

# Injustice

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Rated: PG-13

Submitted: January 2021

Summary: Set five years after the episode *Delusions of Grandeur*. Lois Lane finds herself and her family in the crosshairs of a political scandal when she tries to help find a missing girl. Heartache and intrigue follow as she and Clark find themselves battling a system built to protect the innocent when it becomes obvious the system is corrupt.

Story Size: 176,675 words (981Kb as text)

A/N: Huge thank you to Endelda and Deadly Chakram for being Beta Readers on this one. Big shout out to Julie Gastler for her help as General Editor on this monstrosity. The toys have broken and twisted and put back together with glue and cement in this tale. Thanks for reading!

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## Teaser

*'Marry me.'*

Two words had never had such a profound effect on Lois Lane's life before. As soon as Clark uttered the words, she had responded with an enthusiastic 'yes.' There were no doubts. There were no second-guessing questions or weighing the good versus the bad. She had seen what life with Clark was like. The good. The bad. The ugly. Still, through it all, she found herself unable to imagine her life without him.

Lois ran a hand through her dark locks, looking in the mirror as her reflection stared back at her in the elegant white gown. She fidgeted nervously with the gold band wrapped around her finger, smiling at the small glimmer that came from the diamond on her hand. A flutter ran through her abdomen, and she took in a shallow breath, reminding herself that she was not dreaming.

"Lois?"

She looked back at her sister, seeing her dressed in a simple red spaghetti strap dress with a bouquet of roses. Despite their desire to just elope and share the moment with their families, there were some traditions her mother wouldn't set aside. Having the wedding party and the bride in a traditional wedding attire was one of those traditions.

It wasn't that she didn't want a big wedding.

She wanted to celebrate her marriage to Clark with her friends and family and share the joy and love she felt was about to burst. She wanted it all, but at the same time, she knew tempting fate just by planning anything extravagant was only borrowing trouble. After everything they had been through, she had learned the hard way it was the little things that mattered.

They had rented a small gazebo on the waterfront properties Franklin Stern had out in Florence and arranged for all of their families to fly in Superman express. Perry had offered to officiate for them, so the ceremony would remain under wraps until after she testified.

'No.' she told herself, shaking her head. She was not going to think about that today. Today was about celebrating her and Clark's marriage and the start of their lives together. She would not let Lex take that from her too.

It was hard to believe it had been nearly a year since she'd been forced to go on the run after nearly dying at Lex Luthor's hands. Still, through everything, she found a strength she never knew she was capable of. She had seen everything she loved torn from her and been forced to endure isolation that echoed inside her

like a hollow drum. It wasn't until after she had found Clark and helped rescue him from the torturous prison Lex had built for him that she had finally escaped her own solitude.

The life she had lived as Leila Kane seemed like a distant memory, and even more distant was the person she had been before all of this. Through it all, she had found herself and discovered just how deep her love for Clark truly was. After nearly losing everything, they had come together through the pain and torture they had endured – stronger than before. She couldn't imagine her life without him, and after today she wouldn't have to.

Her Mother laid a hand on her shoulder, helping to adjust the clip in her hair that held the veil. "You look gorgeous, sweetheart." A smile crossed her elderly face as she looked back at Lois. "Perfect."

Lois felt a nervous flutter run through her abdomen, "I hope I got all the auburn out." She touched the back of her hair uncertainly. Even after months of trying, she still found stray hints of auburn from her former life as Leila Kane. Today she didn't want anything reminding her or Clark of their time on the run. Today was about the future. Their future.

She placed a nervous hand to her abdomen, smoothing out invisible lines on her dress as she stared back at her reflection.

"You look fine, Lois," Martha reassured her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Ellen dabbed her eyes as she handed her the bouquet of white roses. "Oh, sweetheart, you look...stunning."

"Hold on," Lucy said, walking up behind her with a small drawstring bag. "Almost forgot something. Just because you two decided to throw caution to the wind and elope doesn't mean you get out of tradition."

Martha laughed, nodding in agreement as Lucy pulled the drawstring to open the bag. "Yes, tradition."

"I'm afraid to ask." Lois looked between the three women warily.

"Now, now, we spent the last two days planning this out," her mother announced as Lucy pulled out a silver chain with a single teardrop pendant inside a silver heart with the engraving 'LLK' around the edges of the heart.

"It's beautiful," Lois commented as Lucy reached over to help put the necklace on her.

"This is your something new," Lucy explained as she fastened the necklace around her neck.

"Thanks, Luce." Lois smiled back at her sister's reflection in the mirror.

"These are your grandmother's. They were my 'something borrowed' when I married your father." Her mother held up a small, blue velvet box and opened it, revealing a pair of matching teardrop earrings for her to wear with a hint of blue in the teardrop. "And they count as something blue."

"They're beautiful, mom," Lois whispered back to her mother, knowing how painful the memory of her mother's marriage to her father was for her.

"This is your something old." Martha held up a silver bracelet and helped her slip it on her wrist. "I wore this when I married Jonathan, and my mother wore it when she married my father."

Lois looked down at the bangle, reading the inscription, *'Love is patient.'* She turned to Martha and smiled. "Thank you, Martha. It's gorgeous."

"Maybe one day you'll be giving this to your daughter or daughter-in-law to wear," Martha said wistfully as a crack in her voice could be heard from the emotion of the day.

"I'd like that," Lois said, reaching over to squeeze her hand.

"Are you ready?" Lucy asked, pointing to the door behind them.

"Never been more ready for anything in my entire life," Lois quipped, smiling at her sister with an eager grin.

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Clark watched in awe as Lois Lane walked down the small stone pathway with Sam Lane walking her down the aisle. He couldn't be certain, but he could swear her father might be shedding a few tears as he approached with her.

The emotion from the day weighed heavily on him as he watched Lois move toward him and Perry. He looked to the small audience they had gathered in the seats up front. After his proposal to Lois a few nights ago, everything had become a blur. There had been a short debate over when to have the wedding. But in the end, they both had come to the decision to elope. They had worked with her parents to arrange for a ceremony both families could be happy with all the while keeping the news that Lois Lane was alive and well out of the presses. They had agreed that after the trial they would make the announcement and have a large reception to celebrate. He hated that Lex Luthor still had the power to keep him and Lois from living their lives, but it was a small price to pay for not having to wait for God knew how long it would take for the trial to finish. Lois refused to wait for the other shoe to drop or tempt fate.

Now here they were, on a small hilltop in Florence, Italy as far away as they could get from Lex Luthor's reach, and the heart of the city of art that had given the world some of the greatest artists in the world. It was a perfect day, and the perfect setting to close the chapter the last year had put them through and embrace his future with Lois.

"You look gorgeous," Clark whispered, offering his elbow for Lois to hook her arm into.

She smiled at him, reaching a hand out to stroke his cheek as she leaned over to kiss his cheek. They turned to face Perry, who was watching them with a broad smile. "A beautiful day for a beautiful couple to get married," Perry said, looking to the small crowd of family and friends that stood behind them.

"I think we all can agree that this is not how any of us imagined spending our Saturday." Perry gestured to the beautiful waterfront behind them with the carefully crafted gazebo surrounding them. "I watched the two of you come together as begrudging partners, then friends...and that's where each successful relationship thrives. Friendship. Marriage is so much more than a piece of paper or a promise you make in front of your family and friends. It takes dedication and love and respect for one another. You have your good days and your bad. But well, you both know that already. You've lived through the worst that life could give you and came out stronger."

Clark felt the corners of his mouth twitch as Perry continued to monologue. Life had certainly handed him and Lois a doozy over the last year. Now even after everything, they had found themselves unwilling to face another day without one another. They had been tested and found the strength to persevere and turn to one another through the good, bad, and incredibly ugly trials they had been forced to endure. He knew in his heart there wasn't anything they couldn't handle together.

"Life puts each of you through trials you couldn't imagine." Perry looked to both of them and smiled with a twinkle in his eyes. "But even through it all, you two still come out on top. Nothing about marriage or life is perfect. We have a beautiful sunset behind me and a perfect day to watch two people I admire and respect exchange their vows. But this picturesque setting is not what marriage is about. It's about you, Lois, and you, Clark, finding one another and supporting each other. You both have seen each other at your worst and best and will continue to help one another through the trials that life hands you. Once you figure that out, the rest is a piece of cake."

Clark took her hands in his, meeting her gaze with a smile as Perry asked the fateful question. "Clark, do you take Lois to cherish and love for as long as the two of you live? To love her faithfully, through the best and the worst? Facing whatever may come together?"

Clark's hand reached up to cup her cheek as he responded solemnly, not taking his eyes off of her as he responded with an emotional, "I do."

Lois smiled, holding her hand over Clark's as Perry continued, "Lois, do you..."

"I do! I do!" Lois cheered enthusiastically, swaying closer and closer to him as she stared back at him, feeling the heavy weight of the emotion from the day threaten to overtake her.

The small crowd of witnesses let out a good-hearted chuckle as Perry waved to Jimmy and Lucy for the rings. "Okay, now the rings," Jimmy nodded to Perry, pulling the velvet ring box from his pocket as Perry continued, taking the ring from Jimmy "Clark?" Perry handed Clark the ring.

Lois smiled shyly up at Clark as he took the ring from Perry and took her hand in his. "Lois, I have been in love with you from the moment I met you," he said earnestly, meeting her gaze as he continued, "I love everything about you, Lois. You have the most incredible fire inside you that pushes me to the brink of insanity one minute and fighting the urge to kiss you senseless the next. You are everything to me. I can't even remember a moment where I didn't love you. You demand this world be a better place, and because of you, it is. You challenge me to keep fighting when I want to give up. You push me when I need it. I love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone. I want to spend the rest of my life with you by my side." He reached over to cup her cheek, brushing away the tears that escaped the corners of her eyes and slipped the wedding band on her finger. "Today, I give you my heart, my soul, and our future."

'Forever,' Lois added, mouthing the words to him, holding his gaze as Perry silently motioned to Lucy for the ring.

"Lois?" Perry handed her the ring Lucy had handed to him, and she took it, shyly looking back at Clark.

Lois bit her lip, trying to find the words to tell him what she was feeling at that moment, "Clark, you're my best friend. Until I met you, I never had a best friend." A frown crossed her face briefly, and he squeezed her hand, encouragingly. "I know a lot of people say that marriage is about love but for us it's so much more. It's about finding your best friend and not wanting to spend a single second without them. It's about lopsided pizzas and late night movies and wanting to go to the ends of the Earth to bring back your favorite person when they're in trouble." Clark could feel the hard lump inside his throat as he let out a chuckle, holding Lois in his arms as her eyes glistened through her vows, portraying the heavy emotions from the day as she continued her vows. "People fall in love every day and get married and start a family, but not everyone gets to do that with their best friend."

She smiled back at him and added, "Falling in love with you has been so easy. I don't know why I fought it for so long. You have such gentle grace, quiet strength, but mostly, such incredible kindness. I've never known anyone with as pure a heart." His hand tightened around hers as she added, "I could never love anyone else as much as I do you. Today, I give you everything I am. I give you my heart, my soul, my honor, and our life...together." She slipped the ring on his finger, smiling shyly up at him.

Clark reached over to capture her lips with his. Both hands moved to cup the sides of her face, tracing the outline of her jaw as he deepened the kiss, forgetting the small crowd of loved ones behind them for the moment.

A soft collection of laughter filled the air, and he heard Perry say, "By the power vested in me ...I now pronounce you man and wife. You may... continue kissing the bride."

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The blurry screen flickered as Lex stared back at the image of his attorney. A scowl crossed his face as he waited for the connection to stabilize long enough for him to see a clear image. "You better have some good news, Bender."

"Lex, I'm trying," Bender responded with a huff. "Judge

Winkler transferred the case to Judge Randal. He is not giving on the conditions set up by the special prosecutor. Until trial starts, you'll remain in isolation."

"And you just rolled over like a yellow-bellied worm, didn't you?" Lex hissed in fury. "I will not live in this cage!"

"Lex, I'm doing everything I can."

"You get me out of here, Bender, or you'll rue the day you crossed Lex Luthor."

The screen flickered into blackness and he slammed his fist against the side of it. "Bender? *Bender!!*"

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Lois let out a soft yawn as she reached her hand out to place a hand over her abdomen, smiling to herself when she found her husband's hand already there. She ran her index finger against the gold band wrapped around his ring finger, feeling a thrill run through her at the realization that it was no longer an act, or a role being played.

They were *really* married.

"How you feeling?" Clark asked, tickling her ear with his breath as he nuzzled the nape of her neck.

"Content," she smiled back at him. "Not a way I've been able to describe life lately, so I'll take it."

He smiled back at her, running his hand over her abdomen with a slow smile. She watched his eyes light up in awe as he gazed down at the hint of a bump that could be seen in her midsection. She reached a hand out to stroke his cheek. "Kinda scary, huh?"

"Unexpected," he amended with a shrug, "but nothing we can't handle."

Lois nodded, still reeling from the news they had discovered the day after Clark's proposal. Who knew a simple blood test to follow up on her healing from surgery would have changed their lives in such a profound way? She had run through every worst-case scenario she could over the last few days. Each time he had an optimistic counter for her. Reassuring her that no matter what they would figure this out together.

"You promise you can hear a heartbeat?"

"I promise," he said solemnly.

"I was shot."

"You survived."

"I was on pain killers."

"That you didn't take regularly," he reminded her with a smirk.

"How is this even possible? I mean, every possible thing in the world that should have worked against..." Lois felt her voice waver with uncertainty as she looked back at Clark. "What if...?"

"Hey." Clark reached his hand over to cup her cheek. "It's there. There is a heartbeat. Against every odd," Clark affirmed.

A smile spread across her face and she looked to Clark with tears glistening in her eyes. She felt so many emotions run through her as she held her hands over her abdomen. A baby. They were going to have a baby. The thought of becoming a mother with anyone would have sent her screaming in the other direction just shy of a year ago. Now it didn't seem so scary.

Sure, she knew there was so much she still was unsure of in regards to child rearing but somehow the knowledge that she had Clark with her made it felt like just another thing for them to figure out together. It had taken everything in her not to shout it to the rooftops to her parents and Clark's parents today.

There was still so much they needed to find out before either of them felt ready to tell anyone. For now, they would keep this news to themselves until they had more information which she was sure both sets of grandparents would be asking for.

"I love you," she whispered back to him, reaching her hand out to take his in her palm. He flashed her a smile and she whispered happily. "We're going to be parents."

"I love you, Lois Lane Kent." Clark leaned in to capture her

lips with his, cupping her cheek as he held her to him. His hand moved to her abdomen, covering her hand with his as he tore his lips from hers, meeting her gaze with his own.

"I love you, Clark Kent." She reached up to cup his cheek, feeling the tears glisten in her eyes as he rested his forehead against hers.

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*Three Weeks Later...*

Clark slipped his hand inside his wife's squeezing it in his as they waited for her name to be called. This was it. The day they'd been both dreading and looking forward to for the last few weeks ever since Davenport had called with the date of the trial. After his proposal, he and Lois had eloped, and he'd spent the last few weeks trying to keep Lois distracted and not focus on the upcoming trial they both knew lurked around the corner.

"Lois Lane," the bailiff called out.

"This is it," Lois said with a shaky breath.

"I'll be right there in the gallery," Clark reassured, running his hand up and down her shoulders.

"Say it again," she said with a shaky breath.

"You can do this," he reassured, brushing his lips against her forehead. "You are the strongest person I know. You're a survivor. There is nothing you can't do when you put your mind to it."

Her hand tightened in his and the trembling stopped. A determined expression crossed her face. "I'm ready."

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Jack Davenport sat in the gallery of the courtroom watching as Emmet Vale exited the witness stand. Agent Rollins escorted him out of the courtroom with two bailiffs on either side. Agent Rollins nodded to him as he heard Sheldon Bender arguing with Vincent Blake, the federal prosecutor.

"Your honor, this case against my client, is a sham! They've done nothing to link these crimes to my client," Bender ranted, pointing an accusatory finger at Blake. "The FBI and the Metropolis Police Department have conspired against my client to sully his good name because of unsubstantiated rumors and a vendetta the newly appointed police commissioner has against my client."

"Mr. Bender, there will be no grandstanding in my courtroom," Judge Randall argued, pounding his gavel.

Vincent Blake argued back, "I'm sorry you feel like the corruption of our nations' government is a waste of your time, Mr. Bender, but the federal government takes organized crime pretty seriously."

"All you've done is proven Nigel St. John is the boss. There is nothing and no one to connect him to..."

Davenport saw Clark Kent enter through the double doors and take a seat in front of him. Lois Lane followed with an escort of Commissioner Bill Henderson and his director, Victor Talley. He nodded toward her and gave her a thumbs-up signal as the room fell silent.

"Hello, Lex," Lois said smugly as she walked toward the witness stand.

Victor Blake turned toward Sheldon Bender. "I'm guessing from the look of shock on your client's face that he's surprised to see Ms. Lane...*alive*."

"It's *Kent*," Lois corrected as she stepped into the witness stand.

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Lois kept her gaze focused on the gallery where Clark was seated in the first row behind the prosecutor, Vincent Blake. This was it. Her moment to finally take Lex Luthor down and make him pay for every deplorable act he had committed against both herself and Clark. Of course, she couldn't put into the record everything he had done. She could at least make him pay for his actions against her.

<<"*I own you. I own this city. No one does anything in this*

city without me knowing about it.”>>

<<“Well, it’s no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.”>>

Her mind flashed back momentarily to that night in her apartment, summing up the courage to face the gut-wrenching moment that had changed her life so profoundly. She had survived all of it. She had seen her life flash before her eyes, convinced the end would come any moment as Lex had taunted her again and again with Superman’s absence.

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

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lane, could you repeat that for the record?” Sheldon Bender pressed from his seat behind the defendant’s table. A smirk crossed his face as she swayed his chair from side to side.

She looked to Clark who nodded in her direction as she cleared her throat, looking Bender and Lex dead in the eye to repeat herself. “Lois Lane Kent.”

“Mrs. Kent, you worked with the FBI to build the case against Lex Luthor – a man you had once been engaged to. Why?” Vincent Blake asked, pushing the notebook in front of him away as he leaned back comfortably in his chair.

“Your honor!”

“I’m only presenting the very question the defense will ask on cross-examination,” Blake countered, standing up from his seat.

“Bu...” Bender stammered.

“There is no rule that says the prosecution can’t ask a question regarding to a witness’ motive for testifying.” The judge ruled.

<<“Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I’ve had you?”>>

Lois stared Vincent Blake square in the eyes before looking toward the gallery and shook her head. “He tried to kill me.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Kent, could you be more specific.” Vincent Blake pressed gently. “Who tried to kill you?”

“Lex Luthor,” Lois responded confidently, stealing a glance at Clark.

“We’ve heard testimony that the boss of Metropolis is, in fact, Nigel St. John. All these violent actions tied to the boss of Metropolis were supposedly all done by Nigel St. John.”

<<“How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?”>>

“Nigel has made an attempt on mine and my husband’s life as well. On Lex Luthor’s orders.”

