

Alone at 7 p.m.

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Summary: In response to the *Kerth 2021 Challenge #2*, Lois Lane receives a mysterious text message, sending her on a hunt for answers.

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The Daily Planet's usual hum of activity was subdued to a light roar as Lois Lane stepped off the elevator, making her way into the bullpen. Almost on instinct, her attention moved to Clark Kent's desk, checking to see if he had made it in. An internal groan when her eyes landed on his empty desk, drifting over to his monitor which was still turned off. A wave of disappointment washed over her as she scanned the bullpen for any sign of his presence. A long breath escaped her lips, realizing he wasn't there. It wasn't the first time she arrived at the Planet before him. Though somehow, the closer they became, the more aware she found herself of his presence.

'*Get a grip*,' she scolded herself, trying to brush off the letdown of emotions that had come over her and turned toward the crowd that had gathered around the newsroom's television set with Perry and Jimmy.

"What's going on?"

Jimmy pointed to the screen where the footage showed a plane taking a hard nosedive trajectory toward the Atlantic ocean. "Engine for Metro Airline plane just went out. At least thirty passengers on board, and the radio transmission just stopped a few minutes ago."

Her hand moved to her mouth, watching with bated breath, hoping for a miracle. At the last second, the red and blue blur appeared, and the plane's nosedive came to a halt, pausing as the red cape from Metropolis' most famous hero billowed in the air as he floated over the Atlantic Ocean holding the tip of the airplane with a single hand.

Lois let out a sigh in relief, clapping her hands with the staff that surrounded her as a hand clamped on her shoulder, startling her. She spun around to see Clark Kent standing behind her with his other hand extended, handing her a coffee. A sheepish grin crossed her lips as she took the coffee from him and nodded her thanks to him.

He flashed her a heart-melting smile that threatened to melt away every thought that had been racing through her mind. That smile was dangerous. The soft curl of his lips teased her as he gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze as he had done countless times before.

It somehow felt different now.

Everything did.

Clark pointed toward the television as the newscaster continued to narrate the events of Superman's recent rescue. "What's going on?"

Lois gestured to the television, looping her arm with his as she walked with Clark to her desk, "Superman saves the day... again."

Clark patted her hand as they came to a stop in front of her desk, releasing it from his grasp after giving it a gentle squeeze. The small gestures reminded her how close they had become over the last several months. Gone were the days of her working in isolation and burying her nose in a tub of rocky road with an old

soap on the television.

<<"*Working late?*"

"*Big news night.*">>

"Where was this at?" Clark asked, glancing at the television as she took a sip from her coffee cup.

"Over the Atlantic," Lois shrugged as she fished out her mobile phone given to her by S.T.A.R. Labs. With the amount of trouble she continued to find herself in, one of the scientists had issued a prototype to her for contacting the man of steel. She had her suspicions from the way Superman had insisted on her using the phone that it had been more his idea than theirs.

"What are you doing?" Clark asked, seeming almost nervous as she flipped the phone open.

"Well, it appears Superman is wrapping up another rescue. I thought..." Lois gestured to the phone in hand.

"I thought that was for emergencies." Clark reached for the phone, pointing at the blinking light. "It looks like you have a message."

"No, it just needs to charge," Lois sighed, reaching for the charging cord from her purse only for Clark to flip the mobile phone open and reveal the blinking message on the screen. "Or not."

She pressed the middle button to reveal the message, scrunching her nose as she watched the icon disappear and the digital text from the message appear.

'*Come alone at 7 p.m. Daily Planet roof.*'

Lois frowned, tapping her hand on the screen, looking for who may have sent it only to see the number was listed as Unknown. She looked back at Clark, who held a curious gaze as he stared at the message on her phone.

"Who do you think it is?" she asked.

"I don't know," Clark shook his head. His eyes darted toward the television, where Superman was still seen on the screen talking with reporters.

"What is it?" Lois asked.

"Nothing," Clark pointed to the phone and asked her, "Are you going to go?"

"I don't know," Lois tapped the edge of her chin, pondering aloud. "I don't even know who I'm meeting...or supposed to be meeting."

"Well, they messaged you on the phone S.T.A.R. Labs gave you. I'm sure it's important." Clark replied confidently.

