He had the same tendency, it seemed. Moving from place to place and never setting down roots or letting anyone get too close for fear he might be exposed. That had all been before Lois, before Superman, and before Metropolis. Now, he couldn't imagine his life with any of those things. He just hoped he still had a choice in the matter.

Sean McCarthy didn't trust anyone – least of all the criminals he had been locked away with at Metropolis Penitentiary. His trust for his contract employer was wearing thinner by the day as well. He already knew Albie was a weasel who would turn on him in a second. Gables he was sure He ran a ragged hand through his thin hair, contemplating his next move.

The letters.

Why hadn't he thought to be more careful about the letters?

Diego had of course been the reason they had made their way out of the mailroom to begin with, but he had stupidly assumed the comradery he had built with his former cell mate would provide him some sort of cover. How wrong he had been.

A dark expression crossed over his face as he dialed the seven digit number on his phone. Two rings and he heard his traitorous cellmate answer, “Yeah, what do you want?”

“What do you think I want, old friend?” McCarthy felt a bitter bile rise in his throat as he choked the word ‘friend’ out.

“Don't get belligerent with me, McCarthy, you and I both know we're out for ourselves on this job.” Diego snapped back

with a mocking laugh, “Hope you said farewell to the old lady.”

With that Diego hung up. McCarthy let out a roar as he threw the phone across the room.

Mayson felt a rush of adrenaline run through her as she watched the wheels in Agent Dan Scardino's head begin to turn. Clark would be thrilled to finally be rid of that needy partner of his so he could finally focus on the more important things – like their relationship. The DEA agent seemed nice enough and he wasn't horrible to be around. Lois would thank her once she had a chance to unhook her claws from Clark – who was so obviously *not* interested in her.

Why hadn't she thought of this before? It was brilliant. It was so obvious Lois Lane was desperately in need of a persuasive distraction. Mayson did her best to keep her cool as she continued to plant the seeds.

If she played her cards right, her problems with Lois Lane would completely disappear and then she and Clark could continue with their lives – without the intrusion of a certain unwanted reporter. She couldn't be too obvious though. This would take delicacy and precision to ensure Dan Scardino's interest in Lois lane

She could feel her heart patter against her chest as she fought to keep the inner smile she held inside from spreading. As much as she had resented the agent's presence upon his arrival yesterday she was growing more and more akin to him. Ridding her and Clark's lives of Lois Lane would be the first step in restoring her relationship with Clark. He had to see what a thorn in his side Lois had become.

“You know, Lois really is the spontaneous type.” Mayson offered her advice with a smooth smile, sipping from her Styrofoam cup of hot liquid. “A spur of the moment grand gesture would probably go a long way to making the right impression.”

Dan looked back at her with a smirk, “Since when do you care so much about Lois Lane's personal life? I thought you hated her.”

“I don't *hate* her,” Mayson argued with a shrug. “I just...I was upset about having lost my evidence and having my car blown up and then losing my witness and it all seemed to stem back to Lois.”

“Uh-huh,” Dan cocked an eyebrow at her. “That wasn't the story you were shouting last night.”

“I have had time to calm down since then,” Mayson responded then paused for a moment before continuing. “Look, if you're not interested, I'm sure she'll find someone eventually. I just thought you two might work well together with you both having similar personalities is all.”

Dan seemed to be contemplating the last remark before he cleared his throat, “I'm here to get McCarthy put back behind bars and that's it. I don't mix business with pleasure.”

Mayson felt her entire face fall with disappointment at his remark and then saved face with a sly smile, “I suppose there's always a first time for everything, right?”

He offered her a half-smile, “You're very persistent.”

“Can't blame a girl for trying, right?”

“I don't do match-making.” Dan said, shaking his head.

Mayson felt her smile fall as she stared back at Dan, the crack in her voice escaped her throat as she responded, “Match making?”

Clark ran a hand through his hair for what felt like the umpteenth time as he paced on the corner where Tony's Steaks met a small boutique on Third. He tossed around the idea of taking his pacing to the roof but quickly dismissed the thought. He let out a deep sigh as he buried his hands in his pockets, uncertain what to expect from this...whatever it was.

It was five till and he still hadn't seen or heard from Lois. Though it wasn't unusual for Lois, the silence and lack of any sign of Lois' impending arrival only further amplified the doubts that continued to nag at the back of his mind. What-if scenarios that

played a game of cat and mouse with a neverending loop in which he couldn't escape.

Not only had he confessed the biggest secret he had gone to great lengths to protect since before he could even remember, but he had also unveiled how he really felt and quite possibly burdened Lois with just enough to destroy any chance he might have had at salvaging their relationship.

A million thoughts had run through his mind over the course of the morning as he had attempted to make sense out of the events from the morning. He still felt he was no closer to understanding any of it than he had just a few hours before.

The sound of a door slamming a block away caught his attention and he jumped, slightly startled as he pulled himself back to the present. He let out an uneasy breath, willing his inner doubts to bury themselves back where they had slithered from and then turned the corner to meet Lois where she had parked.

'Here goes nothing,' he thought to himself.

Tony's.

The place had been everything she had thought.

The windows could have used a good cleaning and the décor was dreadful.

Yet as unwelcoming as the atmosphere was at first glance the food had been out of this world.

A smile crossed Lois' face as she took a sip from her water and placed a used napkin in the red basket her sandwich had once sat in. She glanced across the booth to where Clark sat, finishing up his own sandwich. She had been nervous when she had first arrived – unsure if this was a good idea. She had gone over and over the conversation from this morning, trying to make sense out of everything.

Still, the more she ran through it in her mind the more questions that arose. Should she bring up the rescue from earlier? Should she wait for him to bring it up? How was this supposed to work when they were in public with people that didn't know about his alter-ego?

The sound of Clark clearing his throat and pushing his own red basket away put a stop to her internal ramblings. He reached a hand up to readjust his glasses and asked, "So, what did you think?"

A smile peeked its way across the corners of Lois' lips and she tapped her hand against the tabletop, "Okay, I have to admit I had my doubts but you were right. This place can make up an incredible steak melt."

He felt the corners of his mouth twitch as a grin threatened to take over his face, "Can you say that again?"

"They make up an incredible steak melt?" she asked.

"No, the whole 'you're right' part." He grinned back at her.

She tossed the paper wrapper from her straw at him, "Ha, ha, very funny." Lois felt her spirits lift as she looked back at the half-smile spread across Clark's face. It was a long cry from the tense expression he had worn earlier when he had arrived. She suspected part of his mood had to do with the rescue from earlier, but with how uncertain she felt about everything at the moment, she wasn't sure if she should even ask. She opted to stew in silence and try and make the most of the afternoon. This was uncharted territory. A part of being in the know of possibly the biggest secret she'd ever uncovered. Maybe she could ask him later – when they weren't in a crowded restaurant.

'Later,' the thought rolled around in her mind as a half-smile spread across her face.

Stanley Gables poured over the blueprints of S.T.A.R. Labs the next morning, turning to where Sean McCarthy was standing next to him and then pointing to the plans laid out on the table, drawing an invisible line with his finger. "See the basement? S.T.A.R. Labs has a sub-zero chamber there. That's where they

store the virus."

"How do we get to it?" McCarthy asked, leaning over Gables' shoulder.

"There's an air vent that leads directly to the chamber." Gables answered tapping at the chamber he was referring to on the blueprints. "Then, once I have the virus, we're unstoppable."

"Exactly what makes this virus so special?" McCarthy asked.

"It's airborne and it's lethal. And there's no antidote." An eerie calm came over Gables' face as he spoke. "Anyone who comes in contact it will die a slow painful death."

"Except us of course..." McCarthy reminded him, as if to point out the obvious. Sudden death was not something he or his comrades had signed up for when taking on this job.

"Of course. You'll be wearing protective suits." Gables shrugged McCarthy off but Sean still wasn't entirely convinced when he caught an uneasy expression cross Albie's face.

"That air vent's pretty narrow. Nobody in this room's gonna fit."

"That's right. We're still missing one member of our team. Your old cellmate." Gables turned to McCarthy with a good-natured smile.

"Big Buster." Sean answered, recalling the name before Gables could continue.

Gables nodded, turning to Albie, "Albie's going to pay him a visit today."

"Mr. Gables, are you sure there's no other way to get even with Metropolis?" Albie asked with an uneasy tone. "What I mean is... exposing *everyone* to a deadly virus seems... I don't know... a little severe."

"Exactly." Gables responded, reaching over to roll up the plans. "Metropolis will reap the excruciating pain of this virus and I will have my revenge." He turned to Albie with a dark expression, "And no one better dare get in my way."

Chris Gomez inched his arms up and down the back of the metal chair he was tied to, listening intently with his ear pressed against the thin wall between the room he was in and where his kidnappers were plotting their evil deeds.

"It's airborne and it's lethal. And there's no antidote... Anyone who comes in contact it will die a slow painful death." The muffled voice reached Gomez's ears and he felt his blood run cold.

There appeared to be some back and forth about retrieving another member of their resurrected team and then he heard the high-pitched whine from the weasel that had brought him to this hell.

"Mr. Gables, are you sure there's no other way to get even with Metropolis? What I mean is... exposing *everyone* to a deadly virus seems... I don't know... a little severe."

Gomez lifted his head away from the wall, jiggling the plastic binds he was in, hoping to make some sort of headway in escaping the living hell he was in. He heard a door slam and let out a muffled shout from behind the duct tape covering his mouth. He had to keep trying.

Dan Scardino tapped his foot against the metal foot of the chair he was sitting in, waiting for Detective Ryder to review the findings from yesterday's trip to the impound lot. He had spent most of the day with Mayson, listening to her side of things in what felt like a tortured romance that would show up on the Soaps he would catch himself watching or even the guilty pleasure romantic novels he dove into from time by time. Another thing he could thank Jenna for he supposed. He never could tell her 'no.'

A sad smile crossed his face as he recalled the many nights he'd spent with his late fiancée wondering who the newly branded Jason Morgan would become in the twist of fate that had been dealt to the character in the latest General Hospital sweeps plot.

He never would have dreamed so much could change in his life with just one person, but Jenna had proven just how impactful one person could be on a life. He still felt the dark emptiness in his bones from where the love she held for him had filled him inside and out.

There would never be anyone like Jenna.

He knew that.

Though he often wondered what fate had in store for him next. He had since dated, of course. Nothing too serious given his tendency to move from place to place and, of course, not being able to divulge the details of the job put a crimp on any relationship with someone that didn't get it.

He often wondered if he would ever find someone that could get it – accept him for who he was.

Most guys would rather die right there than admit to a fondness for romance novels or old soap operas but he took pride in that part of himself. It was something he discovered in his relationship with Jenna and he would forever cherish that.

He hadn't been completely sure how to react to the subtle nudging Mayson had been giving him to 'make a move' on Lois Lane – someone he wasn't entirely convinced was available. Though if she was, he wasn't entirely against the idea either. He sighed, not wanting to spend too much time thinking about the twisted pretzel of deceit that he'd listened to the day before. He was here to do a job. Find McCarthy and get him back behind bars where he belonged. That was it.

"Agent Scardino," the door opened and Detective Ryder stepped into the office with a file at least two-inches thick. "You seem to be making a habit of dropping by. Do I need to get you a parking space out front?"

"Well, it would save some on the parking fees," Scardino responded with a good-natured grin. "With those fees you could carve the prison out of gold."

"Well, our city maintenance takes a hit from time to time. We've got to compensate where we can," Detective Ryder responded, taking a seat behind his desk.

"Yeah, that's right. Superman's on the city patrol with you guys too, ain't he?" Scardino grew thoughtful recalling his brief run-in with the hero. Unfortunately he'd been preoccupied with not getting shot and been unable to introduce himself properly but he was sure, given the size of the city, he'd have another chance.

"Unofficially," Ryder corrected.

"Of course." Scardino shrugged his shoulders and sat up. "So, a little birdie told me you got some prints back on the work up you did on ADA Drake's car?"

"Excluding prints from ADA Drake, yourself, and our team we found three different sets of prints on the outside and two different sets under the motor where the car bomb was planted." Ryder set out a photograph of two individuals. "Either of these guys look familiar to you?"

The first one was the driver's license of a man by the name of Albert Eugene Swanson and the other was a woman by the name of Marie Claire Williams. Neither of whom he had seen before. He let out a defeated sigh, hanging his head. He had been so sure McCarthy had been behind this.

"Are you sure there were no other prints?"

"We're sure," Ryder responded with a shrug. "This Marie is actually the ADA's assistant. I've sent a patrol to pick her up for questioning. The other guy we're not so sure."

Scardino pointed to the photos in front of him. "Can I get a copy of these?"

"Sure thing," Ryder nodded, standing up and turning to the copier behind him. A soft hum later and he was turning back to hand Scardino a copy of the driver's license photos of the two suspects.

"Thanks, Ryder." Scardino stood up, taking the photos with him.

"No, thank you," Ryder insisted. "This case has everyone jumpy. The sooner we can close it, the sooner we can get on some of the more pressing cases that have taken a backseat."

Scardino caught a glimmer of anxiety cross Ryder's face and he arched an eyebrow at him, "More pressing cases?"

"We had a few stalking incidents pop up over the last week."

"You talking about the ones with Lois Lane?" Scardino guessed, recalling the information he'd been privy to the previous morning.

"She's just one of them," Ryder admitted. "A judge and even our own Chief of Police got a threat just this morning."

Scardino paused, unsure if he was crossing a line in even asking but every instinct in him was screaming for more information. "Any chance I could get the names of the people that filed a complaint in the last week?" Ryder looked back at him uncertainly. "Look, I already know Lois Lane had two stalkers. If the other threats are connected to one of her stalkers I might be able to help bring him in if it's connected to McCarthy."

"McCarthy?" Ryder shook his head. "The guy died and came back to life just to stalk Metropolis' finest?"

"Stranger things have happened," Scardino responded with a cold expression. "You don't know this guy like I do. He's an animal. He will stalk, torture, and torment his victims just before putting them out of their misery. You have no idea what he's capable of."

Ryder looked at him for a long moment and then nodded, "I'll run it by Henderson and if he okays it, I'll get you a list."

"Thanks, Detective."

Chapter 12: Hands Tied

Clark fiddled with the pen in his hand, nonchalantly moving it between one finger and then another as he sat hunched over the edge of the conference room table as Perry went through the usual Monday morning spiel for the staff meeting. It was mostly the same thing Perry always went over every Monday. Circulation of the paper and whatever tidbit the executives wanted to pass along for the week.

This week's monologue, however, was lost on him as he scanned the newsroom for any sign of Lois. His mind kept drifting back to lunch the previous day and

<< "I've gone over and over it in my head, trying to rationalize how I could have missed something so huge and why someone I thought I knew better than anyone would spend the better part of almost two years lying to me and making me believe he was two different people. Cl...I mean, what do I even call you?" >>

The confession played through his mind most of yesterday afternoon and this morning as he attempted to come to terms with the rollercoaster of emotions he had put himself through after his confession to Lois.

<< "I just need some time...to sort through all this." >>

She had asked for time to work through things and he was willing to give it to her, but what he didn't know was where this left their relationship. She had agreed to have lunch with him yesterday but he had left afterward feeling even more confused on where things stood. That, coupled with her noticeable absence this morning, left him second-guessing every move.

He had contemplated flying over to her apartment but then quickly squashed the idea for fear it would come across as overbearing. He had promised to give her the space she needed to process everything. At the same time, he knew Lois' knack for getting into trouble and, given the threats from the stalker, it probably wasn't a bad idea to do a fly-by. Just as he had convinced himself of his decision he found himself second-guessing himself again.

'And what if she's not in trouble? Then you look like you're snooping and not giving her space. What then?'

Why oh why had he chosen now of all times for this revelation? Why couldn't he have planned it better? Wait until after the stalker had been caught? Then at least he could take comfort in the fact that she didn't have some creep lurking in the shadows while she shut him out.

<< "This secret—It's not something I could share with just anyone."

"But, you shared it with me?" >>

He quickly dismissed the thought, frowning at himself. Lois hadn't exactly shut him out, but she hadn't opened the door either. After lunch, she had hit him with the painful blow, reminding him just how deeply he had hurt her.

<< "I feel like I hardly know you."

"Lois, I'm still me."

"Are you?" >>

He knew it would take time for her to come to terms with the revelation, but the patience he had clinging to for the last year and a half seemed to be dwindling into ashes as he contemplated his next move. The heartfelt confession and anguish over his revelation cut him to the core.

<< "I get why you lied at first, and I understand why you probably felt like you had to keep the secret last year what with Lex and Trask but ... for almost two years? Everything I thought was one way is..."

"...different." >>

He glanced at the clock, spotting the late hour once more. He looked out to the newsroom and sighed when he saw the empty desk once more. Try as he might to give Lois the distance she had asked for, he couldn't just sit there – especially not when he knew there was someone lurking in the shadows with his or her sights on Lois.

If he was wrong then so be it, but if she was in danger he'd never forgive himself for not being there. He took a quick glance in Perry's direction and noticed he was just about done and his presence wouldn't be missed if he ducked out of the meeting a few minutes early anyway.

Two.

Two stalkers.

One – sociopathic killer.

One – unknown.

Lois Lane tapped her hand on the table she was seated at, trying to find anyone in the list of convicts that could possibly be behind the threats she had received. Not exactly how she had planned to spend her morning but then again what choice did she have?

Henderson had assured her that the Metropolis P.D. was making it a top priority to find McCarthy and bring him to justice but in the back of her mind she wondered just how much effort would be put forward on the second stalker if everyone was after McCarthy.

She let out a sigh, looking around the police department and spying Henderson speaking with Detective Ryder in the corner. She had skimmed through a dozen copies of mugshots from convicts and only a handful had the means and motive to pull something like this off.

Unfortunately, just about everyone had the motive.

It was the same with every convict she'd helped put behind bars.

Revenge for ruining their plans.

Revenge for putting them behind bars.

Revenge.

"You stalkin' me, Lane?" A voice came from behind her and she jumped when she heard the DEA Agent's sarcastic tone as he added, "Cuz a police station isn't exactly the best place."

Lois looked over her shoulder and groaned at the pompous DEA Agent's lame attempt at a joke. "What are you doing here,

Scardino? Run out of doughnuts already?"

"I'm more of a bagels guy myself," Scardino answered with a thumb pointing toward Henderson from a few feet away. "I don't guess these clowns drug you down here for a fourth in bridge." He pointed to the book in front of her. "Anything interesting?"

"Just a walk down memory lane," Lois said with a roll of her eyes. She still wasn't sure what to make of Scardino, but his information had panned out and having access to federal information on Sean McCarthy could only help. "Trying to come up with a list of potential stalkers."

He nodded, holding up a file in his hand, "I might have something that could help narrow the list down."

Mayson twiddled with a strand of her hair on her index finger and hummed to herself as she looked over the report the police had furnished her with after the second inspection of her car. She glared at the form with the newly discovered evidence circled in red.

A scowl crossed her face as she wondered just what she had done to end up in the cross-hairs of a known sociopath like Sean McCarthy. Her eyes drifted to the other name on the report with a grimace, tapping her fingertips against the table with a steady hum.

She could find no plausible explanation for why Mary would have had her fingerprints on the undercarriage of her car.

'Along with Sean McCarthy's,' she thought to herself bitterly.

She looked over at the empty desk from her office windows, feeling anger course through her as she realized how deeply she had been betrayed. She felt her hand clench and unclench and felt a tremor run through her wrist as she reached out for the cup of coffee in front of her. Unfortunately, balance and grip were not strengths she held at the moment as her coffee splattered across the desk, pouring hot liquid over the report she had been examining.

'Great.'

Clark soared through the morning sky, zeroing in on the Metropolis P.D. where he had been told to check after finding Lois' apartment empty. He let out a sigh of relief when he spotted her in one of the conference rooms with Dan Scardino and Bill Henderson. The officer standing guard outside the door was the same one that had been there the night he'd brought pizza over and stepped into this royal mess.

He steadied himself, pushing the memories from the last few days out of his mind, preparing to focus on whatever it was that had Lois not even bothering to show up at the Planet. He ducked into a nearby alley to change and, hopefully, get some answers.

Lois sifted through the file in front of her. "Who is this Marie Claire Williams?" She scrunched up her nose, looking at the name. "I've never heard of her."

"She's Mayson Drake's assistant," Bill Henderson supplied, and pointed a finger toward the precinct behind him. "Detective Ryder brought her in about an hour ago for questioning. Mayson's real tore up about it."

A knock came from the door and she jumped out of reflex, feeling her adrenaline pulse through her as she turned to the door and saw Clark standing in the doorway. She felt herself physically relax – realizing there was no boogeyman or potential stalker lurking outside the door. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to calm down from the rush of adrenaline before responding.

"Uh, come in," she motioned to him through the glass door.

He nodded and entered the room, closing the door behind him. "Sorry to drop by like this. I didn't see you at the Planet and got worried."

Lois nodded, recalling she had forgotten to call Perry this morning. "Yeah, I'm going to have to explain that one to the Chief later. Sorry."

"It's okay," he nodded, still standing in the doorway. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right after what happened

Saturday.”

“I’m okay,” she reassured with a weak smile, pointing to the vacant seat across from her. “I could actually use your help.”

“We’ve got a unit on her 24/7, Kent,” Henderson piped up to reassure him. “She’s in good hands.” He glanced at his watch, “I’m going to go run these names and see what we have on them. Lois, keep going through these and let me know if anything stands out. We still have that anonymous stalker to identify since this Marie isn’t it.”

“Marie?” Clark asked, taking the seat across from Lois.

“Mayson’s assistant is apparently one of the three people that had their fingerprints on the undercarriage of Mayson’s car.” Lois explained with a groan.

“And the other?” Clark ventured uncertainly.

“Sean McCarthy.” Scardino added smugly. “Apparently, he’s been getting his kicks off on sending threats to your partner while trying to kill ADA Drake.”

“Wait, *he’s* the one behind all those threats?” Clark asked.

“One of them,” Scardino answered before Lois could respond.

Lois thought she almost saw a glimmer of red in Clark’s eyes and had to double check to make sure he had not burned a hole in the wall behind Scardino’s head with how hard of a glare he directed in the DEA Agent’s direction. She blanched slightly, recalling the tidbit of information she hadn’t shared with Clark yet – given the preoccupation of his revelation taking over all conversations they had had over the last twenty-four hours.

“Apparently we’re not dealing with just one stalker, but *two*.” Lois explained carefully, noting the expression on Clark’s face shifting between surprise, concern and then annoyance as he stared down Scardino in silence.

“Two?” Clark practically choked out through his gritted teeth.

Lois squashed down the momentary guilt that rose up within her for not sharing that bit of news earlier and pressed forward as she explained, “Henderson has me going through some of the mugshots to see if anyone stands out as a potential suspect.”

“It could also be an accomplice of McCarthy’s that’s behind the threats too,” Scardino added. “It’s definitely his style.”

“Great,” Clark tapped his hand on the file in the middle of the table. “And what exactly does that do to help keep said potential accomplice from oh, I don’t know – including a third or fourth participant to this sick game they’re playing while you’re over here bragging about knowing Sean McCarthy *sooo* well?”

“Hey, the guy is an unpredictable animal but I know the way he thinks. I can’t produce miracles.” Scardino scoffed back at Clark. “What have you got?”

“Okay, that’s enough from both of you.” Henderson growled at the two of them. He looked at Scardino, “We’ve got every officer looking out for sightings of McCarthy but if he’s working with someone – anyone we need to find out who and fast.” He looked around the room prompting them for leads, “Any ideas?”

“McCarthy doesn’t have anyone he’d turn to outside the prison walls.” Scardino puffed out his chest. “Jenna and I made sure of that.”

“What about family?” Clark ventured, seeming to hold in his frustration as he spoke.

“He’s got a mother up north but I doubt he’s going to be that cliché and run to his mom’s for cover.” Scardino retorted, taking a bite from the muffin in front of him.

“Well, it’s a start at least,” Lois said with a sigh, reaching for her cup of coffee.

“Unless you have something better,” Clark challenged.

Scardino smiled, “I guess we’re going on a road trip.” He let out a sigh, “I’ll give Mayson a call and let her know what’s up.” Panic.

That was the only way to describe how Mary Williams felt as she sat in the middle of the interrogation room at Metropolis P.D. She looked around the room, hoping to find some inspiration on

how to get herself out of the mess she had landed in. Albie had promised nothing would come back on her. He swore she would be safe.

Now it appeared she was on her own.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked toward the door.

She was not going down for this alone.

The sound of horns blaring on the highway reached Clark Kent’s eardrums as he cast a glance toward Lois who was tapping her hand on the steering wheel impatiently. They could have already been on their way by now if not for Mayson’s insistence on tagging along. Now here they were nearly an hour behind.

“How long has she been in there?” a voice came from the backseat where an equally annoyed Dan Scardino was seated in the backseat of Lois’ Jeep.

“Almost half an hour,” Clark said, glancing at the time on the dashboard.

Scardino let out a sigh, “I’m going to go see what’s taking her so long.” Scardino then poked his head through the space between himself and Lois and added, “You two want anything while I’m in there?” He pointed to the convenience store Mayson had disappeared into half an hour ago citing the need to ‘grab a drink real quick’ never to return.

“Just get Mayson out here in the next five minutes or I’m leaving both of you,” Lois threatened in a growl that made the hair on the back of Clark’s neck stand up.

Clark watched Dan Scardino disappear inside the convenience store and shook his head before turning to Lois. “How exactly did we get roped into bringing Mayson and Scardino on this interview?”

Lois shrugged her shoulders, “He has the history with McCarthy, and he is the one that pointed us in Colleen McCarthy’s direction in the first place.”

“We could have flown there and back and had time to write up our notes in the time we’ve wasted sitting here waiting.” Clark gestured to the time on the dashboard in frustration. He noticed an amused expression cross Lois’ face and felt a bit self-conscious under her gaze before asking, “What?”

“Nothing,” she shrugged with a half-smile. “It’s just funny I guess to hear you talk about *flying* over to do an interview so casually.”

“Well, yeah,” he smiled back at her. “I *do* fly.”

“I know,” she smiled back at him. “I just mean... I didn’t realize you talked about it so casually.”

He shrugged his shoulders, caught off guard by the comment. He pondered for a moment what she meant by that remark but chose not to think too hard on it. It was progress at least.

“Well, I don’t talk openly about using my powers or Superman unless I’m sure no one is around.” Clark explained, reaching his hand up to tap his ear.

“I guess super-hearing comes in handy with that,” Lois observed with a contemplative expression.

“You could say that,” he nodded.

His gaze shifted to the dashboard and then back to Lois as he pondered what could be going through her mind. She was talking about it. The ginormous elephant in the room that had taken over every conversation between them and yet stifled each word as well. No more secrets. No more hiding who he was. No more lying. It was refreshing and exhilarating yet terrifying all at the same time.

He frowned as he tried to bring up the subject of her two stalkers. He had picked up on the uncomfortable tension in the air as Lois quickly tried to push through the discussion of not one but two stalkers in play. Information he appeared to be the last to know.

“Did Henderson have any idea which threats came from McCarthy?”

There he had put it out there. The question that had been on his mind for the last hour. Had McCarthy been behind the threatening notes or shredding Lois' eveningwear to expensive rags?

Lois drew out a long breath and then responded, "He was the one that sent the threatening note on Friday night."

"You think there's any truth to Scardino's theory about it being an accomplice of McCarthy's?" Clark asked.

"I don't know." Lois responded with a frown. "I mean, it'd make things a lot easier if it was, but the other notes and the whole going into my apartment and targeting my eveningwear? It just feels *different*."

The door opened, startling Lois as Scardino and then Mayson climbed in the backseat. "Alright, everyone's here. Let's get moving."

Lois tightened her grip on the steering wheel as she took the turn off the freeway, leading into Bakerline, Metropolis where Colleen McCarthy's residence was. She stole a glance in the rearview mirror where Mayson kept glaring at her with a tight-lipped expression. Mayson had barely said two words to anyone since she had returned to the Jeep. Even before the stop at the gas station and Mayson's impromptu run into the accompanying convenience store the ADA had been short with her, rarely offering more than one word answers.

Lois blew a short breath out, pushing a stray hair out of her face as she took a right turn and pulled out onto the main highway. She could feel Mayson's eyes on her as she jerked the steering wheel, hoping to throw the ADA off balance and just say something – whatever it was that was fueling that snarky glare in her direction.

Why had Mayson insisted on tagging along in the first place?

Sharing the lead had just been a courtesy, not an invitation to tag along.

Yet here she was, silently staring Lois down as she went out of her way to hinder any ground they were attempting to make in their investigation of McCarthy.

Lois met Mayson's glare in the rearview mirror with an equally threatening stare of her own before clearing her throat and asking, "So, Mayson, what exactly is the District Attorney's position if we find Colleen McCarthy is helping her son?"

Mayson appeared to be caught off guard at the question, narrowing her eyes at Lois before then looking over her shoulder at Dan Scardino, "I haven't updated the District Attorney on the case yet."

"So, you're here on an unofficial capacity?" Lois ventured, jerking the wheel again, causing Mayson to slide across the backseat and throw her off her game.

"Why does it matter?" Mayson snarled back at her.

"It matters if you decide to start making an official arrest as an officer of the court," Clark interrupted, reaching his hand over to squeeze Lois' shoulder. She caught an expression cross his face that looked almost like apprehension as they reached the neighborhood she had been looking for.

"How about I save everyone the trouble?" Dan piped in, raising his hand. "I'll make any arrests needed. Just stop knocking us around like scrambled eggs. I'm getting sea sick here, Lane."

"Sorry," Lois smiled sweetly, allowing a fake smile to cross her face as she stared back at Mayson in her rearview mirror. "I guess I'm just not used to having passengers."

Clark gave her a warning stare but didn't say anything as they reached the driveway they had been looking for.

"We're here."

Clark sat next to Lois, leaning over her shoulder on the front porch swing of the McCarthy residence where the hospitable Colleen McCarthy was pouring over the photo albums of Sean

McCarthy's younger – yet still deviant days in lieu of answering Lois' questions.

"... and that's a picture of Sean when he was ten. We took that the day before he blew up the garage. Look at those dimples. He was such a cute baby." The elderly Colleen McCarthy pointed to the photo album, intent on walking through each and every deviant milestone of Sean McCarthy's troublesome past.

He caught Lois' uncomfortable expression as she looked from him and then back to Colleen McCarthy before adding a weak, "Adorable," in response.

"And really a wonderful son. Actually, Sean is responsible for my taking up needle point. After he went to prison I had to find some way to support myself." Colleen gestured to the needles in her hand as she worked on knitting the tapestry as they spoke.

At this rate they would never find out who might be working with Sean McCarthy or who could be behind his sudden rise from the dead. "Um, Mrs. McCarthy, did Sean have any close friends?"

Colleen frowned, looking distressed for a moment before pasting on a grin as she responded, "I'm afraid little Sean didn't make friends easily." She pointed to a mugshot in the album of Sean McCarthy with this year's date on it. "Oh, that was the last picture taken of Sean. Two weeks before he died. Isn't he adorable?"

There was that smile again.

Clark couldn't help but wonder how a woman that should be grieving her son's death could be so carefree and happy as she spoke of her son. From the many rescues he had made and failed to be enough, Clark knew first hand how hard it was to push past the grief and move on. As Superman, he had come across countless grieving relatives that found themselves in the impossible situation of accepting a loss they thought would never come. Seeing their grief through the eyes of Superman and sharing their pain was one of the more difficult aspects of his job yet he felt a duty to be there for them. Many of the goodwill visits he made to grieving parents after a rescue often times, shook him to the core. The incredible strength that came from parents and widows and widowers that were faced with a new reality was humbling. It was never as easy as brushing yourself off and pasting on a good face for the world when it came to grief – especially a parent's child - no matter what mistakes that child may or may not have made in their life. His gut told him Mrs. McCarthy knew something. He just wasn't sure how to pass that bit to Lois without raising Colleen's suspicions.

"So, Sean was a loner?" Clark asked, tapping Lois on the elbow as he spoke. She looked back at him in surprise. He gestured with his neck to the back where Mayson and Dan were supposed to be searching the house while they kept Colleen busy. So far all he could pick up on was bickering.

"Well, I wouldn't say that exactly," Colleen ventured thoughtfully. "He was a special boy, my Sean. He was selective of those he kept company with."

"And who exactly did he keep company with?" Lois asked, catching the glint in Clark's eyes.

"Well, they were pen pals."

"They wrote to each other?" Clark asked.

Mrs. McCarthy shook her head, "No, no. They met in the pen." She let out a light chuckle. "I think Sean might have mentioned him in one of the letters he wrote me from prison." Clark watched her reach behind her for the large box of letters tied together with a blue ribbon.

Just as she pulled them out Clark heard an argument from inside the house.

"Are you crazy? You're going to get us caught!"

"If that sociopath is behind my car bombing then he deserves to know I'm the one that got him!"

"Mayson you don't have anything to prove it was McCarthy yet. You can't go around advertising your plans for revenge with

the psycho's mom right outside!"

Clark tapped Lois' elbow once more as he heard Colleen McCarthy get up from her seat, "Oh, sounds like the tea's ready. I'll be right back."

Clark stood up, trying to not alert the potentially deadly woman in front of him. "You know, how about I go with you?"

Her face flashed between surprise, confusion and then quickly was replaced with genuine joy as she held her arm out for him to take. "You know, Sean used to help me with tea time all the time. He was such a smart little boy..."

Clark mouthed to Lois as he was leaving, "Get the letters."

Lois watched Colleen and Clark disappear off the front porch of the McCarthy residence and disappear inside with the sound of the whistling tea kettle ringing in her ears. She flipped through the letters, grabbing a handful of what seemed to be the most recent stack when she heard a shriek come from inside.

A second later, she looked up and saw a red and blue streak of pigments rush past her before she heard a muffled blast coming from below her, shaking the porch and the solid structure of the house it was attached to. She reached out to hold the wooden post, helping hold the porch together. She let out a yelp in surprise as the rumbling below her stopped. She looked up and saw Clark dressed in his Superman uniform, holding an incendiary device.

"Cl... Superman?" Lois corrected herself as she looked back at him, catching sight of Colleen McCarthy a few feet away.

She gripped the frame of the porch swing, taking a moment to get her bearings as she stood to her feet. It was strange to see Clark like this. She had seen Superman before – timeless times before. Flown with him and talked to him but it felt different somehow. Knowing that beneath the spandex and red cape was also her friend and partner made it all feel so surreal somehow. She could feel his gaze on her as she found her bearings. Her gaze shifted to the basket of letters that had been tossed around the porch, and she leaned down to pick them up.

"Oh, my..." Colleen responded in awe as she looked around the porch.

"I heard what sounded like a detonator timer and decided to investigate." Clark explained, holding up the device. "Insurance should take care of the damage." He looked at Colleen, "Are you okay, Ma'am?"

"Why yes, Mr. Superman..." Colleen responded, waving herself. "I... I think I'm going to go lie down. Too much excitement for an old woman."

"Mrs. McCarthy would you mind if we took these letters for a while?" Lois asked, holding the letters in her hand up for Mrs. McCarthy to see.

"Of course," she waved Lois off. "Probably safer with you anyway."

Lois watched Colleen McCarthy disappear then looked back at Clark, unsure what to say. There were still so many questions she had – questions she hadn't quite gotten up the nerve to ask him but now was not the time for that. Clark said he found an incendiary device below the house. Someone had tried to level the place with McCarthy's mom and these letters in it.

Could it be McCarthy?

A voice came from around the side of the house and he heard Dan Scardino call out, "Superman, you sure do have some impeccable timing."

"Agent Scardino," Clark crossed his arms over his chest and nodded to the DEA Agent.

"You've heard of me?" Dan asked in surprise.

"Here and there," Clark supplied, with a nod and Lois spotted the crease in between his eyebrows that told her he realized his slip up. "You certainly do have a way of attracting danger." He waved the incendiary device in the air.

Scardino hobbled up the hill to where Clark stood to inspect

the device and frowned. "This isn't McCarthy's handiwork."

"Then whose is it?" Mayson called out, holding her hand to her head, nursing a cut on her forehead as she approached.

"Mayson, are you all right?" Lois asked, seeing the cut on her head.

"I'm fine," Mayson waved her off, dismissing the concern as if it was an annoying fly she was swatting away. She then gestured to the incendiary device in Clark's hands. "If it wasn't McCarthy then who was it?"

"I don't know," Dan shrugged his shoulders. "We'll have to bag it up and take it to the lab for the guys to tell us whose handiwork it is." He pointed to the cut on Mayson's head. "Maybe you can see a doc about that cut on your head while they're analyzing it."

"I don't need a doctor, Scardino." Mayson gritted her teeth as she growled back at Dan.

"You sure about that?" Dan shot back pointing to the house they were just in. "You were the one trying to plaster your name all over the place like some sort of lunatic."

"I wanted him to know I had him in my sights. Make *him* run scared for once."

"Put a target on your back, you mean." Lois interjected, shaking her head. "Look, Mayson, I'm sorry, but I've got to side with Dan here. "You need to get that checked out." She tapped on her forehead to illustrate her point.

"I think I'll find my own way back to New Troy," Mayson huffed, stomping off in defiance.

Lois looked at Clark with an uneasy gaze and he shook his head, unsure what to do. "I'm going to go find Clark."

Dan nodded, holding up the incendiary device. "I'm going to hitch a ride to get this over to the lab across the bay. See if they can rush this. I'll let you guys know what I find out."

"Okay," Lois nodded, holding the letters she'd confiscated from Colleen McCarthy close to her chest as she wondered just who or what had been the target of the bomb placed under Sean McCarthy's mother's home. She turned back to Clark and shrugged her shoulders, "I guess it's just you and me, partner."

Clark straightened his tie as he approached the Jeep, having changed back into his suit and glasses. His head was swimming with confusion over Mayson's bizarre behavior and he pondered momentarily if he should patrol the skies and look for her.

'And do what when you find her?' He scoffed to himself, unable to answer the internal question his mind shot back at him. He didn't have any answers. Mayson's out of character behavior coupled with the injuries she had sustained only amplified his concern for her. The argument he'd overheard between Mayson and Scardino hadn't been a little spat either. Her actions seemed to be rubbing just about everyone the wrong way as of lately. What was causing it, he couldn't quite pinpoint. It seemed Mayson had run into just about every bad situation one could come across in the last week. Car bombing. Shooting. Then another bomb.

He was sure the near-death experiences had something to do with her out of character behavior, but he was at a loss as to how to handle it or what he could do. She wasn't a danger to herself or anyone around her. She wasn't in imminent harm. There was nothing he could do as Clark or Superman to force her to get checked out by a doctor or intervene on what he interpreted as PTSD from the combination of traumatic events that had loomed over Mayson these past few days. He was no more capable of making Mayson seek medical attention than any other concerned citizen. That was a hard truth he had to accept for the moment.

He let out a long breath and glanced over at Lois, who was cleaning the remnants of Dan Scardino's road trip snacks out of her car.

"Hey," he said, setting a hand on the hood of her Jeep.

"Hey," Lois gave him a quick glance before handing him a

small grocery bag of plastic wrappers she had fished out of her floorboards.

“You want some help?” Clark asked, pointing to the mess she was fishing through.

She shook her head, “It’s keeping me from finding Mayson and strangling her for the stunt she tried to pull.” Before he could respond, she added, “I mean, what in the hell was she thinking? Why not point a neon sign at all of us and give the potential third-party bomber that tried to level McCarthy’s whack job of a mother’s house directions on where to find us?”

“Lois, breathe, “ Clark placed another hand on her other shoulder, pulling her to him. “I don’t understand it any more than you do, but there’s not a whole lot we can do other than continue the investigation and hope Colleen McCarthy hasn’t tipped off her son.”

Lois bit her lower lip and looked back at him with a solemn expression, “There’s something wrong with Mayson.” She let out a huff and blew the hair out of her face, “You have to admit that much, right? I mean I didn’t imagine....”

“I know,” Clark sighed, running a hand through his hair. “There is something going on with her, but unfortunately there’s nothing we can do about that until she’s ready to listen.”

“How is she expecting to get back to New Troy?” Lois muttered in disbelief, pointing around the quiet street they were on. “It’s not like there are cabs driving around looking to give people a lift.”