“How do you know that?” Vincent Blake asked, shrugging his shoulders.

“Hearsay!”

“Nice try. I’ll allow it.” Judge Randall wagged his finger in Bender’s direction. “Let the witness have her say. You’ll have your say on cross.”

Bender let out an aggravated huff and sunk back down to his chair as Lois responded to Vincent Blake’s question.

“I attempted to break off the engagement. I realized he wasn’t the person I thought he was and unfortunately I realized it too late.” Lois shook her head in dismay, feeling as if a huge weight was being lifted off her shoulders as she spoke. “He tried to kill me. I was beaten and threatened and choked. He held a gun on me and forced me to call for help knowing there was no one around to help. He stabbed me and just before he was about to leave me to die... He taunted me.” Her tone was cold as she narrowed her eyes, holding back the smile that threatened to break across her face as she watched Lex’s confident smirk disappear, knowing just what she was about to reveal. “How does it feel to know how

close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?”

Blake let out a low whistle, smirking to himself as he looked at his notes and then back up to Lois, “Well, Mrs. Kent? How does it feel?”

“Objection, your honor!” Bender shot up from his seat.

“Withdrawn!”

<<“That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I’m unstoppable.”>>

“Your witness!” Blake replied confidently.

Bender sat leaned over next to Lex, listening as his client hissed in his ear with his orders. Bender shook his head, but finally, begrudgingly stood to his feet and walked to the front of the courtroom.

“Ms. Lane...”

“Kent,” Lois corrected, feeling a smirk cross her face as she saw the fury cross Lex’s face when he heard the name.

“I’m sorry?”

“The name is Kent,” Lois repeated.

“Right.” Bender shook his head. “You married the man my client accused you of cheating on him with. Is that correct?”

“Objection! Relevance!” Blake shot up from his seat.

“I’m establishing character, your honor.”

“You have got to be kidding me!” Blake snapped back.

“Mrs. Kent, that’s an interesting tale you have told the jury about what my client supposedly has done to you.” Bender took a large gulp from his glass of water and then turned to Lois. “But what proof do you have to offer that this supposed attack happened?”

Lois narrowed her eyes at Bender, taken aback by the question.

“Do you have hospital records?”

“I...”

“How about doctor visit records?”

“No.” Lois replied coldly.

“So, we’re just supposed to take your word for it?” Bender asked.

Lois sat in the witness chair, thinking for a long moment before finally contemplating her next move. She would not let Lex weasel his way out of this on the basis that she had no paper trail for the attack. On paper she had been dead.

“The police investigated him, didn’t they?” Lois countered, gripping the hem to her blouse as she stared Bender down with a cold expression.

“Objection, your honor!” Bender countered.

“You opened the door, counselor.” Judge Randall shook his head.

Lois stood up in the witness stand, shaking her head, summing up the courage to nip Bender’s innuendo in the bud. “I’m not exactly sure what you’d like to prove, Mr. Bender, but you want proof?” She lifted the side of her blouse, just enough to see the large pink scar that still covered her midsection with a very clear inscription of the letters, ‘LEX’ that had been carved on her nearly a year ago. “Here’s your proof!”

“Objection!”

“You asked!” Blake countered.

“Mrs. Kent, please take your seat!” Judge Randall snapped before turning on Bender. “Mr. Bender, unless you have a question for this witness...”

“No, your honor.”

“The witness is dismissed,” Judge Randall pounded his gavel.

“Prosecution rests,” Blake announced.

“We’ll take a ten minute recess,” Judge Randall ordered and gestured to Blake and Bender. “I want to see both of you in my chambers. Now.”

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Clark couldn’t help but smile as he watched Lois quickly

descend the steps leading into the witness stand. He stood up from his seat in the gallery and made his way to the swinging gate that separated the gallery from the prosecution and defendant tables. He watched with amusement as Lex Luthor was taken away in chains before Lois had made it across the length of the front of the courtroom. Vincent Blake had promised to keep Luthor as far away from Lois as he could, and he was indeed keeping his word.

Clark reached his hand out to take Lois' as she reached the swinging gate and stepped behind it, letting out a shallow breath. "Lois, you were amazing..." he reached his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him as he rested his arm across her shoulders.

"I just want to get out of here," Lois said in a shaky breath, leaning her head against his shoulder.

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Clark took a deep breath as he waited for the bailiff to bring Luthor back into the courtroom. Lois' testimony had been the last of several witnesses brought forward. Her damning testimony against Luthor, along with Luthor flying into a rage after she'd been sworn in had erased any doubt in the jurors' minds of Luthor's guilt. Bender had tried every attempt in the book to discredit her, but she remained completely composed. It had taken the jury less than an hour to deliberate before finding Luthor guilty. Now all that was left was Luthor's sentencing, which would take place in an hour.

He'd already taken Lois back home to rest. She didn't want to be in the courtroom any longer than she had to, but he did. He wanted to be there and watch to make sure there was no miscarriage of justice. He had to be sure there was no chance Luthor could wriggle himself out of this. He had to be sure Luthor would no longer pose a threat to Lois.

The knowledge that his enemy still knew his secret identity weighed heavily on his mind. Luthor had tried to out him and he didn't doubt he'd try it again if given the chance. Still, he held onto hope that once Luthor lost all credibility here, the threat of his secret identity being exposed would be gone.

The double doors opened, and he saw Luthor being escorted into the courtroom in the orange jumpsuit with the number C100693 printed on the front. Clark felt his jaw tighten as he watched the bailiff lock the chains on Luthor's shackles to the defense table. The bailiff looked up, meeting Clark's eyes with a silent nod before turning toward the double doors leading out of the courtroom. As he passed by he muttered, "Do yourself a favor and try not to kill the bastard just yet. He ain't worth a life sentence."

Clark ground his teeth as he watched the bailiff leave. A chill fell over him as he turned his attention back to the man that was responsible for so much of the pain and suffering both he and Lois had endured over the past eight months. He stood up and strode purposefully toward the defense table Luthor was now chained to and stopped in front of him, slamming his palms on the edge of it just hard enough to make the table shake.

Luthor looked up unimpressed. "Am I supposed to be intimidated now?" He let out a mocking sneer. "You think you've won now, is that it? I'll admit you caught me off my game. Keeping Lois hidden from me was quite a genius move." His eyes darkened as he let out a sinister threat. "You really think you can stop me?"

"It's over, Luthor," Clark hissed in a menacing tone.

"For now, perhaps," Luthor mused. "But I happen to know a secret that every criminal in the world would pay billions upon billions of dollars to know."

"The only criminals you'll be associating with are the criminally insane," Clark bit back, doing his best to not react to the threat. "Your credibility is gone and no one is going to believe the ravings of a delusional psychopath that gets off on beating defenseless women and leaving them for dead."

"Do you really think it's that easy to just move in and take possession of what is mine?" Luthor chuckled. "You really are a desperate fool! Picking up my scraps like a rabid dog..."

Clark smiled back at him. "You can't accept it, can you? Lois finally saw you for the demented monster that you are and you're still holding on to this perverse version of the truth as if it's going to save you somehow." He narrowed his eyes at Luthor and growled out, "If you so much as breathe anywhere near Lois again... I don't care if it's a letter, a phone call, or one of your thugs showing up unannounced... come near her and there won't be enough Kryptonite in the universe to save you from my wrath, you spineless perverted psychopath."

"You think I fear death?" Luthor chuckled.

"You think I'd put an end to your misery? No, that would be too kind," Clark spat out angrily. "I would much rather watch you writhe in pain like the spineless, weak, sorry excuse of a man you are, begging for death that will never... ever come. You will spend every second of every day knowing two things: out of everyone in the world you went up against you were taken down by Lois, and you might have thought you won the battle but she's the one that won the war." His eyes flickered red as he suppressed his anger. "Come near her again, I'll make every day after that a living hell you will never be able to escape."

An uneasy expression crossed Luthor's face and Clark sneered, "Don't look now, Luthor, but your fear is showing." He straightened up and strode toward the back of the courtroom where the bailiff had just reentered. Deciding he had said all he needed to say he walked toward the back of the courtroom as the other bailiff stepped inside, opening the door for the judge to enter. He took his seat in the back of the courtroom and watched as everyone began to slowly trickle in.

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"Mr. Luthor, I find the crimes you have committed horrendous and your disdain and indifferent attitude is horrendous. You are a dangerous criminal with no remorse for your appalling actions. Furthermore, you have proven time and time again just how far you'll go to continue a life of crime. My only hope is that the knowledge of your imprisonment and inability to do more harm on society will bring peace of mind to your victims and their families. May God have mercy on your tortured soul though I doubt you have one." The gavel pounded and the judge ordered, "You are hereby sentenced to thirty life sentences in Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane under maximum security where you will no longer be the disease that you have been on society."

Commissioner Bill Henderson watched from the gallery as Lex Luthor began shouting out threats against his attorney as the bailiffs prepared to escort him out of the courtroom. He turned to see Clark Kent watching from the back of the courtroom with a satisfied smile. Henderson looked back at Davenport who clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's see him bully his way out of this one."

Henderson looked at Davenport. "Why do I have a feeling you had something to do with that sentence?"

"A threat to take one's life should always be taken seriously, don't you agree, Bill?" Davenport winked at him. "Those mental evaluations Sheldon Bender insisted on submitting to the judge helped too."

"Arkham?" Henderson asked uneasily. He'd heard the stories about the place, but never visited.

"I'm sure he'll fit right in," Davenport responded coldly.

"Keep him from causing any further damage to his victims too." He was quiet before adding, "Lex Luthor is a delusional sociopath and he deserves everything that happens to him."

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*Life in Arkham: Luthor's Last Mile*

*By Perry White*

*Governor Pierce Connected to Collusion in White House*

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

"I love a front page news story in the morning, don't you?" Lois beamed, looking back at her husband as he handed her a cup of coffee.

"How are you feeling?" Clark asked, placing a kiss on her cheek.

"Good." She grinned, running her hand over the gold band snugly wrapped around her husband's left ring finger. Even after only two and a half weeks of marriage she found herself needing the reassurance that this wasn't a dream. "Better than I've slept in...ever."

"You're amazing." Clark beamed back at her. "I love you."

"Hey knock it off, wouldya?" Ralph groaned walking past them. "It's not even nine yet. Can't you save the newlywed crap for after lunch?"

Lois twisted her mouth looking back at Clark. "This weekend can't come fast enough."

"Two weeks." He grinned back at her with a heated gaze, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

"Yes, now that Lex is locked away on his way to Arkham we can focus on more important things," she whispered, running a hand down the front of his chest.

"Like our long overdue honeymoon," he agreed leaning in to kiss her.

A smile spread across her face as she beamed back at him. It was hard to believe it had been three weeks since his proposal and their subsequent elopement a few days later. After everything they'd been through the idea of waiting to plan a big event just to say "I do" seemed like borrowing trouble. So after some debate on when and arranging to have Jonathan and Martha flown in and catching her mom before her trip to Seattle, they found a small gazebo to rent for an hour and exchanged their vows. Rather than rushing off to celebrate they'd chosen to wait until after the trial was done. They both needed the reassurance that Lex really was locked away forever and she didn't want to spend their entire honeymoon thinking about the trial. Now that the trial was over they could take the time to plan a two-week getaway with just the two of them.

"Among other things," she purred happily, teasing the knot of his tie. "We really do need to start looking at paint samples soon."

"And furniture," he agreed, making a face. "That couch needs to find a new home."

"I know," Lois sighed, running a hand across his. "There's a long list of things to do..."

Now that the insurance money had finally come back and she'd moved everything from her mom's and her old apartment they could begin determining what to keep and what to give away. They still had a few months to decide if they wanted to stay in the one-bedroom apartment they were currently in or find a bigger place.

It still amazed her to think about how far they'd come over the last year and a half. The days of looking over their shoulders and hiding from Lex and his goons were gone. The city's corruption scandal had exposed all of the misdeeds those on the boss's payroll, and now with the new Mayor stepping in, it looked like everything might settle down long enough for her and Clark to enjoy married life. Well, as normal as Metropolis ever got.

Jimmy held up the phone from his desk and called out, "Chief, there's a hostage situation at the Metropolis Museum of Art." He pointed to the television where coverage of a man in black, holding a round cylinder weapon pointed at the police squad surrounding the building aimed at one of the police cars. The car morphed before the spectators' eyes and exploded.

Lois felt Clark's hand squeeze hers as Perry began shouting orders for everyone to get ready to land the scoop on the newest criminal to dare make a move in Metropolis. She met Clark's eyes, seeing the determined expression on his face. "Sounds like a job for Superman."

They shared a tender look and he led her toward the corridor leading to the back stairwell. "Whoever that guy is, it looks like he's gotten his hands on some serious firepower."

"Military connection or leftovers from LexLabs split?" Lois wondered aloud.

"I don't know," he said, loosening his tie. "I'll check it out and we can have STAR Labs take a look."

"Superman has been slacking on his public appearances these last few weeks," Lois said. "You think someone's trying to test the waters?"

"He's been extremely busy what with his insatiable wife having so much energy lately," his eyes sparkled, and he cupped her cheek.

"Are you complaining?" she teased with a grin.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he responded, pulling his hand away. "I'll try to make this quick." He moved toward the door to the stairwell and she stopped him.

"Forgetting something?" she asked.

He smirked, leaning in to kiss her, cupping her cheek. "I've got to go."

She finished untying his tie for him. "Try not to turn this into anything too big. We still have to stop by the airport to pick up mom." He gave her a muddled look. "Did you forget already?"

"No," he reassured her. "Dinner with your parents is just... complicated."

"This was *your* idea," she reminded him.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he reassured her, placing a hand on her abdomen, leaning in for one last kiss.

Lois watched him leave, shaking her head as she allowed her hand to move to her abdomen, resting there for a moment. One thing was for sure. Life was certainly never dull being married to Clark Kent. "You better not be late."

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Maniacal laughter could be heard in the halls as Lex Luthor was escorted by two heavily armed prison guards through the gates of Arkham Asylum. Lex looked from one end to another, trying to match a face to the sounds of chaos and mayhem that surrounded him. He glanced to the guards, pondering just how much strength it would take to break away from them.

They reached the end of the hallway where a window with a dimly lit fluorescent light emitted a golden hue across the doorway where an older gentleman awaited them. "Mr. Luthor, I see you made it one piece." The man smiled with a dark expression. "I do hope the guards weren't too hard on you." He pointed to the confines that kept Lex's arms strapped into the straitjacket he was in.

A snicker came from the guard on his left and Lex felt a cold chill run down his spine, pondering just how far he had fallen to be disgraced to this level. "Kidnapping attempted mass murder, racketeering...tsk tsk tsk...Well, we certainly have a lot of work to do," The man's eyes went dark as he smiled back at him.

"I'm Dr. Hugo Strange." The man pulled out a bottle from his pocket and a syringe in another hand. "I do hope you'll enjoy your stay with us, Mr. Luthor. I make the rules around here and I expect them to be followed." A gleeful grin crossed his face as he squirted some of the liquid from the syringe out. "I'm told you have some anger issues, Mr. Luthor. Well, we're going to take care of that, won't we?"

A piercing pain hit Lex's shoulder and he let out a low growl, feeling a fatigue wash over him as the room began to turn. Lex let out a hiss of pain and opened his mouth to respond, "You'll pay for this! I will tear you limb from limb and burn this place to the ground!"

"Let's introduce him to Dr. Crane, shall we?" Dr. Strange nodded to the guards and pointed to the hallway behind him. Lex found himself at the mercy of the guards as they escorted him through the darkened hallways.

The maniacal laughter seemed to be getting louder and louder.

“You can’t do this....Do you have any idea who you’re dealing with!?”

Lex struggled against the guards, trying to gain some sort of leverage to free himself from his binds but his attempts were futile as the guards laughed in unison with the laughter coming from the cell door they were approaching. The metal door opened, revealing the distorted figure of a man and scars along his face and a cloth mask on his hand.

Immediately Lex recognized who he was face to face with and he struggled against the guards. “No! No! No!!!!”

“Welcome to Arkham.”

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Clark placed a hand on Lois’ shoulder, giving her a gentle squeeze, silently giving her the support she needed as they looked over at both pairs of parents who seemed oblivious to the exchange. His parents had flown in earlier in the day and after a quick detour at the Metropolis Museum of Art he had picked her mother up from the airport. Sam had been more than willing to adjust his schedule for dinner when they had called him up.

He and Lois had thrown around the idea of how to tell their parents about the baby. First they had put off telling them because they weren’t sure how far along Lois was and then there had been the added stress of Lois testifying against Luthor. Now that Luthor had been sentenced and Lois and he could finally breathe they felt like sharing the news of their upcoming arrival was the next logical step

He knew hiding it any longer than what they’d been able to do for the last three weeks would prove disastrous. They had already lost so much time in the last three months. Lois’ lack of appetite and nausea had been chopped up to recovery from surgery or side affects to the medication. Luckily she had never been good with following directions. Her pain medication dosage had only been taken for a few days before being set aside as Lois stubbornly opted to just tough through it when she didn’t like how the medication made her feel.

He felt the corners of his lips twitch as Lois reached her hand over to grab her glass of water, looking across the table at his in-laws and parents who continued to be oblivious to the news he was bursting at the seams to tell them.

Lois finally nodded and smiled back at them, “So, since I have you all here... I know we typically do Christmas at each of your houses but...”

Her mother broke in, shaking her head, “You can’t be serious, Lois. I know it’s not the most glamorous Christmas party but...! I just spent the last nine months thinking you were dead!

Lois grinned back at Clark before diving into her response, “Mom, I’m not going to be able to fly *anywhere* during the holidays.” She looked at Jonathan and Martha with a glint in her eyes.

A frown crossed her mother’s face. “Why not?”

Lois shrugged her shoulders and set two white boxes down in front of each set of future grandparents with a smile. “We had a bit of unexpected news at my last follow up appointment.”

Her mother reached over to open her box at the same time his parents reached for theirs. An eruption of “Oh, my God!” and “A baby!” came from each of them as hugs and well wishes were exchanged. Finally, Clark allowed the broad grin he’d been holding back for nearly a month cross his face and turned to his and Lois’ parents, preparing to answer the questions they had as best as they could.

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Jenna Blake held the wireless headset to her ear as she examined her reflection in the mirror, running a hand through her dark brown hair. Her bright blue eyes glinted off the fluorescent lights behind her as she tucked the microphone inside her blouse.

She let out a long breath as she took another look in the mirror.

“We sure this contact is who’s moving this drug into Washington?” She asked the team listening in.

“That’s what the lead said,” her partner and fiancé’s voice came in over the line.

“We really need to discuss these undercover assignments in advance,” Jenna said, dabbing at the eyeliner under her eyes. “Prostitute isn’t exactly what I signed up for when I joined the department.”

“Sorry, Jenna, they didn’t let me pick the assignment this time.”

“Just get in and get out,” came her captain’s voice. “Just don’t do anything stupid like getting yourself killed, Jenna.”

“Yeah, yeah, I can feel the sympathy you have for my plight.” Jenna shrugged her shoulders, tugging at the low collar of her top.