"We'll see." Lois glanced back at him, tucking her lower lip inside her mouth as she met his gentle eyes. Her relationship with Clark had been kicked into high gear over the last month when he'd first asked her out, but since then, their conflicting schedules appeared to prevent the elusive date from ever happening.

<<"*I guess what I'm saying is... I'm afraid things will change if we start dating.*"

"*Well, if it makes you feel any better...I'm afraid too.*">>

The more recent close call with Dianna Stride, assassin and tabloid reporter from Top Copy, had left them both unsure how to move forward. Every time either one of them attempted to take a step forward, something else came up. Her and Clark's original first date was crashed with a stakeout on Sheldon Bender, and the moment she and Clark had even mentioned trying to reschedule, they found themselves thrust into another life-or-death situation.

More her than Clark.

<<"*You are some partner.*"

"*Is that all I am?*">>

A slow smile crept across Clark's face as he perched himself on the edge of her desk, "We'll see? You're not the least bit curious about who might have sent you a cryptic message like this?"

"I...might be," Lois glanced back at the phone then to Clark, who was wearing a confident grin. "It's probably a prank."

"On a phone, no one else knows about?" Clark raised an

eyebrow as he chuckled. “Sure. It’s probably a spam caller wanting to sell you an extended warranty.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Lois huffed, reaching out to pick up the phone once more. She pressed the middle button to load the message again and selected the reply button, attempting to type back *‘Who is this?’* in the message; however, when she selected the send button, an error message appeared.

‘Unable to reply to this message.’

“Looks like you’ll have to wait and be surprised,” Clark commented with a shrug. She let out a heavy harrumph as he walked back to his desk, leaving her to mull over the mysterious message she’d received.

Her attention moved to the message on the phone once more. Clark was right. It wasn’t as if the phone number she’d been issued was listed in the phone book for someone to grab. Someone had sent that to her. The question was who...and how did they get the number?

She reached over to dial the number for S.T.A.R. Labs, preparing to do some research on her own.

Clark glanced curiously over at her and asked, “Who are you calling?”

“Dr. Hamilton,” Lois responded confidently, listening to the phone ring as she cradled it between her ear and shoulder.

“Just can’t stand waiting, can you?” Clark teased, ducking as she tossed a rolled-up paper at him.

After following the prompts to enter Dr. Hamilton’s extension, Lois heard a gruff, “Dr. Hamilton’s office,” over the line.

“Yes, Dr. Hamilton, please. This is Lois Lane with the Daily Planet.”

“S.T.A.R. Labs, putting a stop to unknown numbers one unsolicited message at a time...” Clark teased from the background as she mouthed at him to *‘Stop it.’*

Dr. Hamilton’s gruff voice came over the line, “Ms. Lane?”

“Yes, Dr. Hamilton, I wanted to ask you about this mobile phone STAR Labs issued...I got a message from an unknown number and wanted to know if you could trace it?”

Hamilton paused a moment, and she could hear the tapping of keyboard keys over the line as he let a sigh escape his throat.

“That’s odd. Let me see what shows up on my end.” A moment later, Hamilton responded with an apology, “I’m sorry, Ms. Lane, it doesn’t appear there’s any information on the sender.”

“There’s nothing S.T.A.R. Labs can do to trace it?” Lois asked with a frown.

“Not with the current technology we have at our disposal.” Hamilton explained with an apologetic, “I’m sorry. I wish I could help.”

Lois thanked him, turning back to Clark, who shrugged as she hung up the phone. “Any luck?”

“No.”

Clark watched as Lois turned back to her monitor, harrumphing over the mystery of the unknown message she couldn’t seem to solve. He watched her stab a pen into the notebook in front of her with a slow smile across his face. The mystery of the unknown messenger was eating at her and had perked her interest just enough to guarantee she would, of course, investigate. It was in her nature.

He cast a wayward glance toward the clock on his desk, noting the time as it ticked closer to the upcoming meeting.

<<“Lois, I want you to go out with me.”>>

<<“You mean a real date? Like where I take out my best perfume, the one I bought after seeing ‘Love Affair’, the good one not the remake, and put a dab behind my knee, even though I have no idea why?”>>

He had asked her out nearly two months ago, and every challenge had been thrust in their way, preventing them from

having an evening of peace and quiet so he could finally have the long-awaited date with her he had yearned for over the last year and a half.

Lex Luthor.

Dianna Stride.

Sheldon Bender.