“I don’t know,” Clark admitted shaking his head. “I’d try and find her and give her a lift home if I thought it’d do any good.” Clark shrugged his shoulders, unsure what else to say. Lois raised an eyebrow, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I guess there’s limits to what even Superman can do, huh?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “I can do a lot but I can’t break the law or force my will on someone. I’m worried about Mayson, yes, but I can’t just drop her off at a hospital and make her see a doctor if she doesn’t want to.” He gave her a half-smile, “Anymore than I can convince a certain reporter to quit jumping in head first to dangerous situations.”

He then pointed to her car where she had tucked the letters they found at Colleen McCarthy’s. “Anything stand out to you?”

Lois shook her head, “Unfortunately, I haven’t had time to go through them. That bomb went off before I could read anything.”

“If you want, I can drive back and you can go through them.” Clark offered. He then smiled, “Or we could fly back.”

“And how exactly am I supposed to get my Jeep home?” Lois asked with a chuckle.

A smile crossed his face, and she felt a cool breeze brush across her face before the wind bristled through her hair as she flew through the air, tucked safely in Clark’s arms. She looked up in surprise when she saw Clark’s other arm lift up above his head, hoisting her Jeep in his hand with barely any effort.

She let out a gasp in surprise, “I guess that answers that question.”

“Hold on,” Clark instructed. “We’ll be there in just a few.”

Chapter 13: Luck of the Draw

Dan Scardino tapped his hand on the table in front of him as his contact, Dr. Silas Stone at S.T.A.R. Labs, examined the explosive device that had been fished out of the McCarthy residence by Superman. He could immediately recognize the difference in the craftsmanship the minute Superman had shown him the device. McCarthy had always prided himself on the creative ways he found to turn everyday objects into a deadly surprise. This one however seemed too simple for McCarthy’s taste.

“So, what do you think, Dr. Stone?” Dan asked, taking a gulp from the soda he’d been nursing for the last half hour.

“I think for someone that hasn’t darkened my door once since

last year’s fiasco with the suits upstate and that failed drug bust that landed us all in hot water, you have a funny way of showing gratitude for someone that’s doing you a favor.” Dr. Stone replied, not looking up from the microscope he was examining the explosive device under.

“That was not my fault, Dr. Stone,” Dan had the decency to blush at the reminder of the events that had taken place last year with the bad lead the DEA had been fed which had nearly cost his and his superiors their pensions. “We trusted the wrong source.”

“I moved to Metropolis to get away from Washington’s rat race,” Dr. Stone said, pulling out a pair of tweezers to extract a small disc from the device. “I don’t want this to become a habit, Agent Scardino.”

“Noted,” Dan said with a heavy sigh, recalling all the troubles that had transpired over the last year. Dr. Stone was one of the leading scientists in robotic technologies and had assisted in quite a few cases in Washington to help nab some of the most notorious drug runners that often led him to the likes of Intergang and the phony government research center, Cadmus. “Look, Dr. Stone, you’re one of the few people I can trust. I know we ended things on a sour note last year but I swear the fiasco with the Suicide Squad and Amanda Waller had nothing to do with me. I need someone I can trust.”

Dr. Silas Stone met Dan’s gaze with a wary expression then waved a finger in his face, “You cross me and you’ll live to regret it, Agent Scardino.”

“I won’t let you down, Dr. Stone.”

Dr. Stone eyed Dan with a critical gaze, raising an eyebrow at him for a long moment and then let out a gruff snort in agreement. He then cleared his throat and pointed to the disc he had extracted, “Robotics.”

“Sorry?” Dan asked.

“Your bomber is a lot more technical than he appears. Micro circuitry down to the near molecular level.” He pointed to the disc under the microscope. “I’d say some advanced knowledge in micro-coding.”

“Have you seen anything like this before?” Scardino asked, curious where an expert like this could have gotten mixed up with McCarthy.

“I’ll run a search through the S.T.A.R. Labs database and see what I can come up with.”

Clark flew through the sky holding Lois with one arm wrapped around her as she held onto his neck while he used his other arm to hold up her Jeep as they flew. She let out a long breath against his chest as the wind blew across her face, “You know, I could have driven.”

“I know,” he said, allowing a smile to spread across his face. “I just didn’t want to take any chances after what happened at the McCarthy’s.”

“You think the target was the letters or Colleen McCarthy?”

Lois wondered aloud as they reached the center block of Metropolis where the Daily Planet’s parking garage was located.

“I don’t know, but I really didn’t want to take any chances given the last few days,” Clark explained, circling over the rooftop of the parking garage where there were several free parking spaces.

“So, what’s the plan now? Park on the roof?” Lois asked, tightening her arms around his neck.

“No,” he answered with a smile as he x-rayed the levels below them and soared through the path leading further down to the fifth level where a parking space was located just off the corner of the elevator. He smiled to himself as he set the Jeep down in the middle of the parking space lines then set Lois down so her feet were touching the concrete floor beneath them.

He felt his breath catch in his throat for a moment, staring into Lois’ eyes as his hands shifted from the middle of her back to her

hips. She wasn't letting go. Not that he wanted her to. He'd flown them out of Bakerline and as far away from Colleen McCarthy and her sociopathic son as he could.

Partly for Lois' safety and partly to provide a change of pace and, if he was honest with himself, to show off just a little bit. Things felt so unsettled between him and Lois ever since his revelation. Where they stood in their relationship – if it could even still be called that. Everything felt like a thick blinding fog, preventing him from seeing where to turn next. He wanted more than anything to pick up where they had left off, but he knew it was wishful thinking to presume anything right now.

He felt the corners of his mouth twitch as he gestured to the elevator next to them, "Door to door service, Ms. Lane."

Her arms slipped from around his neck and she took a step back, escaping from his embrace before she began to get back to business. Her attention focused on retrieving the letters from the Jeep and rambling off how to bring Perry into everything. He sighed internally, nodding his agreement as he ducked behind the dark corner where he'd parked to change back into his suit.

Diego Martinez tossed a bag of leather gloves and a dark duffie bag on the table in front of Albie Swanson. He frowned as he looked back at Albie Swanson, "I thought you said this guy's work was top notch, Albie."

"It is," Albie said, raising his eyebrows in surprise as she stared at the duffie bag suspiciously.

"Well, if you consider top notch work to be an earthquake inside the McCarthy home and no boom then I guess you're right." Diego shrugged, slamming his hands on the table.

"What?" Albie hissed in anger, standing to his feet.

"What the heck is going on?" Diego asked.

Lois hunched over the large stack of letters she and Clark had obtained from Colleen McCarthy just after the near-miss of being caught in an explosion Lois was sure connected to the cagey notes sent to Sean McCarthy's mother. After the flight back to the Planet, they had updated Perry on everything they had discovered and then begun going through the letters in hopes they could uncover whatever clue someone had been trying to hide with the bombing of the McCarthy home.

A chill ran down her spine as she recognized the handwriting as the same as the threatening notes that had been sent to her over the last few days. Still, she pressed on. Refusing to give McCarthy the satisfaction of scaring her off.

"Are you sure you're all right going through these?" Clark asked, setting another stack of letters down. "I can go through these at super-speed and just..."

"And then you might miss something, or I might miss something," Lois cut him off as she set the letter in her hand down. A smile crossed her face as she watched him flip through the letters in his hand at super-speed. "You're supposed to be reading those."

"I am," he answered with a grin.

"Really?" she cocked an eyebrow at him. "You read every single word on all twenty of those letters in five minutes?"

He probably had. If she had learned anything over the past year it was to expect the unexplainable from Su...Clark. Her mind quickly corrected almost on auto-pilot now. It seemed to get easier the more she did it. Correcting herself to think of Superman as Clark and Clark as Superman. They were of course one and the same. Something she was becoming more and more comfortable with reconciling the more she watched him show the side to him that she had never been privy to before.

A small smile peaked across her lips as she looked back at him, wondering just what was going through his mind. She had asked for time to process his revelation and, with it, the shift in their relationship. Where their relationship stood after learning of his alter ego was anyone's guess at this point. She had been the

one to pull away but so had he. There were the occasional moments where it felt just as easy as it had been just a few short days ago when she had been oblivious to his need to moonlight in tight-fits and leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Clark interrupted her thoughts, transcribing what he'd read from memory with a yawn, "Blah, blah, blah, thanks for the cookies. My pals really enjoyed them. Blah, blah, blah, thanks for sending me money for cigarettes. I'm going to get out of here one day, you'll see..."

"Show off," Lois said, reaching for another letter. She frowned when she spotted the date on the letter in her hand. "Hey, this one was sent a few days before McCarthy supposedly died in prison." She pulled the letter out of its envelope and began skimming it for clues. "Listen to this. 'This is probably the last letter I will be writing you from prison. If you don't hear from me for a while or ever again —don't worry. Just know that I am in a far better place...'"

"If we didn't know he was walking around free as a bird I'd say that sounds like a man who knew he was going to die." Clark responded with a frown.

"Yeah," Lois frowned as she continued to skim the letter. "He mentions someone named 'Albie' for her to send this month's check to."

"An Albert Swanson was mentioned in a letter," Clark said, fishing it out of the stack he'd read through already. "Here it is!" he proudly handed over the letter for her to read. "Second paragraph."

Lois pulled up the letter and read the paragraph aloud, "I'm making more friends in here every day. I've come across a man that Buster Williams introduced me to. Albert Swanson. A name you could easily forget but will help with overturning this prison sentence." Lois frowned as she contemplated the words she read aloud. "He doesn't come out and say it but it sounds like this Albert or Albie Swanson could be the one that helped him escape."

"Or at least connected him with the person behind this resurrection pill." Clark reasoned, shaking his head. "Where's the notes on that interview with the medical examiner that did McCarthy's exam?"

"The Medical Examiner?" Lois frowned, crinkling her nose as she looked around the table for the information Clark was asking about.

"I had Jimmy run a background check on the ME staff. I want to compare and see if..." Clark found the file he was looking for and quickly flipped to the page he was looking for. "There was a large donation made to the Assistant M.E. ... A Melissa Scott. A grant of some sort from....Ah, ha!" he pointed to the name on the page.

Lois leaned over his shoulder and read the name aloud. "Gables Estate? What do they have to do with this Albie Swanson?"

"I don't know," Clark frowned, pointing at the page. "But something tells me he's connected."

Dr. Stone tapped at his keyboard at a speed that made Dan Scardino think for sure the good doctor was part robot. He wouldn't have been surprised to see smoke rising from the keys but was thankful the computer he worked at seemed to be able to keep up with Dr. Stone. He watched the screen change again and again as the data Dr. Stone had found was matched up with every known expert in robotics until it finally landed on one image.

Dr. Rollie Vale.

A large red box with the word 'Deceased' was splashed across the doctor's image and Dan frowned at the screen. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"No joke," Dr. Stone shook his head, "It appears the individual that built this bomb has done so from beyond the grave."

“Great,” Dan fumed angrily, feeling the frustration rise within him. He pointed to the file. “When did Dr. Vale supposedly die then?”

“It looks like it was just about a month ago,” Dr. Stone pointed to the report on the screen.

Dan frowned when he recognized the name at the bottom of the report as one of the Assistant Medical Examiner’s that he’d spoken with a few days ago. The same examiner that had signed off on McCarthy’s exam, declaring him dead.

Albie craned his neck, looking over his shoulder as he made his way to the study of the Gables estate. McCarthy was gone. Where was anyone’s guess. Gables was still too consumed with his plan for destruction. A destruction by the means of a lethal virus that would cripple everyone within the city’s limits with an agonizing and painful death. A death he would not be around to witness. He wasn’t sure if it was the medication or the disease eating away at Gables’ brain cells, but the man was becoming more and more unhinged by the second. Despite the obvious issues that kept arising – Mayson Drake surviving the assassination attempts, the letters not being destroyed—he wasn’t going to stay around to watch the fallout.

He reached his hand over to where the safe was – hidden behind the portrait Stanley Gables kept of his golden retriever that had passed a few years ago. He expertly spun the combination lock, hearing each click until the release of the safe’s inner locks gave away. He reached over to pull the handle, opening the safe and reaching in to grab as much mad cash as he could along with the phony identification, he had obtained under the Gables Estate. A smile spread across his face as his hand tightened around the briefcase in his hand. He couldn’t linger too much longer or risk drawing attention to himself. He patted his pockets, feeling his wallet and keys snug in his pocket and then turned toward the exit, ignoring the shouting match that was taking place upstairs.

Jimmy Olsen pointed to the screen on his computer, showing the information he’d been able to pull up on Gables Estate. “This place is anything you want it to be. A cancer treatment center looking for funds to help the poor sick kids fighting a disease we know will never be cured, a foundation looking to fund assistance for third world countries, and never making its way to the promised recipients.” Jimmy pressed his index finger against the screen and added. “It’s an elaborate Ponzi scheme.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Clark muttered, shaking his head as he flipped through the printout of the Medical Examiner’s deposits from the supposed charity. “Nearly three hundred thousand dollars paid to our questionable Medical Examiner.”

He looked to Jimmy and asked, “Any chance of getting into this Ponzi scheme’s bank records?”

Jimmy let out a long breath, stretching his arms out over the keyboard with a confident grin. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“So, this Gables Estate charity was paying off the Medical Examiner,” Lois deducted aloud, looking at Clark, “You think they are paying off the prison too?”

“I don’t know,” Clark’s brow furrowed as he read over Jimmy’s shoulder as he worked on trying to hack into the dummy charity’s online bank information. “But it can’t be a coincidence.”

“Medical Examiner. Prison. Possibly our missing prisoners... What does it all mean?” Lois wondered aloud, folding her arms across her chest. Clark’s brow furrowed as Jimmy pulled up another screen, revealing a familiar-looking man with dark curly hair. “Is that...?”

“Albert Swanson.” Clark read the name below the image.

“He was at the prison and sends a huge amount of money to the Medical Examiner.” Lois crinkled her nose as she stared at the image. “Why? What is he up to?”

“Let’s find out.” Clark pointed to the file in his hand. “We know at least one person involved in his scheme.”

Lois reached the elevator leading to the morgue, then stole a glance at Clark before reaching over to press the call button. Clark placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She smiled back at him, “So, what are the chances she’s still around? Nearly three hundred thousand dollars in the last month. That’s enough to start a cozy life somewhere if you don’t want to get caught doing something dubious.”

“If she has made a run for it, I’m sure we’ll find out.” Clark responded as the elevator pinged and they stepped inside. “There’s still the question of the other three deposits made to Dr. Scott. How many others has she pulled this scheme for?”

“McCarthy isn’t the first, but hopefully he’ll be the last,” Lois said, reaching her arm over to press the button for the lower level where the morgue was located.

“I still don’t understand what all this has to do with Mayson’s car bombing.” Clark mused aloud, “I mean, Mayson knew about the resurrection pill but still had no idea about this Gables Estate scheme or what we think the M.E. was doing...”

“Maybe they decided not to take any chances when they realized she’d uncovered the pill?” Lois wondered aloud. “Though we still don’t know where this pill came from or how much Mayson *really* knew.”

“You think she was holding back on what she knew?” Clark asked as the elevator pinged, announcing their arrival to the morgue.

“Well, you have to admit she isn’t exactly forthcoming with information lately and she’s obviously hiding something.” Lois hooked her arm through Clark’s as they stepped off the elevator.

“Bizarre behavior, yes.” Clark acknowledged as he walked through the darkened hallways. “I’m not sure I’d go so far as to say she’s lying to us though. She’s always been truthful.”

Lois cocked an eyebrow at him and sighed, “You really don’t give up on that whole finding the good in everyone bit, do you?”

“There *is* good in everyone, Lois, even if you do have to look carefully for it in certain people,” Clark smiled back at her as they reached the Medical Examiner’s office. Lois threw him a half-smile but didn’t respond. Clark looked around the office and sighed, “Looks like the doctor isn’t in.”

“So, where do you think she’s gone to?” Lois wondered aloud as she began to look around the office.

Clark scanned the desk in the corner and spotted a day planner next to the name plate that read, ‘Dr. Melissa Scott,’ and then reached down to sift through it. “Looks like she’s scheduled to do an autopsy at the hospital right now...”

“So, that gives us some time to look around,” Lois purred happily as she began to sift through the contents on the medical examiner’s desk. “Nothing here, but pictures of her cat,” she squinted at the frame the photograph was in and read it aloud, “Whiskers.”

Clark flipped through the filebox on the desk, looking for anything that would provide some insight into what the medical examiner was up to. “Nothing here but copies of autopsy reports.”

Lois leaned down, looking under the desk when she spotted a small black safe beneath the desk, “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Clark asked, kneeling down next to her.

Lois pointed at the safe then looked over her shoulder to where Clark was hunched down next to her. “Think you can see what’s inside it or should I put my safe cracking skills to the test?”

“It was never safe cracking skills that got you in,” Clark smirked and before she could respond she saw a smoke begin to rise from the lock. She glanced back at him in surprise and he pointed ahead, “Go ahead and open it.”

Inside she found a small file jacket and a clear jar of 4 capsules that looked to be halfway dissolved – more than likely extracted at the time of the autopsy exam. Lois stared at the half-eroded pills in the jar, holding it in her hand as Clark sifted through the file jacket. “Think this is enough to prove our case to

Henderson?"

"If not, I've got something." Clark handed her the file jacket. "Look at the first name on the file."

"Rollie Vale?" Lois nearly choked out when she read the name. "How long has she been doing this?"

Clark pointed at the notes in the report, "Looks like Rollie Vale was their first experiment."

"Successful anyway," Clark muttered, skimming through the file in his hand. "This is sick."

"Why? Why would someone do something like this?" Lois wondered aloud, trying to comprehend the horrendous notes that depicted how Rollie Vale's death had been orchestrated by a name that appeared to be redacted from the file and then his body experimented on with what was being referred to as 'resurrection.' The experiment status was marked as 'successful.' No other notes were listed on the doctor's report.

Clark's brow furrowed as he looked through the other files in his hand, "Looks like there were more than a few misfires," he handed her a handful of files labeled with a red stamp indicating 'Rejected.'

"Now why am I not surprised to find you two here?" a voice came from behind them and they both jumped.

Lois turned around and spotted Dan Scardino standing behind them with a file jacket of his own in his hands. "Agent Scardino, what brings you here? Following us?"

"No, I wanted to ask our ever so popular Medical Examiner a few questions about an autopsy she did on an inmate a few months back." Dan Scardino explained, looking around the empty office. "I'm guessing I just missed her."

"I'm guessing the guy looking at that bomb was a dead end?" Lois prodded, trying to change the subject.

"On the contrary, it was quite enlightening." Dan said with a shrug. "Apparently the bomb that was planted was a very sophisticated bomb. Something that had to be created by someone that understood robotic engineering down to the microscopic level." Dan held his hands up as if to signal his uncertainty before grunting a quick, "Whatever that means."

"Robotics?" Clark echoed as Lois stared at the name on the file in her hand.

"Apparently only one person could build such a thing with the code that was used. The man that built it..." Dan continued.

"Rollie Vale," Lois guessed, staring at the report in her hand that described how Rollie Vale was the first patient to receive the resurrection pill and not die from complications.

"How did you...?" Dan began to ask.

"Apparently Rollie Vale was the first successful experiment of this Resurrection drug," Clark explained, standing up and helping Lois to her feet. "Our Medical Examiner was complicit in the coverup and receiving regular payments from a dummy charity..."

"I'm guessing each deposit is going to match up with one of these," Lois said pointing to the three files in her hand. "Sean McCarthy. Diego Martinez. Rollie Vale." She set each file down on the desk.

"Sounds like we've got a lot of catching up to do," Dan said, leaning over to read through the files in front of him.

Lois held up the jar of half eroded pills, "I believe we have more than enough for Henderson to get an arrest warrant."

"He may need to move sooner than we think," Clark said, pulling out a single form from the back of the file jacket. He looked at Scardino and handed the form to him. "Does the name Buster Williams ring a bell?"

Detective Ryder tapped on the steel metal table in front of him as he stared back at the dark-haired Mary Williams dressed in an orange jumpsuit after being booked in the system. He felt the corners of his mouth twitch as he tightened his jaw and waited for Mary to look away from him. His mouth curled into a smirk when

he saw her look down at her hands that were planted in front of her.

Ryder reached over and flipped through the file on the table next to him, letting out a low whistle before looking back up at Mary. "Mary, Mary, Mary, you seem like such a smart girl." He folded his hands on the table and leaned forward, resting his chin on top of his knuckles. "Explain it to me how you go from the doting assistant of the DA to orchestrating a conspiracy to have the ADA killed?"

"I didn't!" Mary argued.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah," Ryder chastised, wagging a finger at her. "You know we have you dead to rights. Don't patronize me by lying to me." His gaze darkened as he stared her down. "I know you put the bomb in ADA Drake's car." He tossed a printout on the table for her to read. "I know you've been receiving regular payments from an organization called the Gables Estate for a sizable amount in the last six months." He pointed his finger at the line on the printout he was referring to. "Who are you working with?"

Sweat poured down the back of Christopher Gomez's neck as he struggled within the binds that kept him tied securely to the chair whose back was kept in place behind the door with a rope tied securely to the door knob. He could feel the skin burning beneath his plastic binds as he attempted to loosen his wrists. He could feel the plastic cutting through the skin as the ground below him vibrated with a rumble as his hand clasped around the door knob behind him.

Voices below him could be heard through the muffled floor boards as he tightened his grip on the doorknob behind him. He opened his jaw from behind the tight bind wrapped around his head and silencing his shouts for help. He fumbled with the doorknob with his hands and then toppled to the ground as the lock on the door broke and his face hit the wooden floor.

Bill Henderson reached his hand up to grasp the coffee mug on his desk. His tired eyes swept across his desk to where the tall stack of interrogation reports were awaiting his review. At the top of it was the write-up Ryder had done on his interview with Mary Williams. A groan escaped his throat as he set his mug of coffee down.

He skimmed through the report, uncertain what to make of the fallout that had been uncovered. Mary Williams had given up Stanley Gables and Albie Swanson as the key conspirators behind the grand scheme to commit assassination of mass proportions with biohazard weapons that had been developed by Stanley Gables himself. The plan was ingenious and diabolical.

There was still the unanswered questions regarding how Sean McCarthy and Diego Martinez had shown back up, but he was sure Diego would give up what he knew. The history of Diego's criminal past and how he had ended up in Metropolis Penitentiary to begin with; the deal he had copped to testify against his former partner in crime.

A loud thump shook his desk and he jumped, startled by the noise. He looked up and saw an irritated Detective Riley in front of him, pointing to the front door. "You expecting a visit from the press, Henderson?"

Henderson let out a deep sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose before glancing back at Riley, "Just one or both of them?"

"Lane and Kent are holed up in the front, demanding answers about Gomez and the sting you ran on Gables." Riley pointed behind him with his thumb. "You want to handle it?"

Henderson shook his head with a grimace, recalling the hysterics his captain had been in just a few short hours ago when they had not only found Christopher Gomez – the security guard that had supposedly died of unknown causes in the hospital just days before – along with the supposed mastermind behind the bioterrorist attack. He couldn't really blame Lane and Kent. They

had helped provide him the information that had led to the arrest of a rogue Medical Examiner who had been in on probably much more than a conspiracy to sneak criminals out of prison by faking their deaths. This was a big story—A big story that he was sure every reporter was scrambling to get the scoop on.

“Tell them I’ll be out to talk with them in a few minutes.” Henderson said, as he stood up, taking the report with him as he navigated his way through the maze of cubicles in the precinct. He could wait of course and see if his fellow detectives could break Diego, but since the ADA’s assistant had been so open to conversation with Ryder it was reasonable to think she might be forthcoming with more information on Gables and Swanson’s operation.

He reached the interrogation room where Mary had been left after the last round of interrogation and tried to turn the knob only for his hand to be met with resistance. He frowned, trying once more with a grunt. He looked around, seeing nothing out of place with the fellow officers as they continued about their day to day duties. He attempted to turn the knob once more and then took a step back, lifting his foot to kick the door open. The door was quick to give away with the weak hinges that hadn’t been maintained properly over the years.

“Oh, no,” Henderson let out a gasp in horror when he spotted the body of Mary Williams lying in a pool of blood in the middle of the interrogation room floor.

Chapter 14: In Too Deep ***Death Pill Exposed – Scientist Linked to Attempt on DA’s Life!***

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Perry White set a copy of the Daily Planet’s mock-up for the evening edition on his desk, glancing over the photo and headline that had accompanied the article on Stanley Gables’ arrest. It still amazed him how something so intricate like faking an inmate’s death could be planned out in order to cause such chaos in the world. If these criminal masterminds would spend half their energy focusing on trying to make a difference in the world rather than destroying it, such horrors like cancer might not exist.

He tapped his hand against his chin, skimming the mock-up and finding the article on Christopher Gomez’s rise from the dead. He let out a snort as he recalled his reaction when he’d first heard the news that not only were former criminals being given this drug - this resurrection drug - but also potential witnesses. There would be plenty of material for follow-ups and further investigation into just who had been behind the resurrection drug, but for now, he would call the arrest and exposure of the corruption of the Assistant Medical Examiner, Melissa Scott and former scientist, Stanley Gables a win.

“Chief?” Jimmy poked his head inside Perry’s office, resting a hand on the doorframe. “The photos from the bust on Gables’ arrest are ready.”

Perry waved Jimmy inside the office, gesturing to his desk for Jimmy to set the photos down. He unfolded the pair of eyeglasses that were tucked in the pocket of his dress shirt and put them on, leaning toward the stack of prints to examine them under his critical gaze.

Lois kicked her foot against the tire of her Jeep, wincing slightly as she felt the bounce back from the rubber tire. Her sour mood had consumed her after the chaotic bundle of a mess the Metropolis P.D. had made of what should have been an open and shut case came to light. Not only was their star witness against this Albie Swanson dead but the two-star culprits and supposed ringleaders behind this entire scheme were nowhere to be found.

A shudder ran through her as she was suddenly filled with a sense of dread, wondering just how safe anywhere in Metropolis was - given the sociopath behind the threats and stalking was now on the lam. ‘*One of them anyway,*’ she was reminded, as her inner

doubts and insecurities began to get the best of her. The turmoil from the last few days threatened to become too much for her as she blinked back the burning tears in her eyes.

The mixture of euphoric relief mixed with panic filled her mind. On one hand, several of the conspirators behind this resurrection operation had been arrested. On the other, there were still some assailants out there. The assistant medical examiner was still missing. McCarthy and Albie Swanson were in the wind somewhere, and apparently they had a very *alive* Rollie Vale fit into the mix somewhere—How exactly, she wasn’t sure. A chill ran down her spine at the realization that her other stalker could very well be one of the other criminals on the run. Why go to all this trouble to smuggle criminals out of prison?

“Lois?”

She heard her name and jumped, startled by the familiar sound of Clark’s voice behind her. “Hey, what’s up?” she quickly covered as he walked up to her with the file jacket they’d retrieved from Henderson. She pointed to the file jacket, “Was Henderson able to get us a copy of the personnel file on Melissa Scott?”

Clark nodded and pointed to the Jeep that was half a foot away, “Everything okay?”

“Fine,” she lied, turning away from her quicker than she needed as she busied herself with unlocking the driver’s side door. She could feel his gaze on her as she reached her hand out to grasp the door handle, hoping the retreat inside her Jeep would alleviate the overwhelming sense of dread and panic that threatened to consume her.

Clark’s hand reached around to rest on her shoulder and he offered up an acute observation with his knowing gaze, “No, you’re not.”

“Fine, you’re right,” Lois said hurriedly, yanking the door open and climbing inside. “Happy?”

The door hung open and Clark leaned inside, his head dipped low as he looked back at her with a solemn expression, “Lois, we’re going to catch McCarthy and whoever else is working with him.”

Lois stared down at her hands sitting in her lap, uncertain how to respond. She shouldn’t be surprised. He had always been able to read her so well—A trait that had both endeared him to her and yet unnerved her all at the same time. The static haze from the overwhelming ‘what-ifs’ that raced through her mind hung over her, taunting her with the reminder that despite all of their best efforts, there were still several threats out there. Not only did they have more questions than answers, but they had a dead witness on their hands and a murder to solve. The more they dug, the more dangerous the situation became.

She had been in dangerous situations before and had taken down the corrupt and sadistic, but this felt different. Much like the times when Kyle Griffin had set his sights on torturing her with his sick pranks, this felt personal. The stalking and the threats weren’t directed at Metropolis or a group of individuals but at her personally. Now with McCarthy on the run and still not being any closer to identifying her second stalker, she felt exposed. There were names for them to look into but no leads on where this Albie or even Rollie Vale had disappeared to.

Clark extended his hand to her, tossing the file jacket inside the Jeep, “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Lois raised an eyebrow at him with and offered him a quizzical gaze as she took his hand, “Where?”

Dan Scardino set the folder in front of him, waiting for the suspect in custody to be brought in for questioning. Diego Martinez had been one of the terrorists he and Jenna had taken down at the time of McCarthy’s arrest. He had also been one of the supposedly dead criminals to be resurrected by Stanley Gables’ resurrection pill. Now that he was back in custody, he planned to use Diego to get to the bottom of what McCarthy’s plans were and where the sociopathic leech was lurking.

The door buzzed and the metal door slid open, revealing a very agitated Diego Martinez jangling the secure chains that were wrapped around his waist and ankles as he entered the room with a sneer. “Scardino.”

“Martinez,” Scardino glared back at the prisoner in front of him. “I’m disappointed. You had a reunion with the old gang and I didn’t even get an invite.” Dan shook his head. “Tsk, ts, ts, I’m hurt.”

“Well, Scardino, you always did crash the parties with your rules and laws you expected us to follow,” Diego snorted back.

“Yeah, silly me,” Scardino scoffed, “I don’t want you killing innocent children and families.”

“You’re not gonna find him,” Martinez narrowed his steely gaze at Dan Scardino. “He was long gone with that rat Albie well before you and your caravan came breaking in. McCarthy won’t be found unless he wants you to find him.” Martinez let out a light chuckle, “And I think we both know that by then it’ll be too late.”

The cool air blew through Lois’ hair as Clark cradled her in his arms, flying them higher and higher until they had reached the altitude where he felt they were safe from the intruding outside world. Even flying through the sky at super speed he found himself overwhelmed by the sometimes overwhelming sounds from the world below. Radio frequencies, airline pilots and military jets all soaring through the air at an alarming rate. But here—Here above the clouds, all of the distractions from the world below came to a grinding halt.

“You okay?” Clark asked, wrapping his cape over her shoulders as he held her close.

She nodded, looking around the clouds that surrounded them, “It’s beautiful up here.”

Clark nodded, raising his eyebrows as he gazed up at the dark blue sky above them. “This place – I come here when I just need to clear my head.” He shook his head. “Think without the intrusion of ... the entire world.” A smile peaked across the corners of his mouth and he shrugged, “You seemed like you needed the distraction.”

Lois let out a short breath, tucking a strand of loose hair behind her ear. “Well, it certainly beats sulking behind the wheel and yelling at idiot drivers.”

“Probably safer too,” Clark commented with a light chuckle. A pause fell between them and he tightened his arms around her, uncertain if he should continue the conversation or let the silence fill the void between them.

Lois’ smile spread and she turned her head to look at him, looping her arms around his neck, “I suppose everything with McCarthy and the threats may have gotten to me more than I let on.”

“You don’t have to explain,” Clark reassured her. He could feel the strain from the emotion he was attempting to hold back continue to bear down on him. What he wanted to do more than anything was to take Lois with him and find a place where she would be safe from these threats, but he knew he couldn’t. Instead, he opted to accept the cards handed to him and suffer in silence as he waited for the day when he could bring the lowlifes lurking in the dark corners of the world to justice.

“They killed her,” Lois said numbly. “Right in the middle of a police station.”

“I know,” Clark felt the tension in his vocal chords give away as his voice cracked beneath the strain.

“Which means there’s probably someone inside the police department that helped them,” Lois mumbled aloud, not really directing her comment to him. “We could have gotten some answers from her.”

“Maybe,” Clark agreed, tightening his arms around her instinctively. “We will find them, Lois.”

“You don’t know that,” Lois shook her head. “No one knows where McCarthy is or who this other stalker is.” She let out a

snort, “How long do you think Henderson is going to keep a patrol outside my apartment before he just up and gives up?”

“I’m not giving up,” Clark clarified.

“You can’t be everywhere at once,” Lois pointed out.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” he said, reaching his hand out to cup her cheek. His eyes met hers, and for a brief moment, he could feel the electrical storm pulse through him, tempting him with the memory of being this close to her – able to act on how he felt without balancing between giving her the space she asked for and being the friend he always had been.

What he wouldn’t give just to throw caution to the wind and close the distance between them – the unbearable distance that he knew he had put there. He wanted – needed to feel that closeness again – but he knew things were far too fragile for him to allow a moment of impulsive weakness to shatter everything. For now, he would have to find contentment with the occasional close moments between them - letting Lois set the pace and taking her lead.

“I know,” she murmured softly, reaching a hand out to touch his cheek.

He swallowed hard and his eyes fluttered closed as he savored the sweet caress of her touch. A turmoil of mixed emotions tumbled within him. He wanted more than anything to forget every reason he’d given himself not to just lean in and kiss her so he could brush every fear and anxious plea from her mind and then hold her close and never let go. His forehead rested against hers for a long moment, contemplating his options before he covered back, turning to look around the white array of light tones beneath them where the clouds covered all visibility into the world below.

“You know, I discovered this place by accident. Dumb luck testing how high I could fly. I used to come up here and just sort of drift...not really part of the stars...not knowing where I fit in...”

A saddened expression filled her eyes, and she placed a hand on his chest, “Clark?”

He let out a long sigh, “It wasn’t until I came to Metropolis that I really figured out where I fit in. My purpose...to help those in need...but what good are all these gifts if I can’t keep those I care about safe?”

Albie Swanson set his keycard down on the desk and then turned to look around the room with a critical gaze. The cash he had smuggled out of the Gables estate would be depleted soon but it had been enough to get him a new identity and the proper papers to remain under the watchful eye of law enforcement.

He tapped the face of his watch checking the time as if it could have changed in the last few seconds. The phone in his room rang and he jumped, startled by the break in silence. He crossed the distance in his room to answer the phone.

“Hello?”

“I trust you’ve checked in successfully?” The thick middle eastern accent came through the telephone earpiece.

“Mr. Muunour, “ Albie breathed with a sigh of relief. “Have you had time to examine the package I sent?”

“What exactly would Lebanon have to gain from such medical experiments, Mr. Swanson?”

Albie let out a light chuckle, “The entire world thinking your enemy is dead while you hold their life in your hands isn’t a good enough incentive?” Albie shrugged dismissively, “if you’re not interested, I’m sure I can find a buyer who is...”

“Wait!”

“Yes?”

“If we go forward with this deal, I need assurances.”

“What kind of assurances?” Albie asked.

“That it won’t interfere with another project I’ve invested my time into.” Muunour’s time dropped to a deadly whisper as he uttered the name, “Valhalla.”

Dan Scardino shoved his hands in his pockets, unsure what to make of his confrontation with Diego Martinez earlier. He was right. McCarthy was in the wind and any lead he could have had was more than likely gone with the ADA that had disappeared on him. McCarthy never did like loose ends. A scowl crossed his face as he recalled how badly McCarthy's last loose end had ended.

The gunfire erupting in the Assistant District Attorney's office had been no small feat to overcome. Where McCarthy had gotten his hands on such powerful artillery when he was supposedly trying to lay low he wasn't sure. Someone was helping McCarthy and now that they had Gables and Martinez in custody. The circle in which McCarthy could operate in was becoming smaller and smaller. His entire old crew was still behind bars and this Albie Swanson was one of the few that might still be helping the convict.

He looked up at the dark brick apartment complex, spotting the patrol unit out front. His lead with ADA Drake might have dried up for now, but there was still another lead he could follow up on.

A thousand thoughts filled Lois Lane's mind as the hot water drummed against her back, washing away the suds from the shampoo that had drizzled down from her scalp. Her mind was still swimming from the day. Clark had given her exactly what she had needed and then more at exactly the right time. Just like he always did. The flight above the clouds had left her breathless and her mind swimming with thoughts of anything but their investigation or her stalkers lurking in the shadows. A blush crossed her face as she recalled just how close she had been to closing the millimeters of distance between them and indulging herself in a moment of indulgence. But she knew it wouldn't have been fair to Clark. Though she was growing more and more at ease with herself and him with the revelation she still wasn't sure where their relationship stood now.

<< "You'll be wearing something elegant. Not too dark... charcoal suit and I'll be dressed in deep violet."

"Burgundy."

"Burgundy?"

"Or violet.">>

A smile crossed her face as the memory from their first date came flooding back. The entire evening had been wonderful. She had seen a glimpse of what was possible if she were just honest with herself about her feelings for Clark. He was no longer just her friend. He was no longer just her partner. He was no longer this intangible hero; she allowed herself to become mooney-eyed over. With every barrier down and the secret – the big secret – no longer providing a cover to hide from one another, she was forced to face the reality of how deep she had fallen. There was no slowly dipping her toe in or testing the water level.

Everything felt so complicated now. Even though the panic and anger were no longer coursing through her fresh off his revelation, she still was no closer to feeling as if she knew him – the real him. She supposed in a way it was an ironic twist of fate. Just a few days ago she was conflicted over her relationship with Clark due to how well she thought she knew him. Now here she was faced with how little she actually did. She was slowly coming around but there was still so much she didn't know- or felt she didn't anyway. She still had countless questions that she was sure would arise but the more time she spent around him, the more she became comfortable with the knowledge that her friend the superhero and her friend the farmboy from Kansas were one and the same.

She stepped out of the shower and wrapped her towel around her, as she patted herself dry. She padded her way into the bedroom, pulling out a pair of dark violet pinstriped pajamas from her dresser drawer. She grabbed the hairdryer from the counter and turned it on, aiming it at her damp hair as she leaned over to dry it.

She moved the hairdryer back and forth, aiming the warm air at her damp hair when the sound of glass shattering followed by a sharp creak reached her ears.

She set the dryer down, clicking it off and reaching for the toilet plunger hidden under the sink. She heard another creak and what sounded like footsteps coming from the living room.

A rush of adrenaline pulsed through her as she flattened herself against the bedroom wall, brandishing the bathroom plunger as a weapon. Who was it? McCarthy? The other stalker? She felt her heart thumping against her chest at an alarming rate as she peeked over the corner of her bedroom wall, checking the living room where she saw a figure move beneath the veil of darkness.

Panic rose up inside her as her mind screamed at her over how this shouldn't or couldn't be happening. A patrol car was just outside. How had they missed this? And of course, she had shrugged off the concerns Perry and Clark had expressed over her returning to her apartment so soon.

The footsteps moved further in the living room and she tightened her grasp on the plunger she held in her hands. Summing up all the inner-strength she could, she tightened her grip on the end of the plunger and took a hard swing as she lunged her way into the living room. The sound of a muffled yelp and a hard thud filled her eardrums as she felt her would-be assailant beneath her and smiled to herself. *'I've got you now.'* She prepared to deliver a hard blow with the end of the plunger when she heard a familiar voice cry out.

"Wait, wait, wait!"

The light flickered on, and fury flashed in her eyes as she held the plunger in her hand and stared at the familiar face in shock, "*Scardino?!'*"

Chapter 15: Dangerously Close

Clark's head was still swimming from the afternoon flight with Lois as he soared through the sky, finishing up his late-night patrol. He had just finished patrolling Hobb's Bay, spending more time around the area in search of Sean McCarthy. As of right now, there was still no evidence that McCarthy was still in Metropolis but there was still no evidence he wasn't.

He made his way toward the inner-city block of Metropolis, noting the lights still on at the Planet where Perry's office window was. A sad smile crossed his face, and the question of just how late the Chief actually stayed at the Planet crossed his mind. He turned the corner, checking the abandoned alley and surrounding buildings for any sign of the escaped convict he knew still posed a danger to Lois.

After coming up empty from his search, he made his way toward Carter Avenue to do one last check-in with Lois. Even though she had brushed off his concerns – as she always did- he knew she was still worried about McCarthy still being out there.

"We will find them, Lois."

<< "You don't know that. No one knows where McCarthy is or who this other stalker is." She let out a snort, "How long do you think Henderson is going to keep a patrol outside my apartment before he just up and gives up?"

"I'm not giving up."