“Any word on the girl?” Jenna asked, combing her hair with her fingertips.

“She didn’t make it.” Her captain’s voice came over the speaker. “Just be careful, Jenna.”

“When am I not careful?” Jenna responded with a smirk.

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Jack Davenport looked at the large conference room that had been packed up from the months and months of investigation that had brought down Lex Luthor. He should feel something. They had won. Lex Luthor was behind bars and wouldn’t pose any threat to society where he would be serving his sentence, but somehow he couldn’t allow himself to celebrate.

“Hey Davenport.” A hand clasped over Jack’s shoulder and he looked up to see his director, Victor Talley, holding an empty glass and a bottle of scotch.

“Celebrating?” Davenport asked.

Talley shook his head, pouring the scotch into the glasses in his hand and passed one of the glasses to him. “When we lose an agent, it’s like a kick to the gut. It’s hard to allow yourself the opportunity to celebrate the wins when you carry that loss with you.”

“Wallace was a good agent.” Davenport commented, holding his glass up to toast his former partner.

“To Wallace,” Talley said, clinking his glass with Jack’s. He looked down, staring at the content of his glass, and sighed. “Not many cases tear you apart from the insides but this one... This one was a big one, Davenport.”

Jack looked to the conference room and commented, “There’s a lot of cases that’ll probably be busted open by what we’ve pulled off of Luthor’s hard drives and the encrypted files... There’s no telling how far his reach truly was.”

“Maybe,” Talley commented, taking a sip of his Scotch. “But that is for someone else to worry about.” He pointed to the door behind him. “I want you to take some time and recharge. This case hit us both in a hard way. I need my best agent at the top of his game.”

“Is this your way of saying you’re kicking me out?”

“Consider it a strongly worded suggestion with the intention of taking your keys if you try and show up here tomorrow.” Talley chuckled.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to work on my golf swing...” Davenport joked.

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## Chapter 1: Bite My Tongue and Hold My Breath

### *Five Years Later...*

A smile spread across Lois Lane’s face as she pressed her cheek against the cotton pillow beneath her. She felt her husband’s breath against the nape of her neck as he wrapped his arms around her, looping his right arm comfortably around her waist as he pressed his lips against her cheek. She reached her hand back, patting his cheek and grinning to herself when she felt him pull her against him, leaning in to capture her lips as he leaned over her

shoulder. Her lips parted, feeling his lips caress hers as his hands roamed up and down her sides.

She rolled over on her side, turning to face him and reached her hand out to cup his cheek. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself,” he replied, cradling her in his arms.

She brushed her index finger against the bridge of his nose, noting the tension lines across his forehead. “Everything okay?”

Clark shook his head, resting his forehead against hers.

“Just...grateful.” His hand brushed across her face, outlining the frame of her face with his thumb as he gazed back at her.

“Counting our blessings.”

She pointed to the purplish bruise on his forehead. “Last night’s run-in with Parasite still hasn’t completely healed up.”

Her mind drifted back to the run-in Clark had had with the latest supervillain that had been hell bent on using Clark as his never-ending energy supply. Another recent accidental villain due to bureaucracy incompetence. A point that she would be sure to point out when she put the finishing touches on Parasite’s reign of terror of Metropolis.

Rudy Jones seemed to be just another ordinary janitor. He had worked at S.T.A.R. Labs for years. However when faced with the opportunity to take advantage of one of the scientists’ forgetful nature he had been exposed to a radioactive substance that had turned him into a powerful being that couldn’t seem to quench his thirst for energy – feeding off of innocent Metropolis citizens until he found himself facing off with Superman.

Clark and Dr. Klein had found a way to combat Parasite by using his unquenchable thirst for energy against him. The poisonous rock that had the power to bring Clark to his knees had been the very weapon they needed to combat Parasite. After inheriting Clark’s abilities temporarily, the nefarious villain had inherited his weaknesses as well. Thankfully, after Parasite’s exposure to the Kryptonite all memories he’d inherited from Clark – including the knowledge that Clark and Superman were one and the same- had disappeared.

Clark shrugged his shoulders, tightening his arms around her, “Dr. Klein said it should be healed up in a few days.” He leaned in to kiss her. “Lois, I’m fine, I promise.” His hand moved across her cheek. “Parasite is in custody without a single memory of anyone he victimized. We found one *good* thing to use Kryptonite for. Most of my strength has returned. I’m here with my gorgeous wife and our incredible son who is still snoring like a chainsaw in the next room – who continues to be oblivious that anything even happened last night.”

“Thanks to his knack for getting his grandparents to stop for ice cream on the way home.” Lois bit her lower-lip, feeling her own doubts waver as she stared back at him. “He doesn’t snore like a chainsaw. A leaf blower maybe...”

“My mistake.” Clark grinned back at her.

“I love you, you know that,” Lois murmured back at him.

“I believe you’ve mentioned it a time or two,” he stroked her jaw with his thumb. He let out a chuckle, “He’s still snoring like a bullhorn.”

She giggled, leaning against him. “It’s cute.”

“Adorable,” he agreed, nodding his head in agreement. “But I’m glad he isn’t sleeping in here anymore.”

“Yeah?” Lois teased, tracing his collar bone with her index finger. “I kinda miss it. His little baby snores and rocking him to sleep.”

“Mmm hmm.” Clark tightened his arms around her. “And that curious expression he used to get when he was trying to figure something new out.” He gave her a peck on the cheek. “Just like his mother.”

“How is our son already turning *four*?” Lois whimpered, leaning her head against him.

“I don’t know,” Clark chuckled, leaning in to brush his lips against her cheek. “Seems like just yesterday we were watching

him struggle to scoot across the foyer floor and now we’re lucky if he can even sit still long enough to stay in one room for longer than twenty minutes.”

Lois let out a breath, feeling the mixed emotions hit her like a wave. While she loved every second of Jon’s curious nature and watching him become more and more like his father everyday there was a part of her that ached for him to stay this age just a little longer. The surprise of her pregnancy with Jon and his subsequent arrival had left both her and Clark in survival mode the better part of their first year of marriage. Looking back on that time she found herself yearning for the easier times when her rambunctious toddler was still small enough to fit in her arms and the hardest thing either of them had to figure out was whether he was hungry or tired.

Clark’s gaze drifted to the curve of her hip where his hand was currently resting. She followed his gaze momentarily before turning her attention back to him, tracing the outline of his jaw with her index finger. A slow smile spread across her face as she looped her arms around his neck, “So, Jon is still asleep?”

A knowing look crossed his face and he wiggled his eyebrows at her before wrapping her in his arms and rolling on top of her as she let out a light-hearted giggle, savoring the feeling of being in her husband’s arms.

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Martha Kent finished placing the red bow on the polka dot covered gift in front of her. Jonathan brought over a fresh cup of coffee. “You know he’s just going to tear that to pieces when he sees it, Martha.”

“I know, but I want to make sure everything’s perfect.” Martha beamed back at her husband. She let out a happy sigh. “I can’t believe Jon is already turning four.”

“Time certainly does fly by, doesn’t it?” Jonathan chuckled, taking a seat next to her.

She followed his gaze, looking around the townhome they had been living in for the last four and a half years. After Lois and Clark had shared the news of Lois’ pregnancy and some discussions with Wayne Irig, they had made the difficult decision to move to Metropolis and rent out the farmhouse to Wayne and his nephew, Eugene. The decision wasn’t made lightly. Both her and Jonathan had grown up in Smallville and loved every moment they had shared there. Though as much as they both loved the small town, they knew the trips from Smallville to Metropolis would continue to be burdensome. More so with the arrival of their first grandchild. Missing moments with him and their son due to their being so far away seemed like a small issue that could easily be addressed with a necessary move to the city their son had called home.

As much as she had expected Jonathan to argue with her on this decision, he had been the biggest supporter. The move had made it so they could help with Jon when Lois and Clark needed them and start what she liked to refer to as their own second act. Jonathan had taken a job at a local hardware store and moved up over the last few years into management, finding his niche in the quick paced city he had once despised. Finding friends in some of the most unique places. The owner of the hardware store, Al was originally from Kansas. The two had immediately hit it off and forged a friendship.

Martha had been working part time at the Museum of Art and taking advantage of some of the free classes that were offered to seniors at the Metropolis University. So far she had learned two new languages and become immersed in art history. She enjoyed the intellectual challenges that came with learning new subjects and savored the flexibility it gave her. She had quickly made friends with the other senior students and even bonded with Al’s sister, Marie who often accompanied them on their dinners and visits with Al.

Metropolis had become their home and with it she and

Jonathan had grown closer, savoring each moment they had with their grandson and watching their son grow into the father and husband they knew he was capable of. It was hard to imagine it was nearly six years ago when their lives had been turned upside down by Lex Luthor's deadly attack on both Lois and Clark. The mental scars were still there for both Lois and Clark – even after all these years. But rather than let the painful memories define them they had grown in spite of the despicable acts they had endured at the hands of Lex Luthor.

She admired and respected the resilience Lois had shown through the trials she had been forced to undergo. Through everything, she never gave up. She had fought tooth and nail to save Clark from his mental and physical prison and helped pull him from the depths of despair to find himself once more. Watching and hearing of the progress Clark had made through their time on the run, Martha had become convinced Lois was the only one for Clark. The heinous acts she had suffered that would have sent anyone else running for the hills had only made her more determined. She refused to give up on Clark and, even more so, refused to allow him to walk away from his alter-ego. The alter-ego that Lex Luthor now knew.

Every fear Clark had once had had become a reality. It became her and Jonathan's reality as well when they had been forced to hide, knowing Lex Luthor was out there and capable of anything. They had spent months desperately waiting for some form of communication from Clark after he'd been rescued. It never came. Lois was desperately trying to keep them informed as she looked over her shoulder and attempted to drag Clark out of the mental despair he had been locked away in. Both she and Jonathan had resigned themselves to the fact that he may never reach out. Until the moment that he had contacted Wayne Irig. The relief that had washed over the both of them when they had gotten the call from Wayne had brought her to tears. They both had been so relieved to finally see Clark and hear his voice.

Though, he was not the same person he had once been. What he had suffered at the hands of Lex Luthor – it had changed him. Over time, the bitterness had disappeared, but Clark was no longer naive about the world and never allowed himself to go into a situation without having an exit strategy. Attending a rescue without first letting someone know was a thing of the past. It was a necessary change that she wished had not come at such a steep price.

Still, deep down, the core of what made Clark the man she and Jonathan had raised him to be was still there. A truth that she savored as she watched him grow into a loving husband and father, dedicated to taking care of his family – even when life had been so cruel.

"Think he'll like it?" Martha asked, holding up the medium sized box with a big red bow on the top.

"I think Jon will love it." Jonathan beamed, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek.

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Tobias Berg was not a patient man. His dark eyes reflected nothing of the sort when he bore into those unfortunate enough to have crossed him. He fingered the thinning hair on the top of his head and let out a heavy sigh as he looked over at his lieutenant who was shaking in fear.

"Gregory, do I look like a man that accepts failure?" Tobias picked the sterling silver pen up from its stand on his desk and examined it as he spoke. "I gave you a job. A chance to turn your life around after society so mercilessly turned its back on you."

"Tobias, I swear I'll find her..." Gregory stammered out as Tobias flipped the end of the pen open and revealed a hidden switchblade. Gregory's eyes widened in horror and stammered. "Tobias, please just let me talk to some of the girls. I'm sure I can..." Gregory let out a loud hiss as he reached for his leg that was now impaled with the sharp silver pen.

Tobias looked across the room unfazed by Gregory's yelps of pain and coldly remarked, "Be sure to have that cleaned. It was a gift."

"Yes, Tobias," Gregory whimpered behind his tears as he limped out of the room.

Lois let out a happy sigh, watching as Jon poured a spoonful of the cake batter into the cakepan in front of him. She glanced toward the living room where Clark was discreetly setting up decorations out of the line of sight of the birthday boy. Jon like any other boy his age looked up to Superman and admired him but still didn't know that Superman and his daddy were one and the same. And if she had anything to say about it, Jon would remain in the dark about that fact for as long as they could reasonably get away with it. She knew it wasn't realistic to expect he would believe his father and Superman were two different people forever but having her son's childhood changed with a revelation like this wasn't something she looked forward to. It felt no different than telling him there was no Santa Claus or Easter Bunny.

"Look, mommy!" Jon squealed as the cake batter swirled into different colors that almost looked like a rabbit. "A bunny cake!"

"Mmm, bunny cakes are my favorite." Lois grinned back at him as she reached over to help him even the cake batter out with the spatula.

"Mine too," Jon giggled pouring another spoonful into the cake pan.

"Bunny cake?" Clark called, walking up behind them. "I thought we were making a neon cake."

"We are but look!" Jon pointed at the bright yellow patterns inside the cake pan. "A bunny."

"That's awesome, buddy." Clark leaned in to hug him, reaching over to brush some of the blue cake batter off Jon's face. "You think it's ready to go in the oven."

"Yup!" Jon grinned back at Clark, setting his spoon inside the now empty batter bowl.

Lois watched with a smile as Jon was handed his own set of oven mitts to put on. Clark put on the show of slipping his own oven mitts on and opened the oven door and set the cake pan inside the oven and closed the door.

"All right, high five." Clark held his hand up for Jon to give him a high five through the oven mitt he was wearing. "Happy Birthday, buddy."

"It's my birthday, mommy!" Jon grinned on happily.

"So, I've been told," Lois whispered, leaning in to kiss him on the cheek. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up before your grandparents get here."

Jon grinned happily, holding up his sticky red and green hands for inspection. The color would be a pain to get out, but the memories would last forever. Lois led him over to the sink to help him clean the color off his hands.

"How many kids are supposed to be coming?" Clark asked, wiping down the counter as Lois lathered enough soap for Jon to clean his hands with.

"I think there were eight kids that RSVP'd," Lois said helping Jon rub his hands together beneath the water to wash the soapy residue away.

"How many pizzas do you think?" Clark asked, pointing to the time.

"Oh, shoot!" Lois let out a heavy sigh. "I forgot to order the pizza."

"I'll go pick it up," Clark handed her a towel to dry Jon's hands.

"Okay, um, I guess cheese and pepperoni for the kids and what do you think three large for the grown-ups?" Lois guessed aloud as she patted Jon's hands dry.

"Sounds good." Clark leaned in to kiss her then leaned down to where he was eye-level with Jon. "Any special requests from the birthday boy?"

“Cheese!” Jon grinned back at his dad happily. “Lots of cheese.”

“Cheese it is.” Clark tapped his hand to his forehead as if to salute a superior. “Be good for you mom, bud. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Yes, sir.” Jon tapped his own forehead with his arm and watched as his dad headed for the door to leave. He looked back at his mom and asked, “How much longer until we can frosty the cake?”

“The cake will have to cool down before we can frost it,” Lois explained, pointing toward the back door leading to their backyard. “How about we go test that bouncy house out?”

“Yay!”

*Five Years Ago...*

Clark moved around the townhome, setting the last of the boxes in the foyer. He glanced toward the kitchen where Lois was sitting on the floor attempting to unpack the pots and pans from where they had been neatly packed up. He let out a soft chuckle when he saw Lois staring at the small steaming pot with confusion as she placed her hand in the bottom of it.

“It’s for steaming vegetables,” Clark explained from the doorway.

“It has holes in the bottom,” Lois pondered aloud as she shook her head. “I feel like I’m missing a piece somewhere...”

“Here.” Clark pointed to the matching stainless-steel pot sitting just out of reach.

Lois placed the pot beneath the steamer pot, smirking back at him when they fit perfectly. “Well, that makes sense.”

“Last of the boxes have been moved,” Clark said, squatting down to help take the empty box from Lois.

“So, we’re officially moved in?” Lois asked with a glint in her eyes.

“I still have to drop the keys off with Floyd, but yes,” Clark grinned back at her. “We’re officially moved in.” He looked around the kitchen, noting the half-emptied boxes. “Is there a reason you started in the kitchen?”

“I was looking for the cups,” Lois gave him a wry expression, “and then got distracted.”

Clark let out a chuckle, reaching over to move one of the boxes to make room for him to take a seat next to her. “I’ll find the cups.” He lowered his glasses, looking over to the left where the small kitchen island was covered in three boxes and grinned. “Second box to the left.” He pointed at the kitchen island proudly.

She reached up to brace herself on the cabinet handle behind her, attempting to stand up. No small feat at four and a half months pregnant. Clark reached his hand out to help her to her feet as he rose from the tile floor.

“Ta da.” He pulled the tape on the top of the box off and flipped the flap over to reveal the neatly packed cups to Lois.

“My hero,” Lois gushed, leaning in to kiss him as she looped her arms around his neck. She let out a heavy sigh, looking around their new townhome with a weary expression. “It’s going to take us forever to get this place unpacked.”

“I can have everything unpacked in two seconds,” Clark reminded her, reaching his hand out to stroke her cheek.

“Taking everything out of boxes is one thing, but we still need to figure out where to put everything,” Lois reminded him, stroking the outline of his jaw with her index finger. “We have no furniture, remember?”

“We have a bed...and a dresser,” he reminded her happily, wrapping his arms around her expanding waist. “The rest of everything can go in the spare bedroom until the rest of the furniture gets here.”

“Uh-huh,” Lois giggled, shaking her head. “My point exactly.”

“Well, so we live out of boxes for a few weeks,” he shrugged his shoulders. “We’ve survived worse.”

“I know,” she offered him a sad smile. “I just wish we could get everything unpacked before I start resembling the Metro blimp and can barely make it up and down the stairs.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re barely even showing,” he placed his hands possessively over the small bump that had begun to form along her waistline. “And you’re gorgeous.”

“I can barely make it down the steps to the newsroom without getting winded,” Lois reminded him.

“They added like eight steps,” Clark reminded her. “Perry even gets winded.”

“Uh-huh,” Lois gave him a ‘yeah right’ expression rolling her eyes. “You’re biased.”

“Maybe, but that still doesn’t change the fact that you my gorgeous wife are the most incredible pregnant woman I’ve ever seen.” Clark tightened his arms around her, leaning in to kiss her.

“Smooth talker,” Lois teased, stroking his face with her palm.

“And I mean every word,” he murmured, resting his forehead against hers. “Lois, we’ve got plenty of time to figure out where everything’s going to go...” He gestured to the space around them. “We’ve got four bedrooms to work with.”

Lois nodded silently, resting her head against his chest. “We lost three months of planning. I feel like we’re scrambling to catch up. There’s still so much to do.”

“I know,” Clark acknowledged, letting out a long sigh. “We’ll figure it all out. Just like we always do.”

“Pretty confident there,” Lois noted with a smile.

Clark smiled, “I’ve seen you face off with some pretty fearsome opponents. I think time management will run screaming by the time you’re done with it.”

Lois let out a soft giggle, looping her arms around her neck.

“So, what you’re saying is I’m worrying for nothing?”

“No, I think it’s good you’re worried. I’m just trying to put it into perspective.” Clark ran his hand against her back and pointed to the corner where two boxes were sitting on top of the built-in breakfast nook. “I know it seems like a lot. But when this little one is born and driving us both crazy with feeding schedules and arguing about dinner and bedtime stories it won’t seem that big of a deal.”