The names ran through his mind, recalling the recent hurdles they had evaded just in the past few months. The hurdles were harmless trials, each bringing a delay in either of them taking the next step in their relationship. For so long, he had thought he was doomed to forever remain in the shadows, never to share anything but friendship with Lois Lane.

It wasn’t until recently that he’d seen hope as their relationship had grown into something more. He dreamed of so much more and was willing to take the risk of putting everything on the line. Thirty years of fear and isolation crossed through his mind as he swallowed back the boulder-sized lump in his throat. He knew deep in the pit of his gut, the closer he and Lois became, the more at risk everything he had buried deep, his secret identity and the truth behind his absences would soon be impossible to hide. But a life of isolation and regret was too painful to imagine if he didn’t take that ultimate leap of faith and try.

The brisk early spring air sent a chill through Lois as she climbed the steps to the Daily Planet roof, wondering if she should have called for back-up. Fleeting, she had thought about getting Clark to tag along with her, but he had been nowhere to be found.

Was it a scoop on a story?

A trap?

The message had left her with little to go on, and as her heels clicked on the steps, leading to the door of the Daily Planet roof, her hand tightened around the pepper spray in her purse, preparing to defend herself should she be walking into the lion’s den of some criminal’s trap.

Who had sent that mysterious message?

The questions continued to nag at the back of her mind on repeat as she reached the top of the stairs only to find a notecard with the words ‘Open Me’ scribbled on the front. She reached for the card and unfolded it, reading the note inside.

‘Follow the light.’

Her hand tightened around the door, feeling the cold metal tingle in her palm as she turned the knob to reveal the mystery to her. She opened the door revealing the rooftop that had been transformed into a candlelit walkway, guiding her on the secluded path to a single table with a linen cloth and a single-stemmed rose in a glass vase upon it. Two chairs were set up looking across the cityscape, and two covered plates.

A smile spread across her face when she saw Clark standing by the ledge of the roof waiting for her. A mix of relief and apprehension crossed over her as she stared at him, pondering her next move.

She had spent the last several hours wracking her brain, wondering if the mysterious messenger was a threat or friend.

She twisted her mouth into a half-smile, looking around the candlelit rooftop that created a romantic ambiance she would never have imagined on the top of the Daily Planet roof, yet here they were. Her knees felt weak as she stared into his eyes, feeling the magnetic charge run through her as a million thoughts ran through her mind.

<<“Let’s finish what we started.”>>

He was her partner.

He was her best friend.

Their friendship and partnership had been turbulent over the last year. First with her engagement and almost marriage with Lex Luthor, only to discover he was secretly running a criminal empire and behind many of the city’s crimes. With the arrival of the new A.D.A., Mayson Drake insisted was all wrong for Clark, yet if she

faced the truth behind her uncertainties, she didn't want to see Clark with anyone else. The bitter pill had been hard to swallow and forced her to face the reality of how she truly felt about him.

It terrified her and excited her but running away wasn't an option.

He walked with her to the table he had set, pulling out a chair for her. She turned toward the dimly lit cityscape the table was looking over, watching as the sunset. "It's breathtaking up here."

A smile crossed her face as she looked over at Clark with a smirk, "So, the cryptic message was just to get me up here for this...?" Her lips pursed as she walked down the candlelit path, gesturing to Clark with a heavy sigh. "I suppose I should put away the pepper spray?"

Clark held his hands up in surrender, "Unless the food is severely under spiced." He flashed her an apologetic smile, "I figured the only way to reschedule that date was to surprise you."

"I'm definitely surprised," she smiled back at him. "But that doesn't explain how you sent a message on a phone you didn't have the number for."

Clark's face flushed, running a hand across his face. "Yeah, about that..."

Lois' brow raised as she waited patiently for an answer. "Yes?"

"You see, I gave you that phone."

Her forehead creased as she shook her head, noticing as he removed his hand rested on the brim of his glasses, seeming to hesitate for a moment. "You...Clark, come on. No, you didn't, Superman..." realization dawned on her as he removed his glasses for the first time and set them on the table in front of him, "did." Every doubt and question she'd had seemed to answer itself as she stared into his unfiltered eyes for the first time, merging the image of Clark and Superman as one. In that final moment she let out a shallow breath and folded her arms across her chest, "I guess we have a lot to talk about."

THE END