"You can't be everywhere at once.">>

A loud crash reached his ears, and everything went on high alert when he realized the crash had come from Lois' apartment. The muffled crash was followed by a shriek from Lois and he quickly soared through the double window, opening and closing it at super-speed as he entered the apartment and yanked up the intruder just as he heard Lois yell out his name.

"Scardino?!"

"Superman," Scardino's response came from beneath Clark's strong grip as he held him in place, pinning his arm against the agent's throat. "We really need to quit running into one another

like this.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” Clark growled, glaring back at the agent as the lights flickered on. He could feel the adrenaline pulsing through him as he held the agent at bay.

“I ch-checked in with the unit out f-front,” Scardino’s response came. “Would you mind loosening that gr-iiip?”

Realizing how tight his grasp on Scardino was, Clark nodded, releasing his grasp on him and then stepped back, folding his arms across his chest as he glared the agent down. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

Scardino shot a look at Lois, who was anything but amused at the moment as she was still brandishing the plunger in her hands, seemingly ready to swing at any moment and use her makeshift weapon on anyone who thought to cross her.

“Metropolis P.D. and Superman, huh?” Scardino chuckled, “I guess you’re not taking any chances, huh?”

Lois folded her arms across her chest and glared back at him, “What are you doing here?”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by to check and make sure you were okay.” He shot a look in Clark’s direction. “The door was unlocked, so I decided to check it out.”

“It was *not* unlocked,” Lois argued, narrowing his eyebrows as she stared him down.

“It was when I came by,” Scardino pressed, shrugging her off as he knelt down to turn the couch back over.

“Is anything missing?” Clark asked, turning to Lois.

“I...I don’t know,” Lois said, running a hand through her hair as she looked around. “Nothing looks out of place other than the couch.” She shot a glare in Scardino’s attention.

Scardino dismissed the glares being thrown in his direction. “I checked in with the patrol out front. I’m sorry I scared you. I saw an unlocked door to someone McCarthy has set his sights on. I did what anyone else in my situation would do.”

“If you thought Lois was in danger, why didn’t you call the police?” Clark finally spoke up, still not sure what to make of Scardino’s shoot by the hip tactics.

“I am a trained DEA Agent,” Scardino shot back with a sardonic smile. “Shootout at ADA Drake’s ring any bells? I can hold my own.”

“You’re still only one person. If you really thought McCarthy was in here, then why didn’t you call for backup? Why sneak around like a common criminal?”

“I wasn’t sneaking...”

“If it looks like a duck...”

“Do you know who you’re dealing with here, Superman? Sean McCarthy is a monster. His last victim was killed in a matter of seconds with a lethal dose of cyanide from nearly a block away.” Scardino let out a snort as he shook his head. “Little did I know when I was slapping the cuffs on that animal, he had just taken another victim.”

Clark caught something he knew all too well in Scardino’s eyes as he spoke. A pang of gut-wrenching guilt over knowing someone close to him had been hurt, and he should have been there to stop it. He could feel the dryness of his throat burning with a distinct prickle as he stared back at the agent with a less critical gaze than before.

“Jenna.” Lois interrupted his thoughts. “You’ve mentioned her a few times.” Her head cocked at an angle and she shrugged her shoulders. A long pause fell between them and she asked, “Who was she?”

Dan Scardino shook his head, seeming to drift off into the past, “My partner. She was bright, sensitive. A little mouthy sometimes, but then I’m not exactly a monk.”

“And McCarthy?” Clark ventured cautiously.

“He took her out with a cyanide filled tranquilizer from five hundred feet away. Right before the bomb went off and killed everyone inside.” Dan hung his head. “The real kicker was later

when I had McCarthy in custody, and I was grilling him. I had no clue what had happened to Jenna. I spent twelve hours grilling that monster on his connections to Intergang and didn’t find out till I was out of the box. I’ll never forgive myself for that.”

A look crossed between Clark and Lois before Lois broke the awkward silence between the trio. “That must have been hard... losing someone that close to you.”

“It was,” Scardino nodded, looking around the apartment. His gaze rested on a photo on her mantel and then switched back to where Clark stood still holding his arms across his chest. “I guess since there isn’t any danger and Superman’s looking out for you, I’ll go ahead and head out.” He paused, looking back at Lois with a frown. “Your door was unlocked, Lois. Just be careful.”

Lois nodded, her features across her face creased with concern as she watched Dan Scardino leave, closing the front door behind him. She leaned against the door, resting her forehead against the top wood panel as she turned each and every deadbolt lock, pausing for a moment to look up and check the locks with the sharp tug on the door before she reached up to slide the chain across the top of the door.

“Lois?” Clark called out to her, uncertain what to make of her silence.

“I know I locked this door,” she mumbled more to herself than to him as she looked back at him.

“I believe you,” he reassured her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Her uncertainty remained on her face, and then she folded her arms over her chest and stared at him, narrowing her eyes as if to prompt him into something, “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“What the heck were you thinking barging in here like that?!” Lois demanded, jabbing her index finger in his spandex covered chest. “I mean, why don’t you just take out an ad in the Planet and announce everything to the world?”

“What are you talking about?” Clark asked, taken aback.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe the fact that you barged in here as Superman and started threatening a DEA Agent as Superman – who has had the third degree from the other you and yet...” She let out a chuckle. “You couldn’t have at least feigned not recalling his name or act like information he had shared with ‘Clark’ wasn’t something Superman knew. Oh, and how exactly am I supposed to explain why Superman just barged into my apartment without raising even more questions?”

“I didn’t...” he began to argue and then stopped when he realized he had done just that.

“For your sake, let’s hope he’s too rattled from being beaten with a plunger to put two and two together, but you cannot just barge in and act like some overgrown baboon trying to come to the rescue – especially not with someone like that.” Lois admonished, pacing in front of him in a panic.

As much as he was kicking himself for the slight slip, he couldn’t help but smile at the panicked expression on Lois’ face. Even though they’d been in an awkward limbo for the last few days, it was clear she still cared and was worried about what his slip up might do to him and what it might mean for the both of them.

“*What?*” Lois finally asked, shrugging her shoulders at him in confusion. “This is not funny.”

“I didn’t say it was,” Clark said softly, taking a step toward her. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking. I just kind of reacted.”

“Are you admitting to jumping in without checking the water level?” Lois asked, raising an eyebrow as she looked back at him with amusement.

A soft chuckle escaped his throat, “Maybe, but I don’t make a regular practice of it.”

“Uh-huh,” Lois smiled back at him. “And just how often do you barge into situations without checking the water level? I

mean, with how often you do lecture me on this practice, one might assume you're an expert in this practice."

"Enough times to know better," Clark responded with a half-smile, feeling a blush spread across his cheeks.

"I see," Lois pursed her lips and gazed up and down him as she circled around him, almost as if she was circling her prey. "So, you admit, sometimes you're a hypocrite?"

"I wouldn't call it hypocritical," Clark responded with a smirk.

"What would you call it?" Lois wondered aloud.

"Attempting to prevent the preventable." He said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Sometimes that's not possible," she responded softly, catching his gaze as he took her hand in his.

"I can try," he offered.

"You can't do that anymore," Lois added, desperate for him to hear her plea.

Clark nodded, hearing the desperation in her voice as he reached over to cup her cheek. "I hear you. I'll be more careful. I promise."

She nodded, reaching her hand over to cup her hand over his. Her eyes met his for a brief second that he was sure lasted an eternity as he felt her eyes sink into his with a fierceness that enveloped him in the most exquisite intoxicating mixture of infatuation and desire as his lips inched ever so closer to hers.

"Promise?" her question squeaked out in a soft murmur as he nodded a non-verbal agreement before snaking her arms around his neck and pulling him to her, sealing her mouth over his in the most intoxicating embrace he had ever been privileged enough to find himself in.

His hands roamed through her damp hair, feeling the wedges of his fingers through the damp strands as he gave in to the burning need that had been simmering inside him for as long as he could remember. A weightlessness fell over him as his lips roamed over Lois' lips, tasting the intoxicating chocolate and coffee mixture that still tingled on the tip of her tongue.

He wanted to hold her close and never let go for as long as she would let him. Her arms loosened around him, and he slowly pulled himself back, focusing on slowing down the pace of each soft caress against her lips, silently pleading with her for what he had so desperately needed from her. A chance. A chance to give their relationship a real chance and take that leap of faith into the unknown future – a future he prayed would end with both of them together.

Her mouth spread into a broad smile as she pulled away, "I... probably shouldn't have done that."

"Why?" he asked curiously. A soft sigh escaped from her throat but she hadn't pulled away from his embrace.

"I don't know," she frowned, looking down. "I just... this is so confusing."

"What is?" he asked, brushing the strand of hair that had fallen across her face out of the way so he could look into her eyes.

"Everything." She answered with a noncommittal shrug.

"There's how I felt before and how I feel now, and they're both so... conflicted."

"I'm still the same person, Lois." He reminded her, resting his hand on her cheek as he held her in his arms, praying to whatever gods above them had blessed him with this moment that she wouldn't bolt for the nearest exit.

"I know. I mean, I think I do." She shook her head. "I went from feeling like I knew you better than anyone to not knowing you at all."

"What do you want to know?" Clark asked.

"Everything." She responded with a crack of her voice.

He nodded and offered her a half-smile, "You already do, Lois."

"Do I?" she challenged, shaking her head. "Because it feels like there's this whole other part of you that I had no clue existed

and... I don't know how I feel about that."

"You know me better than anyone, Lois. You always have," Clark reassured her.

"So you keep saying," she smiled back at him. Uncertainty covered her facial expression as she stared back at him, wondering just how to move forward with the heavy burden of his recent revelation still weighing heavily on her shoulders.

As if he had read her mind, he reached a hand out to stroke, her cheek and broke the awkward silence that had fallen between them. "Well, maybe instead of tip-toeing around one another, we try to get back to where we were before I had the brilliant idea of dropping this on you in the middle of chasing down a serial bomber?" Clark offered with a shrug. "I am sorry for that."

"Sorry, you told me or just the timing?" Lois asked. Her tone was playful but he could tell from the questioning gaze she gave him she was serious.

"Timing," he responded firmly. "I knew I had to tell you eventually. I just wished it was a little more planned out."

"I think it was better this way," Lois sighed, placing a hand on his chest.

"You think so?" Clark asked curiously.

"I asked for the truth, and you gave it to me," Lois responded simply.

"So, you're happy I told you?"

"The shock has worn off. I'm still mulling over some things, but I am becoming more and more comfortable with the news."

"I noticed," he responded.

"Therein lies the question that keeps being asked. Where does this leave us?" Lois asked.

"I have zero complaints with the last twenty minutes," Clark grinned back at her, tightening his arms around her waist.

"There is a patrol out front that would blab Superman's presence to the nearest tabloid rag if they knew you were in here." Lois teased, tracing the emblem to his 'S' shield as she looked back at him shyly.

"How about dinner... tomorrow night?"

The question was out there. He stared back at her, hoping against hope that her answer would be yes, and he would finally be free from this isolating prison of uncertainty, wondering which way to turn. He could do this. They could do this.

"Dinner, huh? I'll have to check my schedule."

"Of course."

"Where exactly would we be going?"

"Greece," he grinned back at her.

A slow smile spread across her face. "Greece?"

"Or Bangkok." He smiled back at her. "Or wherever you want."

"It might be hard to get dinner in Bangkok with the whole time difference issue." Lois pointed out.

"So, maybe we stay a little closer to home." Clark shrugged. A smirk crossed his face, "Is that a yes?"

She nodded, looping an arm around his neck, "Goodnight."

McCarthy On the Run!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Dan Scardino turned the newspaper over to find himself staring at Sean McCarthy's mugshot from the last time he had brought him in. He checked the time on his watch, noting that it was still early but late enough in the morning for offices around the city to be opening. In all the chaos with bringing in Diego Martinez, there hadn't even been a whisper from Mayson Drake. The quiet always seemed to bring with it a storm. A storm Dan Scardino was not prepared to take on while hunting down McCarthy.

The erratic behavior from the ADA had been troublesome at best. He still couldn't make heads or tails out of the ramblings that all seemed to be focused on the reporting duo Lois Lane and Clark

Kent. Whether he wanted to or not, he was being pulled into the chaotic spiraling. Mayson Drake had a target on her back as did Lois Lane. Who McCarthy would go after first was anyone's guess. Though Mayson seemed to have every erratic argument against working with Lois Lane, Dan had found the reporting duo to be quite resourceful and useful in his investigation. How good of an idea it was for him to work with the reporting duo was sure to end up a subject of debate with the higher-ups, but for now, what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

The city bus came to a stop with a slight shudder, jerking Dan back against the seat as a reminder to check his surroundings. He smiled to himself when he saw the steps to City Hall through the window and stood up, making his exit from the bus through the crowd of passengers who by all appearances, seemed to be on their daily commute in ties and suits. He nodded his thanks to the bus driver and stepped off, preparing himself mentally for his confrontation with Mayson Drake.

Lois wandered from one end of her apartment, hurriedly trying to get ready for work as her mind continued to run through her conversation with Clark last night. Something seemed to have lifted, and for the first time since Clark's revelation, she felt like things would be okay.

<<“I went from feeling like I knew you better than anyone to not knowing you at all.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“You already do, Lois.”>>

The smile that had forced its way across her face last night when she had found herself unable to resist the deep yearning in the pit of her gut and break through the steel barriers that had made even the most casual touch or look non-existent seemed to be a permanent fixture across her face. After some prodding and the promise of a dinner date, Clark had left to finish his patrol, leaving Lois to contemplate just what the future might hold.

<<“What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”>>

It was a strange feeling. Knowing that at one point, the questions she had been seeking to be answered a year ago were finally to come to fruition. But instead of having those answers be the biggest story to grace the front page of any paper, they would be something much more important. A secret she would hold closer than any secret she had before.

She moved through the apartment, gathering up her things, preparing to face the day with her travel mug of coffee, and her satchel filled with notes from the previous day's interviews and investigation into the coroner. Once she was sure, she had everything she pulled the keys out from her purse and worked on unlocking the swiss army array of locks on her front door. Finally, reaching the last lock, she opened the door and let out a sharp gasp when she saw Detective Riley on her doorstep.

“You guys really don't have to do the whole door to door thing,” Lois said, letting out a shuddered breath.

“Agent Scardino mentioned the confusion surrounding your locked door, Ms. Lane,” Detective Riley said, pointing to a long brown paper bag around her doorknob. “Expecting anything?”

“Um, no,” Lois said, recognizing the handwriting on the bag with her name on it as Clark's. She reached over to grab it, and Riley stopped her.

“I'm not sure that's a good idea, Ms. Lane.”

Lois took the bag from the door and pulled out a card. “It's just a gift from a . . .uh, friend.” She smiled as she pulled out a single long-stemmed rose and a small pastry bag that could be from anywhere. Inside the bag, she found a folded note with Clark's handwriting and opened it.

“Thought you might want something more than coffee this morning. Superman has to help escort Martinez into federal

custody this morning. I'll be in as soon as I can.

~ CK”

Lois smiled, tapping the rose against the pastry bag for a moment and sniffed the heavenly smell of the pastry inside. With a smile, she headed into work.

“Everything okay, Ms. Lane?” Detective Riley asked.

“Perfect,” Lois responded. She looked back at the detective with a shrug.

“Security is on high alert this morning over the transfer of Martinez, so an extra unit has been added to the detail on you and Ms. Drake,” Riley said, pointing to the door in front of them. “Any visits from friends or boyfriends will need to be cleared with your patrol unit to prevent . . .unwanted circumstances.”

“So, no going about my business like it's my business. Got it.” Lois let out a heavy sigh. The security was a necessary step. She knew that, but at the same time, she also felt as if her security was coming at a great cost. Freedom to make impulsive decisions or even the simple benefit of knowing there wasn't someone lurking around the shadows or in a patrol car watching her every move.

“We'll catch him, Ms. Lane,” Riley gave her a reassuring smile as they made their way toward the exit of the apartment building.

Dan Scardino tightened his grip on the edge of the doorframe as he watched the cleaning crew work on the repairs to the window that had been shattered from where the glass panes had been shot out during the shootout. His attention moved from the corner of the office to where Mayson Drake was seated behind the desk, spinning from side to side as she tapped her hand frantically on the tabletop.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” Mayson commented with a purse of her lips, jutting her chin out as she stared back at Dan.

“Mayson,” Dan called her name out calmly as he stepped inside the office, feeling the crunch of broken glass beneath the heel of his leather boot. He released a long breath he didn't realize he'd been holding and approached her with caution. He hadn't seen her since she had stormed off from Colleen McCarthy's residence, and he hadn't heard a peep from her when the news of McCarthy's escape from capture had been broadcast across the media news circuit. “Glad to see you made it back to Metropolis in one piece.”

“I am a big girl, Agent Scardino,” Mayson commented, unimpressed as she shrugged her shoulders and pointed to the newspaper scattered across the floor by her desk. “I see you were still unable to catch your man.”

“Well, we got some of them, but McCarthy is still on the run with this Albie character,” Dan explained, taking a seat in front of her. He leaned down to pick up the newspaper, noting the small dark holes that had been poked through the paper. He frowned when he turned the paper over, attempting to fold it and spotted the bio picture next to the article that had been published where Lois Lane and Clark Kent's photos were printed below the headline on the capture of Stanley Gables.

He slowly shifted his eyes up and met the steely gaze from the ADA. He cleared his throat and let out a sigh, “I guess you heard about the medical examiner being in on the scandal with Resurrection?”

“I do read,” Mayson responded, not looking away as she continued to stare him down.

“So, is the District Attorney's office going to pursue the case against her?” Dan pressed, shifting uncomfortably under her unwavering gaze.

“I don't know.”

“You don't know?” Dan's brow furrowed.

“Nope,” Mayson shrugged her shoulders and leaned back in her chair, continuing to stare back at Dan, locking herself onto him

like a lion hunting an antelope. Her features remained stern until he finally stood up and made an excuse to leave.

Something – he wasn't sure what – was wrong here. He quickly backed out of the office and headed to the Daily Planet with the torn front page tucked inside his jacket.

Camera flashes went off from every direction as armed agents with bulletproof vests with yellow DEA stamped across the back exited through the prison doors with Diego Martinez in custody. Police officers had the area marked off for the pathway from the Metropolis prison to the awaiting steel van Martinez was to be loaded into for his transfer to federal custody.

Clark let out a long breath as he floated above the crowded scene from his viewpoint atop the Metropolis Savings building where two snipers were positioned to take out any possible attempts on Martinez. It was believed that given the history with McCarthy and Martinez, the fugitive serial bomber would try to make a move to exact his revenge on Martinez. Whether there was any merit to the perceived threat was to be decided in the next few minutes as Martinez would be secured in federal custody once he crossed the bridge with the FBI Agents to their setup in Hell's Kitchen.

Lois leaned back in her chair as she skimmed through her notes from the interview she had finished up with Detective Ryder. Melissa Scott was still under lock and key with the department, but she was able to get some information regarding the case being built against the former assistant medical examiner. Her gaze shifted to the news coverage of Diego Martinez being transported into federal custody.

She let out a long breath, reaching her hand up to finger the silky strands of her hair, shifting her gaze away from the fluorescent light emitting from her monitor and focusing on the long-stemmed rose gently leaning against the rim of the vase. For a moment, she pushed away from the stress of the story she was chasing and allowed herself to ponder on what the future might hold.

Though there was still so much she wasn't sure of in regards to her relationship with Clark, the one undeniable truth she knew was how she *felt*. The intoxicatingly overpowering rush of emotion that pulled her to him continued to grow stronger despite her mind's cry of foul over his recent revelation. How she felt and what she thought continued to be two considerably different things but no matter what, there was no going back.

She knew the uneasy limbo they'd both been in would only grow worse the longer she quietly obsessed over the deception while her heart ached for the gaping hole inside her to be filled from where she had banished her once closest friend. The world-shattering truth had been said. The only thing left to do was pick up the pieces and move forward. She wanted this to work. She wanted to move past this gut-wrenching state of uncertainty and find the next step.

A slow smile spread across her face when she recalled her and Clark's conversation from the night before. It had been the first time both of them had dropped the facade of niceties and said what had been weighing on both of their minds.

"You keep making that face it'll get stuck like that." A voice behind her interrupted her thoughts.

She turned her head and let out a low groan when she saw Dan Scardino standing behind her. "Haven't you had enough of this place yet? Gables is behind bars with Martinez. I would have thought you'd be all over this custody transfer."

"Martinez isn't who I'm after," he remarked softly, glancing down as he took a seat at her desk.

"Any leads?" Lois asked, subconsciously biting the inside of her lower lip.

"No," he frowned.

"So, you're here to hunt down leads from us?" Lois prompted, folding her arms across her chest with a disapproving glare.

"No," He reached up to rake a hand through his dark hair and then folded his hands in front of him as he leaned forward and whispered. "I know you don't know me that well and you have every reason to be suspicious. I get it. You're a reporter, and I'm just some federal agent getting in your way."

"You did break into my apartment last night," Lois reminded him, raising her eyebrow as she continued to stare him down with a disapproving glare.

"The door was unlocked." He insisted. She didn't respond, continuing to stare him down, and he let out a long sigh, admitting defeat as he shook his head. "I shouldn't have gone into your apartment without knocking. I'm sorry. You happy now?"

Lois sighed, reaching over to tap her hand on her desk. "Is there a point to all this?"

"Yes," Scardino insisted.

"Which is?"

"I need to tell you something."

"About the case?" Lois prompted.

"No," Scardino frowned.

"Then what...?"

"Look, you don't know me. I get it, but if you get to know me, you'll find I'm not that bad of a guy." He offered a quick smile before he continued to plead his case, "I like to make noise with the higher-ups and keep them on their toes. It's how I keep things interesting."

Lois paused, arching an eyebrow up at him as she waited for whatever bomb he was about to drop on her. Whatever it was that he was leading up to seemed to be something big as she noted the way his hands remained clenched on his knees as he spoke, and the lines around his eyes were tense, relaying how visibly upset he was with whatever was bothering him.

"I'm listening." Lois prompted, letting out a long sigh.

Dan looked behind him, checking to make sure their conversation wasn't being overheard. "I found this on Mayson's desk when I went to check in with her this morning." He set a folded newspaper on her desk, tapping at the side of it to allow it to unfold before her to reveal the front-page article of the Daily Planet with her and Clark's by-line photos. Her eyes focused on the pen markings covering her photo.

"What?" Lois stared at the newspaper, unsure how to respond as Dan Scardino continued.

"Look, I don't know what's going on with you two. I know there's a history there with her and Kent's relationship..."

"What are you even talking about?" Lois scoffed, reaching over to grab the paper, staring hard at the frantic pen marks and indented tears into the newspaper where her by-line photo was. She sat up straight suddenly as she tried to process everything Dan Scardino had dropped on her. "Relationship?"

His brow furrowed as he looked back at her even more confused, "Wasn't she and Kent in some sort of relationship before you two, um...?"

Lois folded her arms across her chest, growing more and more irritated by the second as she stared him down. "Before we ... what, exactly?"

"I mean, aren't you two..." he motioned with his hands and whispered, "you know?"

She opened her mouth to respond and then stopped herself, clamping her mouth shut before she said something she would regret. After a long pause, she found her voice and responded in a slow eerily calm tone as she glared back at Dan, "My relationship with Clark is absolutely none of your business—or *Mayson's*."

"Even if she's making it out like you're the crazy one that stole him away?" Dan prompted, pointing to the paper in her hands. "I don't care what happened between you all. But I do care about the fact that this is a very serious sign of instability in

someone that's leading the investigation into McCarthy."

"Henderson and Ryder are leading the investigation," Lois corrected.

"And exactly who is doing the legwork with the DA's office?" Dan prompted, pointing to the paper.

"She's been under a lot of stress," Lois gave a noncommittal shrug as she flipped the paper over and saw the frantic scribbles on the other side in an eerily familiar handwriting.

"What is it?" Dan asked.

Lois dropped the paper, flipping it back over as she shook her head. "I...I have to go."

Bill Henderson slammed his fists on the table in front of him, taking delight as he watched the prisoner in front of him jump in his seat. Henderson's brow furrowed as he tapped his fingertips against the tabletop and pushed the file across the table, grinning to himself when he saw the sweat beads begin to dribble down the side of his prisoner's forehead.

"Where is he?"

The wind blew through Lois' hair as she paced the rooftop of the Daily Planet. The panic from the bombshell that had been laid on her just a few short hours ago. A sick sinking feeling continued to overtake her as her thoughts were filled with question after question. Should she go to the police with her suspicions? Clark?

'You don't know anything for sure,' she reminded herself.

'Don't I?'

The deep sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach continued to ache as she paced the rooftop, staring up at the rounded beams that formed the sculpture of the Daily Planet's logo. If what she suspected was true, then not only would she have the answer to the burning question that had been running through her mind for the last few nights but she would also have a very newsworthy angle on the story she was working. She should be elated with the prospect of having answers, but she wasn't. All she could focus on was how this could potentially destroy someone she respected as a colleague — even if she had been threatened by her.

'Maybe.'

"Lois?"

She jumped, startled by the sound of her name being called and turned to see Clark standing behind her in a tan business suit complimented by a blue dress shirt and, as usual, an outlandish tie that was just—Clark. She felt the wind whistle through her hair as she stared back at him, unsure what to even say or how to respond to his questioning gaze as he closed the distance between them. He hooked his arm across the back of her shoulders, allowing the silence between them to continue for just a few more minutes before he broke the silence between them.

"You can't just disappear like this, Lois," he let out a shaky breath as his hand gently squeezed her shoulder. "Perry's about to lose his mind, and the officers out front were about to scale the Planet floor by floor."

Lois closed her eyes, feeling a wave of regret wash over her at the reminder of just how ill-advised her trip to the roof had been. In her rush to escape the newsroom and think through the news Dan Scardino had dropped on her, she had forgotten she was supposed to be under protective watch. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

His brow furrowed, and he brushed it off with a quiet wave, "It's okay." He reached his hand over to cup her cheek, tilting her chin up to look at him. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," she heard her voice crack as she looked back at him with tears shimmering in her eyes.

"You don't know?" he asked, frowning back at her.

Her voice trembled as she shook her head, searching for the words to explain the wave of uncertainty that filled her mind. "I... I think I *might* know who the other stalker is."

His thumb brushed against her jaw, and the question came

from his eyes while the only thing that escaped his lips was her name. She reached her hand up to cup his hand with hers and felt the weight of what she was about to say press against her chest.

"Lois?"

She closed her eyes, feeling the moisture from her tears burning as she held back the tears. She knew she had to say it. She couldn't hide what she knew. Even if she wasn't completely convinced, it was Mayson behind the threats, the evidence was certainly there and worth a critical look.

"I haven't told Henderson yet. I'm honestly not even sure what to tell him." Lois began, pulling the folded paper out from her jacket pocket. She handed the damaged newspaper to him. "Look familiar?"

"Where did this come from?" Clark asked as his arm fell from her cheek to rest across her shoulders.

"Apparently, it came from Mayson Drake's office."

Chapter 16: Collateral Damage

Martha looked up over the rim of her coffee mug at the young brunette, gripping her coffee mug as if it held the answers to life's greatest questions. The whiteness of her knuckles showed the anxiousness behind the calm façade she attempted to portray. A trait Martha had quickly picked up on from Lois Lane's first visit to Smallville.

Martha set her mug down on the table in front of her and pointed to her mug. "Can I get you some more coffee?"

Lois set her mug down, suddenly aware of how tight her grip on the mug must have been, allowing the green and red ceramic mug to rest on the table. She looked up at Martha with her dark eyes, still holding back the boulder-sized weight that had yet to leave since her arrival just a few short hours ago.

Martha pointed to the backdoor where Clark and Jonathan had disappeared behind just a few minutes ago. "They shouldn't be too long. Clark likes to try and help where he can with the heavy stuff on the farm ever since Jonathan's back surgery a few years ago," Martha spotted the nervous tapping of Lois' leg as she stared into the coffee mug in front of her as if it would somehow save her. She reached her hand across the table, placing it over Lois' hand to stop her from fidgeting. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Lois gave a noncommittal shrug and looked up at her with a heavy sigh, "I don't really know where to start."

Martha nodded, offering the young woman a smile as she sighed, "Well, I understand Clark finally told you."

"Yeah," She smiled, taking a sip of her coffee. "I'm still processing that revelation."

Martha recognized the uncertainty swimming across Lois' face, feeling a pang in her chest as she stared back at this woman that held her son's future in the palm of her hand. She took a shallow breath as she tried to form her words carefully, "It was never easy for him. The lying. The secrets. Even as a child, he absolutely hated it, but it was a necessary evil in order to protect him...and our family."

A warm smile spread across Lois' face, "Martha, you don't have to worry. I..." she stopped herself mid-sentence, finding her words before she continued. "You can trust me. I would never do anything to betray Clark's secret."

A weak smile fell across Martha's face, and she let out a weak chuckle, "I know. He, uh, never would have entrusted it to someone he didn't trust completely."

Lois paused for a moment, biting her lower-lip and nodded, "I...uh, I guess that makes sense."

Martha nodded, feeling nearly thirty years' worth of tears threaten to push their way to the forefront of her mind and make themselves known. "Clark's always been alone." She paused and looked back at Lois, "When he was thirteen and getting strong—really, *really* strong—he made up his own mind, he wasn't going to tell anybody."

Martha grew quiet, recalling the painfully isolating teenage years of watching her son close himself off from everyone around him in an attempt to be ‘normal.’ “He said he wanted to fit in... But he never could, not really.” The tears fell down Martha’s cheek of their own accord and she didn’t bother trying to swipe them away. “It broke my heart, watching him have to hide so much; afraid he’d always be alone...”

“You know I do love him,” Lois responded with a slight crack in her voice as she reached her hand over to offer Martha a supportive squeeze on the shoulder.

“I know,” Martha let out a soft chuckle. “I’ve known there was something special about you since he first mentioned you.”

“It’s still so much...” Lois gave her a weak smile. “There are all these secrets and then there’s how I feel, which completely contradicts what I would do or react if anyone else had lied to me like this. I just don’t know how to process this—Any of this.”

“It probably doesn’t help having your private life invaded either,” Martha commented, scooting her chair over.

Lois looked up, running her palm against her damp cheeks, “What are the odds of having two stalkers at the same time?”

“Well, you do live in Metropolis.” Martha reminded her.

“I just keep thinking ‘what if I’m wrong?’” Lois let out a sharp shudder. “I mean, I could be wrong. There could be a reasonable explanation for all of this.”

“Of course,” Martha said softly.

“I mean, she’s the Assistant District Attorney for crying out loud. Why would she stoop to stalking and threatening me like this?”

“It doesn’t hurt to check out the possibility, Lois,” Martha replied calmly. “I’m not saying she is the one behind this, but if she is, given what you and Clark have shared with me, I would think this isn’t normal behavior for her. She obviously needs help—Help she won’t get unless someone does something.”

“Clark wants me to go to Henderson with my suspicions.”

“I’m guessing you don’t want to.”

“This kind of accusation could destroy her career.”

“If she’s as unhelped as you and Clark have said, then it could save her life.”

Clark came to a stop after moving at super-speed to chop the old oak tree that had fallen across the creek on the end of his parent’s and Wayne Irig’s property. He let out a long breath, unsure what to make of the rush of rage and apprehension that was coursing through him. Even in his worse battles with Luthor, he had never been tested to this degree. On the one hand, he wanted to do everything he could to protect Lois – hence the impromptu trip to Smallville after discovering one of her stalkers could very well be someone they both had once looked at as a friend and colleague.

He had barely asked before flying her out here as a safety precaution. He knew they had to go back. Neither of them had packed anything, and Superman couldn’t just disappear for days ...or weeks.

The deep, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach screamed at him to do more. He needed to do something, but with so little pointing him in the direction of the ADA, he knew a single wrong move could push what appeared to be a very fragile Mayson Drake even further over the edge. Something he wasn’t comfortable doing – especially knowing it was Lois Mayson had in her crosshairs.

Mayson.

Could Mayson really be behind the threats Lois had been receiving? The thought seemed preposterous. The Mayson he had known was a kind hearted person that held everyone to a higher standard – even Superman. Imagining the fierce defender of justice to not only stoop so low as to become a criminal herself but to be the source of the pain and turmoil Lois had been suffering

through since the stalking and threatening notes had begun was hard to reconcile. It seemed so completely contradictory to the Mayson Drake he knew. Or thought he knew.

“You missed one,” a voice came from behind him.

He jumped, startled, and relaxed when he saw Lois standing a few feet away from him, pointing with her foot to a long branch that had fallen on the other side of the creek. “Hey,” he offered a weak smile and set the axe down, opting to take a break rather than finish the last branch.

“So, no crop festivals...” Lois observed, leaning against the bench he was seated at with a smile. “No crazy Bureau 39 agents...”

“Nope, just a normal day in Smallville,” he grinned at her as she took a seat next to him.

Lois gave him a sad smile, “Your parents are really wonderful.”

He nodded, smiling back at her, “They’re the most incredibly patient people you will ever meet.”

“I can only imagine what it must have been like growing up here.” She observed quietly, looking over her shoulder at the creek behind them. “This place has a calming effect you can’t really find in Metropolis.”

“Yeah, but don’t let the quiet fool you. If you come here in the evening during one of the festivals, it can get a little crazy.” Clark grinned, recalling some of the memories from his adolescence.

“Why is that hard to imagine?” Lois chuckled. He gave a silent shrug, and she pointed to the old rope hanging from one of the trees that hung its branches over the creek below. Just a few feet away from the rope was the old board wedged between the rocky cliff. “What’s that rope for?”

Clark let out a soft chuckle, recalling some of the memories of swinging across and sometimes into the creek during his youth. “Smallville is just like any other place. Community gets together around the holidays and can put on a great party.” He grinned to himself, “May not be as fancy as some of the ones that get thrown in Metropolis, but they’re still a lot of fun.”

“Well, Metropolis can put on some pretty lame parties,” Lois observed

“Hmm, so can Smallville.” A reminiscent expression crossed his face, and he pointed to the rocky ledge on the corner of the creek. “In the summers, we used to dare one another to see who could jump across.” He pointed to the board where the old rope that had been used to swing across looked to have seen better days. “I used to pretend to fall with the rest of the group...”

“Must be hard to fall when you can defy gravity by flying,” Lois raised an eyebrow at him.

Clark shook his head, “I didn’t start flying till after high school.”

“Really?” Lois gave him a half-smile.

“Really.” Clark nodded with a shrug of his shoulders. “I didn’t start developing any of my powers until Junior High.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Lois reasoned aloud, tapping her hand on the arm of the bench.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said, “I’m just...realizing how many little things I never thought of...or thought to ask...”

“Well, I told you before...Superman is just a disguise,” he responded softly.

“I’m starting to see that,” Lois said, turning toward him.

A silence fell between them and as tempting as it was for him to fill the void with the burning questions that had been nagging at him for days, he opted to let the silence continue. Something seemed to be stirring within her. He could practically see the wheels turning in her mind as she sat there quietly.

“I’m sorry,” Lois finally broke the silence.

“For what?” his brow furrowed in confusion as he stared back at her.

“Everything.” Lois gave him a weak smile. “I didn’t handle the whole ‘sharing a secret you’ve never shared before’ thing very well.” Clark reached his hand over and placed a hand over hers, unsure how to respond as she continued to ramble. “I was so focused on this one – completely necessary - lie you had told and trying to come to terms with it and forgetting everything else.”

“Like?”

“Like maybe I know you better than I give myself credit for?” Lois shook her head in dismay. “I don’t know. I guess I could chalk it up to bad relationships or my childhood, but when you get down to it, I just didn’t handle any of this very well.”

“I think you’re being a little hard on yourself, Lois,” Clark said cautiously. “Yes, I would have preferred a better reaction, but I didn’t exactly approach the revelation with kid gloves either. Plus, my timing could have been a lot better.” He took her hand in his. “Crazy psycho bomber on the run, resurrected criminals popping up all over Metropolis…”

“That and all this stalker business. It feels like one disaster after another…” Lois admitted with a shake of her head.

“We do seem to attract disasters,” he remarked with a smirk. The space between them remained unbearable as he watched her toy with the hem of her t-shirt. He wanted more than anything to just gather her up in his arms and never let go, but he knew he had to let her work through the inner turmoil on her own. Drawing her to him too soon could cause her to pull away and put them back where they had been just days ago.

“Well, it probably didn’t help things when you started sparring with Lex Luthor before the ink was even dry on your debut article.” Lois winked at him, shaking her head. “I thought I was bold.”

“Where did you…?” he shook his head, knowing already where she had heard about his confrontation with Lex Luthor. “How much did she tell you?”

“Oh, you know some here and there.” She gave him a sheepish grin. “So, are you planning on keeping the old costumes for posterity or just backups in case you need to change identities?”

“What old costumes?” he felt the heat on the back of his neck and swore he could feel his ears burning.

She scrunched her nose up as she seemed to be recalling something and then spun off the description of his many, many rejected suits before deciding on the suit. “Green spandex, leopard spandex, and some hat with wings on it…”

“Oh, nooooo…” he hung his head in shame, feeling the burning sensation cover his entire face. “Remind me to toss that box into the sun later.”

Lois let out a giggle, “So it’s *not* for posterity?”

“No,” he shook his head in embarrassment. “I didn’t even know mom still had those.”

A soft chuckle escaped the back of her throat, and he heard her let out a long sigh, allowing the silence that had once been there before to fill the voided space between them. He cast an uncertain gaze in her direction and found himself met with an anxious-ridden expression as her hand gripped his.

“Do you think I’m overreacting?”

“What?” he frowned, looking back at her in surprise.

“I mean, I don’t have any real evidence that points at this being Mayson.” Lois elaborated softly. “I’ve got a newspaper that was found in Mayson’s office, but who knows if that was her that scribbled on it. Anyone could have put it there.”

Clark let out a quiet breath, letting her finish her rambling before he spoke up. “Lois, someone *very* smart once told me that the obvious answer is almost always the right answer.”

Lois smirked back at him, “Maybe that person didn’t know what they were talking about.”

“She’s always right,” Clark frowned, placing a hand on her shoulders. “Do I think you’re overreacting? No. Do I think Mayson did this? I don’t know, but I’m not willing to take any

chances right now.”

Lois nodded, running a hand through her hair and brushing the stray strands out of her eyes. “We can’t hide out here forever.”

“I know,” Clark nodded to her, feeling the unbearable heavy weight against his chest. “I’m sorry. I know I probably should have talked to you before flying you out here. I…panicked.”

“I wasn’t exactly arguing either,” Lois flashed him a brief smile. She let out a long breath, turning to Clark. “How exactly do we prove or disprove this theory that Mayson is behind the ‘*I hate you*’ threats?”

“Well, I guess for starters we talk to Bill Henderson,” Clark placed a hand on her shoulder. “I know you don’t want to take this to him, but…”

“But what if I’m wrong?” Lois cut him off, shaking her head.

“What if you’re not?”

Detective Ryder looked down at his notebook, staring at the name in bewilderment as he took a breath and then turned his attention back to Mayson Drake. Her hand tapped repeatedly on the corner of her desk as she turned her chair from side to side, nonchalantly barking out orders on what the police department should or shouldn’t do in regards to the McCarthy case. Her latest order left Ryder unsure how seriously to take anything she had said. He tightened his jaw, setting the notebook aside and leaned forward, folding his hands on his lap as he prepared himself mentally on how to approach this latest development.

“Mayson,” he let out a nervous cough, eying the uneven movements from side to side she made as he spoke. “I understand you’re trying to do your job here, and I can empathize that it must not be easy at times juggling so many spinning plates…”

“I can spin my plates just fine, detective,” Mayson sniffed with an aggravated shrug. “I just don’t want to waste my time charging Ms. Scott with such a weak case…”

“With all due respect. Ms. Drake, the charges against Ms. Scott aren’t exactly up to you,” Ryder snorted back. “She was instrumental in smuggling known criminals out of prison and very well could be much deeper in this than we all realize.”

“Has she given you anything?” Mayson countered, tossing her head from side to side with a mocking tone.

“No,” Ryder sighed.

“Let her go.” Mayson snorted, shaking her head. “We’ll charge her when we have something.”

“But…”

“Ryder, we’ve got bigger fish to fry.” Mayson pushed a file across the table to him.

“What’s this?”