“You think so?” Lois looked up at him with a grin.

“I know so,” he replied confidently. He gestured to the island. “This little one is going to be so lucky to have you as his or her mother. Teaching him or her how to talk and read and cook...”

“Don’t get any ideas about cooking. I’m still limited on my expertise in the kitchen,” Lois reminded him with a giggle.

He let out a chuckle, “Oh, I don’t know about that...”

“*Cooking!*” Lois swatted his chest playfully as he leaned in to capture her mouth with his.

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Jack Davenport looked over the report in front of him, uncertain how to respond to the DEA Agent in front of him. A frown crossed his face as he looked to the dark haired man sitting across from him.

“Agent Scardino...”

“Dan.”

“Dan,” Davenport let out a heavy sigh as he glanced up at him, setting the report down. “This case is over a month old. Any lead your partner might have had would have been dried up by now. The FBI can’t just commit its resources to find an agent the DEA lost contact with. Especially if she was...”

“Look, Davenport, I get it. The FBI plays by different rules than the DEA. I don’t want to get into a pissing contest over whose badge is bigger.” Dan Scardino waved his hand in the air. “Frankly, I don’t give a damn. Jenna wouldn’t just go silent on us. There’s something more going on here.”

“Let’s say I believe you, Agent Scardino.” Davenport pointed to the file in front of him. “What have I got to go on?”

Scardino let out a heavy sigh. “They say you’re one of the

best agents on the force.” Dan gave him a pleading look. “I’m desperate. I know Jenna. I know she wouldn’t just...”

“She was more than just your partner, wasn’t she?”

Davenport summarized.

“She was my fiancée.” Dan Scardino swallowed hard, running his hands across his face with a weary sigh. “Please, Davenport, I just need someone to help me.”

“Officially, I have to tell you there’s no case here. Officially, I have to tell you that given the time lapse and the fact that the DEA has yet to declare Agent Blake as an official missing agent there is nothing the FBI can do.” Davenport jotted his number down on the pad with a note of where to start and pushed it toward Scardino. “Officially that’s what I have to tell you.”

Dan Scardino smiled, reading the note on the pad and tucking it into his pocket. “Thank you for your time, Agent Davenport.”

“Good luck, Agent Scardino.”

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*Present Day...*

The backyard was filled with laughter as Clark carried the tall stack of pizzas in his arms, keeping an eye out for any toddlers darting in front of him as he made his way to the folding table Lois had setup for the food and cake. He stole a glance toward the bouncy house where Jon was propped up against the side with his friend, Michael, picking up the colorful balls that had fallen out.

“Mmm, pizza,” Lois grinned when she saw him approaching.

Clark smiled, leaning in to kiss Lois as he set the boxes down on the space she had cleared off. “Pepperoni and cheese.” He pointed to the box on the bottom. “And of course, one supreme no onions.”

“My hero,” Lois grinned back at him, looping her arms around his neck.

“Pizza!” he heard Jon’s voice squeal from across the backyard with the subsequent shrieks coming from his friends.

He quickly went into action, grabbing plates and helping Lois set out the pizza for the kids while his mom and dad helped carry the plates over to the small table they had setup with a blue and green table cloth. A grin crossed his face as he watched the crowd of kids surround the table, taking their seats with loud cheers. Once the kids were settled, he turned his attention to Lois who was watching Jon with an equally content expression he was sure was mirrored on his own face.

Ellen approached, cradling her water bottle with her sunglasses pushed back on her head, looking on at Jon and his friends and then back to where Lois and he were standing. “What a turnout. Did you see those kids trying to do backflips in the ball pit?”

“They’re having a blast, Mom,” Lois agreed, letting out a long sigh. “I’m still not sure why you had to have such an extravagant bouncy house. He would have been fine with a ball pit and some water guns.”

“Oh, I know, but he’ll only turn four once,” Ellen gushed, leaning in to give them both a side hug. “Besides, it’s a grandparent’s job to spoil her grandkids.” She let out a long sigh. “Lord knows with the rate your sister is going this might be my only chance...”

Lois let out a groan, shaking her head. “Lucy is in med school, Mom.”

“Ellen, I think the attendant was looking for you.” Sam approached, pointing to the man standing by the colorful red and blue bouncy house behind him. “I think there was a misunderstanding on the time...”

“Oh, for goodness sake...” Ellen mumbled, heading toward the attendant to sort out the confusion.

Clark let out a chuckle as he watched her leave and turned to where Sam and his dad were squatted at the miniature picnic table, helping refill Jon and his friends’ plates. He felt a heavy weight on his chest as he watched the two grandfathers interact with his son.

It amazed him to watch little innocent moments like this unfold. There was a time when a quiet afternoon like this with their families and friends all together would have been a fool’s dream. After everything that had happened with Luthor – nearly losing everything he held dear – he never would have imagined the future would be so bright. He found a way to push past his fears and embrace his alter-ego despite Luthor’s knowledge of his being Superman.

He never would have imagined he and Lois would have ever been able to work through the demons that had weighed on them. Not only had they endured the very worst at Luthor’s hands and survived but they had found a way to build their lives together from the ashes of what had been. There had been a time when he had accepted his fate to forever be known as his undercover identity, Collin Kane – destined to never revisit his life as Clark Kent again. He had resigned himself to his fate and spent many nights tortured over the heavy loss. If he had his way, he probably would have stayed hidden and never ventured out.

Lois had pushed him.

Lois had been his saving grace through every torturous moment. She had been there to help guide him back and remind him of who he was when he was content to bury himself in his depression and forget the world. She refused to give up on him. To this day, she continued to be his rock and the very fiber that kept him grounded when the world around them threatened to become too much.

Jon’s very existence was a miracle. Conceived in the heat of the moment after nearly two years of quiet longing – Jon was the beautiful miracle he would thank the heavens for every waking moment of every day. It had been terrifying to learn Lois was not only pregnant but had survived the impossible throughout.

Gunshots.

Surgery.

Recovery.

She had endured it all and Jon had continued to survive – proving just how strong his will to live was. Thankfully Pete had already known about his alter ego. His childhood friend had proven to be a great ally and had subsequently introduced them to Dr. Klein who had been an equally trustworthy friend and confidante.

He stole a glance toward Lois who appeared to be carrying the weight of the innuendo from her mother’s recent complaints over subsequent grandchildren. He sighed and reached his arm over to hold her close.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Fine,” Lois shrugged her shoulders, twiddling with the fabric on her blouse. “I think we should probably let these kids run off some more energy before cutting the cake.”

“Probably a good idea. I don’t think they’ll argue.” Clark grinned back at her. He placed a hand on her shoulder. “Lois?”

“I know it wasn’t aimed *at* me...” Lois said softly.

“She didn’t mean it,” Clark said gently. “You know how your mom gets.”

“I know,” Lois smiled sadly.

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The underground transit station was abuzz with activity as people moved from place to place, focused on their next destination. Mothers tending to their children as they waited impatiently for the next train to come through. Businessmen and women checking the time as they calculated the time they had to prepare for their next meeting with a client. Each person was lost in their own world as the underground subway tunnels hummed with the trains whirling by in the distance.

Everyone that is except for one person.

Off to the corner where the tracks and open platform began, a young woman with a slender figure and bleach blonde hair stood with her arms wrapped around her. The breeze from the motion of

the trains flying by bristled through her hair as she stared off into the distance, watching everyone.

Watching the Transit Manager sift through the tickets that had been collected through the turnstiles.

Watching the many patrons whose attention were anywhere but focused on her.

Watching as the Transit Operator drove unsuspectingly toward her.

She took in a deep breath, steadying herself as the wind bristled through her hair and she took a step toward the edge of the open platform....

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*Five Years Ago...*

Lois fingered her husband's hand as she leaned back against the thin sheet covering the exam table. This was her second visit with the doctor since discovering she was pregnant. Her mind had been reeling from the shock for the better part of a month, still trying to comprehend how a baby had survived her being shot and the stress of Dr. Pete Ross' emergency surgery to retrieve the bullets and the heavy dose of drugs that weren't even in the realm of being safe for pregnancy. Still, this baby had stubbornly survived against all odds, proving that much like his or her parents this baby was made of much stronger stuff than what they could toss his or her way.

"You're about eighteen and a half weeks now?" the technician asked as she squeezed the warm gel on her small bump and rolled the ultrasound wand over her bump.

"Yes," Lois said nervously, gripping Clark's hand as she waited for the familiar thumping of their unborn child's heartbeat to fill the room.

"Hmm, someone is hiding from us today." The technician frowned, moving the wand to the side.

Lois glanced back at Clark feeling a sense of dread run down her spine. "I-is that normal?"

"Babies tend to move around a lot in the later months," the technician explained. "I think we've found.. Ah! There we are." The loud thumping filled the room, and Lois smiled as she listened to the sound of her baby's heartbeat once more. The more time she spent preparing for their child's upcoming arrival the more she felt this innate instinct to go to the ends of the Earth to protect the life growing inside her.

"Someone's a little stubborn today." The technician commented as the thumping stopped again.

"Probably hereditary," Clark remarked with a teasing smile as the thumping returned.

"Heartbeat and placenta all look normal." The technician smiled as she continued rolling the wand over Lois' belly. "Oh! It looks like we can even see what the baby is —unless you want to wait?"

Clark looked at Lois. "It's up to you."

"We want to know," Lois said letting out a long breath as Clark wrapped an arm around her.

The technician smiled warmly, "Looks like we have a healthy baby boy. Congratulations."

"A boy?" Lois' voice cracked when she heard the gender as tears she didn't even realize were there began to trickle down her cheeks.

"Looks to be a perfectly healthy baby boy," the technician noted as she pointed out the different parts that were growing on their son, noting the different measurements she wasn't sure how to make heads or tails of.

Lois looked back at Clark as he whispered in her ear, "I love you."

\*\*\*

Dr. Albert Schiller examined the droplets in the tube in front of him. The features on his face tensed as he looked through the microscope, tapping his hand on the table with a light drum. He

smiled to himself, snapping the rubber gloves on his hands and then pulled out a small syringe.

A sharp hiss came from the cage where he had locked up stray animals that had made the mistake of crossing over his doorstep. "Not to worry. This will only hurt for a moment..."

The phone rang on the other side of where his lab was setup and he let out a low growl, setting the syringe down and reaching for the phone. "What is it?"

"We got the leak taken care of, Dr. Schiller." The thick German accent came over the phone lines and Schiller recognized the voice immediately as one of his business acquaintances, Yusuf Ligor.

"It's contained?"

"She won't be talking to anyone ever again."

"Be sure to contain any others she may have spoken with," Schiller ordered before slamming the phone down.

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The pristine white walls had little effect on Clark Kent's mood as he looked across the desk to where his friend, Pete Ross was seated, fiddling with the pen in his hand. The décor was exactly what he would have expected from Pete. Classic cars framed on the wall with a few collections of photographs from Pete's wedding to Lana and of course the graduation photos next to his framed doctorate degree hanging on the wall.

Pete tossed the hacky sack in the air as he finally broke the silence. "I'm not an OB."

"I know." Clark let out a heavy breath, shaking his head.

"I don't even live in Metropolis," Pete reminded him.

"Another good point," Clark agreed, running a hand through his hair.

"You need a *real* doctor."

"Isn't that what you went to medical school for?"

"Oh, he's got jokes now," Pete joked, letting out a quiet snort. He set the hacky sack down on his desk and sighed. "Look, I can't explain it. The only plausible explanation is what makes you...you is what protected the baby from..."

"Being shot," Clark supplied grimly.

"The bullet was close. I didn't say it struck any major organs there." Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Her shoulder took more damage than anything."

"And the whole nearly dying and having an emergency surgery in your exam room?" Clark cocked an eyebrow at him. "The morphine alone..."

"There's no other explanation, Clark," Pete let out a long sigh. "I'm sorry."

"What if something else shows up?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know." Clark let out a heavy sigh. "I'm in uncharted territory here."

"Look, I get it. It's scary as hell, but..."

"I can't take the risk of someone connecting Lois and our son to Superman," Clark said firmly. "Look what happened with Luthor."

"You think her doctor is going to throw her in a Kryptonite laced asylum?" Pete shook his head. "That'd definitely get 'em in front of the medical board."

"You're not funny."

"You give me unrealistic scenarios and I give you reality."

Pete grinned back at him. "It's an even trade."

"I'm serious."

"I know you are," Pete nodded, pulling out a pen and paper. "Look, I don't think you're at any risk with Lois seeing a regular OB, but I do think you should work with someone to help plan for when little Supes there starts floating in his crib..."

"Not even remotely funny, Pete..."

"What, you don't think the kid is gonna take after his old man?" Pete teased.

"I've got enough to worry about." Clark ran a hand across his face and shook his head.

"Look, I know you're a little put off after everything with that Dr. Kelly character but this is one of the doctor's I interned with out in Washington. He has one of the best reputations out there and he excels in challenging the norm and examining the paranormal..." Pete chuckled, "He's right up your alley."

"Sounds promising at least..." Clark admitted. "What's this guy's name?"

"Bernard Klein. He just transferred to S.T.A.R. Labs. He hasn't picked his location yet." Pete passed the card to him and winked. "Maybe a visit from everyone's favorite superhero will persuade him to settle down in Metropolis."

"Thanks Pete." Clark smiled back at his friend.

"Anytime, man." Pete nodded to him and added with a smile, "Now, in between freaking out and stressing over the boogie man, I do hope you find a way to relax."

"Easier said than done."

"See? You're already starting to sound like a dad."

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*Present Day...*

Lois set her mug of hot tea on the table, looking toward the living room where Jon was fast asleep on the couch curled up next to his Grandpa Jon while Martha and Ellen were catching up with one another. She stole a glance at Clark who was cleaning up the kitchen.

She felt the corners of her mouth twitch as she looked on. It warmed her heart to see her son experience the simple moments with family she never had. She didn't have a lot of memories with her grandparents. Many of the memories she did have were of the hospital visits when her grandmother was near the end of her life. Watching Jon have the joy of spending time on a regular basis with both sets of grandparents filled her heart with such joy.

When Martha and Jonathan had announced their intention to move to Metropolis, both she and Clark had been concerned. The decision couldn't be an easy one, and neither she nor Clark wanted them to uproot their lives over a false sense of obligation to either of them. Clark had quickly countered them with the reminder of Jonathan's apprehension of the big city. The farm had been in the family for generations and giving up that life wasn't something that just happened overnight. The cultural change would be hard for both of them.

Still, Martha and Jonathan had been determined. When they explained their reasoning for wanting to be closer, neither she nor Clark could argue with the logic. It would be easier having them nearby. Sharing the milestones Jon had over the years had certainly been all the more wonderful knowing the Kents were just a phone call away.

Her parents had certainly surprised her too. Not only had they figured out how to bury the hatchet they each had been carrying for years, but somewhere in the midst of the chaos they had learned to not only coexist with one another, but to rediscover what it was that made them love one another to begin with. Tentatively optimistic had been the way her mother had described it. Whatever it was that had brought them closer Lois hoped this journey for the both of them wouldn't end in heartache.

Clark took a seat next to her and passed her the small plate of cookies from the party, "I think someone played hard."

"He had a lot of fun," Lois grinned back at Clark.

"Once everyone leaves, we can get everything cleaned up," Clark said, looking around the backyard. Despite the debate they had with concerns of 'what if' when she was pregnant with Jon, they had finally decided to keep her parents in the dark regarding their son-in-law's alter-ego. It was too soon after everything that had happened with Lex Luthor and putting them in unnecessary harm's way wasn't how she wanted to remember bringing Jon into the world. So, they had opted to wait until it was a necessary step.

Lois nodded, letting out a yawn of her own as she reached for a copy of the folded up newspaper on the table. She smiled when she saw Jimmy's by-line on the front page. "Jimmy's moving on up I see."

"Yeah, Jimmy's really come a long way." Clark pointed to the headline. "Knocking down doors and shaking things up just like the rest of us."

"He certainly knows how to press the political buttons," Lois agreed, reading the headline. "*Missing Children On the Rise: Metropolis Child Trafficking Hot Spot?*" She let out a low whistle, "Perry's certainly going to get a call from Mr. Stern on that one."

"He let it go the press like that," Clark smirked, shaking his head. "Though if the data Jimmy found is correct you have to wonder why no one else is saying anything."

"Children go missing – *it's a story*." Lois corrected.

"How many stories do you remember hearing over missing children in the last month?" Clark asked solemnly. The expression on his face told her he already knew the answer.

"Five," she frowned, second-guessing herself. "No, eight."

Clark pointed to the paper in her hands, "According to the numbers Jimmy pulled there were over two hundred kids reported missing in the last ninety days."

"What?" Lois grabbed the paper again, re-reading the article with careful precision intent to prove Clark wrong until she found the numbers Clark was referring to on the second paragraph.

"How is that even possible?"

"That's just the ones we know about," Clark added.

"Do you think there's something to this Child Trafficking line?" Lois wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Clark let out a sigh, about to add to his thought when a familiar expression crossed his face.

"Go." Lois nodded to him, pointing to the back door. "Be careful."

"Always." He leaned in to kiss her before disappearing out the backdoor unbeknownst to any of the four adults visiting in the living room.

She glanced down at the article in front of her once more, pondering what could cause such a rise in missing children in Metropolis before moving to the Living Room.

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## **Chapter 2: Scared to Rock the Boat**

*Four Years Ago...*

Senator Donald Schumer, loosened his tie as he made his way through the double doors leading into his pristine office. He ran a hand through his thinning blonde hair as his dark blue eyes sparkled with excitement. The rush high from the day still hung over him as he moved to his desk, beginning each end of the day routine on auto-pilot. He called out to his assistant, "Lisa?"

He turned his head, looking for the familiar brunette whose desk was just outside his office, but found her desk vacant. A frown crossed his face as he walked toward the door leading back out into the hallway. Sure enough, there was no sign of his assistant.

"Good help is so hard to find, isn't it?" A thick German accented man's voice he did not recognize tickled his ear and he jumped, startled by the unknown man standing a few feet from him with a cigarette in between his index and middle finger, waving it in the air as he fumbled with his lighter.

"You can't smoke in here," Schumer sniffed, waving the man off.

"Oh?" The man took a long puff from his cigarette after finally getting the tobacco to burn and exhaled with a long drag of white smoke escaping his mouth. He pointed to Schumer's office and sighed, "I've been watching you, Schumer. I like what I see."

"Well, as flattering as that is, I'm happily married."

A snort escaped the stranger's throat and he let out a loud

guffaw as he took another drag from his cigarette, narrowing his gaze at Schumer before pointing to his office. “Not from what I hear, Donny.” He grinned behind his gnarled yellow teeth and glared coldly at him. “Let’s talk.”

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Tobias swayed from side to side, watching as Senator Donald Schumer looked around his office with a paranoid frenzy, searching for just how he had been intruded upon. Tobias let out a yawn, “Do you really feel that I wouldn’t be careful?”

“What do you want?” Schumer stammered out, wide-eyed as he glared back at Tobias.