“What does it look like?” a smug expression crossed her face.

“Absolutely not.” He shoved the file back to her.

“I have a case,” Mayson argued, tightening her jaw as she added smugly. “Unlike your Medical Examiner, I actually have evidence for these charges.”

“I had evidence when I locked Melissa Scott up too.” Ryder countered.

“Yes, the suicide murder conspiracy,” Mayson rolled her eyes. “Pining over your witness isn’t going to make the case stronger.” She pointed to the file, “You can’t build something that isn’t there. But this is a clear case of obstruction.”

“I thought you guys were friends.” Ryder snorted, taking the file in disbelief.

“Things change,” Mayson said with a shrug.

Ryder stared at the warrant that had yet to be signed by a judge just yet. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Let me know once Ms. Lane is in custody. I want to be present when you question her.” Mayson instructed.

“If Judge Thompson signs this.”

“He will.” She responded confidently.

“Well, until he does, the Metropolis P.D. isn’t making any

moves on this.” He instructed her.

“Just keep an eye on her, would you?” Mayson narrowed her eyes. “I don’t want to see you lose another suspect in custody.”

The crowd around the small town square where a makeshift open town square theater on the lawn had been setup had brought a small crowd. Accompanied by the entertainment of a classic action thriller, the local town’s residents had a small potluck of drinks and snacks and a small bonfire setup to keep everyone warm in the cool air.

Lois reached her hand over, allowing her fingers to wedge themselves around Clark’s as they watched the final scene of Dirty Harry threatening Scorpio with the infamous line of, “You’ve got to ask yourself one question: ‘Do I feel lucky?’” Dirty Harry held his .44 Magnum up for good measure and let out the mean challenge of, “Well, do ya?”

The infamous shots were fired, and the closing credits rolled. Lois looked over her shoulder, turning to Clark and smiling to herself when she saw the relaxed expression on his face. She had noticed it on their last visit as well. How laid back Clark appeared to be and just...different in Smallville. She had brushed it off as him just being at ease with himself but knowing now what she knew regarding the brush with Kryptonite from her conversation with Martha earlier and how that contributed to him having the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders, the difference in his demeanor seemed to be something to be met with caution.

“So, what did you think?” Clark asked, helping her stand up from the picnic table they had been seated at.

“I’ve seen Dirty Harry before,” Lois grinned back at him.

“I was referring to the drive thru you claimed never to have gone to before.” Clark shot back with a smirk.

“It was nice,” Lois admitted, looping her arm around his as they made their way through the small crowd around the town square.

“Not exactly what I’d planned, but still a fun night.” Clark gave her a sheepish grin. “I suppose we just need to quit making any plans for fear of the universe squashing them to pieces.”

Lois nodded her agreement as they made their way back from the town square. “I wouldn’t say that exactly...” she ventured cautiously. “I mean, technically you didn’t say where we were going. We did go somewhere out of town.”

Lois felt a flutter in her abdomen as he leaned in close. A quiver ran down her spine as the cool wind blew against the back of her neck. The night had not been what she had expected and most certainly wasn’t anywhere near the grand plans Clark had been boasting about before. Yet despite that, it still had that magical pull that seemed to envelop her whenever she was around Clark. That undeniable force that pulled her to him like two opposite magnetic pulses unable to pull away from one another.

The movie had been an added treat even though Clark hadn’t known it was going to be showing. They had explored the creek and strolled around town and found the bonfire at the town square and settled in for a surprise showing of Dirty Harry. As low key as the evening was, it just seemed to be the perfect way to end the day.

Her worries over Mayson and what to do with the threats remained silent as she focused on exploring the small town with a new set of eyes. No longer feeling like an outsider intruding on a strange place she’d never been, she found herself examining Smallville as something much more. The place that brought forth Clark and Superman as one. Back at the Kents, she had had the unique pleasure of seeing him let his guard down – really let it down. No cape. No glasses. Just Clark.

The stories from when he was younger from both Clark and Martha helped fill in some of the questions Lois had had – yet had been too afraid or just unwilling to ask before. Now she found herself wavering into familiar yet uncharted territory. The deep,

intoxicating feelings that had been suppressed for the last few days continued to nag at her, and the more time she spent with him the harder it was to deny how she felt. How she really felt.

The late night of way too much food and connecting with some of the residents in a setting that wasn’t tainted with the memory of Bureau 39 left a broad smile on her face. The smell of the fire ablaze and wood burning reached her nostrils as they turned the corner, approaching the crowded parking lot where they had flown in from.

Clark gave her a sheepish shrug, “Sometimes it gets a little crowded.” He pointed to the hill a few feet away. “Looks like we can probably duck behind that old tackle shop by Muriel’s and head back.”

Lois nodded, following him up the hill. Though she still knew many questions would continue to hang in the air until they returned to Metropolis, indulging in the small-town charm for the evening and forgetting her worries had an appeal to it that she couldn’t deny. It seemed as if every day brought another disaster or another ‘gotcha’ moment that left her wondering if they would ever catch those responsible for their misdeeds. Taking a moment to relax and enjoy the quiet company with Clark had been a welcome reprieve.

They reached the end of the hill where the old tackle shop was, and indeed there was hardly anyone around, allowing Clark the perfect cover to change. A chuckle escaped her lips as she watched Clark duck between the back building to change into his Superman uniform. When he came to a stop, reappearing in front of her in the red, blue, and yellow suit she’d come to know so well, she asked him, “Do you always change in alleys like this?”

“Anywhere secluded,” he responded, scooping her up in his arms. “You ready?”

“I guess,” she let out a soft sigh. “This was a lot of fun.”

“I’m glad,” Clark responded, leaning in to cup her cheek. For a brief moment, she wondered if he would try to lean in and kiss her, but just as quickly as his hand moved to her, it disappeared, and she found herself in the clear night sky with wind blowing through her hair as they flew back to Metropolis.

Amir Munour looked to his security detail as the glass doors behind them closed. The visit to the states was one that had to be done with extreme caution, given the current uprisal in his country. An uprisal he would soon have under control once he got his hands on the formula of Dr. Wilder. Still, bargaining with a woman over price and delivery seemed to be such a wasted effort given how easily he could take what was his – at least when his feet were planted on his country’s soil.

“Mr. Munour, this way,” He was directed to the dark town car that awaited by the curb with a driver standing by the door, ready to open the door for them as they approached.

“Mr. Munour, welcome to America,” The driver spoke, and he reached behind him to open the door, jutting his chin out in recognition as a smile spread across his face.

Amir Munour looked around the dingy streets, unimpressed as he took his seat inside the town car, “Yes, well let’s get on with it. Metropolis General Hospital.”

“Yes, sir,” The driver tucked his dark hair behind his ear and moved to the driver’s side of the town car. “Metropolis General Hospital?” He clarified, to confirm the destination.

Amir nodded to the driver and looked down at his briefcase as the driver took them to their destination. In the first file, he had the complete profile of both Dr. Katherine Wilder and Claudette Wilder, the two women that held the keys to his future.

‘Soon,’ he told himself. ‘*Very soon.*’

The curtains billowed in the wind as Clark landed on the balcony of his apartment. With a soft brush of cold air, he blew the balcony door open and flew inside, holding Lois to him with a protective embrace as they entered the apartment with caution.

Though it was only Lois' apartment where the threats had been made, he still wasn't taking any chances.

"Thanks," she smiled back at him as he changed out of the Superman suit and back into the t-shirt and jeans he'd been wearing earlier. "You sure you don't mind me staying here? I mean, I can get a hotel or something..."

He held up a hand to stop her, "Lois, it's fine. I would feel a lot better having you stay here than at a hotel." He let out a long breath. "We'll figure all this out in the morning. Talk to Henderson and see what we can find out."

"Right," Lois nodded, shaking her head. "I guess we do have a crazy stalker and serial bomber to stop."

"Yeah," he reached a hand over to cup her cheek. He pointed to the couch behind him. "If you need anything, I'll be right out here."

"I can sleep on the couch." She offered, trying to argue.

Clark floated a few inches off the ground and stretched himself out on his side, shaking his head. "I can sleep on the ceiling if I want." He grinned back at her.

Lois raised an eyebrow, staring at him, floating in the air in front of her with bemusement. "You sleep on the ceiling?"

"Sometimes," he shrugged. "It's comfortable."

"Compared to what?" her brow furrowed in surprise, trying to understand the logic.

Clark shook his head, "I'm also invulnerable." He let out a long sigh. "Seriously, take the bedroom. It's been an exhausting few days. Try and get some rest."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," he floated back down to where he was standing in front of her.

He stared at her for the longest minute of his life, contemplating if he should say or do anything more. Every fiber of his being wanted to end this ridiculousness of tip-toeing around one another and say what he really felt. They had been growing closer, but were they close enough to where Lois felt like she could trust him again?

She stared back at him for what felt like an eternity before leaning up and brushing her lips against his cheek, whispering a kiss before murmuring a quick 'goodnight' to him. An internal battle of what to say or do ensued as he watched her disappear behind his bedroom door.

Chapter 17: Beautiful Disaster

Perry White set his reading glasses down and waved the familiar Inspector inside his office as he finished jotting down a note from the voicemail he was listening to. After a quick scribble and a click of the phone on his desk he turned his attention to the Inspector who looked none too pleased to be sitting in his office at this late of an hour. Perry let out an uneasy sigh, folding his hands in front of him. "I, uh, thanks for coming down, Bill. I got your call and well, frankly I figured this would be best discussed in person."

"Well, I appreciate the face to face approach whenever I can, Mr. White." Henderson remarked, taking a seat in the chair across from him.

"Well, good," Perry nodded, unsure where to begin. "You mentioned there was an investigation into how the Planet broke the McCarthy story?"

"Not exactly," Henderson shook his head, tapping nervously with his hand on his knee. "The investigation was completed and as far as the Metropolis P.D. was concerned, there was no case."

"I didn't realize there was even an investigation," Perry remarked, trying to maintain a friendly demeanor with the inspector as he spoke.

"As a rule, whenever we receive information from an outside source the Metropolis P.D. goes in and fact checks everything to be sure our information is accurate and make sure our case doesn't

fall apart once charges are pressed."

"Understandable," Perry nodded feeling himself relax ever so slightly. "But I'm still not understanding where the problem is."

"Well, the Metropolis P.D. found no issues but the ADA did." Henderson frowned as he looked back at Perry. "I haven't heard anything from the judge's clerk on whether the request for a warrant will be approved or not."

"But you just said..."

"If the ADA thinks there is a case then there's nothing the Metropolis P.D. can do, Perry." Henderson explained calmly.

"Now, Judge Thompson is one of your more fair judges but there is a chance this could end with Lois Lane charged with obstruction."

"I don't understand what the ADA might be seeing as obstruction," Perry shook his head in despair. "Lois and Clark were working on this case with the ADA and the DEA. What could Lois have possibly done that could be seen as obstruction?"

"She does like to bend the rules from time to time, Perry," Henderson reminded him gently.

"Did she bend them in this instance?" Perry challenged.

"Not that I can tell."

Lois let out a long sigh as her head hit the pillow, rolling over on her side as the weight of the fatigue from the day pressured her to give into the sleep she had been putting off for most of the evening. The stress from the day and the previous days continued to weigh on her as her mind recollected the short trip to Smallville. Though she had visited before, this time had been different. The guarded walls that she hadn't even realized had been carefully placed during her last visit had disappeared.

She thought back to her conversation with Martha. It was easy to see just where Clark had gotten his friendly nature. After talking with her for an hour, she felt as if she'd known her all of her life. A strange feeling for her given the only woman she had ever allowed to get close to her was her younger sister, Lucy. Martha Kent was certainly no Lucy, but she certainly had an uncanny ability to make those around her feel at ease.

Much like Clark.

Though she had spent much of the time since Clark's revelation obsessing about the things she hadn't noticed, she found herself in awe of the stories – the real stories that were coming to light after the revelation. Talking openly about Clark learning to fly or fighting villains over a poisonous rock that the world could never know existed. This was what it was like to be one of the few people that knew the truth about Clark Kent.

Holding the secrets close and seeing a side to him and those close to him that no one would ever see. A slow smile spread across her face as she drifted into the sweet reverie of sleep, allowing her mind to escape the stresses of the day and disappear behind the welcoming fog of fatigue that had teased her for the past several hours.

The streets of Metropolis were quiet as Sean McCarthy took a long puff from the cigarette between his lips. He watched from his vantage point on the roof of the Daily Planet. He had a perfect bird's eye view of the City Hall steps. A sly smile crossed his lips as he watched his target storm out the double doors of the building. He held a hand on the remote in his hand, waiting for just the right moment...

"You have no case for obstruction!" Michael Clemmons slammed his fist against the door in front of him as he tossed the warrant application Mayson had submitted to Judge Thompson's office in her direction. "What were you thinking trying something like this without discussing it with me first?"

"Why, so you can try and talk me out of it?" Mayson scoffed, shaking her head and waving him off. "I have a case. Lois Lane has done this one too many times and this time it cost us a witness."

“You’re reaching so far you aren’t even in the same district, Mayson,” Clemmons accused her, wagging his index finger at her angrily. “You are going to muddy up the reputation of this office pulling stunts like this.”

“This office is supposed to be putting criminals away.”

“Criminals,” Clemmons stressed. “Someone who has broken the law. You have nothing here. All I see is an angry ADA who is lashing out at a reporter that’s just a little too close to the case that blew up in her face because she couldn’t get her act together.”

“It did not blow up in my face!” Mayson spat back through gritted teeth.

“Agent Scardino submitted a report citing erratic and irrational behavior from you, Mayson. Are you going to file charges against him too?” Clemmons challenged with a narrow gaze. “You need to get yourself some help.”

The last accusation was met with a slap across Clemmons face. His hand reflexively reached for his face to cover the sting from her assault on him. He let out a low growl, “Scardino was right. You *are* crazy.” He narrowed his eyes at her and spat out, “You’re done.”

Mayson fumed angrily as she glared back at Clemmons, storming past him as she felt a rumble beneath her feet. She felt her breath catch in her throat as she felt heat surround her and the onslaught of a rocky rainstorm collapsing on her. She let out a cry for help as she looked behind her and saw the building she’d been standing in the doorway of just moments ago crumbling and in flames.

Sirens blared through the streets echoing around the hospital as Clark stared numbly at the chaos unfolding around him. Doctors and nurses had piled in on top of the gurneys that had been wheeled in the emergency room. Twelve. There had been twelve bodies caught in the explosion tonight.

Twelve.

“We got a pulse!” one of the nurses called out as he spotted the bloodied and bruised body of Mayson Drake be wheeled through the double doors.

He stared numbly at the double doors, uncertain what to do or say at that point. Everyone in the building had been unburied from the rubble. The fire from the blast that had taken down Metropolis’ City Hall down was out. He swallowed hard as he turned back to where he saw another blue sheet get pulled up over one of the gurneys.

The bodies.

The blood.

He swallowed hard as he backed away from the scene in front of him. He could see the faces in front of him – the paramedics and doctors asking him questions – but he couldn’t make out the words coming from them.

“Superman?”

Lois felt a cool breeze rustle against her cheek and stirred from what she could only assume was a peaceful night’s sleep. Her eyes fluttered open and her gaze drifted to the side table where Clark’s digital clock read *1:45a.m.* Fragments from the day came back to her as she sat up in bed, letting out a low moan as she swung her legs over the side of the bed preparing to make her way to the kitchen for a glass of water. She made it as far as the doorframe when she stopped, spotting the empty couch in the living room.

Just as quickly as the question of Clark’s whereabouts crossed her mind, it was answered with the soft bristle of the curtains by the backdoor where it appeared he had left through. A frown crossed her face as she padded toward the kitchen, wondering momentarily just how many times Clark was called away in the middle of the night to tend to a call for help.

She reached the kitchen and found the cabinet where Clark

kept his glasses, pulling out a glass and taking it to the sink to fill up her glass. She let out a sigh as she brought the cool liquid to her lips and took a long gulp feeling the liquid quench her thirst.

A familiar sonic boom sounded from just outside the window, and Lois turned, catching a glimpse of the blurry red and blue pigments moving at a speed so fast she couldn’t make out a clear shape until Clark came to a stop in front of the window. She gave him a quick once over, seeing him standing there in the same t-shirt and shorts from earlier. A frown crossed her face when she saw the ghost white expression on his face as he numbly wandered into the living room, sinking onto the couch in a daze. She set her empty glass next to the sink and made her way to him, unsure what to make of his uncharacteristic behavior.

“Clark? Everything okay?”

He gave a noncommittal shrug as she crossed the distance to the living room and took a seat next to him on the couch. “Fine. Just... another rescue.”

Her frown turned to worry as she watched him run a weary hand through his hair and sink down on the couch with just enough force to burst one of the pillows behind him. He shook his head, reaching over to toss the pillow on the floor.

Lois took a seat next to him, placing a hand on his shoulder, “Clark?”

Clark shook his head, running his two weary hands up and down his face, unable to respond as he sat there, staring silently into the distance with a stoic expression. She reached her hand over, placing it on his knee and squeezing it in an attempt to get his attention. A stern grunt escaped his throat, and he looked back at her with a dismal expression.

He shook his head in despair. “I... didn’t get there in time.”

She bit her lower-lip, uncertain how to respond, “Didn’t get where?”

A hard frown covered his jawline as he leaned back against the couch, and numbly responded. “There was a ... bomb. He didn’t make it.”

Lois leaned back next to him, trying to make sense of what he was trying to tell her – or not telling her. She quietly reached over to take his hand in hers. The torturous expression on Clark’s face hit her like a punch to the gut. She leaned her head over, resting against his shoulder as she waited for him to find the words he seemed to be struggling with. The fatigue that had been weighing on her moments ago had disappeared.

She gently squeezed his hand, silently offering him her support as he turned toward her, reaching his hand over to cup her face, tracing the outline of her jaw with his thumb. She felt a flutter in her abdomen as she stared back at him, feeling an intoxicating pull that tugged at her insides, luring her closer and closer until the distance between them became too unbearable to endure. His lips found hers, and his hands buried themselves in her hair as she sank down into the couch, feeling herself melt beneath his touch.

Her hands reached up, cupping the sides of his face as he hovered over her, smoothing his lips over hers with his velvet touch. A shudder escaped the back of her throat as his lips moved across her jaw. Her hands moved up the sides of his face, feeling moisture from the tears that had trickled down his cheeks. A low moan escaped his throat, vibrating against her lips, and she felt him shudder beneath her touch. His lips sought hers out, each caress growing more insistent than the last as his body shuddered against hers. A low rumble escaped the back of his throat, and the moisture from his tears continued to trickle down.

Her hands moved up the sides of his face, brushing each tear away as she whispered muddled ramblings of reassurances to him. Feeling the vibration against her as his head hung down, resting in the crook between her shoulder and neck. Her right hand moved up the back of his head, holding him as the shocking vulnerability and despair continued to shake her to the core.

The underground subway tunnels had a certain charm about them. Sean McCarthy tossed the butt of his cigarette into the ground, squashing the embers with the heel of his foot before making his way to the familiar corner where he was scheduled to report in. He never was one for taking orders, but when the money was this good and the freedom to stretch his creative and sinister nature was an added bonus—who was he to turn down a job that benefited both himself and the individual writing the checks?

“You’re late,” came a voice from behind him.

He turned with a startled jump and saw Rollie Vale leaned up against one of the brick columns, shaking his head as he straightened his shoulders and walked toward McCarthy. “Well, look who’s decided to join us mere mortals. Getting claustrophobic are we, Rollie?”

“That bomb was supposed to go off when the building was full,” Rollie growled, reaching over to snatch the remote from Sean’s shirt jacket. “Are you trying to draw attention to yourself, or is this incompetence just an added bonus?”

“The targets were neutralized,” Sean growled back at Rollie. “Clemmons won’t be poking his nose into anyone’s business ever again.”

“Yes, well, that’s not exactly how we envisioned taking him out of the picture, Mr. McCarthy,” a British accented voice came from the corner, and a man in all black with a white goatee stepped forward. “So, glad you could join us, Mr. McCarthy. I was beginning to wonder if you had reneged on our deal.”

McCarthy gave a noncommittal shrug, “I’m a man of my word.”

“Yes, except when it comes to following specific instructions regarding an assassination on a public official.” The man with the British accent vaguely shrugged McCarthy off.

“Clemmons is dead, and I’m sure Drake is on her way to joining him. No one could have survived that blast.” McCarthy added smugly.

The man in black stared coldly at McCarthy for a long moment, seeming to contemplate something before he turned on his heel and begin barking out orders. “You do excellent work, Mr. McCarthy. Your cooperation in the takedown of Dr. Gables and his minions has helped instill a certain level of support from those with deep pockets and who hold your work in high regard. That being said, it is disappointing to find you straying from the original plan in how to remove the District Attorney from office along with his conspiring officials.”

“My orders were Clemmons and Drake,” McCarthy growled back. “I always follow through.”

“And the reporter?” Rollie Vale challenged with a snort. “You seem to be getting your kicks out of the threats, but when exactly are you going to shut her up? This entire operation has been shut down thanks to this investigation into the Medical Examiner’s office and the local prison.”

“Patience, Mr. Vale,” the man with the British accent chastised. “We mustn’t rush these things.”

“I’ve been waiting to take this thorn in my side down since I was arrested. I have no intention of just sitting back and doing nothing.” Rollie argued bitterly.

“Now, see there is your problem, Mr. Vale. You can’t expect revenge to come so willingly. It must be wooed and drawn out then extracted at just the right moment.”

“And who exactly is deciding on what the right moment is, hmm, Nigel?” Rollie challenged as he glared back at the man in black. “I was promised a new identity and enough money to start over. Slinking around in the shadows *wasn’t* part of the deal.”

“All in good time, Mr. Vale,” Nigel responded smugly. “Ms. Lane will meet her demise along with those responsible for the miscarriage of justice that befell this city.” He turned to McCarthy and added, “Revenge is so much sweeter when you draw it out.”

“I still don’t see the point in spooking her and ADA. She’s got to know she’s being watched, and that’s not doing us any good to have a patrol on her all the time.” Rollie growled bitterly.

“No, but prolonging the torture with threats makes the end that much sweeter.” McCarthy let out a sinister chuckle.

Nigel handed Rollie an envelope and then handed another one to McCarthy, “Orders from our benefactor are to continue watching Ms. Lane and increase the threats, but nothing more. For now. We do have to discuss the matter of the traitor, Albie Swanson....”

Chapter 18: Hold On To Me

The warm morning rays peeked through the window, invading the corners of Clark Kent’s eyes, forcing him to draw himself out of the safe cocoon where he had found solace for the last few hours, sleeping away the stress of the previous day and the trauma from the failed rescue at City Hall. Fragments from the night and most of the morning pushed their way to the forefront of his mind as he let out a groan, stretching his arm out over the intoxicating warmth from the petite brunette that was curled up next to him. He squinted as the sun’s rays continued to make their presence known, sending warm rays across the bedroom. He began to stir, allowing his eyes to flicker open and peeled themselves back as he looked around the room, turning to his side where Lois was curled up against him,

Though he still carried the heavy weight from being unable to stop the bomb that had erupted in the middle of City Hall square, he was grateful for the glimmer of hope he had received from the doctors last night. Michael Clemmons had been gone before he had arrived but, thankfully, they had been able to tend to Mayson Drake and the Judge’s clerk that had been found in the rubble that had once been the esteemed Metropolitan City Hall. The anguish and pain that had continued to torture him throughout the rescue with what-ifs was long gone. All that was left was the solemn gratitude he felt that it hadn’t been in the middle of the day when the bomb had gone off.

It had been out of nowhere.

A shriek for help.

A deathly blast.

An explosion that was powerful enough to shake the foundation of both the City Hall building and the parking garage cemented across the street. His mind drifted to the never-ending river of what-ifs. How different would things have been if the bomb had gone off in the middle of the day with the building full of innocent people coming in and out of the courthouse and the public offices of City Hall? What would have happened if he had heard the bomb go off just a second before...or later?

He pushed the overflowing anxiety back down and turned to the surroundings around him, seeking out anything and everything to help ground him after the torturous evening of feeling anything but heroic. He glanced toward the bedroom window, blinking at the sun’s rays that shone through the bedroom and then moved his gaze to the dresser where the duffle bag Lois had packed after their trip to Smallville. Then he shifted his gaze to the petite brunette curled up next to him, feeling a hard lump in his throat.

He said a silent prayer as he reached over to tuck the loose strands of hair behind Lois’ ear. She let out a soft breath that tugged at his heartstrings. The anguish and despair that had filled his mind and thoughts for the better part of the early hours of the morning dwindled to a low ember as he stared back at her, mesmerized by the overwhelming feeling of pure serenity that came over him.

He had gone through it before.

Countless times.

He had come home after an extra torturous rescue and fallen into a depressive hole that he had to dig himself out of. All the while pasting a smile on for everyone, pretending to be okay and

to be facing the world as if it was just another day.

Last night had been different.

For once, it wasn't just isolation that greeted him but instead he found himself facing the tragic events of the evening with Lois. So many times he had anguished over his desire to have someone to see him and accept him through the good, bad and ugly. He'd dreamed of having that kind of openness in a relationship, sought it out desperately for years only to find roadblock after roadblock with everyone he had dared dip his toe into the relationship pool with.

Of course, that was before Lois.

A slow smile spread across her face as he reached over to cup her face with his palm, recalling the thousand times he had dreamed of waking up like this. Fragmented memories from the evening's turmoil tumbled through his minds as he fought to hold onto the exhilarating embrace he had found himself in as each and every agonizing memory had been caressed away.

Before he could allow his mind to drift too far into the pleasurable memories from the wee hours of the morning, he felt a vibration against his chest as Lois tilted her head up and met his gaze with a sleepy yawn.

"Hey," she whispered, lifting her head up and rolling back on her side and gazing at him with a trance he felt would swallow him whole.

"Hey," he responded, feeling his throat go dry as he wondered what else to say. Flashes from the early morning teased him. The intensity of the embrace he'd found himself in for nearly two hours before succumbing to the strain of exhaustion and mental weariness haunted him. He wanted nothing more than to pick up where they had left off and recapture her lips with his and block out the rest of the world. It was oh so tempting to lean just a little closer and do just that, but something stopped him from indulging in that ever so tempting desire.

Many things really. Deadlines. McCarthy. The twelve people he'd pulled out of the remains of City Hall. Then there was the uncertainty regarding Mayson and her possible involvement in the threats against Lois. As tempting as it was to forget the world around him, he knew he *couldn't*.

"How are you?" Lois asked, reaching her hand over to cup his cheek.

"Better...I think." He responded, not completely convinced of how he actually felt, but for the moment he did feel better than he had when he'd returned from the scene at City Hall.

"Are you sure?" she asked, moving her hand to his chest as she stared back at him with a concerned expression.

He felt his heart jump into his throat as he met her gaze, feeling as if she was piercing his soul with her dark brown eyes. He cleared his throat, placing a hand over hers as he responded, "I don't think anyone's sure of anything right now. But for now, I'm okay." He was quiet a moment before adding, "Thank you. I'm not used to..."

"It's okay," she cut him off, propping herself up in the bed with her arm as she patted her hand against his chest. She paused for a brief moment before pulling away, pointing to the bathroom door. "I should probably get ready. With everything that happened last night I don't imagine Perry will be too lenient on either one of us walking in the door after nine."

He nodded, feeling what felt like an unbearable weight on him as he watched her rummage through her duffle bag to retrieve a change of clothes before disappearing behind the bathroom door. He heard the sound of water running and let out a deep sigh, propping himself up in the bed and preparing to get ready for the day.

He let out a heavy breath as he lifted himself up from the bed and made his way to the kitchen to start brewing some coffee while he waited for Lois to finish her shower. He wandered into

the living room and flipped the television on to fill the background with only to be faced with the bloody images from last night's explosion.

He felt his entire body go numb and his mind clear of any thought of time as the image of the fiery blaze pulled him into a trance, blocking the world out as he found himself transported back to the scene where he had fished out people he had come to know as friends and colleagues.

"Clark?"

A hand reached over to tap him on the shoulder, and he looked up, slightly startled to see Lois standing in front of him fully dressed.

"Hey," he gave a bewildered expression as he nodded to her, trying to push the memories from last night's rescue out of his mind.

"Probably not a good idea to watch this right now," She reached over to take the remote from his hand. "All it is is conjecture and sound bytes."

He nodded, watching the remote fall into her hand and blinked when he saw the flash of power go from the screen. "It's going to be on everywhere. Might as well rip the band aid off." He looked around the room, taking in the scent of freshly brewed coffee coming from the kitchen. "I guess the coffee's ready." He pointed toward the bedroom. "I should get ready..."

"Okay," Lois nodded to him.

"I..." He stared into her dark brown eyes as she stared back at him, finding himself unable to break away from the trance that drew him to her.

The words escaped his lips before he could stop them. Not that he would have stopped them if he had had the chance. They had been sitting there, festering in the back of his mind and weighing on his heart for the better part of a year.

"I love you."

As soon as the words escaped his lips, he felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders and the many torturous reasons for why he couldn't indulge himself just a second longer in the sweet serenity of everything that was Lois Lane became a distant memory as she closed the distance between them and murmured her own declaration to him.

"I love you too."

City Hall had been reduced to ashes. Seven prisoners. One clerk. An ADA. The District Attorney and two bailiffs had been caught in the fiery blaze. Judge Andrew Thompson leaned back in his chair, taking in the surroundings of cherry wood and golden trim scattered around the conference room he had rented. There had still been no word on his clerk and as much as he loathed being here, he knew the DA's office hated it even more. He turned to the man across from him, light-skinned and blonde hair with an uncertainty in everything he did.

Thompson had seen ADA Clarence Wright in his courtroom a time or two before but never without the esteemed protection from District Attorney, Michael Clemmons. His heart lurched in his chest, recalling the grim news that had reached him in the early hours of the morning. He was one of the newest recruits to the office and unfortunately, one of the least knowledgeable when it came to the cases the DA was working on.

Though with Mayson Drake in the hospital and Michael Clemmons having become a casualty from last night's attack, there wasn't much the District Attorney's office could do in this situation.

"ADA Wright, I'm trying to be generous with my time given the circumstances, but if you can't be bothered to pay attention..." Thompson growled, tossing the ADA a red file folder, causing the ADA to sit upright, tossing his PalmPilot to the table space in front of him.

"I know I have it, your honor..." Wright began to stammer, continuing to flip between the digital device in his hand and the

file jacket in front of him.

“Well, how about I just summarize for you?” Thompson shook his head in disbelief. “Your fellow ADA submitted a warrant application to my clerk without the backing of the Metropolis P.D. and without any solid evidence other than conjecture to support her claims....”

“Your honor, I’m sure...”

“I’m not finished, young man!” Thompson snapped, cutting the stammering from Wright off. “I want this taken care of. I will not see another warrant application from your office without a sign off from the Metropolis P.D...am I clear?”

“Yes, your honor,” Wright replied softly.

“You’re not the only one that lost someone in that blast.”

Thompson shook his head in dismay. “I will not be showing the District Attorney’s office any leniency in this matter. We all are suffering but that doesn’t excuse gross misconduct and overreaching from your office. Am I clear?”

Sean McCarthy readjusted his suit jacket as he kept a close eye on Amir Munour ducking out of the hotel room across the hall and making his way to the elevators. He kept himself at the appropriate distance for tailing Amir Munour. He spotted a security detail a few feet away but the assigned detail appeared to be more interested in talking up the cleaning lady than paying attention to the subject he was supposed to be protecting. A trait McCarthy planned to exploit during this draining assignment.

He knew he had to get close to Munour in order to make his move. He wasn’t sure exactly what Nigel and this secret partner had planned but they were confident Munour would lead him to Albie Swanson. When he did, he would be there.

He stepped on the elevator, tucking his head down and huddling himself in the corner of the elevator car as he watched Munour pull out a phone and dial. “Yes, Wilder? I’m ready to review this Project Valhalla. Please have your proposal ready.”

A flutter of anticipation ran through every nerve ending as Lois stood in front of the elevator doors in the Daily Planet lobby, just a mere inch away from Clark Kent as she tried desperately to think of anything other than the intoxicating thrill that had run through her each time his lips had touched hers for the better part of the morning.

“We are so late,” Lois breathed, stealing a glance toward him before jerking her head back around for fear that allowing her gaze to wander would lead down a road that could possibly end with both of them enduring Perry’s wrath.

“Perry will understand,” Clark replied confidently as the elevator doors opened for them.

Lois let out a muffled grunt, uncertain how understanding their editor would be with the story of City Hall having been reduced to ashes and nothing to show for it. “We haven’t even got anything to offer up as condolences for our very poor time management skills...”

Clark let out a chuckle, and his eyes twinkled as he responded, “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

She playfully swatted at his chest as they entered the elevator car, feeling a twinge of apprehension flood through her as she stared back at him. She let out a low hiss as her arms looped around his neck, pulling him to her as the elevator doors closed behind them. His lips pressed against hers with an assertive tug, taking her lower lip into his possession and teasing her with the tip of his tongue. She felt a flash of heat run through her as his hands roamed up and down her sides, slowly walking her back until her shoulder blades came in contact with the corner wall of the elevator car.

“This is not helping,” she murmured against his lips. “As soon as those doors open, we’re going to be on dog shows and police academy coverage for the next month.”

“We’ll be in good company,” he whispered in her ear, teasing

her earlobe with a caress of his tongue, and a soft breath against the sensitive flesh. She let out a shuddered gasp as his lips moved across the curve of her neck, tightening her arms around him as the last of her argument died on her lips. His attention moved back to her jaw, brushing featherlight kisses against her lips and fingering the outline of her ribcage with his index finger on her right side.

His hands moved up and down her sides as the soft ping of the elevator bell reached her ears, announcing their arrival on the newsroom floor, accompanied by the obnoxious catcalls coming from her fellow co-workers. A flush of embarrassment flooded across her cheeks, but she found herself unapologetic when faced with the irritated Perry White outside the elevator doors.

“Lane, Kent! You got a lot of nerve moseying in here at this hour without so much as a whisper of a story.”

Lois glanced sheepishly back at Clark, following his lead as Perry pointed at his office, motioning with his index finger for them to follow. She gave one last longing gaze to Clark before separating and making her way to Perry’s office.

‘Later,’ she smiled to herself.

Panic.

That was the only word to describe the overwhelming feeling that ran through Mayson Drake’s mind as she scribbled her name across the forms in front of her. Discharge Against Medical Advice. That’s what they printed across the top of the page, staring back at her with the taunting formality of what she was doing.

She was incredibly lucky. She knew that. The blast had left her with a concussion and a few bruised ribs but she was alive. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes as the reminder of what had happened to those she had grown to respect over the past few years flooded through her mind.

She let out a breath as she pushed the forms back to the nurse standing in front of her, readjusting the bag on her shoulder.

‘You can do this.’ She told herself.

“Ms. Drake are you sure you want to do this?” the nurse asked.

“I can’t be here another minute,” Mayson said numbly, taking her discharge papers and heading toward the exit.

Dan Scardino walked through the debris of the building that had once held the city’s prestigious offices and was home to the district attorney’s office and the courthouse that instilled justice throughout the city. He felt a sense of dread wash over him as he rummaged through the site. He knew it was too soon for conspiracy theories but he already knew who was behind this. The deadly and precise action against the city’s officials were too close to the many cases he had pursued against Sean McCarthy. It was too coincidental not to be him.

“Over here, Scardino,” the Fire Marshall pointed toward the elevator shaft where they said the bomb had been planted.

Scardino let out a heavy sigh and approached the Fire Marshall, “What’s your theory, Marshall?”

He tapped on the blackened frame where the elevator shaft to City Hall had once been. “You see where these white spots are,” he pointed to the white flashes across the remnants of the elevator shaft wall that Scardino knew all too well. “That’s where the fire started and the bomb was ignited.” He pulled out a charred square metallic device and handed it to Scardino, “One of these bad boys was pinned to every single floor.”

“Christ,” Scardino muttered, feeling a heavy sense of dread fall over him as he looked back at the Marshall. He pointed to the crew that was still rummaging through the half of City Hall that had been crumbled to the ground and asked. “Any word on theories?”

“You’ll get my report like everyone else, Agent Scardino,” the Fire Marshall replied.

Scardino nodded, flashing a half-smile, “A guy’s gotta try, right?”

“I’ll try and get it to you as soon as I can.”

Lois fiddled with the top button to her suit jacket, kicking her leg nervously, tightening her arms around her chest as she craned her neck to look over at Clark who was seated next to her as they waited for Bill Henderson to arrive. Her hand wrapped around the newspaper clipping that had sent her spiraling yesterday. Clark reached his hand over and squeezed her knee, offering her a silent sign of reassurance. She flashed him a quick smile, feeling a flush cross her cheeks at the contact.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Bill Henderson remarked as he opened the door to his office and circled around the desk to take his seat. “It’s been all hands on deck since last night’s bombing.”

“I can imagine,” Lois replied, stealing a glance in Clark’s direction before turning back to Inspector Henderson. “We don’t want to take up too much of your time, Bill. We just...came across something and well...”

“What is it?” Bill wondered aloud. “You got a lead on last night’s bombing?”

“Theories.” Clark shrugged his shoulders but didn’t elaborate on the suggestion that he might have a thought on who could be behind last night’s bombing.

“No, this isn’t related to the bombing but rather the case on McCarthy.” Lois pushed the newspaper clipping across Henderson’s desk and watched his brow furrow as he stared at the printed clipping.

Valhalla.

It had been a mystic story that Katherine had heard time and time again as a young child. Her father had spoken of it with such pride. What she would have given for him to look at her the way he did his research on the mystical project.

She smoothed a hand across the manilla folders she had retrieved from her father’s old home office. She’d spent the last forty-eight hours consuming everything she could find of her father’s files on Project Valhalla. In just a few moments they would be meeting with their potential buyer, Amir Muunour, one of the most feared and hated terrorist leaders in the middle east.

A knock came from her office door and she looked up, startled at the interruption. The door cracked open and she saw a balding man in his late fifties surrounded by two burly sized men she could only assume were bodyguards.

“Dr. Wilder?”

“You must be Mr. Munour,” Katherine Wilder stood up from her desk and approached the terroristic leader with her hand held out for him to shake. “A pleasure to meet you.”

He stared at her hand for a long moment before opting to take it, giving it a firm shake and adding, “We’ll see if this project is worth my time, Dr. Wilder.”

Bill Henderson ran a weary hand across his face as he looked back at Lois Lane and Clark Kent who were seated across from him. He caught the nervous glances coming from Lois and the uncertainty that came across like a neon sign. He glanced down at the newspaper clipping with the scribblings and then looked back at the duo.

“I’m not going to lie and say I think you’ve got your guy...err, girl.” Henderson remarked carefully as he folded his hands across the table. “The evidence...is weak and the chain of custody is ... well, nonexistent.”

“But?” Clark prompted, furrowing his brow as he stared back at Henderson. It was clear the patience he was being forced to endure was eating at him.

“But the theory and circumstantial evidence does at least deserve a look.” He caught a concerned look on Lois’ face and

quickly amended, “I’ll be sure to keep this with just myself for now until I have something more concrete.” He raised an eyebrow at Lois and added. “And something that can be used in court.”

Chapter 19: Chasing You

Amir Munour sniffed at the rats inside the cage, waving his hand in dismissal as he stood up to leave, “I can see my time has been wasted here, Dr. Wilder. I was promised a drug that would allow me to control the populous. This is nothing more than a game of cat and mouse on a wheel!” He shook his head in frustration, pinching the bridge of his nose as he looked to the doctor in disappointment. “What exactly am I supposed to do with a rat that turns on its own kind? Feed it to the rioting villagers?”

Dr. Wilder looked down in disappointment, “Mr. Munour, unlike my father you lack vision!” She stood to her feet. “Imagine the possibilities of taking a drug and marketing it as a flu vaccine to your country. Every man, woman and child would be at your control...”

“You have yet to even prove this will even work on human test subjects. All you’ve given me is rats!” Munour shouted in disgust.

“I don’t have the test subjects yet, but I know where to find them,” Dr. Wilder promised.

“Well, then don’t bother calling me until you’ve located them,” Munour growled, turning on his heel. He exited the office and tapped on his bodyguard’s shoulder for him to follow, motioning to the elevators. He fished for the mobile phone in his pocket and pulled it out to dial, “Yes, Mr. Swanson? I’m very interested in this Resurrection drug. When can you meet?”

The streets of Metropolis were filled with the usual hustle and bustle of the passersby. City bus wheels squeaked as exhaust escaped the tailpipe of passing vehicles. Lois looked over her shoulder as the wind blew through her hair, tossing a few strands in her face as she looked to the site that was sectioned off by the police barricade guarded by the patrol.

“Chilling, isn’t it?” Clark murmured, placing a hand on her shoulder as she took in the crippling scene. She gasped, feeling the cold air hit her lungs as she watched the scene behind the barricades unfold. Men and women covered in protective gear, surveying the crumbled remains of what was once the dignified home to the courts of Metropolis, New Troy.

“Still no statement from the mayor on the bombing last night,” Lois commented, turning back to where Clark was standing behind her.

“Probably won’t be until she knows who is stepping in for Clemmons,” Clark reasoned, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“You think?”

“There’s nothing to tell.” Clark pointed out.

“I suppose,” Lois agreed, turning back toward the street where she had parked. After a few steps in silence she turned over her shoulder to look back at Clark and asked, “So, Henderson seemed...blunt.”

Clark shrugged his shoulders, “I think Bill Henderson will look at the facts and make an unbiased decision based on what he’s been presented with. As he should.”

“I know he will. I wouldn’t expect anything less from him.” Lois gave him a weak smile, “Still, I know it can’t be easy, potentially looking at someone that was once a friend and colleague as a...”

“Potential criminal?” Clark shook his head. “I don’t know. I guess I’m still rolling through everything in my head. We still don’t know anything for sure and until we do, I’ll keep an open mind...”

“But if it is her?” Lois wondered aloud. “How in the world are we going to get her the help she needs without...”

“I don’t know,” Clark said abruptly, shaking his head as they reached where the Jeep was parked at a parking meter. “Guilty or not Mayson needs ...someone to help her. Unfortunately, she

appears to be shutting everyone that wants to help her out. Whoever *is* behind the threats, we will find them and stop them. McCarthy is still out there along with that Albie Swanson character....”

Lois nodded, reaching over to place a hand on his chest, “McCarthy will be brought to justice.”

“How many more people are going to get hurt between now and then?” Clark asked, placing his hand over hers.

She kept his gaze for a moment, seeing the turmoil of ‘what-ifs’ cross his face. She circled her hand around his wrist and gave it a gentle squeeze, silently reassuring him he wasn’t alone in his struggle to come to terms with the horrific events from last night.

He reached his hand over to cup her face with his palm, brushing the outline of her jaw with his thumb. She felt the corners of her mouth twitch into a smile as his lips brushed against hers. For the moment, at least the nightmare of last night’s bombing was a distant memory as she found her mind drift into the serene fog of bliss, blocking out the world around her.

Dan Scardino perched himself on the corner of the stool he was halfway seated on, searching for any sign of hesitancy from the subject in front of him. There was of course anything but hesitancy coming from Nurse Berkley as she squared her jaw, narrowed her eyes and silently told him he was not going to get through her with the usual tactics he had at his disposal.

Getting access to the files on the victims from last night’s explosion required getting through Nurse Berkley who was not budging without a call from Washington or orders from her superiors. Unfortunately for him, it seemed getting access would require a call to Washington in order to get the ball rolling. He still hadn’t been granted privileges at the Metropolis P.D. which made investigating McCarthy’s latest stunt with City Hall all the more challenging. He was not looking forward to explaining how McCarthy had managed to level the city’s judicial building with himself being just a few streets away and still having no inclination of what McCarthy had been planning.

“You really want me to turn this into a bureaucratic nightmare, I will.” Scardino muttered, giving a last-ditch effort to try to sway Berkley. He noted the steely gaze she was giving him and resigned himself to the phone call he had to make. He stood up, backing away from her station and headed down the hall he had just come through. As he was walking toward the corridor that led to the exit, he heard a thick Middle Eastern accented gentleman screaming into his phone. He ducked back, trying to remain in the shadows as the subject of the conversation peaked his interest.

“This Valhalla drug could revolutionize the way our country and its supposed leaders conduct business. The doctor promises great things but I’ve still yet to see just what an assassin can do under the influence of this Valhalla.”

Scardino narrowed his gaze as he checked his phone to be sure the conversation was being picked up by his phone recorder. He held his breath, listening for anything that might help him identify the caller.

There was a pause and then the caller added, “We’ll need to expedite that shipment of Ticeon to the states. If this exercise proves fruitful, I want mass production to begin immediately.”

‘Ticeon?’ Scardino wondered silently to himself at the mention of the highly regulated drug’s name. The caller continued, exposing himself even more unwittingly to the recording Dan continued to take.

“I’ll need to make arrangements. You know Kasparov won’t take kindly to the interference of our resistance.” A light chuckle escaped the caller’s throat and he added. “Not that it will do much good.”

Scardino heard footsteps approaching and quickly put the phone to his ear, setting up the pretense that he was preoccupied with his own phone call to notice as he spotted the caller cross the doorway with two suits behind him. He waited for his opportunity

and then quickly snapped a few shots with the camera on his phone. He knew the quality wouldn’t be the best but it would be better than nothing.

He held his breath, waiting for the suits to disappear from his line of vision before he hit the red square button on his phone to stop the recording. As quickly as he could, he began to dial the number he knew by heart. The phone rang, and he tapped his toe, impatiently waiting for his boss to answer the call.

“This better be good, Scardino,” his boss’ response came from the other end of the phone line when he answered it. “You really screwed up big this time. How in the hell did you let McCarthy pull something like this off? Were you sleeping on the job? Maybe I should send Marcus down there to help you?”

“Marcus is as green as you can get. He doesn’t know the first thing about field agent work,” Scardino spat back on instinct.

“I’m beginning to think he might be a step up, Scardino. What in the hell happened?”

“I don’t know, but I am trying to find out.” Scardino quickly added in a hushed whisper. “I’m over here at the hospital trying to get the records of the victims and I’m hitting a few roadblocks...”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You let McCarthy level Metropolis square just about and you want me to come in there and save your hide?”

“It’s not like that,” Scardino said quickly. “There’s something else going on here. I’m sending you a recording and some photos now...”

“What now, Scardino? McCarthy is now the culprit behind the Kennedy assassination?” There was a pause and a sharp gasp, “Christ, is that Munour? What the hell is he doing stateside?”

“Trying to smuggle Ticeon into the country and mass produce something called Valhalla.” Scardino responded with a grim expression. “This is bad, isn’t it?”

“What do you need?”

“Full access to everything I can get my hands on.” Scardino answered.

Mayson moved through the crowded streets of Metropolis with a fog of uncertainty weighing her down as she spotted the blue and white sign for the Metropolis P.D. from the crosswalk. The Metro bus came to a stop as the light turned red and the crosswalk signaled it was clear to cross. She reached the other side of the street, mentally preparing herself to walk past the wreckage from last night’s bombing.

A shudder ran through her as she spotted the men in orange and yellow vests circling around the blockade that had been put up to keep prying eyes away from the site. She felt her throat go dry as her mind flashed back to the horrific events from when she found herself buried in scorching hot concrete with white-hot flames billowing around her and threatening to take her last breath with each creeping second. She felt a cold fear pierce its way past the painful memory, running down her cheek as she turned her head away, desperate to escape from the place that reminded her of how simple life had been just a mere twelve hours ago.

Then she saw it.

Her.

Mayson ground her teeth as her hand clenched and unclenched, flexing the tension that coursed through her veins as she stared in a quiet fury, watching as Lois Lane dug her traitorous claws further and further into Clark Kent. She tore her eyes away, unable to watch any further as she saw him lean closer to....her. Unbridled fury rose up inside her as she fought to keep the simmering flames deep into the pits of despair she was struggling with and searched the street for the staircase leading into the Metropolis P.D. Each step was met with a loud clank from her heel as she pushed forward, unwilling to look back for fear that she might be met with an even more disturbing image from the street below.

She pushed the double doors open, hearing the familiar voices around her. She nodded with a non-committal shrug and grunt as she wandered through the precinct, catching sight of the expressions being thrown her way by fellow officers.

“Uh, nice haircut, Mayson...”

“You changed your hair!”

“Good to see...uh, straight, I mean, uh, see you.”

She finally stopped at the elevator leading to the wing of offices she was searching for. The tall, slender detective brooding at his desk was a sight for sore eyes. She ran a hand through her newly darkened locks and stopped in front of the detective’s door.

“Miss me?”

“Mayson?”

Clark wandered through the empty halls of Metropolis General with Lois a few paces behind him. After finishing up with Bill Henderson this morning, they had made a detour to Metropolis General to talk with the doctor on call last night and get a statement for the afternoon edition, as well as check on how the victims from last night’s bombing were doing. He already knew Michael Clemmons didn’t make it and he was aware that Judge Thompson’s clerk had succumbed to her injuries early this morning as well. News of the condition of the other ten remaining victims had not been released. He took that as a sign that no news meant good news for the moment.

“This is it,” Clark pointed to the hallway leading to the Physician’s plaza as he motioned for Lois to follow him.

“I don’t understand why that nurse couldn’t at least point us in the right direction,” Lois grumbled readjusting her bag on her shoulder as she read the names on the directory. “What was the doctor on call’s name again?”

“Dr. Katherine Wilder,” Clark answered as they approached the elevator the sign was pointing them to.

“Third floor,” Lois said with a shrug. “I don’t understand why they make these things so hard to navigate. Isn’t the idea to be able to find people?”

Clark shrugged his shoulders, uncertain how to respond as the elevator pinged, letting off an elderly couple and a middle-aged man who was wheeling the older woman in a wheelchair. Clark nodded to the couple, stepping aside so they had enough room to exit the elevator car and reached his arm out to hold the elevator for himself and Lois. They stepped onto the elevator and Lois scanned the elevator panel for the third floor, pressing the button with a sigh.

She turned to him and flashed him a quick smile, “Hopefully we can wrap this up and get back to the Planet in time for the afternoon edition.”

Clark nodded his agreement. “He’s left three voicemails since we left the police station. I think Perry’s getting antsy.”

“We do our best work under pressure,” Lois grinned back at him as the elevator doors opened on the third floor. “Perry needs to relax. We’ll have his front page story all tied up in a nice pretty bow in time for the evening edition.”

“Afternoon edition.” Clark corrected her with a smirk.

“You can’t rush perfection. Evening edition.”

“Tell that to the three voicemails from Perry.” Clark waved his phone in front of her.

“I left my phone at the office.” Lois grinned happily.

They stepped out onto the floor, following the signs that led them to where Dr. Wilder’s office was located. They reached the office that read ‘Wilder and Associates’ and opened the door, uncertain where to go once they entered as there was no receptionist at the front desk and no one seated in the waiting room.

Clark looked to Lois who shrugged and then lowered his glasses, scanning the office for a sign of where to go next. From the waiting room, he spotted an office in the back of the long hallway where Dr. Wilder was seated at her desk with none other

than Dan Scardino across from her.

“Oh, brother,” Clark let out a heavy sigh.

“What is it?” Lois asked, raising an eyebrow at him with a curious gaze.

“Scardino,” Clark pointed to the hallway in front of them. He heard a creak of the door from Dr. Wilder’s office and saw the doctor and Scardino walking toward them from behind the wooden door. The door rattled and Scardino stepped into the waiting room.

“Thanks for your time, Dr. Wilder, I...” Scardino stopped when he saw Lois and Clark standing by the door. “Well, fancy seeing you two here. What are the odds we all go to the same primary for our checkup?”

“Cute,” Lois rolled her eyes at the agent. “But I’m not buying it.”

Dr. Wilder looked at them with a questioning gaze, “May I help you two with something?”

“Lois Lane, Clark Kent. Daily Planet.” Lois pulled out her business card and handed it to her. “We understand you were the doctor on call last night when the twelve victims were brought in. We just wanted to get a statement from you on how the victims are doing.”

“As I told Agent Scardino here, I can’t discuss a patient’s medical treatment with anyone without the patient’s permission. HIPAA.” She prompted with a smile.

“We understand,” Clark interjected, “Can you at least confirm the remaining ten victims are stable?”

She paused for a moment pursing her lips before responding. “I can confirm the hospital is doing everything we can to treat the injuries and keep the patients comfortable as they try and recover from this horrific tragedy.”

Lois nodded to Dr. Wilder, “Of course. Thank you, Dr. Wilder.”

Dr. Wilder motioned to the door behind them, “Now I hate to be rude but I do have a pressing appointment.”

“Of course,” Lois flashed a smile to the doctor and made her way to the exit. She waited until the door was closed behind them and the trio were standing in the hallway before turning to Clark, motioning to him to slide his glasses down.

He nodded, getting the hint as Lois turned to Scardino to press him for more information, “So what exactly does the DEA want from Dr. Wilder?”

Clark lowered his glasses and spotted Dr. Wilder opening a side entrance where an older woman and man with long blonde hair were exiting her office. He focused his super-hearing to pick up the conversation taking place.

“What took so long?”

“I had to get rid of a couple of nosey reporters and a DEA Agent. What’s your excuse, Mother?”

“Has Amir Munour responded yet?”

“He is interested in a field test. To do that we have to have a subject. Which we don’t have.”

“Nonsense, there’s three subjects here in Metropolis.”

“What are you rambling on about, Mother? Valhalla was never approved by Congress. There are no...”

“Officially no, but your father being the man of vision that he was never was one to wait for permission.”

“Where are they? Who are they?”

A hand waved in front of him, breaking him from his concentration followed by a whistle. “Woo, hoo, Earth to Kent? Come in Kent! Houston, we’ve got no contact...”

Clark reached out to take Scardino’s wrist and pushed it back, mildly irritated with the agent’s antics. “Something tells me Dr. Wilder knows more than she’s letting on.”

“And this came to you from staring at a door?” Scardino asked, mildly amused.

“Would you stop it already?” Lois rolled her eyes.

“Well, up to something or not, we just got kicked out of there and have nothing but a gut instinct to go on.” Scardino pointed out.

“Maybe,” Clark let a small smile crack across his features as he pointed to the office in front of them, “but I got a hunch Dr. Wilder’s supposed appointment isn’t happening in that office.”

“Well, then let’s find out,” Lois challenged, pointing to the long corridor behind them.

“You want to what?” Scardino chuckled, “Sit here and wait for her to lead you to ... what? An old and crusty patient she’s probably treating? No thanks.”

“Suit yourself, Agent Scardino,” Lois shrugged, making her way toward the corridor where a wooden bench had been placed for visitors to wait.

“We’ll be here if you need us,” Clark chimed in, taking a seat next to Lois. “Seeing who all is involved in this Valhalla experiment.”

“Val- what?” Scardino turned to them with a questioning gaze and pressed, “Where did you hear that name?”

Albie Swanson.

The name had been mentioned time and time again over the last few months. Sometimes in disdain. Other Times with admiration. Rollie Vale had heard it enough times to know eventually Albie’s time would run out. He gritted his teeth as he mulled over the threat that loomed over him.

To say he felt grateful that the powers that be had given him the second chance would have been an understatement. Rollie knew he had been blessed with a unique opportunity to right a wrong done to him. He also had the added bonus of using his second chance to help extract revenge on the very being that had snuffed his life to a screeching halt in a mere nanosecond.

His hand tightened on the handrail as he stood to his feet, mulling over just how far he had come. He looked back at the makeshift office that had been built to keep track of the criminal activity cropping up throughout all three hundred thousand locations Intergang had worked hard to infiltrate. Metropolis had been a challenge for the Intergang lieutenants to take over but, with his help, they would soon take possession of each weakened position of power in the city and, with it, the city would fall into Intergang’s control without the interference of the city’s self-serving super-powered boy scout.

Unlike his brother, Emmet, Rollie knew a good deal when it was presented. Taking his place in an organization like Intergang that had a far reach across the globe opened up the possibilities for him. The added advantage of course, was to ensure with each action taken he would help keep Lex Luthor stewing in the prison cell he had been isolated in for the next nine hundred years. The more power Intergang had, the more power he knew Lex Luthor was without. Even behind bars, the former criminal mastermind had a reach that would threaten Rollie’s very existence.

Unfortunately, Albie Swanson was not one to understand just how far his benefactors’ reach was. The traitorous move of turning on Gables had landed them all in a compromising situation. Now as payment for Albie’s traitorous move, the rat would pay and be one of many victims McCarthy would take with him on his siege of Metropolis. They were unstoppable.

Dan Scardino stole a glance to the duo of reporters who seemed to be oblivious to just how big of a case they were on the verge of unveiling by pure accident. He had barely gotten the information to Washington before setting his sights on Dr. Wilder’s daughter, Katherine Wilder, on just a hunch. How had Lane and Kent even heard the name Valhalla?

He wasn’t sure if he completely bought Kent’s story about hearing it from their interview with one of the victims from last night’s bombing as random ramblings but, for now, he would remain quiet and bide his time until they saw movement from

Wilder’s office. He was too deep in this to back out now. Worst case scenario, he would have to put a gag order on the Planet in order to keep Lane and Kent in check. For now he’d work with them and hold his tongue.

The door to Wilder’s office rustled and they watched as an unfamiliar older woman exited the office with Dr. Wilder in tow. “I guess that’s our cue.”

Detective Ryder fidgeted in his seat, stealing glances to where the dark brunette sat across from him with her hair newly dyed and straightened. It wasn’t as if it was a bad look for her. Quite the opposite really. Had he not been an engaged man he might even consider As quickly as the thought flooded through his mind he quickly dismissed it, catching sight of the bloodshot gaze coming from Mayson. Something was wrong here.

“So,” Mayson twirled a strand of her dark hair on her index finger, “I wanted to talk to you about this case you’re handling for this Gomez character...”

“Christopher Gomez’s testimony is recorded and will go into the record as identifying Melissa Scott as the supposed nurse that administered the resurrection drug to him in the hospital.” Detective Ryder reassured her. “We spoke with Mr. Clemmons a few days ago about the precautions he needed.” He let out a long breath, unsure how to address the clear conflict of interest here. “Mayson, do you really think you’re the right person for this case?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You just watched your boss die. You’re grieving. You’ve been through a traumatic event...” Ryder continued cautiously.

“I am a capable district attorney, Detective Ryder,” Mayson snapped back.

“I know you are, Mayson, but, uh...well you just don’t seem yourself.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Mayson demanded.

“Well,” he was quiet a moment and finally decided to just bite the bullet. “What is up with the hair Mayson?”

“I dyed it.”

“I can see that.”

“It makes me look more sophisticated; don’t you think?”

Mayson ran a hand through her silky strands.

“Mayson!” Bill Henderson walked up to them, resting a hand on Ryder’s shoulder as he approached. “You look...different.”

“Well, I figured a change of pace was needed,” Mayson sniffed, straightening her shoulders as she glared back at Henderson. “Any luck finding the cowardous traitor that decided to try and take me out with a collapsing building to the head?”

“We’re running down all the leads we can, Mayson but we like McCarthy for this.” Henderson explained, motioning to the busy police station. “Everyone is working on this.”

“Hmm, convenient the finger gets pointed at the bomber we were hunting down just a few days ago that by all rights should be headed for the hills.”

“McCarthy is an animal,” Ryder explained calmly. “What equates to normal reasoning to you or me doesn’t click for him. He gets off on the adrenaline of almost being caught and getting away with it.”

“What’s your point, Mayson?” Henderson asked.

“Well, I just find it interesting that you’re looking at McCarthy when he was nowhere near the City Hall building when it exploded, yet a certain nosey reporter with an axe to grind with the DA’s office was.” Mayson quipped with gritted teeth.

“You were buried in nearly ten feet of rubble, Mayson. How do you know who was around when the bomb went off?” Ryder challenged.

“Michael and I were on the steps when the bomb went off.” Mayson growled back. “I saw her.”

“Who?” Henderson demanded.

“Lois Lane.”

Clark glanced up from the printout in front of him, catching a glimpse of Lois as she chewed on her lower-lip, staring at the open manilla folder on her lap. The trip to the hospital had given them a small tidbit of information regarding something called Valhalla and a reason to be suspicious of Dr. Katherine Wilder but, unfortunately, the trail they had attempted to put on Wilder had ended with them losing her behind the city morgue where every inch of the walls appeared to be lined in lead.

Scardino had sulked off to wherever it was he had been hiding out the last few days and he and Lois had returned to the Planet and written up Perry’s cover story on the bombing. Despite not having anything other than a name to go on, he had asked Jimmy to pull everything he could with the name Valhalla and gather what he could on McCarthy. As of right now, McCarthy was the only known suspect anyone could pinpoint with the motive and the opportunity to pull off something like this.

“Anything on this Dr. Wilder?” Clark asked, looking to where Lois was curled up in her chair, leaning over reading through the file in her hands.

“Lots of accolades and overall praises for her work in neuroscience,” Lois said not looking up. “Army brat. Her father was a doctor and worked with the military as a doctor too.”

“What kind of doctor was he?” Clark asked.

“Doesn’t say,” Lois reached over to hand him the file. “Most of everything from the army is redacted.”

Clark pulled his gaze away from the printout in front of him, hearing a light tap from the conference room door where Jimmy was standing with a thick file in his hand. Clark waved him in and Jimmy entered, holding the file in his hands, “Hey guys, so I’ve dug up what I can on this Sean McCarthy guy.”

“Anything interesting?” Clark asked, turning his chair toward Jimmy as his young friend spoke.

“Most of it’s the same stuff we already knew, but some not so much,” Jimmy handed the thick file to Clark. “Apparently, this guy has connections to criminals all over. He’s known as the Mr. Fix It and he’s got an impeccable reputation of always finishing the job. Rumormill with all the top agencies is that he did some work with Mrs. Cox – that personal assistant of Lex Luthor’s – just before the Planet was bombed.”

“I thought that was Joe Black.” Clark’s brow creased at the mention of his former rival.

Jimmy shook his head. “Rumor is Joe Black was hired as the guy to bring the bomb in but McCarthy was the one to build it.”

“From inside prison?” Lois wondered aloud.

“It’s a rumor for a reason,” Jimmy shrugged, “but I’ve seen crazier things happen from behind prison walls. Afterall, it is Metropolis.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark said flipping through the file in front of him.

“Any luck getting a copy of the reports on Valhalla without the redaction?” Lois asked.

Jimmy shook his head, “Not unless you get some serious government clearance.” Jimmy shrugged his shoulders as he backed out of the conference room. “Sorry guys.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark called after him.

Lois let out a sigh of defeat, “So we’ve got nothing.”

“We’ve got clue half,” Clark corrected.

Lois glanced at the clock and groaned, “Is it really that late already?”

“You want to take a break?” Clark asked, setting the file down in front of him. “Get some air?”

Lois smiled back at him, “I might be persuaded. What’d you have in mind?”

Dr. Katherine Wilder waited patiently for Dr. Golden to leave

his office. She held the key to his office in her palm, waiting the momentary few minutes before approaching his office, key in hand and ready to take what was rightfully hers.

With a quick shallow breath, she fit the key into the lock and turned it, hearing the sharp click of the door hinge unlocking and quickly entered the office, preparing to find exactly what she needed to make Valhalla a reality.

The wind blew through Lois’ hair, catching her off guard as the cool air tickled the back of her neck and whistled in her ear. She flashed a quick smile to Clark who was watching her with a mesmerized expression. She then turned to the surroundings, taking in the serenity of nature as she looked around Hyde Park, watching the people around them go about their day in utter bliss.

She reached her hand over to take another fish out of the basket in front of her and turned to Clark, “You know when I mentioned fish and chips, I meant the cart over by Louie’s, not London.”

“But those aren’t real fish and chips,” Clark responded taking a bite of his own lunch with a happy sigh. “And then we would have missed the sunset over Buckingham Palace.” Clark pointed out the sky that was dimming into a light pink. “If we were still in Metropolis you’d be complaining your fish was too soggy and the gang down the street needed to go home and read a book.”

Lois giggled, letting a smirk fall across her face in surprise. “I don’t complain that much, do I?”

“No, you just like things a certain way,” Clark chuckled. “I always liked coming here when I was traveling. You always see the most amazing things and meet the most interesting people.” A smile crossed his face, “I remember this one time there was this guy that came out for some big spring event they had going on and he was a one man band taking requests for some of the most versatile music you would ever think and he still was able to play every last request. It was amazing.”

Lois’ eyes lit up, watching Clark reminisce over the memory, “Sounds like an interesting character.”

“Yeah,” Clark reached over to take another bite, looking around the scenery. “I guess you run into people like that everywhere. I saw a lot of them when I traveled. The loners or the ones that would just kinda stand out or grab your attention doing something bizarre.”

“Like swallowing bombs?” Lois teased, nudging him in the side lightly.

“Bomb swallowing is an art,” Clark teased, wagging his index finger in the air for emphasis. Lois let out a soft giggle, leaning her head against his shoulder. “I don’t think I would have had the courage to try and do something that bold as to swallow a bomb in front of someone – especially you – a few years ago. It took me years to feel comfortable in my own skin – with these powers.” Clark gestured to himself recalling some of the challenges he’d come across over the years in learning how to control his powers.

“I guess that’s what makes everyone human...or Kryptonian.” Lois gave him a smile turning her head to look to where the sun was setting behind the majestic Buckingham Palace. “The view here is pretty amazing.”

“Perfection,” he agreed, looking back at her.

She smiled, reaching her hand up to stroke his cheek “I think you’re looking in the wrong direction, Farmboy.” She gestured to the sunset she had been watching a moment ago. “The sunset’s that way.”

“I know.” He whispered, leaning in to kiss her.

Jimmy reached over to turn his monitor off, ready to call it a night when he felt a vibration in his pocket. He looked down and saw the number that was calling was from his doctor’s office and stopped to answer it.

“James Olsen.”

“Jimmy,” he heard the familiar voice of Dr. Golden on the other line. “Listen, I hate to call so late but it’s very important that

you come down to the hospital immediately.”

“Is everything all right?” Jimmy asked, picking up on the slight edge in his doctor’s voice.

“Everything’s fine, Jimmy, I just need to talk to you about an experiment that took place at Fort Truman when....”

“Hello? Dr. Goldman?”

A gun shot could be heard through the receiver and Jimmy let out a muffled scream when a voice came on the line.

“Who is this?”

Lois felt a flutter run through her abdomen as she leaned her head back against Clark’s chest, feeling the warmth of his touch run through her as they walked up the steps to her apartment building. As tempting as it was to have a repeat of last night or even the enchanting evening they had shared over the last few hours, she knew if she didn’t try to return to her normal routine and sleep in her own bed she very well could find herself tempted to give into the temptation of moving their relationship faster than a speeding bullet into a territory she felt neither of them was quite ready for.

Physically, she felt an undeniable pull that continued to taunt her over and over again with the many many fantasies she had over the past year of that morning at the Apollo. Even prior to her reconciling the two identities and even before Superman had come onto the scene she had found herself undeniably drawn to Clark Kent. A truth she had tried to deny again and again – refusing to admit she had allowed herself to succumb to the physical desire that begged to find gratification in the arms of the farmboy that by all intents and purposes was much more than he seemed.

More so, now that she knew everything.

Emotionally, the magnetic pull that drew her to Clark was still there but she knew they weren’t ready to take that step just yet. They were just now discovering the rhythm to their relationship and figuring out how to just be with one another in this new normal. As satisfying as it was to finally say the words that had been weighing on her and feel as if she could say them without hesitation, she knew giving into desire too soon would only cause further heartache. The temptation was there but a wrong move could put the brakes on everything they both had worked so hard to build.

She knew each and every one of these facts.

She had categorized them and emphasized their importance internally again and again.

Yet here she was ready to throw caution to the wind the second Clark Kent’s lips touched hers and she felt the array of deadbolts press against her back. It was so unbelievably tempting to indulge in the burning desire that had been fanned into a fiery inferno as his lips smoothed their way across hers with the most exquisite precision.

“I love you, Lois Lane,” he murmured in her ear, pulling back to gaze into her eyes.

“I love you too,” Lois grinned back at him, looping her arms around his neck. “See, this is exactly why I need to stay here.”

His body rumbled from laughter as he asked, “Oh, really, why is that?”

“Too tempting.” She responded with a sigh.

“What exactly is...?” Clark stopped mid-sentence when he turned toward the hallway they had just entered from and saw Bill Henderson and Detective Ryder.

“Lane, Kent, I hate to interrupt, but...uh, this is important.” Bill Henderson spoke up as a hint of pink crossed his face to reveal his own embarrassment on barging in on the obvious intimate scene between the couple.

“What’s going on?” Lois asked, smoothing her jacket with her palm.

“I, uh, need to take you downtown for questioning,” Henderson explained.

“For what?” Lois asked, not following.

“It’s just routine,” Ryder interjected. “We don’t believe it for a second but...”

“Don’t believe what?” Clark asked concerned.

Henderson’s jaw tightened as he continued, “We have reason to believe you may have either witnessed or been involved in the bombing of City Hall.”

“What?” Lois gasped at the same time Clark let out a “That is ridiculous!”

“I’m sure it is,” Henderson responded. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I have a lead to follow up. Now, you can either come downtown willingly or I can get a warrant. Which is it going to be?”

Lois crossed her arms over her chest in defiance, “I don’t really have much choice, now do I?”

Chapter 20: Fire Away

The Physician’s Plaza at Metropolis General had been lit up by the sunlight coming in from each window surrounding the long corridor earlier in the day. Now that the sun had set, the plaza was nothing but darkened corners and narrow hallways furnished with the occasional lamp to light the floor. Dan Scardino used the darkness as a cover as he waited for his opportunity to move in on Dr. Wilder’s office.

After his first meeting with Dr. Wilder, Scardino had grown increasingly suspicious of the doctor and even more suspicious of her when he saw Lois Lane and Clark Kent had darkened her doorway. The recent rumblings of Ticeon coming into the States by way of Munour and his black market deals only fueled his suspicions, but he still wasn’t entirely sure what the doctor could be involved in.

All he knew at this point was his gut was screaming at him to dig deeper, and his gut had never steered him wrong before. He wasn’t about to start ignoring it now. He waited in the corner of the corridor, watching as the door to Dr. Wilder’s office opened, and the doctor, followed by an older woman and a man with long blonde hair from earlier exited the office, leaning into one another in a conspiratorial way as they disappeared down the hall.

Scardino waited patiently for any sign that the subjects might return after forgetting something, but after ten minutes of waiting in darkness, he stepped out of the shadows, stepping into the hint of fluorescent light coming from the floor. He crossed the hall to where the door Dr. Katherine Wilder had exited from was located and fished out a pocketknife from his jacket pocket, pulling the blade he needed and inserted the pointed blade in the keyhole. He pulled a long pin out from behind his ear and inserted it into the hole above the doorknob where the lock’s mechanics were carefully hidden. With a quick jiggle and expert amount of pressure, he heard the lock give away and, with ease, the door opened.

He smiled to himself, tucking the pin back behind his ear and pocketing his pocketknife before entering the office. He approached the front desk and reached his arm over, pressing the green access button to release the lock on the door that led to the doctor’s office, letting out a yawn. Overall, he was mildly unimpressed with the security the hospital had in place, but for the moment, he was grateful for their lapse in judgment. He reached the end of the hall and turned the knob to the office that had the name ‘Dr. Katherine Wilder’ painted in gold across the glass of the door. The door opened with ease, and he held out his arms as if to welcome the invisible applause that was to come his way.

He immediately went for the file cabinets, propping them open with the same expertise he had displayed on the office door and searched for anything – a clue to give him the next direction on what Dr. Wilder could possibly be mixed up in. He skimmed through the patient files, finding nothing of importance. He then moved to her desk drawers, fiddling with the locks until they gave away. He smiled to himself when he found himself feeling his way

to a false bottom on one of the desk drawers.

“Eureka,” Scardino whispered to himself as he pulled out a file jacket that looked to be at least thirty years old. The stains on the worn heavy paper stock were riddled with cup rings, and signs of liquid and what he assumed were food residue. He reached over and pulled the jacket open, noting that the string that had once held the jacket together was long gone.

Inside, he found a thick file with a military seal on the cover. The cover of the file had a name printed on the cover that sent a chill down his spine. ‘Valhalla.’

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding. It can’t be this easy...” Scardino muttered under his breath. He opened the file and flipped through it, reading the case studies from the former Dr. Wilder’s original work with a Dr. Alan Golden at Fort Truman – detailing the tests performed on infants to one day program them into unwitting assassins.

A chill ran down Scardino’s spine as he read through the file, feeling as if he was reading through a science fiction novel rather than an actual secret government project. He set the file down, unsure if he could stomach much more. Files like these were normally redacted – never shared with departments outside the military. The fact that Wilder had this in her possession told him not only was she neck-deep in this project, but she was probably related to the Dr. Wilder mentioned in the file.

He pushed his hand through the false bottom again, searching blindly for what else might be hiding in the bottom of Katherine Wilder’s desk drawer. He frowned when he found another file jacket sitting in the bottom of the desk drawer and pulled it out. Minus the worn-out appearance and stains, the file looked almost identical to the one he had pulled out. It appeared to be much more pristine in appearance. The only stain was a dark red blot on the corner of the file jacket.

Scardino narrowed his eyes as he ran his hand across the file in his hands. Why would Wilder have two of the same file? He flipped it open, wondering if one might be a dummy, but he was greeted with the same data he had read through before. He flipped through it just to be sure, feeling a numbness run through him as he stared at the printed copy of the treachery the government had attempted to inflict on the country. He reached the last of the file and stopped when he saw three smaller files tucked away in the back of it. Inside were patient files with the patient’s photos stapled to the back. He took in a sharp breath when he saw the photo on one of the files.

‘James Olsen.’

He reached his hand over to pick up the other file he had been flipping through earlier and skimmed through to the back and, sure enough, he found the original intake files for the patients with photos of each of them as toddlers.

Another sharp breath escaped his throat as he read the names.

‘Gregory Edward Mallow.’

‘Sarah Goodwin.’

His gaze shifted to the photo of James Olsen once more. He then turned his attention to the photo of the fully grown patients.

Sarah Goodwin was a young woman who looked to be in her early twenties with dark curly brown hair.

Gregory Edward Mallow had in parenthesis ‘G.E. Mallow’ and a photo of a tall man with dark hair. Scardino felt his jaw clench as he stared at the photo in front of him.

G.E. Mallow was not a new face to him. The name had been a constant on his tongue during his days of fieldwork when hunting down McCarthy eight years ago Mallow had been his star witness and informant during his initial investigation into McCarthy – back in his field agent days. His testimony had brought McCarthy down once and for all and helped solidify Scardino’s reputation within the DEA as a reputable agent. Now here he was, forced to face a ghost he thought he’d buried long ago and, hopefully, save Mallow before Dr. Frankenstein here had a chance to initiate this

Valhalla project, and turn him into a mindless assassin for hire along with the other subjects in front of him.

He let out a deep breath and pulled out his camera, filling the room with flash after flash as he took photo after photo of each page, unwilling to chance that the file might disappear when this was all over.

Lois toyed with the wrapper on the water bottle she had been given, listening carefully to the detective in front of her as he went through the questions again and again. She hadn’t had many interactions with the police on this side of the table outside of a few spats she’d gotten into with Bill Henderson and, of course, the fiasco with Arianna Carlin when she was framed for stealing her old engagement ring out of lockup. Even then, her interactions with Detective Ryder had remained professional, and he didn’t appear to be rushing to judgment.

She scanned the room for a sign that Henderson would be returning soon but unfortunately found no sign of him. She let out a heavy sigh as she tapped her hand on the water bottle in front of her. “I’m not sure how else to say it, Detective, I wasn’t there.”

“You’ve mentioned that Ms. Lane, but unfortunately you’ve yet to provide an alibi for exactly where you were during the time the hours of eleven p.m and one a.m for last night’s bombing,” Ryder informed her, tapping his pen on the table irritably.

“Asleep,” Lois responded with a weary sigh. “Sort of.”

“Uh-huh,” his brow furrowed, and he looked back at her with a questioning gaze. “Anyone see you sleeping...or whatever ‘*sort of*’ thing you were doing?”

Lois folded her arms over her chest and responded with a sigh, “Clark.”

“Anyone else?”

“Well, I don’t make a habit of planning out sleepovers,” Lois responded with a defeated sigh.

“Well, if you had kept your detail on you we wouldn’t have to go through this, Ms. Lane,” Ryder responded with a sigh. “The fact of the matter is we have a witness placing you at the scene of the bombing and your only alibi witness is your partner who is probably motivated to cover for you.”

“That is ridiculous!” Lois fumed irritably. “I never even left the apartment from the time we got ...”

“Got what?” Ryder attempted to pry out of her.

“Back to Clark’s apartment,” Lois grumbled, slightly miffed at how her story was sounding. “I do have a serial bomber threatening me. I didn’t want to stay at my apartment.”

“You’re *really* not making this any easier for me, Ms. Lane,” Ryder said, running a ragged hand across his face.

“So, what now I can’t even stay at a friend’s ...”

“...boyfriend.”

“Whatever.”

“It looks bad when we’re trying to validate whether this witness is telling the truth or not and you can only offer up your boyfriend as an alibi.”

“It’s the truth.” Lois snapped irritably, “And Clark doesn’t lie.”

Ryder hung his head, shaking it from side to side as he seemed to be struggling to find the words he needed to respond. “Look, I’m not saying either you or Mr. Kent are being dishonest. I’m saying in the eyes of a detective looking at this it’s not a rock solid alibi because people are motivated to lie, cheat, steal and even commit the unthinkable when it comes to the ones they love.”

“Do you seriously think I would do something so heinous?” Lois challenged, biting her lower-lip.

“No, I don’t,” Ryder responded, “but we do have to follow every single lead we’re given.” He pointed to the door, “You’re free to go. Just...make sure you have communication with the security detail Henderson gave you. It’ll help all of us out.”

“Is that an order or a request?” Lois asked.

“Take it however you like, Ms. Lane,” Ryder shrugged his

shoulders. “Just don’t go on any cruises across the Atlantic for now, okay?”

“Goodnight, detective.”

The high beams moved through the winding roads with precision, giving just enough light to see the street below. Sean McCarthy puffed on the cigarette in his mouth as he followed the car from a safe distance, keeping his lights off through the fog and using the night vision helmet he’d been furnished by Rollie Vale to keep his tabs on Amir Munour. The terrorist was just the type of target Albie Swanson would move in on and try to make his move with.

The tabs he had kept on Munour had proved useful and now he would finally see the fruit of all his labor when he finally had the satisfaction of taking Albie Swanson out and making it look like a drug bust gone wrong. He smiled to himself as he reached for the M16 strapped to his back. Albie really should be more careful where he decides to meet terrorists to sell illegally gained formulas. Espionage certainly wasn’t the career it had once been years ago.

McCarthy put out his cigarette and crouched down on the ground, waiting for just the right moment to fire....

A foggy mist hovered over the water, creating a blanket of cover. A perfect setting if one was about to engage in something illegal and more than likely dangerous and possibly deadly... Yet, here he was, salivating over his moment to finally cash in on his years of service to an organization that was as cutthroat as they came.

Albie Swanson patted the pistol in his jacket pocket and let out a shallow breath, tightening his grip around the cold metal barrel from inside the fabric of his jacket. A fluorescent beam of headlights moved through the fog, cutting into the darkness and sending a chill down Albie’s spine. He felt the panic within him begin to rise up and looked over his shoulder, reassuring himself he was indeed alone.

From the distance, he could hear the engine of the car cut off and the slamming of a car door. A beam of light aimed its direction in his eyes, and he blinked back, holding his arm up to block the beam of light from blinding him.

A rough voice with a thick Middle Eastern accent called out to him, “Mr. Swanson, I take it?”

Albie nodded his head, wondering if Munour could even see him and gave a loud grunt that came out as more of a screech as he hollered, “Yes, sir. Albie Swanson. A pleasure to do business with you!”

“Get in the car, you idiot!” a voice came from the left of him and he felt a hand grab him from his shoulder and forcibly push him to where the car Munour had arrived in was parked.

He could make out the silhouette of a man standing in front of the car with his arms crossed and swallowed hard, preparing for the final meeting he had been both anticipating and dreading all at the same time. As he approached, the sound of shots being fired could be heard in the distance.

A mutter came from the man gripping his shoulder as he accused Albie in a low hiss, “You low-life weasel. You will regret double crossing Amir Munour.”