“Donny, Donny, Donny, one would think you’d be a bit more careful with where you take your hooker...”

“She’s not a ...”

“Prostitute?” Tobias offered, unimpressed. “We all know she doesn’t stick by you for the riveting conversation in bed, hmm?”

“Get out.”

“Temper, temper.” Tobias shook his head unimpressed.

“Now, I’m here trying to offer you an opportunity.”

“What kind of opportunity?” Schumer asked uneasily.

“You scratch my back. I scratch yours.” Tobias shrugged his shoulders. “You have a problem, Donny. A very *big* problem.” His eyes twinkled with a chuckle and his eyes danced as he added discreetly, “...or more accurately a smaller than average problem.” He set the glossy 8x10 photos on the desk for Schumer to examine. “For a man who claims to love his wife you certainly don’t mind getting down and dirty, do you?”

“Where did you get these?” Schumer stammered.

“I have a far reach in this community.” He patted Schumer on the shoulder and found the man trembling just before he lunged toward him, grabbing him by the throat. Tobias blinked back at him unamused as he found his voice. “Kill me and every last copy of those negatives makes its way to every publication in this city in the next hour.”

Schumer removed his hand from Tobias’ throat and stammered, “What do you want?”

“Your undying allegiance. Your vote. Your voice. Anything and everything I need to keep business running smoothly.” Tobias reached over to grab Schumer by the throat. “Just so we’re clear, you touch me again and I will hunt down every last relative and friend you have and make their death...ever so painful.” Tobias’ eyes flashed with anger as he hissed out. “Am I clear?”

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The cool breeze from the ceiling fan brushed against Lois Lane’s face as she began to stir. The stagnant summer air had made evenings almost unbearable. She reached her hand out to the space beside her and found the cool sheets. Her eyes blinked open and she looked over her large protruding bump, seeing Clark hunched over the side of the bed next to her abdomen.

She let out tired yawn and whispered, “What time is it?”

“It’s three in the morning.” Clark responded, looking up from where he was comfortably nestled next to her bump.

“What are you doing?” she asked sleepily.

“Talking to my boy,” he said with a grin.

“You’re going to teach him bad habits of staying up late and then we’ll never get him to sleep,” she whispered sleepily.

“Why don’t you go back to sleep?”

“Shouldn’t you be taking your own advice?”

“I’m just checking on our little guy,” he grinned back at her, resting his hand on her abdomen just as a small jab hit exposed flesh where Clark’s hand was. A proud smile crossed Clark’s face, “He’s strong.”

“He’s having a party in there,” Lois giggled, placing her hand over her abdomen.

“Are you dancing in there, little guy?” Clark whispered, running his hand over the smooth bump of her abdomen. “Your mommy and I love you so much, little guy. There are so many

things we want to teach you and show you,” he whispered, placing a kiss on her abdomen. He inched his way up to where he was eye-level with her, reaching over to stroke the frame of her face.

She smiled back at Clark, watching him gaze at her with a mesmerized expression. He smiled at her, tracing the frame of her face with his palm. “What?” she asked suddenly self-conscious under his gaze.

“Nothing. Just thinking about how much I love you,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss her. She smiled against his lips, feeling his other hand move to her abdomen. “Both of you.”

“Yeah?” she whispered, moving her hand to cover his.

“Our little boy is so lucky to have you, Lois.”

“Lucky?” Lois asked, looking back at him.

“You’ve been amazing through all of this and just taken everything in stride.” Clark stroked her cheek with his thumb. His voice was low as he murmured softly, “Luthor’s trial. This pregnancy and all the changes at the Planet. You’ve been incredible with all of it. I know you’re going to be an amazing mother. I love you, Lois.”

“Oh, Clark...” Lois smiled at him. It amazed her how easily Clark could make her melt with just a few words or an expression on his face. He leaned in to capture her lips, cradling her in his arms, showing her just how much she meant to him in the late hours of the morning.

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#### *Present Day...*

The tram whistle blared in the background as everyone around her called out to her from beyond the tracks where she stood trembling as she realized she had failed yet again at one of her great plans. Everything in her life continued to spiral from the moment she had turned fourteen. Every moment of every second felt like a bad dream she just couldn’t wake up from.

Even as she stood here in the middle of the tracks attempting to put an end to it all, she couldn’t even get that right. She cradled her arms around herself, falling to her knees in despair. The siren in the distance could be heard and she felt a panic rise within her, pondering what would happen if Tobias found her. She had put so much at risk and now she was destined to be pulled right back into the nightmarish world of money, drugs and prostitution.

The wind bristled through her hair as she felt a warm trickle run down her cheeks. A man’s voice coming from the edge of the platform reached her ears and she turned her head to look at him. He seemed to be friendly. His eyes were warm and caring, though the blue and red costume was a bit outlandish for her taste.

“Just take my hand...”

A second later, he was next to her and she felt her body go limp as she let out a labored sob, feeling a warmth spread through her as her body trembled. Everything around her began to spin as every bad decision flashed through her mind, reminding her of just how dead inside she had become. The darkness that had been put there by her captors had spread until she had been enveloped by it. She had become the very thing she hated and had been swallowed up by the pain that had slowly killed her inside. All that was left was to finish the job.

“It’s okay.” Another voice spoke and she turned her head to see a familiar looking man on the platform.

“Nein...” she stammered out, feeling her insides tremble as she cradled her body, unable to move at the presence of the familiar man. She knew his voice anywhere. Yusuf’s deadbeat friend on the police force. Sergeant Nicholas Moore. Reminders of the sergeant’s underhanded deeds came back to her and she felt her stomach churn with apprehension.

“Ingrid...*Du kannst nicht rennen!*”

// Translation: “Ingrid...*You can’t run!*”

“Geh weg!” she called out to him.

// Translation: “*Get away!*”

The man next to her called out to the officers approaching,

pointing to Moore and quickly instructed them, “Hold him! He might be involved in this.” Before she could react the man turned to her and spoke in her native tongue, “Er wird dich nicht mehr verletzen.”

*// Translation: “He won’t hurt you anymore!”*

Before she could respond, he reached his hand out for her to take and whispered, “Let me help you.”

She peered over to see three officers pulling a syringe out of Moore’s pocket and beginning to question him. She looked to the stranger who had inadvertently saved her from a fate she was sure would have been a gruesome torture at the hands of Yusif and let out a heavy breath.

“It’s okay.”

For the first time she felt like those words weren’t empty.

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Jon let out a giggle as he squished his hands in the soft sugary batter as Lois added the softened butter to the mix, instructing him to “keep squishing.” Lois turned her attention to the pan Martha was quietly browning the other half of the butter in and called out to her, “Almost ready?”

“Just about,” Martha cheered happily, running her spoon over the melting butter.

“I love sugar cookies!” Jon squealed as he squished his little hands in the mixture.

“You two got the eggs mixed in?” Martha asked.

Lois smirked, looking over at a few spots in the mixture where some yellow yolk could still be seen. “I think we need to turn the mixer on.”

“Aw, man!” Jon pouted, holding up his gooey hands. “I was having fun.”

“Well, just think of how delicious those cookies will be once they’re all mixed in.” Martha reminded him with a wink.

“Oh!” Jon grinned happily, jumping on the tip of his toes with excitement. “Don’t forget the secret ingredient!”

“Of course!” Martha laughed happily as Jon pulled his hands out of the mixing bowl. “Everyone ready?”

Lois reached over to flip the switch on for the mixer, letting it spin for a few moments before nodding to Martha it was ready.

“Yay!” Jon laughed as the brown butter mixed inside the cookie mixture and clapped his gooey hands. “Cookie time!”

Lois laughed, reaching over with a hand towel to wipe the gooey cookie dough mix off his cheek. Her parents had said their goodbyes an hour after Clark had left, noting the flight they were scheduled for tomorrow morning. Now that her father had extracted himself from the likes of Max Menken, and unknowingly Lex Luthor, he had gone back to the part of medical treatment he and her mother were both passionate about. Helping the underprivileged parts of the world receive medical care.

It kept them both busy and at the same time had given her father a new lease on life to rediscover why he had become a doctor in the first place. Private practice never had been a passion of his, but being out on the field and saving lives – that was where he truly found himself. Over the years she had watched in amazement as the parents she had thought would never speak more than two words to one another had set aside each and every painful deception the other had inflicted on them and began to not only tolerate one another but to begin to rediscover what it was that had brought them together in the first place.

“Mama?” Jon’s little voice reached her, and she turned to see Jon handing her a rolled up gooey dough ball. “Is this good?”

“Perfect,” Lois whispered, leaning over to give him a peck on the cheek. “Absolutely perfect.”

\*\*\*

*Four Years Ago...*

Lois gazed over the round bump protruding from her abdomen, then peeked over at her husband as he set the plate down in front of her. She frowned, staring at the portion size,

wondering if she would be able to fit the delicious food being offered into the cramped space that was left inside her. She felt as if she was trying to cram a semi into a narrow one-way road. She let out a sigh, stirring her chicken around the plate with the spinach salad.

Clark reached his hand over to take her palm in his. “Everything okay?”

“Just tired,” she gave him a weak smile. Though honestly, when wasn’t she tired was the better question. She had spent the better part of her third trimester being exhausted. She had read all the books, and she and Clark had taken all the classes that were supposed to prepare them for what was to come in a few short weeks, but what she hadn’t been prepared for was just how little energy she would have near the end of her pregnancy.

She had her occasional bursts of energy of course. Her mother referred to it as nesting but Lois wasn’t so sure. Procrastination had always been a trait she struggled with over the years and with the pregnancy consuming so much of her mind it felt as if it were one of the side effects of her poor habits. Thankfully, they had finally gotten all of the baby’s things unpacked and setup in their bedroom and his nursery. Now all that was left to do was wait until he was ready to make his entrance.

She had been working half-days for the last two weeks, trying to slowly transition into what would be the new normal and give her body and mind a chance to rest in the afternoon when she felt the effects of the pregnancy weigh more heavily on her. She had thought it would be torture to take a step back and watch while everyone – Clark, Perry, Jimmy, and even Alice – continue about their days chasing down leads and continuing with the stories that would appear on the front page of the different news organizations’ headlines the next day. It wasn’t something she welcomed with open arms but once she had found herself a routine, she discovered it wasn’t nearly as hard as she had imagined.

She was growing impatient with the hours and minutes and days that passed. Clark did his best to try and make a habit of stopping by for lunch and the occasional mid-afternoon check-in. The afternoon routine had begun with just naps and shaking off the fatigue but as time had passed, she’d ventured into more creative uses of the time. Preparing the nursery and working on meal prep for when the baby did come. Though Clark had quickly shrugged it off, stating he could take care of everything, she knew from experience that even he needed to slow down and rest. From what she had heard from the few moms she befriended in their Lamaze class, the first few weeks would test both of their patience, and choosing to over-prepare rather than under-prepared helped set her mind at ease.

“You want to turn in early?” Clark offered, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “I know you haven’t been sleeping that well.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Lois let out a yawn. “This little guy is getting way too comfortable in there. It’s hard for anyone to get any sleep.”

“Well, the doctor said he could come any day now...” Clark reminded her.

“Thirty-seven weeks and two days,” Lois let out a long sigh.

“I’ll get this cleaned up. Why don’t you sit down in the living room and make yourself comfortable?” Clark offered, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

“If that’s even possible,” Lois mumbled, standing up from her feet. She reached her arms over her head to stretch and felt her lower back pop and something else stretch from her abdomen. She looked down uncertainly, feeling a small trickle of liquid run down her leg. Her eyes widened, wondering if she had just... She tried to tighten her inner muscles and found it had zero effect on the liquid trickling out of her.

*‘Is that...?’*

“What is it?” Clark asked, looking over at her with concern.

“Clark?”

He stopped in front of her. “What is it?”

“I think my water just broke...or is trickling,” she amended, looking down at the pool of liquid that was now soaking her cotton pants.

“Don’t move,” he ordered. A split-second later he had changed into his Superman suit and was carrying her hospital bag and they were in the air on the way to the hospital.

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Ellen Lane paced across the waiting room, nervously glancing toward the double doors leading back into the maternity ward where her daughter and son-in-law had disappeared behind just three hours before. She had barely made it out of the car when she’d run into Martha and Jonathan in the parking garage. After a few quick hugs and tears, they had made their way to the waiting room where they had found the nurse just about to take Lois back with Clark.

She was trying to be patient. She knew these things took time. Her labor with Lois had taken nearly nine hours while her delivery with Lucy had been a short four and a half hours. Each had been different in their own way.

“Coffee?” She glanced over to where Sam was standing with a Styrofoam cup held out for her to take. “No cream and three sugars just how you like it.”

“Thanks, Sam.” Ellen reached out to take the cup, drinking the warm liquid graciously.

“Looks like we’ll be here awhile,” Alice spoke up, pulling her phone out. “Would anyone like to order something in?”

“I could go for a pizza,” Jimmy Olsen prompted with a grin.

“Just no bell peppers,” Ellen said on auto-pilot recalling her ex-husband’s aversion to bell pepper on just about anything at the same time Sam voiced his own, “No peppers.”

Sam flashed a nervous smile her way and then shrugged his shoulders. “Uh, here,” he pulled his Visa Credit Card out of his wallet and handed it to Alice. “My treat.”

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Lois fell back against her husband, allowing him to support her as he gently massaged her lower back. Back contractions. Painful, excruciating back contractions. If it weren’t for the added heat vision Clark was applying to her back, she would have been in tears hours ago.

From the time her water broke, she’d made it to the hospital and been given an epidural to help control the pain. Though it had done a doozy on her lower extremities she was still feeling the hard-painful contractions along her back. She was in hell. Her back was on fire. She felt like she was being ripped in half. Then finally the pain subsided and was replaced with an unbearable pressure all along her back with every contraction.

“I swear to God if you tell me I’m doing great one more time without being any further along...” Lois muttered irritably.

“Come on, Lois, you’re almost there,” Clark cheered, looping his arms around Lois as she gripped him tightly. Everything faded into the background as she focused on the never-ending pressure that bore down on her insides.

“Okay, we’re ready to push!” the doctor encouraged. “Now.”

“I *am* pushing!” Lois cried, feeling her muscles tense as she leaned her head against Clark’s shoulder.

“You’re doing great, Lois,” Clark responded, squeezing her shoulder with an encouraging nod.

“Clark, I ...” She let out an exasperated cry as the pressure continued to build.

“You can do this, Lois...”

“Here we go!”

A soft cry filled the room. “You hear that?” the doctor asked. “Just one more push to get him out.”

Lois listened to their son continue to cry. She tightened her grip on Clark as she put all her energy into the last push. Another

cry from her son. She wasn’t sure if she should be worried or relieved. She had never experienced so many emotions all at once. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to cry, laugh, or scream.

A sudden movement came from where the doctor was and then she felt a warmth across her chest. She looked over to the side, feeling her insides melt as she stared back into the dark brown eyes squinting through the light around him, reaching out for her.

“Congratulations,” the doctor cheered, “A beautiful baby boy. Time of birth is 9:30 pm.”

Lois shivered involuntarily; Clark held her close, running his hands up and down her arms to help keep her warm. She looked over at the little boy who quietly fussed as he squirmed across her chest, making an “oh” with his mouth. “Hey, there sweetheart.” She felt the tears glisten from her eyes as she stared back into those gorgeous dark eyes that reminded her so much of her husband.

Lois watched in amazement as Clark followed the directions from the nurse to cut the cord. Their son’s eyes were still closed. He moved his head from side to side, whimpering as Lois reached out to hold her son’s hand. She stared back into their son’s eyes, wrestling with the overpowering emotions that took over.

“He’s so perfect,” Lois whispered in amazement as she reached over to stroke her son’s cheek. “He’s gorgeous.”

Clark wrapped his arms around her, kissing her forehead. “You are amazing,” e whispered, “I love you so much.”

The nurse reached out for the baby. “We need to check his vitals...”

The nurses began looking their son over, and Lois turned back to Clark with a pained plea, “Stay with him.” She fell back on the hospital bed, completely spent from delivering their son. She craned her neck to watch as Clark stood a few feet away from the small table the nurses were examining Jon on.

Her son’s soft cries were like music to her ears as she watched the team of nurses gather their little boy up into a warm blanket and wrap him up as they cleaned him up after his exam. Clark reached his hand out and whispered reassurances to him.

“He recognizes your voice,” one of the nurses told him.

“Hey, little guy,” Clark let out a hoarse whisper.

Lois reached her hand up to wipe the tears from her eyes. He was here. He was finally here. They had read all the books. They had gone to all the classes—but nothing had prepared her for that moment of looking into his son’s eyes for the first time.

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#### *Present Day...*

Clark soared through the sky, cradling the young girl he had rescued in his arms. He had never seen anything like it before. The dead zone gaze she had given him had chilled him to the bone. Fifth Street Mission had a close relationship with the Police Department and had helped save thousands of lives over the years. They had been the model he had used for the Superman Foundation to build their own safe havens in hopes of helping rescue runaways and families in need from the street. He reached the small blue and white multi-story building and set the young girl down on her feet.

“Are you okay to stand?”

She didn’t respond, but she seemed to be able to keep her balance on the landing in front of the dark blue door. He sighed, reaching over to gently knock on the front door and turned back to the young girl. “You’ll be safe here.”

The door opened and they both turned to see a dark-haired woman standing in the doorway with a warm smile. “Superman, so good of you to stop by.”

“Tracy.” Superman smiled, happy to see a welcoming face. “I wanted to introduce you to someone....”

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#### *Four Years Ago...*

Victor Talley took a large gulp from the semi-warm mug of coffee from his desk, taking a glimpse at the late hour of the evening. He set the mug back down and turned back to the file in front of him, grimacing when he saw the notes on the sidebar from an interview FBI Agent, Jack Davenport, had with one of the lead agents on the case nearly nine months ago.

He bit his lower lip, reviewing the notes Davenport had filed meticulously inside the file. He looked over at the yellow file folder of cases that had yet to be assigned out to his agents. On the top was the open yellow file with the gruesome photos of Agent Blake's unsolved murder. It had taken the DEA three months to gather everything prior to transferring the case to the FBI. Yet, he had an active agent in contact with an interested party from the DEA – and who was never able to get past the red tape. He let out a long breath. As much as he hated to admit it, he needed to put a fresh set of eyes on this case.

He reached over to pick up the handset from the phone on his desk and dialed the extension he knew by heart, “Jack? You mind coming in here?” He then set the phone back down and dialed the other extension to call out to another agent. “Elena? New case. Come to my office.”

\*\*\*

The screen flickered and Dr. Albert Schiller straightened his tie as he stared at the image before him. A balding man appeared on the screen and Schiller straightened up, preparing mentally to give his presentation.

“Dr. Schiller, I presume?”

“Has the package arrived in an acceptable condition, Tobias?”

Tobias Berg held up the small vial of clear liquid, examining it as he spoke. “The dosage is unclear on this Betäubenal.”

“The full five milliliters will suffice.” Dr. Schiller let out a sinister laugh as he went on to explain the beauty of his newly crafted drug. “Succinylcholine was a preferred drug of use, but the nausea side effects that came with it were nasty and a hinderance to many of the clients I worked with. Betäubenal has the same paralytic effect with no nausea. As quickly as it enters the blood stream it disappears making it untraceable.”

“If this drug proves to do what you say it will...I'll need to arrange regular shipments,” Tobias remarked carefully.

“I will call you, Tobias. Not the other way around,” Schiller instructed harshly. “I will not have the misdeeds of your unsavory hobbies landing on my doorstep. I provide you with a miracle drug and that is it.”

“But the shipments...”

“Will be arranged.” Schiller replied coldly. “Just keep the deposits coming and you'll get your shipments. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Tobias replied before Schiller disconnected from the call.

\*\*\*

Clark let out a heavy sigh, listening to the soft hum coming from Jon's plastic bassinet as his six pound and five ounce son quietly slept next to his mother's hospital bed. He glanced over at Lois who was sleeping quietly with a peaceful smile across her face. He felt a grin threaten to break the corners of his mouth as he reached up to wipe the tears of joy that had escaped the corners of his eyes. Never in his life had he experienced such an exhilarating high as he had watching Lois give birth to their son. The moment his beautiful voice reached his ears Clark felt the entire world around him disappear. The only thing that mattered was Lois and Jon.

He reached his hand over the plastic bassinet, brushing his index finger against the soft skin of Jon's cheek, feeling the intoxicating high continue to tease his brain as he stared at this beautiful boy that was absolutely perfect in every way.

“You really know how to make an entrance,” Clark grinned at him in a soft monotone voice. He glanced toward Lois' bed,

careful to keep his voice quiet so as not to wake Lois. “Your mommy and I love you so much, Jon. The world is a crazy mixed up place sometimes but it's a wonderful and exciting place to be. I promise I won't let anything happen to you. I'll protect you and your mom with my last dying breath if I have to, but you will never know how cruel this world can be if I have anything to say about it.”

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*Present Day...*

David Zymack wrestled with the pen and notepad in hand as he entered the room inside Fifth Street Mission where he saw a young girl that couldn't be older than his daughter, Gabrielle, in the corner with her arms wrapped around her. The lines across her face and the dark circles beneath her eyes sent a chill down his spine.

He stole a glance toward the woman standing by the table who appeared to work here at the Mission. He pulled out his badge and called out, “I, uh, the department got a call from Superman...” He felt his voice waiver as he introduced himself. “David Zymack with the Metropolis P.D.”

“I, uh,” the woman's face grew stern as she stared him down uncertainly. “I told Superman I would take care of the call to the police.” She pointed at the young girl. “She's been through enough as it is.”

“I understand, ma'am,” Zymack let out a labored breath. “But as painful as this is it is important we go ahead and get her statement so we can stop the people behind this.”

A weary expression crossed her face and she finally nodded, “Ingrid, I'll be down the hall if you need me.”

Zymack watched her leave and turned back to the young girl who was still silently rocking herself in the chair she was seated in. “Tough crowd, huh?” he attempted to joke with her but got no reaction. He nodded, taking a seat at the table and pulling out his tape recorder. “This is Sergeant Zymack with the Metropolis P.D. Interviewing ...” He glanced at the young girl. “Can you state your name for the record?”

“Ingrid,” she responded with a labored breath.

“Do you have a last name, Ingrid?” Zymack asked.

“I don't remember,” she said with a pained expression.

“That's okay,” Zymack said calmly, jotting down the name on his notepad. “Ingrid, I'm here to help. I know some very bad people have done some awful things to you, but that's over now.”

“You don't know that,” Ingrid responded coldly, flashing a distraught expression toward him. “You take me to some halfway house and think he won't come after me?”

“Who?”

“It doesn't matter now,” Ingrid brushed him off. “Nothing matters.”

\*\*\*

Numb.

Every fiber of his being felt numb when Clark returned home, feeling the emotional toll after his rescue of the young girl he had found trembling from her own shadow in the middle of the Metro Tram tracks, holding all traffic up from coming and going. After ensuring she was safely checked into the Fifth Street Mission he had returned home and quickly made a call to Bill Henderson in hopes of speeding up the process of finding out just what had happened to the young girl. She had been traumatized by something – someone, his mind quickly amended – and until that person was behind bars there was no way to truly end the fear that consumed that poor girl.

“Hey,” Lois placed a hand on his shoulder, and he looked over at her with a weak smile, unwilling to voice the turbulent thoughts that consumed him. “Bad rescue?”

He gave her an apologetic frown, “I know I missed the clean-up and bedtime story for Jon. I'm sorry.”

“Hey, it's okay,” Lois said softly, taking a seat in his lap and

cradling him against her as he let out a labored breath. She rested her forehead against his, reaching over to stroke his cheek. “Jon had a blast making cookies with his grandma and crashed from a sugar high early.” She gave him a weak smile.

“Still.” Clark frowned, disappointed with himself. “It was his birthday.”

“You didn’t miss his birthday, Clark. You were here to decorate. You were here with the pizza and the cake and watching him get into mischief with his friends.” Lois replied softly, leaning in to kiss him. “You want to talk about it?”

Clark looked down at his lap where Lois was seated snugly against him before letting out a soft grunt. “Fifteen...” He shook his head, correcting himself, “Maybe even sixteen-year-old jumped on the tracks of the Metropolis Transit.”

“Oh, my God!” Lois gasped, placing a hand over her mouth. “Is...?”

“Thankfully, the engineer stopped the train before it could hit her and shut the place down,” Clark said shakily. “She was a *kid*, Lois. A *kid*.”

“Even as a teenager life can seem pretty horrific,” Lois remarked gently, reaching her hand over to squeeze his hand in hers.

“This is more than that, Lois.” Clark shook his head, recalling the cold dark expression from the young girl. “It was like staring into a... a corpse. This dark nothingness in such a young girl.”

“Oh, Clark,” Lois threaded her fingers with his, tightening her grasp on him as he let out a labored breath.

“I’ve seen that look before. Usually from people on the street near Hobb’s Bay that are just indifferent to everything and so much older...” Clark frowned, staring down at his hand perfectly connected with Lois’ as he spoke. “I took her over to Fifth Street Mission, but I don’t know what Tracy and the rest of the Fifth Street Mission staff can do.”

“You helped a young girl and hopefully put her on the right track to getting the help she needed.” She leaned in to capture his lips as she stroked his cheek. “You can’t be everywhere at once, Superman. Even if you want to.”

\*\*\*

Tracy Hartford felt her hand tremble as she poured the hot tea into the cup on the tray in front of her. Her voice trembled as she looked over to the middle-aged man with dark hair and sun-dried callouses that covered his face and hands from old scars from the years of abuse. She felt a hard lump pulsate in the back of her throat as she set the tea kettle down.

She gave a forced smile toward the man, feeling a sinking feeling continue to quiver from within the pit of her stomach. She let out a heavy sigh and nodded to him. “I, uh, put her in the back room so she’d be out of sight from the others.”

“Smart,” came his response with a thick accent she couldn’t quite place.

They reached the end of the hallway and she knocked lightly on the door. “Ingrid?”

A gruff exhale came from behind her and she looked back at the man waiting patiently for her delivery of Ingrid.

“Ingrid?”

Nothing.

“I, uh...”

“I don’t appreciate being jerked around...” The threat from him was clear.

Tracy reached over to unlock the door with the keys from her pocket, letting out a nervous laugh, “I’m sure she’s just...”

Her heart lurched in her chest when she saw the empty room and the open window with the curtains billowing in the wind.

“Missing.” The man corrected for her.

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### Chapter 3: Forged I Had A Choice

*Four Years Ago...*

The bitter heat bore down on Dan Scardino’s neck as he fumbled for the map he had picked up from the airport. The dry heat in Turkey was nothing compared to the stint he’d done in Qatar, but that fact didn’t make his sweat glands dry up any faster. He reached up to swipe his brow, noting the tractors hard at work amid the fields. He let out a dry cough as he finally reached his destination.

His brow furrowed as he examined the dark wooden farmhouse with rotting wood barely hanging onto the nails that kept them in place. The pit of his gut tightened as he stared at the long pebbled walkway leading into the farmhouse.

This was it.

This was where Jenna had taken her last breath.

He had poured over the FBI file for nearly three months, trying to find a clue as to what happened to his fiancée. He felt his gut twist as he stared down the farmhouse, flashing back to the black and white photos in Jenna’s file. This was where she’d last been seen. This was where they found traces of her DNA. This was where he had lost Jenna forever.

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Lois looked around the city block that surrounded her Uncle Mike’s restaurant. She let out a low sigh as she closed the door to the passenger door, ensuring the door was locked and turned to where Clark was standing behind her with Jon in his carrier and diaper bag in tow.

“Lois! Clark!” Mike called out to them with a broad smile across his face as he pushed his way past the iron gate, separating his restaurant from the street passersby. His expression softened when he saw Jon. “Why hello, little guy...”

“He’s getting bigger and bigger by the day,” Clark commented proudly.

Lois reached over to give her Uncle Mike a hug as he leaned over to make silly faces at Jon. Jon blinked back at his great-uncle, unimpressed by the antics, and Mike let out a chuckle. “Everyone’s a critic, eh?”

They shared a laugh and she cast a quick glance toward the street his restaurant was on. “You weren’t kidding when you said Southside was changing...”

“These thugs think they can run me out of here.” Mike pointed to the gang of young teens standing across the street from them with their hats turned backward and pants hanging beneath their waists. “This place has been a staple here for years.”

Clark flashed him a weak smile. “This place has seen its ups and downs.”

“Well, if the police would just do their job...” Mike muttered, pointing toward the graffiti that had been etched on the side of his restaurant. “Anyway, this is what I wanted to show you...”

Clark frowned when he saw the red and black graffiti on the white brick siding of Mike’s restaurant. In large black and red spray-painted letters were the letters ‘S-K-I-N-S’ and beneath the letters was the image of skull spray painted black with the words ‘Get Out While You Can’ beneath it. Clark let out a sigh, looking around him and then back to Mike. “I’m no expert, but I’d say that’s a threat.”

“And the police won’t do a damn thing about it,” Mike advised, running his hand through his thinning hair. “If I was the suspicious type, I’d think they’re being paid to look the other way.”

“What makes you think that?” Lois asked, folding her arms across her chest.

“I call and report stuff like this, and it takes them an hour to show up. Of course, by then, the guy is long gone...” Mike shook his head in disgust. “You know, I remember when ...”

The rest of Mike’s tirade was interrupted by Clark leaning over and whispering in her ear, “Get Jon and your uncle out of here *now*.” She looked back at him in surprise, taking Jon’s carrier with her as Clark pointed to the back door, “I’m gonna see if I can

get some photos of this. We can take it to the police ourselves.”

She nodded and quickly jumped into protective mode and cleared her throat, interrupting her uncle, “Uncle Mike, I’m sure we can see what’s going on.” She rambled quickly, walking back toward the Jeep and opening the door to the back passenger door as she turned to continue talking to Mike, who had followed her to the Jeep. “I’m sure if we went to talk to Inspector Henderson, he could help us. Do you think you could come with us to see him? We can drop Jon off with Clark’s mom and ...”

A loud pop came from behind the restaurant, and she let out a startled gasp when she saw Clark dressed in his Superman suit, exiting the back of the restaurant with a dark-skinned man with black sweats and a loose dark navy knit cap in his grasp.

Mike turned on the young man with a harsh scowl as the burnt remnants of an incendiary device was thrown on the ground in front of the restaurant, and Clark let out a harsh threat, “For your sake, I hope you don’t mind showering in groups.”

“Superman!” Mike gasped the name out in surprise as he looked suspiciously at the man in Clark’s grasp.

“Sorry to drop in on you like this, but I spotted this one here trying to plant *this*,” Clark pointed to the burnt incendiary device lying on the ground in front of them, “on your back door.” He looked pointedly at the man that was still struggling in his makeshift metal binds.

“A bomb?” Mike asked aghast. “Little punk, you tried to burn me out!” he accused, stepping toward the captive thug.

“Can’t prove nothin’,” The thug taunted as Clark forced him down on the ground with a firm hand on his shoulder. “Nobody saw a thing!”

“Clark!” Mike pointed to the back door. “He was just back there...”

“Ain’t nobody back there,” the gang member grumbled cockily.

“I, uh, think he was getting pictures of the graffiti,” Lois said, looking pointedly at Clark.

“Right,” Clark snapped his fingers, catching onto what Lois was hinting at as she pulled out her phone as Clark made a quick exit.

A split-second later, Clark was opening the back gate dressed in his business suit with a frantic expression on his face. He looked to where the thug was sitting on the ground in his metal binds and approached. “Is everyone all right?”

“We’re fine.” Mike pointed his index finger at the man struggling with his metal binds. “Superman stopped this thug from leveling the restaurant.” He looked to Clark. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Clark nodded. “I had taken a few photos from inside...” He held up the camera he had used to take photos with earlier.

“Man, you didn’t see nothin’!” the thug countered smugly.

Clark pointed to the back window looking directly out on the back door. “Except, I had a perfect view from there.”

The thug’s expression went sour as Lois let out a huff, dialing the number to the police station. “Yes, I’m reporting an attempted arson. My name is Lois Lane, and...” She stopped short, looking up at Clark. “They put me on hold.”

The thug sneered at her with a chuckle. “Lois Lane? You’re Lois Lane?”

“Watch it, pal,” Mike warned as Clark took a protective step in front of her.

“I’m sorry, have we met?” Lois asked, peering over Clark’s shoulder.

“No, we ain’t met. It’s just funny to me, ‘cuz you *dead*.” He sneered with a laugh. “I know you’re walkin’ around, but trust me, lady, go pick out a nice grave. And from what I hear, pick it out fast.”

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Dan Scardino skirted his foot across the dirt floor of the barn,

toeing his foot against the loose gravel and dirt as he scanned the scene with a grimace. The yellow and black tape had long since worn away and flew across the ground, floating its way into the crevices of the old barn’s worn out supporting beams.

He let out a labored breath, turning to leave the barn before making his way toward the farmhouse, preparing to find the worst of the worst behind the rickety old doors. He had been prepared for a gruesome scene. A bloody wall or signs of a struggle but he hadn’t been prepared for this. An empty barn with no sign of life outside of the obvious telltale signs from the FBI’s investigation. Not that it mattered much now, but the lead they had on this drug being smuggled into the country had surely dried up the second the FBI made its presence known here in Turkey. A scowl crossed his face as he recalled his last conversation with Jenna.

<< “Any word on the girl?”

“She didn’t make it... Just be careful, Jenna.”

“When am I not careful?”

“You sure you’re up for this, Jenna?”

“Hey, Danny boy, you getting sentimental on me?”

“Dan’s right, Jenna, if you’re not up for this...”

“We’ll waste another week training another agent up. I can do this.”

“Be careful.”

“I’m always careful, Dan. You’re the one that needs to tighten the reins before jumping in head-first... I’m fine. I still have a ring to pick out.”

“Count on it.”>>

A sick churning in his stomach threatened to overtake him. He could have stopped her. He could have told her not to go and made her get another agent. But he didn’t. And because of that, Jenna had paid for his mistake with her life...

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“You okay?” Clark asked, handing Lois a cup of coffee from the drink machine. The police station was littered with police officers who appeared to have nothing better to do other than stand around and shoot the breeze. In the time it had taken the police to arrive, Lois had been able to drop Jon off with his mom and begin typing up the story for Perry to begin editing the piece on the city’s lack of response to emergency calls for help. Three hours. It had taken them three hours to show up at Mike’s restaurant. Three hours of looking over his shoulder and ignoring all calls for help for fear that the thug that had threatened Lois would make good on his threat. The way the thug had thrown around the threat... It seemed as if it was some sort of game to him.

“I’m fine,” Lois said, taking the paper cup from him and flashing him a quick smile. She gestured to where Mike was seated in the corner, pinching the bridge of his nose. “He’s really torn up about this.”

“I know.” Clark sighed heavily sinking into the chair next to her. “I left a message with Henderson but he’s in court right now so I’m not sure how soon he’ll get back to me.”

Lois nodded, recalling the case Henderson was testifying on today. “Yeah, he had that case against Kyle Griffin today.” She let out a long breath, shaking her head. “How sad is it that he’s the only useful police officer in here?” She pointed toward a group of officers that were huddled around a box of doughnuts. “All that crime in the city and look what we’ve got in here—a doughnut commercial.”

Clark chuckled, tightening his arm around her shoulders, throwing a concerned look toward Mike who was pacing in the corridor in front of them. “Mike, everything go okay?”

Mike nodded, throwing a cautious look toward the police nearby. “Everyone’s fine. No major injuries.”

“Good.” Lois smiled back at her uncle.

“I’m sorry I had you bring Jon out here and got you all mixed up in this,” Mike apologized, running a hand across his features. “Who knew an afternoon visit to his great uncle’s would have

ended up with a bomb of all things?”

“Mike, this is not your fault,” Clark soothed gently.  
“Excuse me?”

Clark turned toward the corner where the feminine voice had come from and spotted a blonde woman in her late twenties standing in the doorway of an office marked ‘Interrogation 3.’

“Is one of you Clark Kent?”

Clark turned and nodded. “I am.” He waved a hand at her.

“Mayson Drake, Deputy DA.” She held out her hand to shake his. “I’d like to see if you’re willing to testify against Baby Rage.”

Clark opened his mouth to respond but found his attention pulled to the corner of the station where the thug in question was kicking, yelling and screaming as the police officers were searching him. Clark watched the scene unfold, closing his eyes for a moment to process the insanity that had escaped out of the thug before turning his attention back to the ADA in front of him.

“Baby Rage?” Clark smirked, sharing a look with Lois. “Gee, I wonder why they call him that.”

Lois thwacked him on the chest with a grin and let out a groan. “That was bad.”

“Maybe someone else can bully *him* for a change,” Mike added, shaking his head in disgust.

“You must be Mike Lane?” Mayson inquired, glancing down at the intake report in front of her. “I’m sorry about what happened to your restaurant. We’re going to do what we can to make sure he pays for what he tried to do.”

Mike smiled. “Thanks, but they’re gonna have to do a lot better than that to scare me. I’ve been in business for fifteen years on that block and seen thugs like that come and go. No Skins or Roughnecks are gonna scare me off.”

“Skins?” Lois practically snickered, echoing the name in disbelief.

“It’s the name of the gang Baby Rage is connected to,”

Mayson responded hurriedly as she glanced at the report in front of her. She frowned and looked at Lois inquisitively. “I’m sorry. You are...?”

“That’s my niece, Lois Lane. She was with me when all this happened,” Mike explained. “She’s a little on the over-protective side.”

“I see.” Mayson nodded, glancing over at Lois and then Clark with uncertainty written on her face.

“Yes, I’m the one who called the police and was placed on hold... for three hours.” Lois glared around the police station filled with officers shooting the breeze. “I’ve seen paint dry faster than the police responded to my uncle’s restaurant. I mean...”

Clark noted the look of disbelief on Mayson’s face and then added, “Also, that kid threatened Lois.”