Lois waved to the officers sitting outside her apartment as she made her way up the steps leading into her apartment building. Her mind raced through her conversation with Detective Ryder over and over again, unsure what to make of it. One minute, he seemed to be accusing her and the next, reassuring her of her innocence. Still, she wouldn’t have been pulled in for questioning without someone pointing the finger in her direction and as much as she hated to even think it, she had an inkling on exactly who that might have been.

“Lois?”

She whirled around, jumping in surprise when she saw Clark standing in the doorway of her apartment building. She let out a shaky breath and shook her head, “I thought you went home already.”

Clark shrugged, shaking his head. “I finished up the patrol earlier. Wanted to make sure you got home okay.” He gestured to the security detail outside, “I heard Henderson wasn’t too happy about giving the guys the slip the other day. Sorry about that.”

“Apparently, if I would have just kept them around, I wouldn’t be in this mess,” Lois rolled her eyes as she unlocked the door to the apartment with her passcode and sighed.

“Yeah, I got a similar story from Henderson.” Clark flashed her an apologetic smile. “He didn’t seem to take his witness statement too seriously.”

A familiar expression crossed his face, and he looked at her with a wince, hanging his head. “I’m sorry. I’ve gotta...”

“I’ll be fine,” Lois reassured him, leaning in to give him a peck on the cheek. “Go. Keep the city safe. You can’t be my bodyguard 24/7.”

“I can try,” he leaned in to kiss her before disappearing into a blur of red and blue down the corridor of her apartment building.

She let out a sigh, shaking her head as she called out, “Be careful.”

Albie Swanson let out a gut-wrenching shriek as he felt the burning sensation spread from his side and send a piercing pain through all his nerve endings. The weight pressing into his back threatened to crush every breath out of him as his assailant threatened to break him in half. In that moment, Albie wished for his end to be quick so as to not prolong the torture.

He lifted his head up, scanning his surroundings through the fog through his blurry vision. The car Munour had arrived in was long gone along with any chance he had of escaping his fate. It didn’t matter if he was able to make it out of this by the skin of his teeth. He was still a marked man. His last chance to escape had disappeared already.

“Let him go!” a booming voice came from behind him.

“Superman, I’ve heard of you.” A sneer escaped the throat of his assailant as he lifted his foot off of Albie. “I must say, I’m unimpressed.”

A split-second later a loud crash echoed in Albie’s eardrums and he lifted his head to the side only to see the burly man that had been towering over him moments ago confined to a steel barrel with the lid rolling on the ground next to it.

“I can’t say I’m impressed either,” Superman’s response came as he approached the assailant. He turned to Albie, placing a hand on his back. “Don’t move. You have a few cracked ribs that could puncture your lungs. Help is on the way.”

Mayson skimmed through the screen in front of her, tapping on the side of her monitor when the light flickered as she searched the report for something other than ‘*following up on leads*.’ She let out a frustrated growl when she saw the status of the investigation was still marked as ‘*pending*’ and slammed her laptop closed, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest.

The door to the interrogation room opened and she looked up, relieved for an update from the detectives. She let out a deep sigh and smiled when she saw Bill Henderson with a file folder in his hands as he reached behind him to close the door.

“I take it you have an update for me?” Mayson asked, gesturing to the empty room. “I’ve been waiting here for hours.”

“You’re the one that insisted on waiting until we completed our interview with Lois Lane,” Henderson reminded her.

“Well, excuse me for caring if you’re going to bring in the person responsible for Michael Clemmons’ death and destroying City Hall.” Mayson huffed, casting a sideways glance at him.

“Mayson,” Henderson took the seat across from her, “Are you

sure it was Lois Lane you saw outside the steps of City Hall.”

“It was her.” Mayson growled irritably. “I know it was her.”

She felt her voice catch as the flash of fragmented memories flooded through her mind. Things were still jagged and unclear, but she knew she had seen Lois Lane outside City Hall that night. The fight with Michael Clemmons was all she could think of since she had woken up. He had lost faith in her. He didn’t trust her, but she would prove him wrong. She would prove to him she wasn’t crazy, and he had been wrong to try and fire her. A fact she would take to the grave with her. She was struggling enough as it was with convincing everyone to look into Lois Lane and her involvement in the bombing.

It sounded crazy.

It sounded absurd.

But she knew what she had seen.

Lois Lane had been there.

“So?” Mayson prompted, “What are you going to do?”

“Mayson, she has an alibi. She was nowhere near Metropolis Square when the bomb went off.” Henderson explained calmly.

“I *know* what I saw, Bill.”

“And I know you just woke up from a traumatic experience and have refused treatment again from medical professionals, Mayson.” Henderson replied in an eerily calm tone. “You could have a concussion. You could have brain damage. Hell, you could have internal bleeding...”

“I am fine.” Mayson argued, waving him off. “Quit trying to excuse your inability to see what’s going on here with my mental state.”

“Mayson, she wasn’t there.”

“How do you know?” Mayson asked.

“She *has* an alibi.”

“An alibi that would probably help her commit murder, right?” Mayson asked.

“I don’t know that Riley and Conner would go that far to protect someone,” Henderson cocked an eyebrow at her as he added. “Lois Lane has had a police escort for a few weeks. Her life was threatened by Sean McCarthy.”

“No,” Mayson shook her head in disbelief. “I know what I saw. I’m not crazy, Bill. I know this happened.”

“I’m not saying you are crazy, Mayson. The mind can play some horrible tricks on you when you’re under stress and...” He let out a shaky breath as she stood to her feet and began packing up her things. “Mayson, please don’t go. Let’s talk about this...”

“I have nothing to talk to you about.” Mayson shot back, shoving her laptop in her bag and zipping it up. “You think I’m crazy and refuse to investigate. I got it.”

“Mayson...”

Bill Henderson watched through the glass windows as Mayson disappeared from his line of sight. He let out a heavy sigh, sinking back into his chair as he ran his hands over his weary face, wondering what to do next. It didn’t make sense. None of it made sense.

There was no rationale to Mayson’s accusation against Lois Lane other than the fact that she refused to admit she might not be recalling things as they happened. But admitting that would mean Mayson would have to admit something was wrong.

To top it all off, he had the *very real* possibility that in Mayson’s weakened mental state, she could be the other stalker sending threats to Lois Lane. Still, as convenient as the theory was for his investigation, he couldn’t allow himself to rationalize the hard-nosed ADA he had come to know and respect had become someone capable of committing a crime against someone or even going so far as to purposefully give a false statement.

Even when the evidence was brought in against Mayson, he could tell neither Lois nor Clark full-heartedly believed Mayson was behind the threats, but it was clear they were concerned – as

was he – with her bizarre behavior. That was the piece that left him second-guessing the gut he had relied on for all twenty-three years on the force. He knew all too well when it came to mental illness or even temporary mental instability; the rules went out the window.

Something was going on here.

Something didn’t add up, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

Lois reached her arms up over her head, stretching her shoulders and back as she watched the last few drops from her coffee maker dribble out into the coffee pot. She reached for her coffee mug and poured herself a cup.

She took a sip of her coffee and turned her attention to her living room where her bag and purse had been tossed across the loveseat after she had thrown them across the room, unwilling to even think about anything but sleep. Her evening that had started out with a flight abroad to watch the sunset over Buckingham Palace and enjoy a genuine basket of fish and chips ended with her being grilled by the police and Clark being called away. It had been disappointing, to say the least. What had started out as a romantic evening had quickly sobered into an evening of high tensions and uncertainty.

She finished up her mug of coffee and rinsed it out in the sink before turning her attention to her purse and satchel, working to gather her things up and make her way out the door. She glanced at the time, smiling to herself at the time, noting she wouldn’t have to rush in order to make it to Perry’s staff meeting this morning. She could probably even stop for a croissant at Joe’s before the morning rush wiped him out.

She readjusted the bag on her shoulder and unlocked the set of eight deadbolts on her door, humming to herself as she finally reached the last lock and swung the door open. She let out a short gasp when she saw Dan Scardino standing on the outside of the door, arm raised to knock on the door that had just been opened.

“Practicing those psychic skills, I see,” Dan Scardino smiled back at her, pointing to the apartment behind her. “You might want to take a seat. This is probably going to take awhile.”

“Actually, I’m on my way out,” Lois pointed to the hallway Dan Scardino was standing in.

He shook his head, stepping into the apartment and making himself comfortable on the loveseat as he pulled his leg up over the other, propping it up on his knee as he stretched his arms out against the back frame of the sofa. “I know you thought you were on your way out, but I think you might want to hear this.”

“Hear what?” Lois asked, crossing her arms over her chest, mildly perturbed at the interruption.

Scardino looked around, “No Kent?”

“What do you want Scardino?”

“Please, call me Dan,” he grinned back at her. “Hey, I just assumed...you two appeared to be joined at the hip.”

“I believe you were getting to the part where I would want to hear something out?” Lois prodded, motioning for him to get to the point.

Scardino nodded, pulling out a briefcase he had entered the apartment with and set two large file jackets on her table with a large white 8 x 10 envelope on top. She frowned, staring at the stack of curious looking files he had placed on her coffee table and ventured toward the couch to explore its contents.

“What would you say if I told you I found the unredacted files on Valhalla from the military?”

“I’d ask you who you had to kill in order to get such classified information.” Lois opened one of the file jackets and pulled out a large file, fingering the corner where the discolor of red and brown was reminiscent of dried blood. She looked back at him in surprise. “Okay, I was just joking. Did you seriously...”

“No, no, no, no,” Dan Scardino shook his head adamantly. “I found it like that.”

“That’s usually what the killer says when he’s being sentenced to death row,” Lois reminded him with an unamused expression. “Why would you bring this to me? Why not take it to the police?”

“I take it to the police, and it stops being about how to stop some very dangerous people and then becomes about how to cover up what the government did...or almost did nearly twenty years ago.” Dan explained solemnly. He shook his head, “I can’t trust anyone with the DEA, and I can’t trust anyone with the police department until I know more.” He reached over and flipped the file in her hands to reveal a slim file folder with a photo of Jimmy on it. “And something tells me you and Kent would be motivated to help me and your friend.”

Lois stared at the picture in front of her, unsure how to process the newly revealed information. Whatever this Valhalla was, it involved Jimmy, and Dan Scardino was right. She and Clark would do whatever it took to protect him from whatever this threat was.

A knock came from her front door, and she jumped, startled from the noise. Scardino looked at her with a bemused expression. Lois stood up and placed the file folder on the table and answered the door. She felt a wave of relief rush over her when she saw Clark on the other side of the door with a bag from Joe’s Bakery.

“Hey,” he smiled, stepping into the apartment. “I figured you might ...” Clark stopped when he spotted Scardino seated in the living room.

“Long story,” Lois said, waving the silent question on Clark’s face off as she pointed to the couch. “Remember that Valhalla from our, uh, source?”

Dan Scardino gestured to the table in front of him, “Voila, meet Valhalla.”

Clark closed the door behind him and followed Lois to the couch, taking a seat next to her as Lois fished a golden croissant out of the white pastry bag.

“Thanks for breakfast,” Lois smiled back at Clark.

“I was hoping to celebrate,” he shot a glare in Scardino’s direction. “Superman apparently rescued Albie Swanson from a drug exchange gone bad last night. He’s in custody now.”

“Well, there’s some good news,” Lois sighed in relief.

“Yeah, I guarantee you that was not a drug bust gone bad though.” Scardino commented with the shake of his head. “He probably tried to make a deal with the devil.”

“Why do you say that?” Clark asked.

“I get my hands on a drug that criminals can use to break out of prison, I’m not going to stick around with corner drug dealers. I’m going for the big fish which is more than likely how Albie got caught.” Scardino reached his hands up, pointing to the bag in Lois’ hand. “Hey, you bring me any?” Scardino reached his hand out for one. Lois let out a groan and tossed the bag to him. Given the story he had just brought them she could spare an extra croissant.

“Well, that’s one of these guys behind bars at least,” Lois said with a sigh, then gestured to the files in front of them. “But more keep popping up.”

Clark reached over and flipped through the file folder, skimming through the first page. His brow creased when the name on the file caught his eye. “Wilder. Like Dr. Katherine Wilder?”

“His daughter.” Scardino supplied, shaking his head. “Seems like she’s just as crazy as her old man.”

“What makes you say that?” Clark asked as Lois flipped through the file in her hand, finding a similar set of slim file folders in the back of the file with the same patient names. “What is this?” Clark asked, his brow furrowed as his forehead creased with worry lines.

“The government’s dirty secret from a little over twenty years ago.” Dan Scardino said solemnly.

“Clark, Jimmy’s one of the patients for Valhalla.” Lois said, handing him the patient file for Jimmy.

“Why bring all of this to us?” Clark asked, pointing to the files in front of them. “You seem to have the answers to everything right here.”

“I bring this up with the feds, it turns into a military investigation and I’m in the brig for the next two to three months waiting out military courts. This is way too big for me to take on myself and if what I think is going on really is taking place then we have to stop it before anyone in the military finds out or a whole lot of people and evidence will start to disappear.”

“Why are there two files?” Clark asked.

“I think one of them was Wilder’s and the other...” Dan Scardino shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Our first priority is helping Jimmy,” Clark instructed.

“Understood,” Dan Scardino nodded. “People first then the terrorists.”

“Terrorists?” Lois asked.

“Wilder is trying to resurrect this project and market it to the black market terrorist organizations. Intergang. The Resistance out in the Middle East. You name it. Every last one of them would be chomping at the bit for something like this.” Dan Scardino said solemnly.

“Well, who wouldn’t want an assassin making drug?” Lois muttered in disgust.

“One of the leaders of the Resistance is here in the States. I saw him at the hospital.” Dan Scardino explained cautiously. “I think he’ll be looking to make a deal with Wilder, but he’s going to want a demonstration. Which means Jimmy and every one of those patients there are in danger.”

“Which means we need to tell Perry,” Lois said, flipping through the file on her lap, feeling her skin crawl as she read through the clinical description of just how dark the government had gone nearly twenty years ago in an attempt to create an army of assassins, controlled by a drug they would never know had been administered to them at birth.

“Can you trust him?” Scardino asked.

“With our life,” Lois affirmed.

“Until we stop Munour, everyone on this list is in danger,” Scardino explained. “And more than likely anyone that knew anything about Valhalla.” He pointed to the patient file for Gregory Edward Mallow. “In the spirit of being transparent, this G.E. Mallow was a star witness in the case against McCarthy a few years back. If I had to place bets I would say the connection isn’t a coincidence.”

“If it is, it’s an incredibly creepy one.” Lois agreed, shaking her head.

“McCarthy isn’t going to stop until he’s dead or behind bars. He’s psychotic.” Dan Scardino added in disgust.

“Well, it takes a special kind of evil to blindly kill people the way he does.” Clark growled in agreement. Lois reached her hand over to squeeze Clark’s. He reached his arm over her shoulders, holding her close to him. The trio turned to the files in front of them, preparing to dig into the case before them and determine a way to protect Jimmy and find a way to stop Wilder and project Valhalla from coming to fruition.

Jimmy looked over his shoulder, craning his neck to look around the tall floor-length windows in the Lexor conference room. Most of the cases in progress had been transferred to other cities or relocated to continue proceedings. It seemed taking witness statements was one of those. When he had given his statement last night, the police had quickly gotten him in touch with ADA Wright by phone to have his statement taken. He wasn’t sure exactly what he could offer other than Dr. Golden’s last words.

He turned his attention back to the ADA. He was a tall man in a dark blue suit and trimmed goatee. Though he dressed the part, Jimmy could tell by the way he kept referring to his notes mid-

question he wasn't any more familiar with the process than Jimmy was. Jimmy let out a long breath, looking to where ADA Wright sat across from him, firing off question after question as he took down notes, trying to piece together the events from last night's phone call.

"Well, I don't know what he was referring to," Jimmy shrugged his shoulders as he reached over, scratching his upper arm, wincing when he saw the familiar reddened rash staring back at him. "Something about Fort Truman and an experiment was all he was able to get out before..."

"Before what?" the man asked, interrupting Jimmy again.

"Before I heard shots fired over the phone line." Jimmy explained for what felt like the twentieth time in the last ten minutes.

"And then?"

"Then what?" Jimmy asked, letting out a breath as he raked a hand through his hair.

"You said the caller threatened you?" Wright asked, flipping through the notes in front of him.

"Yes," Jimmy nodded, shaking his head. "I'm sorry but why do I need to keep going over this? It was a five-minute phone call."

"You're the last one to talk to Dr. Golden, Mr. Olsen," the ADA explained. "I am just trying to get all the facts."

"Is there a reason the DA's office is involved in the investigation?" Perry asked, clearing his throat to interject. "I mean, don't get me wrong we're glad you're taking this seriously, Mr. Wright, but isn't this a bit presumptive? There isn't even a suspect yet."

Wright shook his head. "I'm not sure. The Mayor wanted our office to run this investigation personally. Now about this caller..."

Detective Ryder flipped through the file box in front of him, taking each case file and placing it in a stack of importance for the Police Chief. The bombing had put a crimp in many cases and many of the judges were being understanding on the current circumstances, but as of this afternoon there had been three motions filed by defense attorneys attempting to take advantage of the situation in hopes of getting their client's case pushed ahead with an inexperienced ADA.

After the influx of motions began to trickle in, Police Chief Carter had ordered the entire department to review each of their case files and categorize them by importance so the new dockets could be scheduled. Rumor had it the Annex building on 8th was being rented out and turned into a makeshift courtroom to get the city through this bump. The cases would see their day in court, but combing through the many cases DA Clemmons had been working and trying to classify them for a bunch of politicians felt cheap. Each case was important. Each victim deserved justice just as much as the next.

"Detective Ryder?"

Ryder looked up, pulling himself out of the reverie he had been drawn into and saw a young man with a clipboard and large manilla envelope and stack of boxes behind him. He ran a hand over his face, grumbling just loud enough for the tech to hear, "Dear God, no more files."

"Oh, sorry," the tech pointed to the boxes behind him. "These are the first of a few from the bombing site. Bill Henderson asked they be shipped here to you when we were done."

"Oh," Ryder's face fell, recalling the request from the day before. He pointed to the large conference room in the corner, behind his desk. "You can put everything in there." He stood up and followed the tech in the conference room, helping open the door for him.

The tech dropped box after box onto the table with a loud thud, ripping the tape off each box for Ryder to inspect before

handing him a clipboard to sign. "They're all yours."

"Thanks, anything stand out?" Ryder asked curiously.

"Nothing really," The tech responded, shaking his head.

"Thanks," Ryder said with the wave of his hand. He pulled open the first box noting the map on the inside of the box lid with a red 'x' on the section of what had been City Hall's blueprint to indicate where the debris and contents had been rescued from. He sighed, noting the contents came from Michael Clemmons' office.

Inside, he found a desk phone that appeared to be melted to the handset, a computer hard drive that had to be fried and broken picture frames with cracks in the glass. He slammed the box shut and moved to the next box. Looking at the lid, he deduced the contents had come from Mayson Drake's office. Inside were similar contents. A desk phone – no nearly as damaged as Michael Clemmons' – and several file boxes and a fireproof safe. He made a mental note to check with Mayson Drake about the contents of the safe and set the phone aside. As he placed the handset on the table, the earpiece to the handset sprung open.

He frowned when he spotted a black and white device attached to the inner circuitry, he was sure was not standard issue. He spotted one of the patrolmen coming in from their shift and called out to him, "Hey, Lee? Henderson get back yet?"

"No, he's still out. What's up?"

Ryder held up the small device in his palm, "I'm not sure but I think someone's been spying on the DA's office..."

Dr. Jenet Klyburn had long since exited the field of psychology after leaving medical school to focus her attention to neuroscience which as luck would have it had her working side by side with some of the most renowned specialist in the world at S.T.A.R. Laboratories. It was here where she had made astounding discoveries in how not only the brain of a human worked, but that of a Kryptonian. Her work with Professor Hamilton and many others like him had earned her the respect of her colleagues and even many in command at the Metropolis P.D. Including, Bill Henderson.

She watched as Bill Henderson wrung his hands nervously, seeming to try and pick away the problems that were eating away at his mind with each movement of her hands. He took a pause from the hand wringing to look up at her and finally vocalize the anguish he was harboring internally.

"It's just so out of character for this friend of mine. She wouldn't do these things. She wouldn't act this way." Henderson gave her a pleading look, "I'm desperate for some kind of rational explanation as to what could be causing this."

"The only real way to know is for your friend to be assessed by a professional and get the treatment she needs," Dr. Klyburn explained carefully. "Now, I understand there have been attempts for her to see a professional but refuses to take the help."

"That's right," Henderson nodded.

"Well, in that case, you have two options," Klyburn reasoned carefully. "You can try to reason with her and hope she will see treatment is the best course of action."

"I've *tried*," Henderson insisted.

"If you feel she is a danger to herself or others you can have the courts intervene to force treatment on her." Klyburn explained.

"I don't know that she's crossed that line just yet, but I am afraid she might if she continues to refuse treatment," Henderson explained with a sorrowful expression.

"Unfortunately, we can't force a patient to get the help they need unless they prove they are a danger to society or themselves," Klyburn explained carefully. "It's a blessing and a curse. Many patients could be treated more easily had they seen a professional sooner."

"But if they refuse, your hands are tied," Henderson nodded, understanding. "Let me ask you something, is it possible for someone to be perfectly healthy and have hallucinations or false

memories?”

“With the right amount of trauma, anything is possible. Though I do challenge your term of *healthy*. One can be physically healthy and still suffer from a mental illness. We all come across challenges physically, emotionally, and mentally that can cause the mind to play tricks on us. The mind is a powerful organ that is capable of anything when motivated enough.”

“That’s the scary part,” Henderson mumbled to himself.

“I wish I could help more,” Klyburn offered as he stood up from his seat.

“You’ve been very helpful, doctor. Thank you.”

Mayson flipped her hair to the side as she skimmed through the screen on her laptop, biting her lower lip as she navigated her way through the digital case files for the cases. She had set herself up inside the local coffee shop to work through the overloading case files that seemed to be multiplying. She felt a pang in her chest as she saw the last note Michael Clemmons had made on the case. Just six hours before the bombing.

The mayor was supposed to announce his replacement here in the next few days, but until then, the remaining staff were scrambling to continue Clemmons’ cases while simultaneously trying to continue work on their own heavy caseloads. She scrolled down to read the list of witnesses on Clemmons’ latest case against suspected Intergang lieutenant, Raul Borges. She briefly recalled the name from when Lionel Darryl and Vasili Savchenko—Lucky Leon—were brought into custody. Her brow furrowed when she saw one of the names on the witness list.

Christopher Gomez.

“He certainly gets around, doesn’t he?” Mayson muttered under her breath.

She skimmed through the case details in front of her, noting the suspicions Gomez had of Borges working with an unknown party to help smuggle drugs inside the prison he was being held at until trial. An unknown witness was noted in the file as having heard a confession of Borges’ ties to the actual head of Intergang.

She scrolled to the next page, frowning as the screen blinked back at her in protest.

“Come on,” she let out a frustrated growl. The screen flickered and she scowled when she saw a ticker run across the bottom of the screen. *‘No Named Suspects in City Hall Bombing.’*

Even after her eyewitness account of Lois Lane being there at the scene just before the bomb went off there was still no active effort to even look at her as a possible suspect. She let out a frustrated growl, startling the surrounding patrons and even herself as she stared at her screen in disgust.

<< *“Mayson, are you sure it was Lois Lane you saw outside the steps of City Hall.”*

“It was her. I know it was her.”>>

<< *“Mayson, she wasn’t there.”*

“How do you know?”

“She has an alibi.”

“An alibi that would probably help her commit murder, right?”>>

Through her initial check in the system this morning, she had found numerous complaints on Lois Lane’s meddling in active investigations, but along with each complaint was praise for her contribution and help in solving the case. She wasn’t sure what exactly she was looking for. She had worked with Lois and Clark enough times to know what to expect as far as official reports from her fellow officers in blue that came in contact with the investigative reporting duo. Yet she found herself pondering what could be hidden between the lines.

Was there even anything there to help prove to Bill Henderson what she knew to be the truth?

<< *“I’m not saying you are crazy, Mayson. The mind can play some horrible tricks on you when you’re under stress*

and....Mayson, please don’t go. Let’s talk about this...”

“I have nothing to talk to you about. You think I’m crazy and refuse to investigate. I got it.”>>

She wasn’t crazy.

She knew what she had seen.

The more she scoured through the old case files, the more cemented in her hypothesis she became. It wasn’t a random hit by a random bomber. It was an assassination attempt. Lois Lane knew she was a threat. Now that she couldn’t sway Mayson to look the other way by manipulating her supposed friendship with Clark to her will, she knew it would only be a matter of time before Clark would see past the games and manipulation Lois Lane pulled and left her for someone that was worthy of him.

A slow smile spread across her face as she allowed her mind to drift to the possibility of reclaiming her life from a time before her world has shifted into this unrecognizable swirling chaos filled with pigments and shapes that left her feeling numb after each encounter. Despite everything, she knew Clark still cared about her. She knew she hadn’t just invented the relationship in her head despite the easy dismissal everyone around her appeared to give her when she dared speak up over how she was treated.

She knew she wasn’t crazy.

She knew Lois Lane had tried to kill her.

She just had to prove it.

“Drake!”

She looked up from where she was seated in the coffee shop and smiled when she saw the barista setting a paper cup on the counter with the name ‘*Drake*’ printed on the cup. She looked down at her monitor and sighed when she saw it flicker once more. She really needed to get the IT team to look at that. She pressed the lock key on the keyboard and then walked to the front to retrieve her cup of coffee.

“Thanks!” Mayson placed a few dollars in the tip jar and turned back to return to her table. She bumped her shoulder into a tall gentleman who was standing by the register, “Oh, I’m sorry...” she quickly apologized, thankful for the plastic lid that kept the coffee from spilling over.

“Not a problem, Ms. Drake,” the stranger responded, tipping his hat as he ran a hand across the white hairs of his goatee.

She frowned, not recognizing the stranger as he stared back at her. “I’m sorry...do I know you?”

A reassuring smile crossed his face, “It’s perfectly fine, Ms. Drake.” He took the coffee cup the barista handed him and moved along. “I’ll be seeing you.”

She bit her lip, watching him leave, and then turned back to the barista to ask, “I’m sorry. I hate to bother you, but what name did that gentleman give?”

“St. John.” The barista answered, not looking up as he wiped down the counter.

“Huh,” Mayson frowned, unable to place the name. She returned to her table, taking a sip from her coffee cup before turning her attention back to the laptop she had opened. The backlight flickered as it unlocked and she pulled up the New Troy database to run a query for the name “St. John.”

As with any name that proved to be common she found several hundred results, but there at the top was the blinking red open warrant file with the name ‘Nigel St. John.’ She clicked on the link and gasped when she saw the photo matched the man that had just exited the coffee mug. She stared at the name in the system as the one that had filed the warrant application, trying to understand what was happening.

How could she forget someone she had investigated?

How could she forget the name and face of someone she suspected of being a lieutenant of Intergang and with known connections to Lex Luthor?

She couldn’t even picture his face in her mind.

‘What’s wrong with me?’

Outside the coffee shop, Nigel St. John confidently walked down the streets of Metropolis, feeling an invincible veil over him as he dialed the familiar number into the phone he was carrying. “I hear Superman’s just finished cleaning up the mess you made on the bay. Is the apartment ready?”

Rollie Vale chuckled from the other end of the phone line, “It’s perfect. Microchip has been planted, and message has been sent.”

“Perfect,” Nigel purred as he reached the corner of the crosswalk. “Our test run was successful. No recognition from Mayson Drake.”

“How soon before we can test the other subjects?” Rollie asked, pleased with the news.

“I’m not quite done with Mayson Drake yet,” Nigel responded dryly. “I’ll meet you back at the subway station.”

“I’ll call McCarthy.”

“No.” Nigel responded with a harsh growl. “McCarthy’s becoming more of a liability than an asset. Let’s not poke the bear.”

“Understood.”

Clark flew through the sky, checking the city for any signs of further trouble as he returned from dousing a fire on the bay. Most of the morning had been spent scouring through the confidential case files with Lois and Agent Scardino. The call for help had been a blessing for him as it gave him time to think and process the heavy weight of the information they had uncovered. He had to admit that though Scardino was a bit unorthodox, the DEA Agent did appear to have a good heart. The fact that he was breaking rank and pulling in two reporters to help him investigate this case on Valhalla instead of his fellow agents that could possibly cover up what had happened twenty plus years ago, showed just how dedicated Scardino was to finding the truth.

How everything would end and where the pieces would crumble when this all came to a head was anyone’s guess at this point but, for now, they were a team. A team that worked well together to both stop Stanley Gables and his fellow underlings but also put a stop to the sale of black-market drugs to terrorist organizations.

He reached the balcony of his apartment, preparing to get a quick shower to remove the overwhelming scent of smoke from his body before meeting Lois and Scardino back at the Planet. When he landed, he noticed the window was cracked open.

He frowned when he stepped inside, feeling a sense of dread set in as he took in the disarray of his apartment. He quickly raced to the closet where the false back had been installed to hide his Superman suits and sighed in relief when he saw they were still there.

‘Lois Dies!’ was spray-painted on the closet door in red spray paint. The floor was covered in cotton stuffing from what he guessed were the pillows from the bedroom. He carefully floated above the floor, ensuring he wasn’t touching anything as he scanned the apartment for a sign of who could be behind this.

He finally stopped at the front door where he found pinned to it a glossy photo with what appeared to be a bloody thumbprint on the corner of it. The photo showed Lois checking into the Metro hotel with the security detail a few feet behind her.

Etched in the photo with what looked to be a sharp object of some kind were the words, ‘Lois Lane Will Die!’

Chapter 21: Crash Into Me

Sean McCarthy paced nervously in the dark subway tunnels, shoving his hands into the deep pockets of his flannel jacket. He let out a labored breath as a cough tickled his throat, escaping as a partial wheeze. He cleared his throat, trying to rid his throat of the sensation and turned to the corridor, waiting for a sign of Nigel and Rollie Vale’s return. He had been promised safe passage out of

the country in exchange for his services to Intergang.

With Albie Swanson in custody and no longer an imminent threat with his attempted deal with Munour falling through, there was no longer anything holding him in Metropolis. The longer he stayed, the more he risked his freedom. The threats against Lois Lane were enough to spook the reporter from furthering her investigation into Intergang. So far, since the threats had begun, she hadn’t lifted a finger to dig into the old Intergang files. It seemed spooking her and threatening her from afar had been just the gentle shove she needed to back off and let sleeping dogs lie.

It was time to pay up.

Nigel stepped out of the yellow cab he had been seated in, motioning for the driver to keep the car running as he carried a large duffle bag with him toward the back alley that led to the pristine red-bricked townhomes. He smiled to himself as he approached the green dumpster just outside the townhome with the imprint of ‘Drake’ in gold etching on the painted blue door. He lifted up the cover and fished out a shredded white pillow and dropped it into the dumpster. He pulled out a pair of black leather gloves and a switchblade from the bag and tossed them into the dumpster as well. Once he was done, he turned back to the entry of the alley where he had entered, whistling to himself as he approached the awaiting taxicab.

Without a word, he climbed back inside the cab and turned to the driver with one simple word, “Drive.”

‘I’m not crazy.’

The thought raced through Mayson Drake’s mind as she nursed the coffee cup in front of her. She waited patiently for the guards to call her name. She didn’t have a whole lot to go on, but she knew where to start. This had all started with the Gables case, so logic told her that that was where the connection was.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t extract any information out of Mary any longer, given her untimely death. Stanley Gables was refusing calls and visits from the DA’s office now that his case was set to go to trial and he had obtained counsel from the smarmy Barry Barker. There was still one individual she could turn to that was still within reach.

“Ms. Drake?”

Mayson looked up and saw the guard standing by the door leading to the visiting room with the prisoners. “Right here!” Mayson waved her hand in the air and approached with a smile across her face.

“Ms. Scott has been brought to the visitor’s room.” The guard pointed to the cup in her hand. “You’ll have to dispose of that, ma’am.”

“Of course,” Mayson nodded, tossing the coffee cup in the trash and walking through the metal detector for inspection. She took her visitor badge with the bright printed number on it and clipped it on her jacket and then followed the guard through the double doors leading to where Melissa Scott was being held.

‘I’m not crazy.’ She told herself as she reached the dark room where Melissa Scott was seated in a green and white jumpsuit, chained to a table.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Scott muttered when Mayson entered the room.

“You seem surprised to see me.”

“Well, I guess it’s not everyday you see a ghost around here, Ms. Drake.”

“Ghost?” Mayson crinkled her nose at the word.

“You are supposed to be dead, from what I hear.”

Mayson frowned, “I survived.”

“So I see.”

“So let’s get down to it, shall we? Who are you working for?”

“What makes you think I work for anyone?”

“You seem to have a lot of incorrect information. You put your

entire career at risk for a no-name like Stanley Gables. Why?”

“Why else? Money!” Scott scoffed at her. “You think the measly salary awarded to the ME’s office is any different than the DA’s office?”

“I think you’re way too cooperative of a witness.”

“And I think you’re just a little on the paranoid side, Ms. Drake.” Scott sneered back. “I hear that cold shoulder you got isn’t sitting too well with you. Seeing things? Making false accusations.... Tsk Tsk Tsk... You really should get yourself to Shady Brooke. I’m sure they’ve got a nice padded room with a view for you and your crazy...”

“Why you little...!”

“Ah, ah, ah, temper...temper...”

Mayson flew to her feet and slammed her fists on the table. “I will see you rot in here with every other lieutenant of Intergang and vile criminal I throw into the system. You think I’m crazy? Good! You have no idea what I’m capable of!”

Dr. Klyburn read through the report in front of her, frowning as the information loaded on her screen. She scrolled through the screen, and examined the request that had just come through from Metropolis P.D. She saw the priority was marked high and the case it was related to. She pulled the information from the request, opting to work on it herself rather than allow one of the lesser experienced techs work through the data analysis and possible scrubbing that might be required of the project.

She took note of the request number and assigned it to herself before making her way to the file bin, where the large stack of envelopes containing different objects retrieved from the bombing site were awaiting examination. She searched the file bin and retrieved the pack with the same request number on it and made her way back to her office to begin the analysis. She set the package down and slipped on a pair of rubber gloves, preparing to examine the contents.

She ripped open the package, gently coaxing the contents out, allowing it to fall into her palm. She frowned, noting the white light blinking from the small silver disk in her hand.

“Well, what do we have here?”

‘I’m not crazy.’

The sting from the words Melissa Scott had used to taunt her with a mere few hours before still rang in her ears as she turned the corner to the street where her townhome was. The unrelenting taunting from Melissa Scott was nothing but sour grapes. It was a vile criminal attempting to get under her skin. Nothing more.

‘What about Nigel St. John?’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘Is it?’

The back and forth between her inner musings and the questions she continued to press herself for were getting her nowhere. She reached her hands up, gripping the sides of her head by the root of her hair, tugging the fistful of newly dyed dark strands as if to help shove her mind into the present and escape the feud that appeared to be taking place within her mind.

She could worry about this later.

Right now, she just needed to...

She stopped, feeling a chill run down her spine as she took the first step leading up to her front door. The plant on the corner was knocked over. There was soil covering the third step. She turned to where the front door was, noting that though the door was closed, it appeared to have been pried open or attempted to be opened with some heavy metal object. She could see the scratch marks on the frame outside her door.

She gently reached her hand out, turning the knob to test it, and sure enough, the door opened without any resistance. She stared at the spacious apartment, uncertain of what to think or do. She had to call the police. She fumbled through the bag on her shoulder, rummaging through its contents for her phone. She

reached into the deep pockets, hunting for the familiar object but to no avail.

‘It’ll be fine,’ she promised herself, summing up the courage to cross the barrier between the front step and the threshold where her front door and foyer connected. From her vantage point, she couldn’t see anything that would cause any concern outside of the random objects put out of their place. There was really nowhere to hide in the main living area. It was nice and open and gave her a nice view into her home. An advantage she opted for when choosing the townhome.

She took a deep breath and entered her home, hearing the hard clank of her heels on the wooden floor. She moved through the living space noting everything out of place as she approached the phone plugged into the wall in the kitchen. A hard lump hit her throat when she noticed the box where she had kept everything she had gathered on Lois Lane was missing. Along with her box, her desktop computer and keys to her office were missing as well.

The anger and frustration at the situation grew as she punched the digits into the phone and dialed in the number she knew by heart. After a few rings, she heard the familiar voice on the other line. “Bill? I’m going to need you to send someone down here... Well, because someone broke into my apartment...”

Lois ran a hand through her dark strands, looking across the table where Jimmy was seated, recounting his phone call with the doctor and his interview with the District Attorney’s office as a cooperating witness.

“So, what exactly did Dr. Golden say?” Dan Scardino asked, breaking the silence that had fallen after Jimmy had finished his account of the events that had taken place over the evening and most of the morning.

Jimmy gave a quick look to Lois, silently asking for permission for him to divulge the information to the agent. Lois nodded to him, reassuring him that it was indeed safe for him to discuss everything with Scardino.

After pouring over the redacted files with Clark and Dan Scardino earlier, they had all come to the agreement they needed to bring Jimmy and Perry into the investigation. Jimmy’s life, possibly being in jeopardy with the Valhalla project, forced their hand no matter which way they looked at it. Jimmy would only be able to protect himself if he knew all the facts – as painful as they might be.

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders, toying with the pen in front of him as he responded, “Not a whole lot. He wanted me to come down to the hospital and started rambling about some experiment at Fort Truman right before the killer shot him.”

Lois nodded, reaching her hand across the table to squeeze Jimmy’s, offering a silent sign of support as he spoke. “I’m sorry, Jimmy.”

Jimmy gave her a weak smile, “You know, I’ve known Dr. Golden my whole life. I moved from base to base, but Dr. Golden – he was my constant, you know? Army brat and all that.”

“Dr. Golden, was your doctor at other bases?” Lois’ brow furrowed when he mentioned this tidbit of information.

“Yeah, he got transfers, or sometimes dad would just be coming through, and Dr. Golden would ask to do a check-up...” Jimmy frowned, seeming to notice the hesitancy in her tone. “Why?”

Lois looked down at the file in front of her, unsure where to begin. Finally, she just decided to rip off the band-aid, “Jimmy, your file was found with a confidential project file from the military for something called Valhalla.”

“What is that? Some sort of video game?” Jimmy asked, not following where she was going with this.

“Here,” Lois pushed the photocopies of the file to Jimmy to read through. “I made copies for you.”

The joking expression that had been on Jimmy’s face

disappeared as he opened the file and began reading.

“We thought you’d be safer having all the information in front of you.” Dan Scardino explained softly.

“We?” Jimmy’s brow furrowed. “Who all knows about this?”

“Just us,” Lois said gently. “You. Me. Clark and Agent Scardino.”

“This says I was...drugged...as a baby?” Jimmy shook his head in disgust. “Did my parents know about this?”

“We don’t know,” Scardino answered, interjecting himself in the conversation. “There’s a lot of unknowns here. Right now, the biggest concern here is keeping this information limited to as few people as possible.”

“Why? You don’t want to embarrass the good old agency and your buds at the pentagon?” Jimmy scoffed, shaking his head in dismay. “I mean, this is news!”

“And it could also put everyone in very real danger,” Lois said carefully. “Listen, Jimmy, I know this is a lot to take in...”

“Lois?”

Lois looked up, seeing Clark standing in the doorway with two officers and Detective Ryder behind him. She stood up from her chair, sensing Clark wasn’t just returning from a rescue and happened to have run into the detective and officers in the lobby.

“What is it?”

Before she could even register the movement, Clark was by her side, holding her in his arms, rocking back and forth as he performed a great impression of herself in babble mode. “You have no idea how scared I was. Are you okay? Has there been anything out of the ordinary? Packages? Letters?”

“No, I’ve been here going through this case with Jimmy and Agent Scardino,” she said, placing a hand on his cheek, feeling him shudder beneath her touch. Worry crossed her eyes as she looked back at him. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“We want to place a security detail in the newsroom just to be safe,” Detective Ryder explained, pointing to the officers behind him.

“What’s going on?” Lois asked, turning back to Clark. “Clark?”