Mayson’s eyes widened ever so slightly and glanced in Lois’ direction who shrugged it off. “I’m sure he was just trying to scare me.”

“Well, now it’s my turn to scare him.” Mayson threw a stern glare toward where Baby Rage was being escorted into a holding cell. She then turned back to Clark. “With your help?”

“Whatever I saw, I’ll tell in court, Ms. Drake,” Clark reassured her, placing a protective arm around Lois.

“Mayson,” she corrected.

Clark spotted the look of disbelief cross his wife’s face as she rolled her eyes at Mayson as a slow flirtatious smile spread across the ADA’s face. He stifled a groan as Mayson reached over to jot something down. Mayson reached over to hand him her card.

“Call my office in the morning so we can arrange a deposition. And if you need to reach me during off hours, my home phone’s on the back.”

“Great,” Lois cut in, taking the card from Mayson. “I’m sure the next time those thugs show up at my uncle’s restaurant you’ll help make sure the police show up to help him?”

“Well, I can’t help with the politics of police response times.”

Mayson chuckled, flashing an uneasy expression in Clark’s direction.

He bit his lower lip, suppressing a chuckle when he saw Lois place a possessive hand across his knee, ensuring her wedding band was visible. Clark patted her hand with his and interjected gently, “I think what my *wife* is hinting at here is how exactly is the DA’s office and the Police department that...” he glanced over his shoulder with a stern gaze toward the officers still surrounding the doughnut box, “don’t seem concerned with responding to citizens in distress...going to assist to make sure something like this doesn’t happen again? Possibly as retaliation for pressing charges?”

“I can appreciate your concern,” Mayson replied carefully, seeming to be processing the question at the same time she was connecting the fact that he was in fact the victim’s son-in-law. “Unfortunately, we can’t guarantee anything. I suppose we could try to arrange some protection...”

“I don’t want to put anyone out. I just would like the police to show up when I call,” Mike pleaded with her in concern. “Are you going to have Superman testify too?” Mike asked, scratching his chin.

“Oh, Superman, right.” A pensive expression crossed Mayson’s face. “I’ll have to talk to him too, won’t I?”

Lois crossed her arms over her chest and mused quietly, “I mean, he only caught the guy red-handed before Baby Rage was able to demolish my uncle’s restaurant. But yeah I guess you’ll have to talk to him too.”

“We can get him to stop by the DA’s office if you need, Ms. Drake,” Clark interjected, attempting to diffuse the rising tensions that were growing between Lois and Mayson.

“I’ll let you know,” Mayson smiled, moving past him. “Clark, we’ll talk soon?”

He nodded, and she smiled back at him before heading into the station toward the holding cell Baby Rage had just been escorted into. He turned his attention back to Lois who was rolling her eyes.

“Unbelievable.” Lois turned toward the officers who were still surrounding the doughnut box. “All these cops in here. How many calls for help do you think they’re ignoring to sit around and do nothing?”

Mike pointed to the short statured officer in the corner. “That one did take some fingerprints.... after he cleaned out the doughnut box over there.”

“Looks like that one’s filling out some paperwork...” Clark pointed out with a hopeful tone. He saw the officer set the paperwork across his chest and lean back in his chair with his feet on the desk. “Yeah, never mind.”

“It takes all kinds, sweetie.” Mike placed a hand on Lois’ shoulder. “At least I know it wasn’t personal ... the police ignoring me.”

Clark shook his head in dismay as he looked around the crowded police station. “Something tells me this isn’t the first incident and won’t be the last.” He tapped his hand on his chin, pondering aloud, “Which makes you wonder why we haven’t heard about this before now?”

“Maybe it’s selective?” Lois shook her head, reaching over to take Clark’s hand in hers. “Come on, let’s see if we can find out why these cops are taking extended lunch breaks around the water cooler all of a sudden.” She leaned in to give Mike a peck on the cheek. “Bye, Uncle Mike. If you need anything, give me a call.”

“I will. Go get ‘em.” Mike cheered her on. “Clark, take care of her.”

The dimly lit office emitted a light blue light on the receiver, and Bill Church reached his hand over to answer the call. A screen slid up from the table in front of him, revealing one of his lieutenants from Qatar. “*Alsayd*. Church, I take it your gift arrived in one piece?”

Bill Church looked to the side, seeing the tall blonde in a long pink dress seated on the corner of her seat. A pleased smile spread across his face, and Bill nodded to his lieutenant. “Anwir, your gifts are a strain on my heart condition.”

“You only live once,” Anwir responded with a light chuckle.

“Well,” Church responded with a shrug, “I can’t argue with you there, my friend. What exactly are you trying to butter me up for?”

“Well, we might have a problem, Mr. Church,” Anwir explained hesitantly. “It appears we have some competition in the trafficking ring we set up outside of Al Wakrah.”

“I see,” Church noted with dismay, tapping his hand on his chin. “Any idea who is behind the operation?”

“That’s what’s most distressing,” Anwir responded with a frown. “No one knows.”

“A lone gunman?” Church mused aloud. “Perhaps I should send Billy over to check things out and see what he can surmise of the situation.”

“Qatar can be a great region to help build up for Intergang, but the trafficking ring is crucial, Mr. Church.” Anwir grew hesitant before speaking up. “If you’re sure Billy is up to the task, we would welcome his help.”

“I’ll send him over next week,” Church advised, nodding his thanks as Anwir ended the call. He reached over to press a button on the screen to slide it closed.

He turned to the young blonde sitting across from him and smiled, “I believe we were interrupted...”

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Clark whistled quietly as he tossed the freshly chopped vegetables into the pan in front of him. He glanced over to the television he had set up within his line of sight catching sight of the news anchor, Russell Jackson as he read through the nightly news on Stern Media News Network’s station. He and Lois had tried to make a habit of tuning in on the evenings for the occasional segments Alice would have. More and more she seemed to be given bigger assignments to investigate and cover for the televised news station. A fact that Perry rarely let anyone at the Planet forget. Not that anyone would, given how much Perry proudly touted his wife’s newfound success in what he commonly referred to as her “second act.”

Though it had been met with uncertainty by Perry shortly after the Planet’s grand opening, Alice and Perry seemed to have found their groove in balancing their work lives with one another. Perry had begun delegating some of the duties he’d taken on over the years as editor-in-chief out of necessity to some of the more seasoned staff members that could step up and help so he could leave at a reasonable time. Now of course, like with any news circuit, there were exceptions that sometimes kept Perry at the Planet later than he planned, but those were a rarity compared to an everyday occurrence that had become his norm over the last few years. The change seemed to have brought Perry and Alice closer together and he couldn’t be happier for them.

“With gang activity on the rise, one has to wonder just what the city is going to do about it,” Jackson remarked as coverage from Southside and Hobb’s Bay filled the screen. “Superman can’t save everyone.”

Clark sighed, silently agreeing with the anchor and feeling mildly frustrated with the reminder of just how much was out of his control. He reached for the remote, clicking the television off. “I think that’s enough of that, don’t you, buddy?” he turned to the sleeping figure of his son that was nestled snugly in the bassinet of his play yard. He smiled down at him, then turned his attention to the pan in front of him, adding the chicken into the mixture with a light application of olive oil. The pan fizzled and he flipped his wrist to toss the mixture together and alternate the vegetables and chicken over the heat from the stove.

Jon had just turned nine months old last week. Lois had taken

the full twelve weeks of leave and transitioned back into the office effortlessly within the last month of her leave. Chasing down stories without her had left him feeling as if he was missing a half of himself when working through the cases that came up from his Superman duties. He had come across situations that left him conflicted on what to do and of course Lois was no longer there in the office to turn to nor could she really help when it came to figuring out how to write up an article on a story he truly didn’t want told to the world.

He had found himself in the unique situation of facing off with an accidental hero he’d inadvertently created when rescuing the man in the middle of an electrical storm. The temporary situation had put him in a tight spot of being directed to find the answer while at the same time not wanting the real story to come out. Thankfully the toll eventually became too much for the new superhero as well, and he worked with him in the end to transfer the powers back. With the help of Dr. Klein of course. He suspected Perry wasn’t completely buying the story Waldecker had pandered his way, but their editor hadn’t said anything. With Perry though, he never could tell.

There had of course, been the occasional lone ranger criminal setting his sights on proving himself by taking on Superman and attempting to take over the city in one way or another. Lenny Stokes had stirred up a craze a month after Jon had been born and brought Clark to his knees as he figured out his next step. Working with Dr. Klein on how to combat the wall of sound Stokes had built had been one of the first projects outside of LexCorp leftover criminals they had worked through. Then of course, there had been the Prankster and his vendetta against Lois. Thankfully when he had scurried into town Lois and Jon had been out of town visiting her sister.

Lois being there to help him explain away his exits throughout the day had been a welcome change when the Planet had been rebuilt. After she had gone on maternity leave, he had discovered just how many times she was left juggling covering for his exits and keeping his fellow colleagues in the dark about his alter-ego. Simple questions about where he’d been or what story he was working on or why something wasn’t turned in were hard to keep up with on the three to four hours of sleep he’d been awarded the last few months. Thankfully Perry had been understanding and not pressed the issue, but he knew it would only be a matter of time if he didn’t do something.

He looked over to the pan in front of him, noting the crisp brown on the chicken and removed it from the stove to allow it to cool. He smiled proudly, adding in the sauce he’d made. “Looks like dinner’s just about ready, buddy.”

“Smells delicious,” he heard Lois whisper from behind him, placing a hand on his shoulder as she leaned over to kiss him.

He glanced back at her with a smile. “Everything go okay getting Mike settled at your mom’s?”

“As good as it can be expected, but I think having him stay with Mom is safer than leaving him prey to those gangs roaming the block he lives on. Who knows, maybe they’ll find something they can agree on,” she responded with a frown as she smoothed her hands up over his shoulders, connecting them behind the back of his neck as she wedged her fingers together. “Thank you,” she leaned in to kiss him. “For making dinner.”

He grinned back at her, leaning in to kiss her once more. “Selfish motivation really. I don’t want to eat pasta again.”

“I thought you liked my pasta,” Lois retorted with a teasing grin, fingering the loose collar of his blue dress shirt.

“I do,” he murmured against her lips, “just not every day.” He reached over to stroke her cheek with his palm and brushed his lips against hers, lingering a moment longer to savor the hint of chocolate that hung on her lips. “Fudge Castle?” he teased.

“Emergency stash of Double Fudge Crunch bar after chasing down half the police officers in Metropolis and coming up with

nothing,” Lois said with a low groan as she looped her arms around his neck. “And Henderson hasn’t gotten back to me either.”

Clark shrugged his shoulders, “It’s only been a few hours.”

“I’m thinking we may need to talk to Bobby tomorrow,” she let out a soft sigh as she tightened her arms around him. She tapped her index finger against the top button of his dress shirt. “What was up with that ADA? Was it just me or was she annoyed about having to get Superman’s statement?”

“She definitely seemed... *different*,” Clark allowed, uncertain how to describe the behavior from the ADA. Truth be told he had his own concerns about ADA Drake after the brush off she’d given Mike but was still mulling over the encounter to determine if it was just a bad introduction or if there was more to it. Though he didn’t expect anyone to fawn over themselves to meet his alter-ego the fact that the potential interview was met with indifference made him hesitant on just how much they could trust her with Mike’s case. “I think we give her a chance and see where it goes. Worst case scenario, Mike can ask for someone else to take over his case.”

“I guess.” Lois pursed her lips, resting her head against his chest. Her gaze shifted to the basinet he had moved into the dining room just within eyesight from where he was cooking. “I see someone is tucked out.”

“Well, eating peaches and peas really takes it out of a guy,” he replied sympathetically, feeling her body vibrate against his as she leaned into him.

“Is that so?” Lois grinned back at him, stealing a glance to where Jon was sleeping peacefully. “I suppose we should get him to bed.” She let out a long sigh. “I hate that his visit with Uncle Mike got cut short.”

“Me too,” Clark agreed, linking his arms around her waist. “Maybe we can try and meet up with him this weekend.”

“Maybe,” Lois responded, fingering the collar to his dress shirt. “If he’s not tied up with this court case now.”

Clark pulled her closer, resting his hands on her lower-back. “I think we all could use a break from everything. You’ve been burning the candlestick at both ends lately, and with the sudden demand Superman’s been in lately...” He let out a long breath. “Even if we’re not able to connect with Mike, I think an afternoon away from everything is needed for all of us.” He leaned in to press his lips against hers. “Anywhere you want.”

“Anywhere?” She grinned against his lips, tightening her arms around his neck.

“Anywhere.” He repeated, allowing his lips to linger against hers, feeling the heat from her breath tickle his lips. A soft moan escaped her throat, and her lips parted, granting him access as the tip of his tongue brushed against hers, tasting the sweet hint of chocolate that lingered on her. He moved his hands to cup both sides of her face as he smoothed his lips across hers. Each caress of his lips grew with intensity as he lost himself in the art of kissing her.

Dinner was long forgotten as her hands roamed up and down his chest, exploring the soft cotton of his shirt. “Lois...” he let out a deep moan as she leaned into him, tightening her arms around him. “God, you’re beautiful,” he murmured, running his hand against her cheek, outlining the frame of her face with his palm.

“I love you.” She sighed against him, reaching her hand over to cover his.

A hard, rapping knock echoed through the living room and they both turned toward the doorway.

“And there goes the evening,” Lois muttered.

Clark let out a defeated sigh as he lowered his glasses to x-ray the front door and see who it was. “It’s Bill Henderson.”

“Of course, it is.” Lois sighed, shaking her head.

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The light red bricks had long since worn themselves down

and the wooden floors had seen better days. Ingrid reached her hand up to stroke her long blonde hair, twisting her index finger nervously around the strands that framed her face. She took in a deep breath as she steadied herself, making her way to the hallway which led into the main room where one of the sisters were setting up a snack area.

Ingrid felt her stomach churn as she looked on, watching the simple cheese and cracker slices be laid out on the tray, feeling her mouth salivate at the thought of scrounging up the salty snack. She looked around, noting the long line that had already begun to form and quickly found her place behind a middle-aged man that appeared to be in his mid-thirties. The man turned to her, flashing a half-smile in her direction. “Last time I didn’t get in line in time and they ran out.”

“Yeah, it gets crowded here,” Ingrid commented, twisting her mouth into a round ‘o’ as she looked around the room uneasily. She’d only spent two nights here at the mission but still couldn’t really make head or tails out of the sisters that kept the place running or the other patrons being helped that resided here.

A thick Arabic accent came from the man as he continued to press her for conversation, “You should let your hair down.”

She looked back at him with a perplexed look and he pointed to the ponytail holding her hair in a tight bun with a few strands of hair loose framing her face. “Your hair. You should let it down.”

“I like it this way,” she replied coolly, crossing her arms over her chest as she moved with the line.

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Bill Henderson set his mug of coffee down on the table in front of him, looking around the dimly lit dining room he was seated in. Clark was calmly cleaning up the kitchen while they waited for Lois to settle their son Jon down for the evening. He tapped his hand on the table, looking around the room, noting the collection of photographs that covered the walls and shelves on display. How easily all of these moments could have been drummed into nothingness had even one thing gone wrong with their investigation into Lex Luthor. The admirable sacrifice he had seen both Lois and Clark make as they worked tirelessly to expose the criminal mastermind, Lex Luthor, for all of his misdeeds, had made him look at both of them in a new light.

To both of them, it wasn’t just a story.

It wasn’t just a headline.

It was so much more.

Many of the reporters he’d come across in his years on the force had that fire but many of them did not share the burning desire to do what was right and help those that couldn’t help themselves. That was what set both Lois and Clark apart from the rest. Which was why he knew he was making the right decision in trusting both of them.

“Out like a light,” Lois commented, holding up a white and blue baby monitor in her hand, returning to the dining room as she took a seat across from Bill.

“He’s gotten big,” Henderson said softly, offering her a half-smile.

“He’s still growing,” Lois grinned. She glanced over at Clark who was standing behind her with a protective hand on her shoulder. She then looked back at Henderson. “So, something tells me this isn’t a social call?”

Henderson shook his head, burying his face into his hands and looked back up at the couple with a weary expression. “I got your messages...All eight of them.”

“And?” Clark prompted, taking a seat next to Lois.

“And I don’t have answers,” Henderson responded uncertainly. “But I think you’re right to be concerned.”

“Well, gee, thanks for confirming I’m allowed to have feelings, Bill. I didn’t know I was allowed.” Lois snorted, frustrated with his response.

“Lo-is...” Clark chastised, turning to her with a groan.

“No, she’s got every right to be frustrated,” Henderson brushed the comment off. “I know I am.”

“So...Southside. Lower Eastside.” Clark listed off the areas off, looking at Henderson for confirmation.

“All areas in the Southside and Lower East Side are having slower than normal response times from Metropolis units. Areas in the central downtown and Upper Class are overpopulated with patrols.” Henderson hung his head in shame. “And I don’t know why.”

“But how is that even possible?” Lois practically shot up out of her chair. “You are the Inspector!”

“That’s what I thought too,” Henderson grumbled, shaking his head. He let out a heavy sigh. “What I’m about to tell you doesn’t go beyond these walls.” The couple looked at one another and then nodded. Henderson tapped his hand on the table nervously and then began to explain, “It started as just small stuff. Tickets not being written. Calls being made and officers not showing up. Now it’s ballooned into entire sectors of the city being ignored.”

“Selective protection,” Lois summarized.

“And I don’t know who’s doing it or how to stop it.”

Henderson fumed, shaking his head in dismay. “There have been ...grumblings about some new criminal force making a move for the city for a few months. You know as well as I do how crazy this city’s been since Luthor was brought down. Everyone wants to prove themselves and take on Superman to make a statement.”

“And fail,” Lois interjected.

“Thankfully,” Clark supplied gently.

“Yes,” Henderson agreed and then turned to the couple.

“From what I’m able to gather, this organization is like nothing we’ve encountered before with Luthor. Orchestrated crime down to the second in mass proportions.” Henderson shook his head in dismay. “From what I’ve been able to figure out, it’s all focused on the neighborhoods with less funding. Allocated funds that should be going to help maintain units’ presence in those areas have up and disappeared. Officers transferred. Equipment sabotaged. Cops paid to look the other way.”

“Running the neighborhood value down and making people want to move,” Clark muttered in disgust as he put the pieces together.

“And then someone swoops in and makes a big purchase for pennies on the dollar,” Henderson added his own disgusted grunt. “But you’ll have a hell of a time proving it.”

Lois glanced next to her, meeting Clark’s gaze. They shared a silent moment, seeming to be silently communicating with one another before turning back to Henderson. “So, what do you want us to do about it?” Lois asked, tapping her hand on the table.

“I want to help. I want to stop this...whatever it is that’s going on, but I can’t fight a disease that’s happening inside my own department. I’ve got too many stiff shirts breathing down my neck. I don’t know who to trust.” Henderson met Lois and Clark’s gaze and added, “I can’t investigate this without drawing suspicion from these guys, but you two can.”

Lois and Clark shared a look and then Lois nodded before speaking up. “I suppose we should start digging and figure out what to do next.”