Bill Henderson hung his head as he followed Detective Riley inside the townhome. He looked around, taking note of the perimeter the patrol officers had set up in Mayson’s living room. The couch had been turned upside down and ripped along the back. Henderson grimaced as he stared at the disarray of random household objects that had been destroyed and strewn across the living room. He moved toward the kitchen, where one of the investigators was taking a picture of the scene.

“Henderson,” Riley pointed to the table in the corner of the kitchen that looked to be set up as a workstation. Or at least it would have been a workstation had the monitors and computer not been yanked out of the wall. The cords plugged into the wall hung across the table with an imprint on the table from where the missing electronics had been.

Henderson pointed to the table, “Make sure everything is photographed.”

He made his way to the small round table located at the end of the room, where Mayson was seated with a mug of coffee, talking with one of the patrol officers. “Any suspects?” Henderson asked the patrol officer as he approached.

“Nothing obvious,” the officer responded with a shake of his head.

“Nothing obvious?” Mayson hissed out, waving her hands around the townhome, gesturing to the chaotic surroundings.

“What more has to happen before you start taking me seriously?”

“What are you talking about, Mayson?” Henderson asked, not following what she was getting at.

“You want to know who did this?” Mayson growled angrily. “Take a trip down to the Daily Planet.”

“Mayson, you can’t possibly think...”

“Oh, you seriously can’t see it, can you? She’s out of control and you refuse to see it!”

“Who?” the patrolman asked.

“Mayson has certain misgivings about a certain reporter...”

Henderson responded uncertainly.

“You think a reporter did this?” the patrol officer asked.

“Yes! It was *Lois Lane!*”

Henderson let out a long breath, “I’ll take it from here.”

Rollie Vale held up the gold-trimmed micro-chip from beneath the microscope. A giddy squeal escaped his throat as he bounced in his seat, looking at the beauty that was his revolutionary new micro-chip. “Perfection!”

“Gloating is a bit premature, don’t you think, Vale?” Nigel muttered, pushing past him with a dismissive sneer.

“You said ...”

“I said we have promising results.” Nigel corrected with a harsh glare as he reached his arm over to snatch the microchip out from under the microscope and squished it between his index finger and thumb. “As far as you and McCarthy are concerned this...doesn’t work.” A snarl escaped his throat as he glared back at Vale. “Am I clear?”

“Crystal.”

“McCarthy will be taken care of once we have taken care of Mayson Drake,” Nigel said, straightening his shoulders. “No need to get his hopes up by flaunting something he’ll never be around to enjoy.”

“Of course,” Vale nodded, as he looked down at the crushed circuits.

“Get back to work.”

A range of emotions raced through Clark Kent’s mind as he reconciled the scene of his apartment with what Lois and Jimmy had described to him. No threats. No mysterious letters. No danger. Not imminent anyway. Was it a prank? Was it a promise of what was to come? Every fiber of him wanted to scour the city and hunt down the predator he knew had his sights on Lois. He would in a heartbeat, if he knew where to even look. Every patrol. Every rescue. He had searched. Constantly looking for a sign of McCarthy but he continued to come up with nothing.

No matter where he looked, there was no sign of this silent stalker that continued to threaten Lois from afar.

Now, the threats had come to him.

Detective Ryder tapped on the photograph on the table of his apartment, completely trashed with the threat against Lois clear in white paint. “We’re running down all leads, but as a safety precaution, we need you to be as vigilant as possible. No going anywhere without checking in with your detail.”

“You got it,” Jimmy answered for Lois, who was sitting in the corner of the conference room, looking anywhere but in Detective Ryder’s direction.

“Hold on,” Ryder looked down at his phone and frowned. He looked around the room, “I, uh, hate to ask, but I’m assuming you’ve been here all morning?”

“Here for half the morning and the other half...” Jimmy shrugged his shoulders.

“We were working on a case at Lois’ apartment earlier this morning,” Clark responded, pointing to the officer that was speaking with Agent Scardino with Perry. “Agent Scardino was assisting. What’s this about?”

Ryder shook his head, “Nothing. Just trying to get a timeline is all.”

To say he was skeptical of Ryder’s forthcomingness would be an understatement. Ryder was hiding something, but digging into the police detective’s motives was last on his list of priorities. First and foremost, he had to keep Lois safe.

“Right, I’ll leave you to it,” Ryder said, slightly distracted as he shoved his phone in his pocket. He turned to where Lois was seated, “Ms. Lane, I’ll be in touch. Please, no unnecessary risks...”

“Easier said than done,” Jimmy muttered under his breath as Ryder left.

Clark nodded, taking a seat next to Lois. He placed a hand on her shoulder, “Lois?”

Lois shook her head, looking up from her lap. A determined expression crossed her face as her eyebrows furrowed, and she stared back at him. “I guess that gives us some time to dig into Valhalla. Jimmy might actually be able to help with some information.” She gestured to Jimmy, “Jimmy’s working with the DA’s office on their investigation into his doctor’s shooting.”

“Your doctor?” Clark looked at his friend with dismay at the news his doctor had been shot.

“We may be reaching, but” Lois pulled out the file Scardino had found on Jimmy. “We did confirm this is his doctor’s name.” She pointed to the signature of Dr. Andrew Golden at the bottom of the latest report.

“Jimmy, I’m sorry,” Clark apologized to his friend. His head was still swimming with the events that had transpired over the last hour and a half. There was an actual break in the investigation into Vallhalla. This was big news. If he hadn’t been riddled with panic at that moment, he might even be grateful for the news. Instead, all he could do was offer a weak nod in his friend’s direction.

“It’s fine, CK,” Jimmy responded with a shrug of his shoulders. “I just want to get Dr. Golden justice and find out what all of this...” he gestured to the files on the table, “means.”

“With our help,” Lois added, placing a hand on Jimmy’s shoulder.

“Guys...” Jimmy began to argue.

“Jimmy, it’s non-negotiable,” Clark said firmly.

Jimmy was hesitant for a moment and then turned to Clark and nodded. “Thank you.”

“Vandalism?” Mayson shrieked in shock as she looked around the small crowd of officers in her townhome. “Look around! I’m the victim here!”

Henderson nodded, “Mayson, please, I just need to know where you were between eight and ten today.”

“Having coffee,” Mayson growled begrudgingly, crossing her arms over her chest. “Alone.”

“Anyone see you?” Henderson asked.

“Not really,” Mayson muttered. “I have a receipt.”

“I’ll need to see it,” Henderson said, tapping his notepad.

“It’s in my purse,” Mayson fumed, standing up from her seat and hobbling toward the kitchen to find the missing purse. She frowned when she saw it wasn’t where it had been laid earlier.

“Something wrong?” Henderson asked.

“I, uh...”

“Henderson?” a call came from the other side of the room from Detective Riley, motioning for Henderson to approach.

Mayson frowned when she saw the detective holding up a red and white pillow with a slash through it. Riley leaned in to whisper something to Henderson, who looked in her direction then to Riley, who nodded. She watched as Henderson disappeared through the front door to leave, and Detective Riley entered with the shredded pillow in his hand.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” Mayson asked with a snort.

“You tell me, Ms. Drake.” Riley placed the pillow on her table.

“Someone’s idea of a sick joke.” She picked at the white fuzz escaping from the corner.

Riley turned the pillow over and revealed white-painted words

on the dark red fabric. *‘Lois Lane Dies!’*

“Mayson, I’m going to need you to come down to the station with me.”

“Why?”

“Don’t make this any harder than it has to be, Ms. Drake.”

“Don’t you see what’s happening?” Mayson shouted angrily. “She’s behind all of this! It’s all her!” Before she could react, she felt the cold metal wrap around her wrists and heard Detective Riley sounding off with the speel of her Miranda Rights. She let out a whimper as he held her by the shoulder. “I’m not crazy!”

“Mayson, please, just let us help you.”

ADA Wright tapped at the keys on his laptop and looked up to where the patient was handcuffed to his hospital bed with a bloody bandage across his shoulder. Wright leaned forward, taking a moment to size up the situation. If the information divulged to him was true, then he could potentially blow open every case the DA’s office had on Intergang with one witness. If he was lying... it could be his career.

He looked to the bandage on Albie Swanson’s shoulder, mulling over the possibilities once more before finally speaking up. “I can’t promise you a clean slate, but I can give you probation with protection and a new identity in exchange for your testimony.”

“You better get a judge in here then,” Albie responded coldly. “Because the clock will be ticking, and you’re going to want this all on the record.”

Lois let out a deep sigh, pushing the last of the files in front of her to the side. She glanced over at Jimmy, who was pouring over Dr. Golden’s background information, looking for something that would explain the evidence Agent Scardino had found that wasn’t the obvious answer everyone but him seemed to be already leaning toward. Dr. Golden was involved with Dr. Everett Wilder and possibly even his daughter, Katherine Wilder. She was still on the fence on whether the doctor was involved with Wilder’s daughter, but there was an overwhelming amount of evidence that solidified his involvement with Everett Wilder. It appeared Golden was trying to do the right thing by Jimmy in the end – albeit a bit too late.

The door opened, and she looked to where Agent Scardino was standing, notepad in hand, and a concerned expression on his face. “Anything?” she asked.

“Gregory Mallow and Sarah Goodwin were both nowhere to be found at their apartments,” Scardino said as his shoulders sunk with despair. “Any word from Kent on checking out the workplaces?”

Lois frowned, tapping her pen on the notepad in front of her. “He called about an hour ago. Nothing at Mallow’s workshop, and he’s talking to the professors at Met U right now about Sarah Goodwin.”

Scardino shook his head, “Anyone else getting an eerie vibe about the fact that two out of the three assassins being nowhere to be found?”

“They’re not assassins.” Lois corrected sharply, stealing a glance at Jimmy before looking back at Scardino.

Scardino pointed to the files in front of them. “Were you guys able to find anything on Golden?”

“Nothing connecting him to Katherine Wilder,” Jimmy spoke up, frowning as he grumbled out the glaring piece of evidence he and Lois had uncovered. “But it does appear he was stationed at Fort Truman with Everett Wilder at the same time this project started.”

“So, there’s the connection,” Scardino commented with a shrug. He held up his notepad, “I did hear back from my guys at the DEA. There is an active investigation into Dr. Golden regarding a forged signature for Ticeon – a highly regulated drug

used in this Valhalla drug.”

“Sounds like Wilder might have been trying to resurrect Valhalla on her own.” Jimmy mused with a concerned expression.

“And with Amir Munour involved, we should all be very, *very* worried,” Scardino warned.

<< “*McCarthy will be taken care of once we have taken care of Mayson Drake. No need to get his hopes up by flaunting something he’ll never be around to enjoy.*”

“Of course,” >>

Sean McCarthy pressed the rewind button and then hit play once more on the recorder.

<< “*No need to get his hopes up by flaunting something he’ll never be around to enjoy.*” >>

McCarthy tightened his grip around the tape recorder, feeling the white-hot rage run through him as he pondered just how to handle Intergang’s treason. Whether it was Intergang or just the meddling of Nigel, he couldn’t be sure, but he knew from experience never to trust a fellow criminal. It was always a selfish view of looking out for oneself when teaming up with others. It seemed he had outlived his usefulness in Nigel’s eyes. A callous error in judgment he would be sure to remind him of.

A sinister smile spread across McCarthy’s face as an eerie calm fell over him. He would so enjoy educating Metropolis and Nigel in just how expendable they all could be.

Amir Munour straightened his tie in the full-length mirror, glaring at the reflection as he barked out orders to his security team. “I want this Albie taken care of. I have a reputation to uphold and letting anyone think they are safe from my reach after committing treason, hmm...”

“Of course, sir.” The lead guard nodded, tightening his scratched up knuckles inside his hand. “And Dr. Wilder?”

“What about her?” Munour sneered dismissively.

“She keeps calling, sir.” The guard responded with a scowl.

“Would you like for me to take care of her?”

“That’s unnecessary,” Munour shrugged, motioning for his guards to follow him as he opened the door to his room. “The dream of Valhalla appears to be nothing but smokescreen and dreams.”

Munour stepped out into the hallway with his team of guards behind him. “Shall I arrange for transport, sir?” the guard on his left asked.

“Yes, I believe...”

A man appeared in front of him with a shotgun, aiming it in Munour’s direction.

“Get back, sir...”

One-shot.

The guard on his left was down.

Two shots.

The guard on his right was down.

Three shots.

The guard behind him was on his knees.

“W-what is...?” Munour stammered out as he watched the assailant drop the shotgun and fall to the ground.

Out of the corner, Dr. Katherine Wilder and her mother, Claudette, rushed to his side. Wilder checked the man’s pulse and frowned, “The dosage must have been off.”

“You better have a very good explanation for this...” Munour threatened, growling at them with fury.

“It got your attention, did it not, Mr. Munour?” Claudette smiled back at him with a curl of her lip. “I do apologize about your guards, but we needed to get a very clear message to you that just wasn’t sinking in with words.”

“You...”

“As much as I’d love to continue this conversation, I’d suggest we get a move on before the police get here.” Dr. Wilder pointed

to the red lights blinking in the hallway as the hotel manager’s voice came over the intercom, warning guests to remain in their rooms.

“Even if I wanted to listen to your insane proposal how am I supposed to explain the death of each assassin to my people?”

“The human body has changed over the past twenty years. Tolerance or intolerance to the Valhalla drug can be adjusted.” Dr. Wilder explained dismissively.

“And your subject is dead.” Munour pointed to the body on the floor with a shotgun by his side.

“We have another subject,” Claudette reassured him.

“A man.” Amir Munour challenged with a raised eyebrow.

“Where I come from, we don’t need drugs to control our women.”

“Of course,” Wilder frowned, taking his arm in hers. “Now if you’ll just come with us? Unless you’d like to visit the inside of an American Jail this afternoon instead?”

“Cross me, and it’s your life,” Munour warned.

Lightning crackled from outside the Daily Planet windows, Lois pulled the heavy fleece blanket over her as she made herself comfortable on Perry’s couch, reviewing her notes from the research they had been able to pull today. Clark was still searching the city for the missing assassins and any sign of McCarthy. Jimmy was holed up in the conference room with Agent Scardino and as much as she’d like to put up an argument and insist she was fine and push through the last hour to see the case through she could feel the exhaustion taking over.

As much as she would love to stay up and fight the fatigue, she knew it was a losing battle. The last few nights had drained her mentally and emotionally. Being here in the Daily Planet with the officers on guard just outside gave her an extra sense of comfort that helped to ease her into the sweet slumber that had been calling out to her.

Tomorrow they would talk and review what they had and go over their options with Perry.

Tomorrow they would see if they could enlist Henderson’s help in finding Sarah Goodwin and G.E. Mallow to put a stop to Wilder’s plans for them.

Tomorrow....

“Lois?”

She jumped up, startled by the sound of Jimmy calling her name. “What is it, Jimmy?”

She gasped in surprise when she looked toward the window where the office looked out into the newsroom and saw the blinds and been closed. The door slammed to the office and she quickly jumped to her feet as she watched Jimmy wrap his hand around the leather belt in his hands.

“Jimmy, are you feeling okay?” Lois heard the slight waver in her tone as she looked back at her friend who had a dark expression on his face.

“Never better,” he called out before lunging in her direction. She let out a loud scream just before his hand clasped over her mouth. The thunder rumbled outside as the light from outside illuminated the sky.

She sank her teeth into the flesh of his hand, and he released his grasp on her long enough for her to jump to her feet and call out to him, “Jimmy, you’ve been brainwashed!”

Jimmy lunged toward her, wrapping the belt around her throat as she attempted to reason with him, “Jimmy, stop it! Please, it’s me, Lois!”

A flash of red glinted in his eyes as she searched her brain for how to get through to him as the air grew thinner and thinner. She hissed out a raspy, “Fight it, Jimmy...”

Clark heard the distinct voice he would know anywhere. As fast as he could, he soared through the sky, zeroing in on the Daily Planet as he moved at super-speed through the stormy clouds,

dodging the lightning as it lit up the sky.

“Fight it, Jimmy...” he heard Lois wheeze out just before he crashed through the window to Perry’s office, shattering glass all around him as he reached for Jimmy.

“Let her go, Jimmy!” Clark ordered, pulling him off of Lois.

“As you wish,” Jimmy released his grasp on Lois and lunged toward Clark, attempting to wrap his hand around his neck but continuing to fail to make contact as Clark held him out at arm’s length.

Lois let out a shallow breath, gasping for air, and Clark turned to her, “Lois, are you okay?”

She nodded, looking at him slightly disoriented, “Cl-Superman?”

He scanned the newsroom, searching for any sign of assistance he could seek out but grimaced when he saw the officers on guard appeared to be knocked out by the elevator doors. He kept a tight grip on Jimmy, trying to make sense out of the scene in the bullpen and Perry’s office as he searched for any sign of recognition from his friend.

“Lois, do you think you can call the police while I get Jimmy here taken to the hospital?” Clark finally asked.

“What about the officers?” Lois pointed to the closed door.

“Someone’s knocked them out,” Clark answered, looking at Jimmy in dismay as he continued to swing in his direction. “Are you going to be okay?”

Lois nodded, gesturing to Jimmy, “Just get him to the hospital. I’ll take it from here.”

“Be careful.” Clark let the words escape, feeling they were nothing but a weak afterthought as he flew through the night sky, allowing the pouring rain to douse his friend in hopes that it would help draw him out of whatever trance he was in.

Dan Scardino limped through the lobby of the Daily Planet, gripping the bloody side where he had been shot. He looked toward the glass door where the trio had escaped moments ago. He bit his lower-lip, keeping them in his sights as he held out his pistol, ready to fire as soon as the two deadly women moved away from Munour. He wouldn’t let them escape. He wouldn’t let Munour getaway.

A chirp escaped his phone, and he heard the orders come through from Washington. “Permission granted, Agent Scardino. Take him out.”

With one shot, he shattered the glass of the door and smiled to himself as the second bullet hit its target. Red and blue lights blinked in the distance, and he smiled to himself. “Justice is served.”

Lois sat on the edge of her seat, drumming her fingers against the table as she heard the voices around her asking question after question on the events that had transpired. Wilder had been detained. A terrorist leader had been killed. The officers that had been standing guard would live after they recovered from the drug they had been dosed with by Wilder.

Was she losing her touch?

The thought crossed her mind time and time again, as she stared off into the space between the chaos surrounding her and her racing thoughts that plagued her mind.

All of these things had occurred in just a few moments, and she hadn’t been the wiser. Why hadn’t she heard anything? Why hadn’t she put two and two together until Jimmy was facing her with the intention of following through on his orders to kill her?

“Ms. Lane?” a hand touched her shoulder, and she jumped, startled by the physical contact.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lane,” the officer apologized. “Henderson asked that we make sure you get home safe and...”

“I’ll make sure she gets home okay, officer.”

Lois turned to see Clark standing in the doorway, still dressed

in his Superman uniform. The tormented expression on his face shook her to the core as he entered the room.

“Lucky save,” Lois commented, standing up from her seat. “Is Jimmy okay?”

“He came to halfway to the hospital. The doctors are going to keep him overnight.” Clark answered, closing the door behind her as they stepped into the newsroom. His voice dropped an octave. “Are you okay?”

Lois nodded, unable to voice the conundrum of emotions racing through her, “I’ll be fine.” She gave him a pleading look, “Can we please get out of here?”

“Yeah,” Clark nodded, taking her hand in his.

The world seemed to shift into a mixture of blurry pixels as the rain continued to pour down mid-flight on the way back to Lois’ apartment. Clark couldn’t help but let out a frustrated groan at the current situation. Was it too much to ask the universe to just allow him a moment of peace? A moment of solace and let him savor the brief feeling of holding Lois in his arms before another disaster would yank him away or possibly put her in harm’s way again and again.

He had gotten there in time – this time.

He still recalled the image of Jimmy’s face when he had come to in the aftermath of his attack on Lois. Try as she might to hide it, he knew the close call had shaken Lois. Even as she was giving her statement to the police, he felt the tight grip she held on him, recognizing her need to reassure herself that she was indeed safe.

He felt the squish of water beneath his boots as he came to land on her balcony, holding out his cape for cover as she fished her key out to unlock the back door. He ducked his head down to keep from hitting the doorframe as he stepped inside her apartment. He quickly closed the back door behind him and then gave her an apologetic smile before aiming a beam of heat vision around the now soaked cape and spandex that was dripping puddles of rain droplets around him. He let out a frustrated groan, opting to just spin out of the suit and change into his work clothes from earlier. He ran a hand across his white dress shirt, self-consciously feeling almost as if he was missing a limb without the suit on beneath, but for now, Superman wasn’t needed.

“You missed a spot,” Lois threw him a towel from the linen closet, and he looked up just in time to have the white terry fabric hit him in the head.

“Thanks,” he said, taking the towel and patting his hair dry. He looked over to where Lois was standing in the kitchen, attempting to wring her hair out over the sink. “Here,” he offered, sending a beam of heat vision over her and helping to dry the fabric from her clothes and hair. He smiled as he watched the steam rise up.

She reached a hand up, patting her damp cheeks with the towel in her hand, “I guess that storm just came out of nowhere, huh?”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, watching as she tapped her hand on the side of the counter nervously. His gaze shifted to the wet spot on her blouse where her hair kept moving from side to side against the fabric. He watched her fingers tap against the counter and reached his hand out to squeeze her palm in his. Immediately, he felt her relax against his touch.

A pained expression crossed her face as she locked her gaze with his. He nodded, feeling the heavy weight of her silent plea as he reached his hand out to stroke her face with his palm. He rested his forehead against hers, taking her in his arms, leaning his face down to meet hers until finally connecting his lips with hers in a soul-shattering kiss.

Every second after that faded into oblivion as he lost himself in that moment, mesmerized by the serenity that washed over him as the electrical storm of desire and anguish fueled each desperate caress. There were probably a dozen or more reasons why he

should stop and pretend he didn't want to spend every last second of his life holding Lois Lane in his arms and exploring every last atom that formed the fiery woman cradled in his arms. There were reasons, of course, but, in this moment, he couldn't rationalize why he would ever let her go.

Chapter 22: One Step Too Far

The morning rays peeked through the sheer white curtains of Lois' bedroom, gradually coaxing Clark out of the blissful sleep he had fallen into in the late hours of the evening. He turned to his side, smiling to himself as he gazed upon the petite brunette curled up next to him. Though it certainly hadn't been planned – he couldn't imagine anything more perfect than waking up to the woman he loved.

He could have done without the looming threats that hung over them both and the close call from last night, but every second he had spent in Lois' arms last night... It was incredible.

He'd never experienced anything like it in his life. He had scoured the Earth, traveling from place to place in search of where he would fit in and find where he would fit in. For so long, he thought he would forever be destined to live in isolation – a curse to bear as his cross – unable to find anyone who would ever understand or accept him for who he truly was. It wasn't until he had come to Metropolis and met Lois Lane that he finally saw hope.

Not only had he discovered a way to use his gifts to help the world and not put those close to him at risk, but he had found the one person he could share everything with. The one person that truly understood and could see past the flashy superhero and see the man behind the 'S' and pair of glasses.

Each microsecond he had spent over the evening cradling Lois Lane in his arms and making love to her made him forget everything. Every close call he'd ever had. Every rescue that shook him to the core. Every life he held in his hands and struggled with the choices that had been made. Obsessing over what to do when he wasn't enough. More recently, forgetting the darkness that loomed over him, reminding him again and again that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't be everywhere at once, and he couldn't save everyone. Even those he loved with every fiber of his being.

Every caress.

Every touch.

Each moment was seared into his mind, forever reminding him of the moment his journey of isolation became a distant memory. He knew from the moment he had met her that he never wanted to part from her. He knew she was the one for him. This was it. There was never going to be anyone else. He loved her. Every curve, moan, smile, frown, and scent that was wrapped into Lois Lane. He loved everything about her and would continue to love every last atom that made her the woman he loved until the day he died.

He rolled on his side, brushing a stray hair out of her face as he did so. "I love you so much, Lois Lane. You are my ultimate weakness..."

A lazy yawn escaped her throat as her eyelashes fluttered, giving him a peek into her dark brown eyes. "Hey." She reached her hand out for him, resting her hand on his chest. "You stayed the night."

"Mmm hmm," he murmured against her lips. "Someone fell asleep with an alarmingly tight grip on me."

She grinned, stretching her arms up over her head as she stretched her legs out to straighten them out. "I didn't hear you complaining."

"Never," he murmured as he brushed his lips against hers.

Dr. Klyburn stared at the report in front of her, unsure how to comprehend the messages she had decoded from the micro-chip.

Some of them were broken up into fragments – damaged from the blast, most likely. Others had a very clear message in place.

Whoever was receiving these messages was very much in danger – along with everyone around them. She reached her hand out to dial the contact number on the requested report, glancing at the time with a sigh. It was still early, but hopefully, someone would be in.

The phone rang two times, and then a gruff response came over the phone line. "Detective Ryder."

"Detective Ryder, this is Jenet Klyburn at S.T.A.R. Labs. I'd like to review this report you requested...."

Sean McCarthy took in a deep breath from the morning air as he looked out on the Metropolis pier, staring at the sun that had risen over the horizon a few hours ago and took a long puff from his cigarette. He looked down at the remote in his hand and checked the time.

'Almost time.'

Police Chief Carter tapped his hand on the desk in front of him. He looked to Bill Henderson, who was seated across from him with Detective Riley in the chair next to him. He looked to the Lieutenant seated behind them, pondering just what to do with the situation on his hands.

"Henderson, you've been a loyal officer for many years..." Carter began, drawing an invisible line across his beard with his thumb and index finger. "Those many years of service are why we're not having this conversation with IAB."

"I understand that, sir," Henderson responded, stealing a glance in Riley's direction. "This isn't an ordinary situation, though. I did what I thought was best given the circumstances..."

"An impulsive arrest of the District Attorney's officer of the court?" Carter raised an eyebrow as he stared the two detectives down.

"She's not herself, Captain."

"She's not a danger to society either according to this report."

Carter waved the evaluation that had been completed by the department's psychiatrist.

"She just told them what they wanted to hear," Riley argued. "I was there, Captain! She's over there shouting out threats and babbling crazy talk..."

"And the DA will argue that it was a clumsy move made by a hotshot detective looking to make a name for himself..." he glared at Riley and then turned to Henderson, "or even worse an act of a seasoned detective looking to cover for his friend whom the ADA is insisting is behind her break-in."

"No prints and no witnesses," Henderson responded.

"Nothing putting her at Kent's place either," Carter advised solemnly.

"What about that pillow?" Riley argued.

"It could have been planted there by anyone," Carter waved him off. "Look, I'm with both of you. I agree there is something amiss here but, legally, we can't do anything. There is nothing that physically ties Mayson Drake to the break-in at Kent's place, and there is nothing that suggests Mayson Drake is a danger to herself or anyone else. Until then, she needs to be released. Am I clear?"

Riley frowned, shaking his head. "How badly does she need to be crying out for help before someone does something?"

"I don't make the laws, Riley. I just enforce them," Carter reminded him. "And so do you."

Sean McCarthy watched with anticipation as the drawbridge lifted up, and the barge with the red-trimmed letters 'Cost Mart' made its way through the opening. He let out a giddy grin as his finger teased the red button on the small remote control in his hand, waiting for just the right position before sending the large load of goods flying into oblivion with the illegal immigrants huddled beneath the illegally obtained goods from Cuba.

“Sayonara.”

His thumb pressed the button, and a blast of fire and smoke escaped the sides of the drawbridge and spread into the barge that sat helpless below it.

Lois stared up at the ceiling in a daze, feeling her mind slowly come back into focus after their recent lovemaking. She glanced over at Clark, who had a sloppy grin on his face as he stared back at her. The euphoric haze that had transformed her into this person she didn't recognize had yet to disappear.

Never.

She'd never experienced anything like this in her life.

She'd had dates.

She'd had relationships.

Each and every one of them had been disappointing in some form or another. Each experience had taught her to never trust her heart to make the decisions in her relationships. She had closed herself off for years and opted for a life of personal isolation rather than risk heartbreak.

Then, of course, everything had changed.

As she lay in Clark's arms, reeling from the euphoric haze that had washed over her during their lovemaking, she recalled the emotional rollercoaster her ever-evolving relationship with Clark had been over the last two years. Last night was no exception. The barriers that had been up for the better part of two years were gone. In each barrier's place was the most fulfilling connection she had ever felt.

For once, she hadn't obsessed about the consequences.

For once, she hadn't questioned herself.

Even in the morning light, when many mistakes made on an intoxicating high of emotions, she found herself salivating over the unique closeness she now shared with Clark. Her lips curled into a half-smile as she shifted against Clark, feeling the heavy weight of her limbs tingle as she tried to move. The tingle sent a thrill through her at the reminder of just how her limbs had gotten that way.

She had never felt this way before. Feeling this deep insatiable desire for the closeness that being one with Clark brought her to a new high she'd never felt before. True, she wasn't exactly inexperienced with relationships, but each time a relationship became physical, she woke up the next morning to disappointment and betrayal. With Clark, everything had been different.

A welcome change she could take on.

Clark's arm roped its way across her as he leaned in to kiss her. His forehead pressed against hers as his hand moved to cup her cheek, “Unless we want Perry sending a search party, we might want to call in.” He pointed to the clock.

Her gaze moved to follow the direction he was pointing in, and she saw the lateness of the hour and groaned. “We might as well just call in today. Nothing productive is going to happen at the Planet anyway.”

“We did just bring in the story of Amir Munour's death...” Clark agreed, letting out a long yawn. “Though somehow I think we'll still be getting a lecture about only being as good as our next story from Perry.”

“Dog shows and obituaries here we come.” She grinned as his arms tightened around her.

“Uh-huh, misery loves company, huh?” He held her close as he rolled over on his side, so he was facing her. “You are... incredible.” He whispered, reaching over to cup her cheek. “I love you, Lois Lane.”

She shyly looked up at him, feeling a twinge of her usual insecurities peeking their way to the surface, “So, no regrets about rushing things last night?”

“Never,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss her.

Her face broke out into a full grin and she reached up to stroke his cheek. “I know we probably should talk about...certain things,

but talking seems to do nothing but cause more problems lately.” He let out a low rumble as he chuckled against her. “I mean, there are probably some questions we should probably exchange. The whole birth control thing and...”

“Isn't this a part of the whole talking thing that got us into trouble to begin with?” Clark asked, wrapping his arms around her.

“Not that it really matters.” She looked up, suddenly unsure. “Does birth control even work?”

He opened his mouth to respond, then closed it and then quietly whispered, “I don't know. I guess I can find out.”

“You don't...” Realization dawned on her, and she smiled to herself, taking in what he was saying. He didn't know. He wouldn't know if he hadn't ever... Her hand reached out to stroke his cheek and she smiled back at him, “You're full of surprises, Clark Kent.” She felt a rush of emotion flood through her nerve endings as she gazed into his eyes. “So, no regrets?”

“No regrets,” he repeated, stroking her cheek. “You...I love you more than anything, Lois. You mean everything to me.” He leaned into her and recaptured her lips, holding her close. “I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost you, Lois.”

“Well, lucky for you, you don't ever have to find out.” Lois traced the frame of his face. “As much as I'd love to continue to lay in bed all day, I think we both could use a change of scenery. Maybe even some breakfast...”

“I could pick something up,” Clark offered, sitting up in bed.

“And some sunshine.” Lois grinned back at him.

“We could go together.” He grinned back at her.

She was about to respond when she saw his face fall with an anguished scowl as he looked off into the distance, hearing a call for help only he could hear.

“What is it?” Lois asked when he turned back to her.

“I'm sorry.” He frowned. “I'm going to have to take a raincheck on breakfast.” Before he could explain further, he disappeared into a blur of red and blue pigments.

She looked toward the window above her bed where he had just flown out of and whispered, “Be careful.”

Detective Ryder paced back and forth inside the visitor's room, waiting for the guards to escort Mayson out of her jail cell. He ran a hand through his dark hair, looking toward the steel door leading to the cell blocks where the inmates were in custody. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought he would ever find himself visiting one of his fellow officers in here. Let alone escorting them out of the police station.

His mind drifted back to his conversation this morning with Dr. Klyburn and the recent discovery she had made in S.T.A.R. Labs' analysis of the microchip that had been recovered from the City Hall bombing site. He still had to prove the phone he had extracted the microchip from did indeed come from Mayson Drake's office but the breakthrough in Dr. Klyburn's discovery was that every bizarre manic episode and every unexplainable behavior finally had an explanation. It wasn't an unexplainable phenomenon but rather a carefully calculated attempt to manipulate the system by targeting the ADA that was deemed a threat to the invisible puppeteer from behind the scenes.

<< “Each message planted behind the circuitry appears to be coming from within a fifteen-mile radius and has a series of planted subliminal messages meant to take advantage of the subject's vulnerable state of mind and control them through fear.” >>

The door opened, and he stopped mid-pace, seeing Mayson Drake dressed in the clothes she had been taken into custody wearing the night before. He nodded in her direction, “Mayson, uh, Chief Carter wanted to be sure you had a proper escort home.”

Mayson rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her face, “I think I can manage. Apparently, if I ask for help from you guys, that's grounds for false imprisonment.”

“Mayson...”

Mayson narrowed her eyes at him, “Weren’t you supposed to be taking me out of here, Detective?”

“I will.” She shot him a cold glare and he quickly amended, “I am.”

“But?”

“But I wanted to talk first.” Ryder pleaded with her, gesturing to the chair that had been provided.

“I’ll stand.”

“I think the reason you’ve been acting so crazy lately...”

“I am not *crazy!*” Mayson practically screamed at him as her eyes widened and her eyebrows lifted up to her hairline.

“Okay, okay,” Ryder held up his hands, trying to motion for Mayson to calm down as he stammered out. “You’re right, Mayson. You’re *not* crazy. There’s just been a lot of confusing events...”

“I keep telling you all to look at that little witch and you won’t listen!” Mayson growled at him, shaking her head.

“Mayson, this has *nothing* to do with Lois Lane.” Ryder snapped irritably.

“That’s what *she* wants you to think. You have no idea what she’s capable of...”

“Look, would you just quit it?” Ryder slammed his fist on the table in front of him. “This. Right here!” He pointed at her. “This is how you ended up in here to begin with. Now, look, I know you think there’s something going on with some conspiracy with Lois Lane and the police but I’m telling you it’s not real. None of this is real, Mayson. Someone is trying to manipulate you and if you would just come with me to S.T.A.R. Labs I think I can help...”

“Get the hell away from me!” Mayson sneered, narrowing her gaze at him as her eyes darkened.

Searching for anything to hold onto Ryder called out, “Look, there’s this micro chip we found in your phone. I think it might be in other places too if I can just...”

“Get me out of here!” Mayson shouted, kicking the table over. Her gaze remained steely as she spat out, “You open this door or I will be calling an attorney and suing you and this department for every last red cent. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly.” Ryder grumbled as he entered his code into the door to open it.

<< “Whoever is being subjected to this sophisticated form of mind control needs to be brought to S.T.A.R. Labs so we can begin the process of undoing this programming before it is too late. ”>>

Chaos.

It was the only way to describe the scene as Clark flew toward the burning flames. He could hear the blaring horn coming from the barge below and the shrieks from the passengers below.

Passengers.

How in the world were there passengers on a cargo ship?

He didn’t allow his mind to go there as he flew through the fiery flames, doing his best to snuff out what flames he could as he found his way to the hidden passage inside the ship that was taking on water, and filling his arms with as many people as he could before flying out. The sirens were getting closer. He moved through the air again and again flying the unsuspecting passengers out of the deadly ship that could possibly sink them to the bottom of the bay with just the right balance of water and weight on the ship as he flew back and forth. Again and again he flew through the sky and back to the barge to rescue the remaining passengers.

The sound of helicopters up above and the bullhorn from the fire and rescue team that had finally arrived reached his ears. He felt a huge wave of relief wash over him as more and more helicopters arrived on the scene, focusing on putting the stubborn fire out as Clark continued rescuing the passengers.

“Superman!”

He looked up to where one of the firefighters was attempting

to get his attention.

“The pier is clear. Move the wreckage there, and we’ll assist there.”

Clark nodded his understanding, soaring below the wreckage where the large barge had been struck by the flames from the explosion. He glanced over to the pier that had been cornered off by the police and traffic pushed back. He questioned momentarily if the barge would fit but thought it best to at least attempt to get the wrecked ship out of the water and on land where the emergency crew could board and assist.

He felt his insides churn in disgust as he spotted a clear ‘M’ burned into the side of the drawbridge as the smoke clear. The ‘M’ was very distinct with the curve at the end, reminding him of the photos from the bombings Sean McCarthy had been arrested for in the drug bust several years ago.

“I’m coming for you,” Clark muttered under his breath as he soared through the sky and carried the barge to the pier just before the police and emergency crew approached, trying to help the remaining victims.

Two Weeks Later...

Valhalla Exposed!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Terror Ends: Amir Munour Dead!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Assassin Not For Hire!

By James Olsen

Special Contributor: Perry White

Jimmy hummed a tune to himself as he stepped off the elevator and walked toward his desk. An overwhelming sense of pride filled him as he toyed with the front page of the morning edition to the Daily Planet in his hands. He looked over to where Lois was seated at her desk, rummaging through the scattered files, searching for some missing piece of information. He took a detour enroute to his desk and propped his elbow up over her cubicle wall to stop in.

“Hey, Lois, morning,” Jimmy grinned at her.

“Morning, Jimmy,” Lois said, reading through the files in front of her.

“You looking for Jimmy Hoffa’s body in there?” Jimmy asked, noting the seriousness on her face.

Lois smiled weakly, setting the file in front of her down. “I’m trying to see if there are any other matches to the missing person list and the victims from the Metropolis Bridge bombing.” Lois shook her head, looking at the disarray her desk was in. “Nearly seven hundred people.”

“Well, you guys found what, fifty?” Jimmy pointed out. “You can’t expect miracles. Even Superman has to slow down.” His voice cracked, recalling the chaos over the last few weeks.

After his episode with the Valhalla drug and attempt on Lois’ life, he had buried himself in anything and everything he could. Errands for the Chief. Investigation research. Even a small piece with Perry’s help to write up an editorial on his experience. Despite his numerous apologies, he still couldn’t quite move past how dangerously close he’d come to losing one of his best friends at his own hands. Despite her reassurances, he still couldn’t forgive himself.

“Jimmy, this is the second bombing in the last month.” Lois reminded him with a solemn expression. “And they still can’t find him.”

“There haven’t been any more weird packages.” Jimmy pointed out, trying to provide her with a positive spin.

“No, just my apartment having the locks tampered with and someone rearranging the contents of my refrigerator and cabinets...” Lois shuddered involuntarily.

“But, you’ve still got that security detail from Henderson.” Jimmy reminded her. “Are they helping any?”

"I don't know." Lois shrugged. "I guess."
 "Just let me know if you need any help," Jimmy said with a wink before moving off to head back to his desk.
 "I will," Lois promised. "Thanks, Jimmy."

Bill Church slid his arm across his desk, wiping the contents to the floor as he let out a heavy breath, panting as he glared at the screens of his lieutenants' faces staring back at him. He had painstakingly poured over everything he could in the last few weeks, trying to find out how someone had been privy to enough information to not only know when his shipment was set to come in, but to know the shipment carried his quarterly supply of both drugs and labor yet to be sold into his factories and prostitution rings. Now that he had a name for the traitor lurking in the shadows he wanted his head on a platter.

"Dead or alive. I want McCarthy served up on a silver platter and I want him brought to me! Are we clear?"

Clark ran a hand through his dark hair, fingering the locks as he waited for Bill Henderson to appear in the hospital lobby. He had been surprised to get Bill Henderson's call and even more surprised to receive the message to meet him here of all places – without Lois. Whatever news Henderson had, he was sure it had something to do with the threats Lois had been receiving over the last month.

Bill Henderson appeared in the lobby, motioning for him to follow him. "Kent, glad you could make it on such short notice."

"Yeah, you said it was important." Clark commented, following him down the hallway. "What's going on?"

"Official story on Valhalla was good." Henderson commented as they walked. "Seeing the dirty deeds of the government come to light is never easy to stomach but I feel like you and Lois portrayed it well. Thank you for that."

"We just reported the facts, Henderson. You know that's all we ever do." Clark commented as he picked up his pace to stay with Henderson as he turned the corner.

Henderson stopped just outside a small elevator, pointing to the guard outside it. "Normally, I would be telling this information to our DA's office and a select inner circle but right now I don't have an inner circle. There is no DA. There is no trusted ADA. There is me and my fellow detectives trying to figure out who we can trust as we take on the King Pin of Intergang."

"I'm sorry, what?" Clark shook his head, trying to make sure he'd heard him right.

"We have one witness willing to name the leader of Intergang and right now I need someone – anyone I can trust to help choose an ADA to prosecute this case."

"What's wrong with Mayson?"

Henderson shook his head and let out a heavy sigh, "That brings me to my other news." He pulled out a manilla folder from his coat pocket and handed it to him. "S.T.A.R. Labs got the labs back on the handwriting analysis and the results were negative. Whoever wrote those notes on that newspaper clipping is not the same person sending the threatening notes to Lois."

"Why do I hear a 'but' in your tone?" Clark asked, shooting a glare in Henderson's direction.

"Mayson didn't write those notes but her fingerprints were a match on the newspaper clipping which means though she may not be sending Lois any actual threats, the content on that clipping is alarming."

"Among some of her other behavior." Clark agreed, shaking his head. "I don't get it. I have a hard time rationalizing this behavior with the same person that took on Intergang a few months ago."

"You and the entire department, Kent." Henderson let out a long sigh. "I went out on a limb a few weeks ago to try and get her the help she needs by taking her into custody but all that did was

aggravate the situation. No one's heard anything from her in weeks..."

Clark's brow furrowed in concern, "Weeks?"

"Every officer is keeping an eye out for her but I'm growing more and more concerned by the day. The police chief of course wants to keep this under wraps because, God forbid, it gets out that he might have made a decision that could impact the mental health and safety of a young officer of the court." Henderson muttered with disdain in his voice. "I'm not bitter. I swear."

"What can I do to help?" Clark asked.

"I hear you and Superman are close. You can get a hold of him and get his help when needed?"

"He's accessible if there's a need," Clark responded carefully.

"Any chance he might help in the search for Mayson?" Henderson asked. "I wouldn't normally ask, but right now I'm desperate. Mayson isn't just a colleague, she's a friend. I really feel like she might be in danger."

"Even if he was able to find her what could he possibly even do?" Clark asked. "If she doesn't want to come in willingly there isn't a whole lot, he or anyone can do."

"Just let me worry about that." Henderson assured him.

Dr. Elias Stone poured over the data in front of him, looking up momentarily to lock eyes with Dr. Klyburn who was nervously watching him as she tapped her fingers on the desk in front of her. He turned back to the screen in front of him, verifying and checking the data to be sure what he was seeing was indeed what was occurring.

"Dr. Klyburn, if this is right..."

"We can trace where the micro chips are planted and where they're being controlled from." Jenet Klyburn responded with a slow nod. "I know, but I had to be sure before informing the detectives I've been working with on this."

"This micro chip is exquisite." Stone commented, looking over the analysis she'd completed. "If only we could have minds like this focus on helping society instead of hurting it..."

Sean McCarthy held up the blueprints to the underground subway station, reviewing his targets with pride. He had selected each and every location with care. Choosing areas that would cause maximum damage and each with an emotional tie to each lieutenant and officer in Intergang to drive home the very clear message of never crossing Sean McCarthy.

The Daily Planet of course would fall, as it represented the plans Bill Church's son had in acquiring and controlling the media outlet to snuff out the bad press.

The former Luthor Towers would come next as they represented a pride that Nigel felt when looking on the cityscape.

Metropolis Square would crumble to its knees as it was crucial to Bill Church's plans to expand Intergang and infiltrate the city. No city. No Intergang.

Dan Scardino looked through the reports he'd received on the last two bombings, searching for clues. Something that could lead him to a reason for the attacks McCarthy had made on the two large infrastructures. He had gone over and over it in his head and kept coming up blank. Now armed with some information he had gotten from the reporters at the Daily Planet he was attempting to comb through the files again and begin the process of searching for the commonalities between the bombings – besides McCarthy.

On the floor by his bed he had a copy of the subway tunnel blueprints along with each major infrastructure in the city. If McCarthy was going to take on a war with Metropolis he would find the next target before McCarthy struck again – hopefully.

"Ms. Lane, it's standard procedure," the officer standing guard reminded her as he took the keys from her. "It's for your safety."

"I'm not even staying that long." Lois insisted. "I just need to grab a change of clothes."

"Please?" he insisted, turning around and unlocking the door

for her.

“After you,” she gestured to the door in front of him, waiting for him to do his usual patrol of her apartment before he would let her enter. She watched him disappear inside and waited for the usual two minutes he took to check inside.

“Hey, Tom?” Lois called out, reaching her hand over the door to push it open and peek inside. She let out a sharp gasp when she saw him on the floor in front of her couch.

“Tom is a bit preoccupied right now, Lois.”

Lois gasped in surprise when she saw a dark-haired woman sitting on the couch with a gun in her hand. Her eyes widened as she realized who the woman in front of her was.

“Mayson?”

Chapter 23: Where You Are

Dr. Elias Stone tapped at the keyboard, watching as the screen lit up. He looked over his shoulder, offering a smile in Dr. Klyburn’s direction. “Here we go...”

“Let’s see if it works this time,” Dr. Klyburn said, glancing to the monitor where a screen filled with binary code scrolled up and down at lightning speed.

The tracer lit up in red on the screen and a sharp beeping emitted from the speakers as white lights filled the large floor-length screen and the satellite view poured its way into view, pushing its way further into view until the green and white pixels changed to streets and buildings and recognizable locations in Metropolis. A white light flooded the screen and then everything stilled. Dozens of white lights covered the map and pointed out IP addresses and locations.

“What in God’s name...?” Dr. Elias Stone muttered under his breath.

“Look!” Dr. Klyburn stared in awe at the white lights that covered the Metropolis P.D. on the screen. “They’re everywhere.”

Henderson dropped the phone and looked around the police station in a panic, seeing his fellow officers on phones and computers that could possibly be tampered with. He spotted Captain Carter exiting the elevator and rushed up to him, “Captain?”

“What is it, Henderson?” Carter snapped, not looking up from his mug of coffee.

“I need to shut the network down.”

“You need to ... what?”

“Everyone... everything has been tampered with. Everyone’s at risk.” Henderson explained, pleading with his captain.

“Are you sure about this?” Carter challenged.

“I’d trust it with my life.” Henderson said firmly.

“Shut everything down and meet me in my office.”

Nothing.

Clark had scoured the city, searching for any sign of Mayson after his conversation with Bill Henderson but came up with nothing. He had scanned the downtown square for any sign of her near the City Hall bombing site and again at the annex building that had been rented out for courtroom proceedings. He searched the area her neighborhood was located in and had even checked the local restaurants she liked to go to. Still no sign of her. When he’d shown her photo around, he had come up with nothing. No one had seen her. From what he’d heard from Henderson the police had had zero luck either.

A nagging sensation continued to tug at him. Deep in his gut he could feel in his bones that something was wrong. Mayson wouldn’t just up and disappear without a trace. Could it be McCarthy? One of the lieutenants from Intergang? Possibly another criminal group that may have come up against the DA’s office.

‘Or worse...’

He did his best not to dwell too far down the long road of

what-ifs knowing all too well it wouldn’t lead him anywhere good. He reached the coffee shop on the corner of fifth and Main when he nearly collided with a familiar face, engrossed in his own thoughts.

“Kent? What brings you out here?” Detective Ryder asked, pointing to the warehouse district just across the street from the coffee shop.

Clark shook his head, unsure how to respond to the inquisitive detective. “I’m... looking for Mayson.”

Ryder’s face fell into a scowl at Mayson’s name being mentioned. “Henderson pull you into this search too, huh?”

“I haven’t had much luck,” Clark admitted sheepishly, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Probably won’t have any luck to be honest, Kent.” Ryder shook his head. “She was in pretty bad shape when I saw her last. Convinced every bad thing in her life leads right back to Lois Lane which of course is ludicrous.”

“Yeah,” Clark felt the weight bearing down on him continue to press as Ryder continued.

“I think Henderson blames himself. He had her arrested to try and get her evaluated but then Carter got involved before he could bring in his doctor and she ended up with this quack that basically does whatever the DA’s office says. There’s no way she would have passed a mental evaluation the way she was carrying on...”

Clark didn’t even finish listening, unable to push the thoughts out as he raced toward the alleyway behind him. He had to find Lois.

Lois had known Mayson for almost a year. She was a lot of things. A challenge. A bit hard-headed. One thing she was not was impulsive. She thought everything through. Everything.

So finding Mayson in her apartment – hair dyed and straightened to shoulder length in an eerily similar style to hers – waving a firearm in her hands as she sat calmly on her loveseat, she had a hard time believing her eyes. Mayson was fearless as they came when taking on an adversary. Unfortunately for her she was on the other side of the table from Mayson.

“Mayson,” Lois spoke her name, hoping hearing it would draw out the colleague she knew and replace this strange, eerie woman that was hell bent on continuing to twirl the handgun in her hand as if she was toying with a piece of yarn.

Mayson flinched at the sound of her voice and let out a screeching noise that sounded much like an alley cat as it fought for its last crumb of food. “You! You won’t get away with this, Lois Lane!”

Lois eyed the officer on the floor, pondering if he was in any imminent danger as she let her gaze shift to the floor, checking for any sign of blood. Thankfully, he didn’t appear to be hurt terribly. Whatever she had done to knock him out hadn’t left a mark outside of the purplish bruise forming on his neck.

“Mayson, let’s just talk.” Lois pointed to the officer who was on the floor unconscious. “Tom can’t sit here forever. He has to get to a doctor.”

“He’s fine. I just hit him on the back of the head.” Mayson grumbled, waving her off. “An aspirin and some water will take care of it.”

“You assaulted a police officer, Mayson.”

“He got in my way,” Mayson snapped angrily, pointing her pistol in her direction. “Everyone is always getting in my way. No one believes me...”

“Okay, okay,” Lois held her hands up, signaling her surrender as she tried to remain calm. “You’re upset. I hear you. Maybe I can help?”

“Help?” Mayson scoffed, springing to her feet as she waved the pistol in the air, mocking her last statement with a maniacal laugh. “From you? You must be joking, you little witch!”

“Okay, I don’t have to help you.” Lois amended, uncertain

how to respond to the venom being directed in her direction.

"This is all your fault. You did this. You and your connections...trying to destroy me. Make everyone think I'm the crazy one! I'm not crazy!" Mayson fumed, shaking the pistol in her hand as her arms flailed through the air chaotically.

"I never said you were crazy, Mayson."

"No, you just got your friends on the force to do that for you," Mayson accused, jabbing her finger in Lois' direction.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mayson," Lois pleaded with her calmly. "I think if we just sit down and talk about this..."

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you?" Mayson accused. "Big star reporter comes to the rescue. Of course there's nothing to draw out your favorite hero is there? Oh, I know!" Mayson snapped her fingers. "Let's make it a big drawn out thing. Maybe we can go blow something up. You seem good at that."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mayson."

"Don't you?" Mayson let out a mocking laugh and then held out her hand, shaking it accusingly, "I know you were there, Lois." "Where?"

"He's *dead!*" Mayson fumed, growing closer and closer as she continued to wag the pistol in her direction with each accusation and her tone continued to become more and more erratic.

"Mayson, what are you talking about?"

Before she could react, a hard cold object hit her and she felt a flash of darkness wash over her, sending her to her knees as she let out a sharp scream in agony.

Clark spotted the setting sun over the horizon as he flew past Carter Avenue, listening for any sign of Lois's heartbeat. He had scanned the Daily Planet, searching for Lois on the off chance she might still be working but came up with nothing.

Nothing.

The word felt like just another taunt as he came closer to where Lois' apartment building was. A sharp gasp filled his throat when he picked up on a radio call from Lois' protective detail.

"Come in Wallace. Where are you?"

"Patrol, send a unit to the 1058 Carter Avenue...."

Clark hovered just outside the apartment building, scanning Lois' apartment for any sign of the missing officer that was supposed to be protecting Lois. Inside he saw the front door to the apartment was wide open. On the floor was one of the officers. He couldn't quite place the name at the moment, but given the fact that he was on the floor cradling his head and Lois appeared to be nowhere to be found only further amplified the turbulent emotions threatening to spill over and take hold. He quickly made a change of wardrobe and entered Lois' apartment through the open door.

"Lois?" he called out, despite knowing in his gut she wasn't there.

"She ain't here, Kent."

He looked to the officer who was cradling his head as he sat himself up.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked, helping him sit up.

"Just got the wind knocked out of me is all. Caught by surprise." The officer frowned.

"What happened? Where's Lois?"

"She took her."

"Who?" Clark asked, holding back the urge to shake the officer down for answers.

"Mayson."

Dan Scardino tapped the sling his arm was in, fiddling with the strap as he looked down at the notepad in his other hand. He shook his head, frustrated at not being able to multi-task with his limited arm motion and shoved the notepad in his pocket, accepting his fate. He then made his way into the ground zero site where the wreckage from the Metropolis Bridge bombing was still

being investigated.

Two weeks.

Had it really only been two weeks since McCarthy made such a bold move? From what the initial investigation had summarized, it appeared to be a deliberate hit against someone. Whomever was smuggling the illegal immigrants in along with what could have been easily a cool five million dollar score of coke and other assorted paraphernalia had lost millions in product and even more in whatever value they had tied up in the immigrants aboard. The last target McCarthy had taken out that big had been linked to the likes of Cadmus. He shuddered involuntarily, recalling his failed drug bust with the secret agency.

Too much had happened since then.

"Hey, Scardino!"

Dan turned to see one of the detectives from the Metropolis P.D. approaching him with his badge around his neck and an extra cup of coffee in his hands as he nodded in his direction. "Uh, Ryder, isn't it?" Dan spied the name of the detective's badge.

"Yeah," he nodded, handing him a cup in his hand.

"Henderson said you might still be down here."

"He send you to check up on me?" Scardino asked, pointing to the wreckage behind him. "It's just as screwed up as it was when I got here. I swear."

"No, he wanted me to come make sure you stay off your phone and radio."

"Come again?" Dan asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Someone hacked the police station and possibly what was City Hall's computers and phones. What they're doing with the information they have access to we're still not sure. But for now, it's old school. No phones." Ryder explained shaking his head in dismay.

"Why don't you start at the beginning?" Dan prompted, folding his uninjured arm across his chest as he stared back at Ryder in dismay.

"So, there's these scientists at S.T.A.R. Labs...."

Mayson pointed the pistol in her hand at Lois' backside, pressing the hard metal into her flesh as she pressed on ahead. Even with all the evidence in the world, showing just how guilty Lois Lane was for her involvement in District Attorney's demise, the little wench refused to bend. Well, she would show her.

"What exactly are you planning on doing here, Mayson?" Lois asked, looking back over her shoulder as they walked through the deserted parking garage. "You can't exactly go anywhere with a gun pointed at me and have them welcome you with open arms."

"You think I'm stupid?" Mayson snapped back, jabbing the pistol into Lois' back with a hard shove. "I know exactly what I'm doing. You think you have everyone around here fooled. But I know the truth. I know what I saw and I know you're guilty. We're going to go on a little trip and then, for once and all, I'll have the evidence I need to prove it!"

"But..."

"Stop stalling!" Mayson pointed to the stairwell in front of them. "Go!"

"Wouldn't the elevator be faster?" Lois muttered.

"It would, but then I'd have to explain why I'm holding you hostage and I don't want anyone else getting hurt."

"How considerate."

"Shut up and start walking." Mayson ordered.

"Mind telling me where we're going?" Lois asked.

"Just keep walking. You'll know it when you see it."

McCarthy leaned back against the cement wall and stared out at the skyline of Metropolis, laughing giddily to himself as he waited for the fireworks to begin. Though he probably would have been able to escape more cleanly with Nigel and Rollie Vale's help, he would at least have the added advantage of putting them

both out of commission with his latest masterpiece.

While the sniveling fools were too busy arguing with Church and his minions over who had duped who, he would be long gone with all the evidence planted on Cost Mart Holdings and a very clear connection between Church and Luthor. Something he knew would keep the presses hopping for at least a few months. By then he would be long gone.

Clark flew over the city, preparing to close in on the Daily Planet. The officer he'd found at Lois' apartment had overheard Mayson ranting at Lois and heard Mayson mention "the archives." It wasn't much and very well could be a rabbit hole he was about to go down but right now it was all he had to go on. Just as he was about to come in to land, he picked up on a sound he would know anywhere.

The sharp clicking of a magazine being loaded into a sniper rifle.

He quickly looked around, trying to find where the sniper was located. He spotted a man in black on the roof of what had once been Luthor Towers. The man was hunkered down, looking straight across to where he was positioned to a hotel with the name 'Church' plastered across the front of the brick building. He saw the gleam of light reflect off the sun's rays and followed the path of where the rifle was aimed to a small corner room in the hotel. He scanned the inside and swallowed hard when he saw who was inside.

Albie Swanson.

Ryder let out a deep sigh as he followed Dan Scardino through the maze of steps that led to the roof of the Church hotel, uncertain why he was letting the DEA Agent lead him on a wild goose chase. "You mind telling me what exactly we're looking for here?"

"He always stays where he can watch the fireworks." Scardino said, pointing to the steps in front of him. "This is the perfect vantage point to see everything in the city."

"You don't even know if he's going to make a move, Scardino. We've been chasing this guy for over a month."

"I know how he works." Scardino said, tapping his forehead with his index finger. "He wouldn't take out a stash that big unless someone had crossed him. If he's been crossed, then he's going to get the message across with a whole lot of fire power."

"And you think the roof of the Church hotel is where he's going to do that at?" Ryder sighed as he reached the top of the stairs.

"Prove me wrong," Dan pointed at the door leading to the roof. "After you."

One

Two

Three

The shots fired and Clark lunged in front of the sniper's trajectory target, allowing the bullets to hit him across his invulnerable chest and plummet the bullets back to where they originated from. He locked eyes with the sniper, immediately recognizing the would-be assassin as he sprang to his feet, making a run toward the steel door leading into the hotel's stairwell that had led him to the roof.

At super-speed Clark moved toward his moving target, taking hold of Nigel by the collar as he chastised him, "Didn't your mother ever teach you to put your toys away when you're done playing with them?"

"You won't get away with this!"

The fanatical screams of indignation could be heard as Clark landed on the sidewalk with Nigel in tow, spotting a beat cop on the corner, writing a ticket to a car that had been sitting at a meter for too long. Clark smiled to himself, ignoring Nigel's threats as

he approached, keeping a firm hand on the would-be assassin.

"Excuse me, officer? Any chance you could help me out here?"

Bill Church threw the monitor to the ground, watching it shatter into smithereens. He looked to his left where two of his lieutenants were shivering in fear. A rush of adrenaline coursed through him as he pushed the other two monitors down, watching the glass from the screens shatter across the room. He let out heavy, labored breaths as he stared at the damage before him.

A hand waved in front of him and he looked to the side where his son was standing impatiently tapping on his wrist as if to signal something. He should probably listen to what he was saying but the news that not only had the assassination attempt failed, but that the police had taken into custody his lieutenant was too much to bear. He had worked so hard to get everything in place only for it to be ruined by a loud mouth know-it-all who dared turn on Intergang.

The cockiness that emitted from Albie Swanson should have been a dead give away of what was to come, but he had been swayed by the reassurances given to him by Nigel and Vale that he would be contained. Only he hadn't.

Not only had Swanson attempted to turn everything over to a terrorist group but he had nearly pitted Intergang and all its resources into an all out war against the organized criminal elements a hemisphere away. He had to go. Along with anyone and everyone that had allowed Albie to have access to privy information within Intergang.

"Kill them all." Church ordered coldly.

Sean McCarthy jumped up from his vantage point, watching as Nigel was taken into custody. He let out a giddy chuckle as he leaned over the side of the building, watching with his binoculars to see the famous Man of Steel escort the underhanded traitor into police custody.

"One down, three more to go." McCarthy grinned happily.

"Well, well, what do we have here?"

McCarthy jumped, turning to see his old nemesis, Dan Scardino standing behind him with his pistol aimed on his chest and his eyes narrowed as he stared him down. "Scardino, didn't think you'd of all people be able to track me down so easily."

"Well, you know what they say about old dogs and their tricks," Dan shrugged, keeping his pistol aimed on McCarthy. "You certainly haven't gotten any younger over the years."

"I always thought you were a man who could appreciate the arts." McCarthy grinned back at him. "I guess Jenna was right. There really is no teaching you, is there?"

"Say her name again." Dan threatened. "I dare you."

"Jenna," McCarthy let the 'n' of her name roll off his tongue with ease and then grinned. "Blake." He reached his hand out to pull his handheld remote out, waving it in the air. "You wouldn't want to start the show early now, would you, Scardino?"

A shot fired, and McCarthy let out a scream of agony as he dropped the remote to the ground. He fell to the ground, cradling his knee in his hands as he lay on the floor, screaming for help. He reached his hand out to grab the remote only to have his hand met with a piercing hot beam from above.

He looked up, aghast as he stared into the furious eyes of the Man of Steel.

"Scardino, you good?" a voice came from the corner and he saw a man with dark hair holding his pistol in the air.

"I'll be perfect as soon as this piece of garbage is in the hole he belongs in." Scardino muttered, picking up the now burnt remnants of the remote.

Superman reached down to grab McCarthy by the collar, jerking him toward him as he snarled out, "Where are they? Where are the bombs?"

“Everywhere,” McCarthy let out a chuckle, shaking his head as he pointed to the horizon of the Metropolis skyline. “Every last one of them. Boom!” His hand directed a hand pistol pointed directly at the Daily Planet before he let out an uncontrollable laugh. “You can’t stop it. You can’t be everywhere at once.”

Rollie Vale threw his passport and what he could fit into his suitcase as he raced around the abandoned subway tunnels trying to gather what he could to ensure his protection. The signals had been jammed. It was only a matter of time before everyone in this city began to recognize him as the criminal he was and not the no-name they had been programmed to see.

He had to get out of Metropolis.

He had to...

A white blinding light filled the tunnels as the blast flooded his senses, sending him flying across the room. A low hiss escaped his throat as he attempted to cry out.

‘*McCarthy*,’ the name remained pressed against the forefront of his mind as he disappeared into the muffled darkness that surrounded him.

Lois walked through the doorway leading to the Daily Planet archives’ back entrance from the stairwell. It had been a safety measure that Perry and insisted upon when the Planet was rebuilt. Unfortunately, along with the added safety of allowing employees to quickly escape without being detected it also allowed them to enter the archives without being detected.

She looked to the corner where the door leading into the printing press was located. The small dark room they were in was littered with file box after file box and a large screen sat in the middle of the room with a computer hooked up to it.

“Okay, Mayson, we’re here.” Lois pointed to the dingy room they were standing in. “Now what?”

“Find it!” Mayson ordered, waving her pistol in the air as she gestured to the long line of boxes in the corner.

“Find what?” Lois asked not sure what she was referring to.

“The file! The file I had on you, Lois!” Mayson screamed angrily, shoving her toward the file boxes. “I know you took it.”

“Mayson, I...” Lois stopped herself, seeing the bloodshot eyes staring back at her. There was no reasoning with her. There was no talking to her. Whatever was going on with her was beyond a misunderstanding. Nothing Lois said would get through to her. All she could do now was try to bide her time until someone came down here and hope she could escape.

She didn’t dare try to scream for help for fear it would set Mayson off.

She bowed her head as if to signal her submission to Mayson’s demands and made her way to the corner where the first accessible file box was located. She frowned as she reached the corner, noting the thick collection of dust that was on the other boxes didn’t appear on this one. Curious, she reached out to pull it out and let out an instinctive shout when she saw what was inside.

“Oh, my God, it’s a bomb!”

A hard object hit her on the side of the head and she fell to her knees, cradling her head as she saw red spots trickle on the floor.

“Look what you made me do! Why did you ...? Why can’t I just...?” A loud screeching noise escaped out of Mayson’s throat and she went between uncontrollable sobs and panicked outbursts as she fell to the ground.

“Mayson,” Lois let out a labored breath as she blinked past the spots that were hindering her vision at that moment. “You need help.”

A hard blow came, and the stars began to pixelate, blurring her vision as she cradled her head in dismay. With everything she had left in her she let out a healthy ‘*Help Superman! There’s a bomb at the Daily Planet!*’ just before another blow hit her across the face.

Stanley Gables’ transfer van hobbled over the loose rubble on

the ground as the driver drove around the sharp corner, jerking the prisoners inside the van around. Gables let out a rough wheeze as he felt a sharp object come in contact with his throat. His eyes widened as he reached out for the guard standing a few feet away only to fall face first on the floor of the van as it moved around the erratic turns at a speed that had to be illegal.

He gasped for air, struggling to breathe as his throat closed up. He closed his eyes, feeling the familiar burning sensation as it filled his bloodstream and airways with its poison. Penicillin. With one last attempt to fight against the fate he knew was seconds away he let out a gurgled, ‘Why?’

A knowing smile crossed the guard’s face and then darkness fell over him.

It was over.

Perry stood outside the Daily Planet explaining the situation to the bomb squad leader who was preparing his task force to move inside and begin clearing each floor. Perry quickly pointed out the emergency exits that would help the team move in and out with ease. His hands trembled as he flashed back to this time last year when the Planet had been bombed by Lex Luthor as a means to tear down the two hundred and twenty year old paper. He knew there was much more to the reasonings for taking the Planet down in Luthor’s mind but, despite everything, his treachery and callous disregard for life had cost him his freedom. Now here Perry was staring at an eerily similar scene waiting for word that the paper he had helped to build with his blood, sweat and tears would live to print another edition.

“Everyone, move in!”

Clark barely made it off the roof before his ears had been flooded with the familiar voice of Lois Lane screaming for help. He wanted more than anything to pummel the serial bomber and make him pay for the lives he had cost this city. The innocent lives he had put in danger and upended from their day to day lives. He wanted so badly to make McCarthy pay for what he had done but he didn’t.

He couldn’t.

Not with Lois still out there missing and in danger.

Not when he heard the blood curdling scream for help.

He flew through the sky as fast as he could without breaking the sound barrier and landed in the alley just behind the Daily Planet. He let out a sigh of relief when he heard the voices from inside. He homed in on Lois’ and Mayson’s voice trying to assess the situation before moving in.

Lois’ call for help had given him enough information about the situation to know he had to get the Planet evacuated so if things didn’t go as planned, the innocent staffers working at the Planet wouldn’t be caught in the crossfire.

‘*It’s just a precaution,*’ he told himself, mentally preparing for his next steps as he hovered outside the entrance to the basement of the Daily Planet which led to the old archives storage room.

He could hear the alarms blaring from where the building was being evacuated in the floors above where Lois and Mayson were located.

Mayson.

A shudder ran through him as he listened to the sharp frantic pitch of Mayson’s voice screech in his ears. Never in a million years would he have recognized her voice. It was as if an entirely different person had taken possession of the person he’d come to know as a friend and replaced her with this out of control lunatic that was ranting and raving behind the door in front of him.

“Where is it? Where is it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mayson.”

“Stop it. Stop it. Stop it!”

“What?”

“You try to act all innocent like you’re not the conniving witch

I know you are. *Stop it!*”

Clark summed up as much mental strength as he could, preparing to enter the lion’s den not as Superman but as himself. Given Mayson’s past with Superman he might have better luck reasoning with her – even if it was equivalent to negotiating with a mental patient. He swallowed the hard lump in his throat, mentally pushing the doubts behind him as he prepared to walk through the door and confront Mayson.

A million things could go wrong.

All he needed was one thing to go right.

He had to get Lois out of here.

He had to get Mayson the help she needed.

He flashed his badge across the digital scanner, granting him access to the basement archives. He reached his hand over the door and turned the handle to the door just enough to prevent it from locking again as he kept his x-ray vision on Lois and Mayson as he waited for his moment to rush inside.

A sharp thud hit the door from the other side and he heard Mayson call out with a menacing hiss, “Don’t even think about it! Who’s there?”

“Mayson?” Clark called out, looking down at the crushed bullet that had fallen to the ground when it hit his shoulder. A soft ping echoed in his ears as it balanced itself onto the new surface of cement ground.

“Go away!” came Mayson’s frantic cries as he heard the loud metal thud of something hitting the ground from inside the room.

He watched as Mayson took the pistol that had been in her hands moments ago and shoved it into the corner with her foot. The bullet thankfully only hit the door he was standing at, missing both Mayson and Lois thankfully.

“I can’t do that.” Clark replied, gripping the handle as tight as he could without molding the metal with his hands. “They’re evacuating the building. There’s a bomb in there. Just...come on out here and let’s talk.”

“I know there’s a bomb in here.” Mayson replied coldly as she shot a look of daggers in Lois’ direction. “Your girlfriend planted it here!”

“That is not...!” he heard Lois begin to protest.

“Mayson, it’s not safe for you to be in there right now. Just come on out here and we’ll get the bomb squad in there.” Clark pleaded, squashing every desire he had to rush inside and whisk them both out of there. Any wrong move could result in the entire building being blown to smithereens. Any wrong move could result in Lois being even further injured. He couldn’t risk it.

“No,” Mayson let out a whimper as she screeched out a loud sob. “You don’t understand. No one understands.”

“Then explain it to me,” Clark pleaded softly. “There’s a bomb in there. You and Lois both need to get out of there so we can stop it from destroying another building and taking more lives.”

“How did you know Lois was here?”

“I...”

“Clark, look out!”

“*Shut up!*”

A rain of bullets hit the door and he fell to the ground, allowing the bullets to rain against the hinge of the door. He released his hand and the door fell forward, no longer locked into the hinge that held it upright. Clark stared in shock at the scene before him, unsure how to respond to the bloodshot eyes of Mayson Drake staring back at him.

“You wanted in. You’re in.” She held up her pistol and narrowed her eyes at him. “But I don’t think we’ll be going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Lois, are you all right?” Clark asked, looking to where Lois was, cradling her injured head from where she had obviously been struck by a blunt object. He looked to Lois briefly before looking back at Mayson.

In the split-second he had asked about Lois’ injuries Mayson

let out a shriek, “Of course! The gallant hero rushing to the weak little damsel in distress! Pfft! Puh-leaze!”

“Mayson,” Clark stared back at Mayson, feeling a cold chill run down his spine as he looked back at her, “This isn’t you.”

“What would you know about me?” Mayson taunted, shooting daggers in his direction. “You have no idea what I’m capable of!”

“Mayson, you need help.” Clark remarked calmly.

“Right? I’m the one with the problem, right? Meanwhile you and Lulu Lane over here can keep going around hurting everyone around you while you put everyone at risk ... not a care in the world. How exactly does that work exactly? Are you really that cold, Clark or is it just another symptom of not being able to pull yourself out of her web of lies...?”

“Mayson, stop it!” Clark felt a panic begin to rise inside him as he heard the ticking of the bomb grow faster and faster. “You want to fight about something and feel like you’re the victim, fine. You win. You’re the victim, but if you don’t get out of here right now this entire place is going to come down and you could get a lot of people killed.”

A billow of smoke whistled in his direction and he looked behind him just long enough to see the leader of the bomb squad approaching with his team. Clark looked to Mayson and pleaded, “Please, Mayson, just let them do their job.”

McCarthy sat in the dark room at the police precinct tapping his hand on the table in front of him. There was a certain power that came from sitting across from some of the best minds in the police department. A battle of wits he was sure to win.

He might not have taken the city down the way he had intended but he would see it crippled with the fall of Intergang. Each and every last member of the twisted organization would be taken down and he would be there to watch their downfall.

Henderson handed McCarthy a notepad and an ink pen.

McCarthy stared at the paper in front of him, “I’m not really that great at sketches but I’ll give it a shot.”

“Two witnesses were taken out today. All of whom were in police custody.” Henderson pointed at the notepad in front of him. “I read the notes from your statement. The micro chip you and your pals cooked up with Vale was intended to give you a way to live unrecognized among society, to go as you please. Having that kind of opportunity snatched away from you like that...it’s got to sting.”

“Not to mention your whole failed attempt to take the whole city out with your series of bombs in the city.” Ryder added smugly. “It was a creative plan. I’ll give you that.”

McCarthy chuckled back at them, “What makes you think I would help either of you.”

“Well, because if you don’t then I’m going to have to transfer you back into federal custody and right now I don’t think you want to be explaining yourself to the DEA or even the NIA.” Henderson explained, leaning back in his chair proudly.

“You want names. I want immunity.” McCarthy hissed back.

“Oh, no, it doesn’t work like that, McCarthy,” Henderson shot back chastising him with the click of his tongue. “You wanted freedom. You wanted the ability to come and go as you pleased. That’s understandable but not realistic.” He shook his head, “You’ve already proven just how dangerous you really are and why you can never be let back out into society.”

“But?” McCarthy hissed out.

“But where you spend the next nine hundred years is up for debate.” Ryder explained casually.

McCarthy grumbled uncertainty, “I want guarantees. No Scardino.”

“Done.” Henderson shot out casually as he pointed to the pad in front of him. “The crooked officers on Intergang’s payroll.”

McCarthy shook his head as he scribbled out the names with a grunt. “You’d be amazed how easily a Congressman or even a

detective can be bought at the right price.” He pushed the notepad toward Henderson and smiled. “Am I right, detective?”

The name stared back at McCarthy in bold black letters and he couldn’t help but elicit a small thrill of anticipation as he watched the shock wash over Henderson and Ryder.

“I’m sorry, were you friends with Detective Riley?”

“Get him out of my sight.” Henderson growled.

“Oh, but I’m not done,” McCarthy called after him. “We have *so much* to catch up on, detective!”

Lois cradled her head as she leaned her head against Clark’s chest, feeling a wave of emotions wash over her as the smoke cleared and the ranting and raving from Mayson disappeared into the distance as she was taken into protective custody. Clark gently brushed his thumb against her cheek, checking her wounds as he whispered reassurances that she couldn’t quite make out.

It was over.

That was all that mattered.

It was over.

Twelve Weeks Later...

Intergang Leaders Exposed!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

New DA Named: DA Hunter Swears In!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Micro Chip Technology Exposed

By Jimmy Olsen

Special Contribution: Perry White

Cracked and Committed: ADA Drake Unfit For Trial

By Cathy Rawlins

Intergang Taken Down!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

McCarthy Testifies! Churches Get Life!

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Mayson Drake set the newspaper clippings down, feeling a sense of dread fill the forefront of her mind as she closed the file folder she had collected the newspaper clippings in. She looked to her therapist who was staring back at her with a quiet sense of calm she wished she could have even half of.

“Today’s the day, isn’t it?” her therapist inquired.

“Yeah,” Mayson let out a heavy sigh. “I’m not sure I can do this.”

“Mayson, you’ve made great strides in these last few months.” Her therapist reassured her.

“I nearly killed a woman...and so many more.” Mayson replied tearfully.

“You were also not in control of yourself.” Her therapist reminded her.

“It doesn’t make any of it right,” Mayson shrugged the explanation away.

“You have made amends, Mayson.”

“I gave Lois Lane a lame apology after tearing her life apart and destroying any semblance of a friendship we once had.”

“She forgave you, didn’t she?”

“Yes. But that’s just her. I wouldn’t forgive me.”

“Knowing what you know now, Mayson, what would you have done differently?”

“Taken the help when it was offered,” Mayson smiled weakly. “I had so many people trying to reach me. Tell me to talk to someone and I just brushed it off. If I had listened to just one person. Just one. None of this would have happened.”

“Mayson, you were programmed to react that way.”

“Programmed to turn into a psychopath. Great, that makes me feel a lot better.”

“Mayson, I know this is hard, but you will figure this out.” She pointed to the door behind her. “Before you go, there is someone that would like to talk to you.”

Mayson turned to see Bill Henderson standing in the doorway with an older man she didn’t recognize. She let out a deep breath and nodded for them to come in.

“Mayson,” Henderson beamed back at her. “You look great.”

“I should.” Mayson gave him a wry smile. “They’re finally letting me out of this nuthouse.”

“I wouldn’t exactly categorize Shady Brooke as a ‘nut house,’” Her therapist chimed in.

“So, is this the part where you tell me, ‘I told you so’?” Mayson asked, tapping her hand on her knee nervously.

“No,” Henderson shook his head. “This is the part where even though you’ve done some horrible things, I introduce you to a friend that might be able to help.” He pointed to the man behind him.

“I’m the chairperson with the Special Needs Alliance,” the man introduced himself. “Bill here is a dear friend and advised us of the uncertainty of your future with your former job at the District Attorney’s office.”

“Hard to practice law when they suspend your license.” Mayson responded quietly.

“They will reinstate it, Mayson,” Bill advised confidently.

“We work with the state to help protect the rights of people who are disabled, mentally challenged, or even those suffering from episodes that are emotional or behavioral. Many times when society doesn’t understand what they’re dealing with, we find our clients wrongfully imprisoned and even killed. We work together to help protect those that can’t protect themselves. Given the uncertainty of things, I thought you might be interested in at least coming by the center and seeing what it is we do. The pay isn’t the greatest but we make do.”

“I’m crazy, haven’t you heard?” Mayson tried to joke. “I might actually take you up on an offer.”

“Would that be the worst thing in the world?”

Clark looked up at the tall white brick building, watching as the new District Attorney, Constance Hunter and the Mayor clipped the big red ribbon in front of the building. A smile crossed his face as he turned to Lois who was standing next to him.

“Well, City Hall is back in business,” Clark commented dryly. “Let’s see if the criminals can stay out of the courtrooms long enough to enjoy it.”

“I think they did a good job,” Lois responded with a long sigh. “Like the final puzzle piece being put into a jigsaw puzzle.

Everything that had been destroyed by McCarthy is now repaired.”

“Not everything,” Clark commented, looking sadly up at the stage where the other ADAs were standing behind Constance Hunter.

“Henderson said he found someone that was willing to help her get back on her feet,” Lois reminded him. “I know it’s not the same but it’s somewhere.”

“I just wonder what would have happened if we had tried a little harder to get through to her.”

“Well, she didn’t want our help.” Lois replied with a shrug of her shoulders. “Especially not mine. Unless we broke the law and forced her to get help, I don’t see how we could have stopped any of this.”

“I still don’t understand why Nigel and Vale tried to program her to lose control like that. I mean, what was the point of all of this?”

“If what McCarthy said was true and they were working with Intergang, then maybe they wanted to discredit her so she couldn’t go after Intergang.” Lois smiled back at him, placing a hand on his chest. “Not that that did any good in the long run.”

“I was relieved to hear that it was Vale behind the threats and not Mayson.” Clark shook his head. “Not that it makes it that much better. Still, I just hate that there wasn’t more we could have

done for her.”

Lois nodded, tapping her hand on his shoulder as she spoke. “I know. I’m just glad we found who was responsible and put a stop to them.”

“So, I guess you were right about not rushing to judgment on the stalker business,” Clark commented, wrapping an arm around her waist.

“Well, of course,” Lois smiled back at him. “I’m always right.”

“Is that so?” Clark teased, grinning back at her.

“Always,” Lois grinned, leaning in to kiss him.

Clark smiled, feeling a rush of emotions flood through him as he stared back at her. After what felt like an eternity of chaos and uncertainty, he finally felt like he and Lois had finally found that place in their relationship where everything just fell together in perfect unity. His hand brushed against the small velvet box inside his coat pocket, pondering just how to bring up his plans for the weekend with her.

“Is it just me or does it seem like we’ve been doing nothing but chase stories and bad guys for the last three months?” Lois asked, turning to look back at him with a questioning gaze. “We should celebrate. How about Fudge Castle?”

“Or maybe we could get out of the city for a little while and recharge?” Clark suggested, tightening his hand over the velvet box.

“I might be tempted,” Lois responded casually.

“Might?”

“Where exactly are we talking about?”

“It’s just a weekend away. No deadlines. No terrorists. No bombs.” Clark smiled back at her.

“And Superman?” Lois mouthed to him, whispering just loud enough for him to make out the question.

“He’s in need of a vacation too.”

“Is that so...?”

Just on the edge of the crowd, a man in a black overcoat and old nineteenth-century style bowler stood, watching the couple with a pleased smile on his face. He stepped back from the crowd, checking the time on the handheld watch in his hand before tucking it safely inside his pocket.

He let out a soft chuckle to himself as he approached the alley where he had last parked his time machine. A frown crossed his face when he saw his visitor from the future was missing.

“Oh, dear...”

THE END