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Lois sunk back on the couch, shaking her head as she leaned her head against Clark’s shoulder. Bill Henderson had left a few hours ago, and she and Clark were still reeling from the explosive conversation they had had with Henderson. Clark reached over to stroke the frame of her face. “You okay?”

Lois let out a shaky breath, trying to process everything that Bill Henderson had confided in them tonight. “Well, we found something even Bill Henderson isn’t sure how to combat.” She reached her hand over to stroke Clark’s cheek. “Who could be so powerful they can reach an entire police force and bypass

Henderson like that?”

“I don’t know.” Clark shrugged, wrapping a protective arm around her.

She glanced over at the baby monitor, noting the quiet snores escaping the speakers, smiling as she watched the red and yellow lights flicker. A heavy breath escaped her throat and she reached up to wipe the tears that had escaped the corners of her eyes. She and Clark had come up against criminals before and brought down corrupt politicians over the last few years, but this felt different. Having her uncle’s life and livelihood threatened hit home. It was supposed to be a brief visit and a time to catch up with one another and let Jon meet his great uncle. What could have happened had Clark not warned her...

“Hey.” Clark reached a hand over to outline her jaw, looking back at her intently. “We’ll figure this out and stop them. I promise.”

“I know we will.” Lois gave him a watery smile. “I just keep thinking what could have happened if that bomb had gone off...”

“I know.” Clark pressed his lips against her forehead, cradling her in his arms. “Jon’s safe. Mike’s safe. The bomb was diffused before it could cause any damage. Baby Rage is sitting in lock up awaiting his bail hearing...”

Lois nodded her agreement, leaning into him. “Maybe we can try and reach out to Agent Davenport and see if he might have heard of these guys at least.”

“We don’t even have a name,” Clark reminded her, cupping the side of her face as he leaned in to kiss her.

“Well, if this is as big as Henderson is saying then there’s got to be at least something the FBI knows about...” Lois reasoned aloud, leaning her head back against the couch cushions as Clark smoothed his lips across hers, snaking his arms around her waist as they sank further into the couch. She let out a soft giggle. “I know what you’re trying to do...”

“Taking advantage of the fact that our nine-month-old son is sound asleep,” Clark murmured as he brushed his lips against the nape of her neck.

“Trying to distract... me,” she let out a shuddered breath as she sank further into the couch cushions. “We should reach out to Davenport and see if he knows anything.”

“Are you sure Davenport would even take our call? It’s not like we’re working to bring down a mutual enemy anymore.” He brushed his lips against her jawline, grazing against the sensitive flesh with the edge of his teeth. “You know how the FBI likes to close ranks.”

“True,” Lois acknowledged leaning her head back to allow Clark better access to her neck, running her fingers through the dark locks of his hair. “I guess the press and the FBI don’t really make a habit out of working together.”

“But it doesn’t hurt to ask,” Clark murmured in her ear.

“Something we can add to the list of things to worry about tomorrow,” Lois agreed, hooking her arms around his neck and sliding her leg across his backside. “We have more pressing matters to attend to.” Her hands moved to stroke his face as she leaned into him, brushing her lips against his as her other hand moved across his chest. Her index finger brushed across the cotton fabric, tracing the length of his tie as she folded the silk fabric over her hand until she reached the knot of his tie.

“I love the way you think,” Clark murmured, moving his hands up to trace the hem of her skirt, slipping his hand beneath the fabric and brushing against her thighs. She let out a soft giggle as her index finger hooked into the knot of his tie to loosen it.

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Martin Snell walked down the long corridor and into the office across the hall from Bill Church’s office. He knocked on the door frame before entering. Inside, he found the young Bill Church Jr. on the phone.

“I see you have a daughter, Mr. Senator. A very young and

impressionable daughter that may not like to find out about how easily you liquidated her college fund? How about you block that bill and be a good little soldier or Intergang will make sure your daughter and wife know all about your transgressions at the casino, the bars...the backroom of those VIP strip clubs... I know where you live. I know where your kids go to school. I know where your wife gets the car worked on. It'd be a shame if something happened to her... Oh, you do? That's very wise." Bill Church Jr. grinned as he lit his cigar. "I'll send my attorney over to finalize the deal."

Church set the phone down on the receiver and turned to Snell. "You'll be making a trip out to Washington later." Bill Church Jr. wagged his finger at his face. "You can take care of it after you finish up the testing with Superman."

"Ready when you are, Mr. Church," Snell said with an evil grin.

"Good. Make sure the guys are in place and have it all on video for analysis," Bill Church Jr. ordered.

"Anything you say, Mr. Church."

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*Present Day...*

Ingrid felt a strong force push back against her, knocking her to the ground as a white light lit up the dimly lit sky. The hint of chemicals burning hung in the air as she stared into abyss of starlight and darkness. The magnesium flash of the explosion emitted a colorful array into the pitch blackness of the night, coloring it with different hues as chaos surrounding the innocent patrons of the Foster building erupted. A soft whine echoed in the distance and everything around her slowed down as she stared up at the ceiling as it began to tumble. Dust and debris hung in the air and a soft whine rung in her ears.

She glanced over to the line that had begun to form near the train station, silently cursing her luck as everything turned dark.

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Clark waved at Jon, standing in the doorway to the playroom where Jon was happily babbling to himself. He glanced over to Lois who was crouched down next to Jon, stealing one last kiss. A warm smile spread across his face as he watched the exchange. It filled his heart with such an immense amount of joy to watch Jon share these quiet moments with Lois. The way Jon's face lit up when looking back at his mother struck a chord with him, reminding him just how blessed he and Lois were.

"You have a good day, buddy," Lois whispered, leaning over to hug Jon goodbye. "Try not to talk when the teacher's talking."

Clark bit back a chuckle and leaned down to hug Jon one last time. "Have a good one, buddy."

"Bye daddy." Jon giggled and leaned up to give him a peck on the cheek and turned to his mom to give her a quick kiss. They turned to wave goodbye, watching him leave to go play with his friends and then he let out a sigh, turning to Lois who was tucking Jon's jacket into his cubby for him.

"He's going to end up with a cubby full of notes from Ms. Lisa, isn't he," Clark chuckled, taking Lois' hand in his.

"He can't help it." Lois smirked back at him as they walked down the hallway leading to the elevator that led up to the Daily Planet newsroom. Though they had done their research as any couple did in the early months of Lois' pregnancy with Jon, the convenience of having Jon just a few floors away with the flexibility to drop in and see him whenever they wanted to was too good of a benefit to turn down. The teachers and curriculum offered were of high caliber as well.

"Well, we've got about ten minutes before Perry starts yelling for this morning's stories." Clark looped his arm around Lois as they reached the end of the hallway and saw the brightly painted red elevator leading up to the other floors at the Daily Planet.

"Wow, ten whole minutes before the staff meeting, huh?" Lois grinned, reaching up to loosen the knot of Clark's tie. "What

will we ever do with all this time?"

He leaned down, brushing his lips against Lois' and grinned as she wrapped her arms around his neck. His hands moved to cup her cheek as he reached over to press the call button on the elevator. The elevator car pinged, and they stepped into the elevator car, arms still tangled up with one another. His hands reached up to trace the frame of her face, whispering featherlight kisses against her lips, forgetting for a brief moment that they still didn't have anything more for Perry on the Mayor's tax increase.

"These Monday meetings are beginning to lose their appeal," Lois let out a long sigh, tracing the length of his tie down from the knot to his belt buckle. "I'll be glad when something other than politics is covering the front page of the Planet."

"It is an election year," Clark reminded her, resting his forehead against hers as the elevator reached the newsroom.

"Olsen!" Perry's voice boomed across the newsroom floor and Clark let out a low groan, pulling away from Lois.

"I think that's..." Clark found himself unable to finish his thought when an onslaught of cries for help reached his super-enhanced hearing. He felt his entire stature freeze up as he heard the percussion of distant explosions echo from afar.

Lois placed a hand on his shoulder, trying to get his attention. "What's wrong?"

"I've got to go," he whispered, leaning over to kiss her before darting toward the stairwell to tend to the cries for help that began to multiply tenfold over as he flew through the sky at super-speed.

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Lilith Kirsch fingered her light blonde hair as she paced in front of the small coffee shop, waiting for her name to be called, feeling her stomach churn with apprehension as she counted the cracks in the pavement she was standing on. She wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing the sides of her lavender cotton covered arms nervously. She bit her lower lip, pondering momentarily if she had the stomach to make this leap of faith.

"Lilith?"

The barista behind the counter held up the green and white cup with her name on it and set it on the counter. She nodded her thanks, putting a few dollars in the tip cup as she took the cup and began putting the finishing touches on her coffee.

She could do this.

She had to.

For Esma.

\*\*\*

Clark streaked downwards, soaring toward the blast that had nearly wiped the Foster building to rubble. He felt his heart jump into his chest as he flew onto the scene, noting the remnants of brick and glass piled to one side of what used to hold the small office complex. He landed on the broken pavement, letting out a blast of freezing breath, snuffing out the flames from the recent explosion. The sound of sirens in the distance could be heard as he surveyed the debris to check for injured victims.

Beneath the rubble and debris of brick and mortar was a guard struggling to breathe beneath the pressure from the weight bearing down on him. Clark knelt down beside him, offering reassurance as he checked him for internal injuries, hearing the arrival of ambulatory workers. "You're going to be okay," he said softly.

The older man opened his mouth to speak but nothing other than a soft croak escaped his throat. He frowned, squeezing the man's hand and nodding quietly. He knew his words were empty and the man had just a few short moments left before he would succumb to his injuries. But he couldn't bring himself to tell him that. He bowed his head down, kneeling, watching as the man's life drifted away. The sound of sirens and voices from the distance approaching reached his ears and he let out a shallow breath, knowing at least one life had been lost. He knew he couldn't be everywhere at once, but still, he mourned whenever he found

himself face to face with that reality. Losing a life had become a part of the day to day responsibilities of donning the cape and ‘S’ over the years, but it didn’t get any easier.

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Lois took a sip from her coffee cup, reaching up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear as she made her way to her desk after the staff meeting. She glanced across the aisle, noting Clark still hadn’t returned from his rescue and let out a heavy sigh, wondering if his absence meant the rescue had taken more of a toll on him emotionally or physically. It didn’t look like finishing up their follow-up on the Mayor’s new tax plan would happen this morning.

“Lois?”

She looked over her shoulder, seeing Jimmy standing behind her with a young blonde haired woman that looked to be in her mid-twenties, dressed sharply in a lavender button down top and navy pencil skirt. Lois noted the worry lines around the young woman’s eyes as she took her seat behind her desk. “Yes?”

“Sorry to bother you, Lois,” Jimmy apologized, gesturing to the young woman in front of her. “I know you’re busy, but Taylor brought Ms. Kirsch up here while you were talking to Perry...”

Lois frowned. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I had any appointments today...”

“Oh, no, Ms. Lane, I didn’t have an appointment with you,” the young woman said, tucking a loose strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

There was so much about this young woman that struck a chord with Lois. She watched as the young woman nervously twisted the tissue in her hand and glanced over at Jimmy who appeared to be realizing whatever lie this woman had told to get on this floor could mean trouble. After the bombing a few years ago, Mr. Stern had taken extra precautions to make sure security kept outsiders away from the newsroom and especially Perry. He had had a few threats over the years. But this woman didn’t seem threatening. She seemed to be seeking help from the only place she thought could help her.

Jimmy nodded to Lois. “Sorry, I just assumed...”

“You know what, it’s fine,” Lois said, waving him off. “I’ll take it from here.” She looked to Jimmy and said, “Thanks Jimmy.” She pointed to the chair by her desk, gesturing to it and noted, “You managed to talk your way into the newsroom past security and even Jimmy. Whatever this is about must be pretty important.”

“It is,” the young woman said, gently fingering the top button to her shirt. “I’m sorry I lied, but I thought if I waited one more day I would lose my nerve. I’ve been going over this again and again wondering how to say this for a week now and I finally got the courage to just come here and say it.”

“Must be pretty scary news if you have to talk yourself into going to the press,” Lois observed, pulling out her notepad and pen. She noticed the nervousness in Ms. Kirsch’s hand and reached over to take her hand. “How about we just start with your name?”

The young woman nodded, biting her lower lip as she spoke with a shaky breath, “My name is Lilith Kirsch.” She reached her hand up to swipe the tears from her face. “I’m twenty-four years old. I’ve been raising my sister for the last eight months since the car wreck that killed my parents.” The words spilled out flooding Lois with the details of her parents’ death and simultaneous role as sister and guardian. “I’ve been talking to the police for three days and they do nothing. I know Esma wouldn’t just disappear like this.”

“Whoa.” Lois set her pen down and gave the young girl’s hand a squeeze. “Take a breath, Lilith. Let’s just start at the beginning. Who is Esma?”

“My sister.” Lilith reached up to dab her eyes with the tissue in her hand. “She’s just sixteen. She hasn’t been home in three

days and the police...”

“Have you filed a missing persons report?” Lois asked gently. “I tried to file it when she was missing but they wouldn’t do anything until it had been more than twenty-four hours.” Lilith cried. “Who knows where Esma is now. She did not run away!”

“I believe you.” Lois reached over to squeeze the young woman’s hand. “What exactly do you want the Daily Planet to do though? We don’t exactly search for missing people.”

“No, but you do investigate and expose the truth.” Lilith dabbed her eyes. “Please, Ms. Lane, I need your help. I need someone to help tell Esma’s story and keep her from becoming just another number. She’s more than just a missing person poster. She’s more than just another face. I can’t lose her too.”

Lois felt the corners of her eyes burn as the young girl’s plea tugged at her heartstrings. “I’ll do what I can. I promise.”

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#### Chapter 4: Push Me Past the Breaking Point

*Four Years Ago...*

Jack Davenport placed a hand on the table in front of him, glancing over at the couple seated across from him. He let out a chuckle noting the stolen glances exchanged between the couple in the short while they had been seated at the small coffee shop. He reached over to take a sip from the ceramic coffee mug, wincing from the heat and setting it back down to cool.

A smile crossed his face as he looked up at the couple. “So, your message said this was important?”

The couple exchanged a look and then turned back to him before turning their attention back to Davenport. “A confidential source alerted us about what appears to be corruption within the entire police department. Our confidential source also hinted that this might be the work of someone or something bigger than just corrupt officers.”

Davenport let out a chuckle. “Boy, you just go for the jugular, don’t you, Lois?”

“I don’t like small talk.” Lois flashed him a quick smile. “Waste of time.”

“We were hoping you might be able to shed some light on where to look with these guys.” Clark interjected, taking a sip from his own mug of coffee.

“We understand there are things you can’t tell us on active investigations, but ...someone’s got to know something about whoever is behind all this,” Lois pleaded with him.

Davenport grew quiet. Though it was true the FBI didn’t actively work with members of the press unless there was a benefit to the case given what they were bringing him was for an investigation that had hit a brick wall time and time again, when it came to sourcing out the kingpin behind Intergang he could probably argue the point of sharing a part of the investigation with the duo. They had after all proven their trustworthiness during the case with Luthor’s downfall.

“I’ll talk with our director and see if he’s willing to brief you two in on a restricted basis.”

“So, you know who is behind this?” Lois prompted, her eyes lit up happily.

“I suspect I know who is behind this. The FBI’s had a case open for at least a decade.” Davenport looked cautiously over at the duo. “But certain concessions will have to be made on what can be printed.”

Lois and Clark both agreed in unison. “Understood.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but I can’t make any promises.” Davenport turned his attention back to his coffee and stirred it with his spoon, adding in another spoon of sugar.

“Do you have a name at least you can give us?” Lois asked, taking a sip of her own coffee mug.

“Depends on which name you’re searching for.” Davenport shrugged. “In Hong Kong they’re called *Èmò bāng*. If you ask the contacts in Portugal, they’re called *Diabo gang*.” He grew quiet

and then let out a deep sigh. “The official name the FBI refers to these guys with is Intergang.” He shook his head and sighed. “And that’s all I’m willing to say on this subject for now.” He then took another sip of his coffee. “Now, if that’s all with business...” He gestured to them. “I hear congratulations are in order. A little birdie mentioned a nomination you two and Perry were put on the short list for. Something about a Most Influential Voice Award?”

He chuckled when he saw the blush cross the couple’s face. Lois was the first to speak up, “It’s a PR stunt by Mr. Stern. It’s nothing really.”

“Well, most of those nominations come from pretty high up.” Davenport grinned back at her.

“We’re just happy we were able to stop Luthor.” Clark shrugged his shoulders. “It’s really unnecessary.”

“Maybe,” Davenport allowed. “But the reality is without you two leading the charge and doing a lot of the groundwork for this case Luthor would still be running this city with an iron fist.” He grew quiet. “A lot of good men and women put their lives on the line to stop him and you all helped make sure it wasn’t a fruitless effort.” Davenport grinned back at them. “I’m sure it’ll look nice next to that new Kerth.” He winked back at them. “I’ve got to get going but it was great to catch up.” He patted his briefcase. “I’ll take this up the chain and see what they say. Give my best to Jon and try to stay out of trouble.” He gave a warning gaze to Lois. “You don’t know what you’re getting into with these guys. Regardless of whether the FBI does brief you two...just be careful.”

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Ingrid took a long puff from her cigarette, feeling her hands tremble as she watched the white smoke rise from the end. Her teeth chattered in the cold as she looked around the vacant lot behind the halfway house she was staying in.

“Escaping the sisters, eh?”

Ingrid jumped startled by the familiar voice. She let out a sharp cough when she saw the burly man behind her. “Yusif, you scared me.” Ingrid patted her chest

“A beautiful night.” Yusif pulled out a long white paper roll from his pocket with a lighter. She eyed the paper roll with an uneasy gaze. The smell hit her nostrils with a punch and she winced when she saw the white smoke rise into the air. She scrunched up her nose, turning away and Yusif snorted. “Takes the edge off.”

Ingrid flashed a weak smile, taking another puff from her cigarette. “Something like that.”

“Wanna try?” Yusif held the rolled up white paper he had been puffing on and handing it to her.

She shook her head, holding up a hand to push it away. “I don’t think so...”

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Clark looked around the dark walls of the conference room he was seated in, taking note of the lack of anything in the room other than the telephone centered on the table. He glanced across the large wooden table to where Mayson Drake was diligently taking her notes.

“You’re going to make a great witness, Clark,” Mayson commented, looking up from her notepad, and added, “Now, the hearing will be set for this Wednesday. Be sure to arrive on time. Judge Andrews is very punctual and runs his courtroom with precision. If the court time is for seven then you should be there by a quarter till.”

“Understood, Ms. Drake,” Clark answered, leaning back in his seat.

She paused, seeming to mull over something before speaking up. “I really appreciate your willingness to stand up against these guys, Clark. In my line of work, you don’t see much bravery.”

“I’m just telling the truth,” Clark commented, looking back at the ADA with a shrug of his shoulders. He glanced to his right

where Lois was seated comfortably next to him. “What I saw I will tell in court.”

Mayson nodded, tapping her hand on the table. “Hopefully this will be enough to put Baby Rage behind bars for a long time.”

“Any luck on getting the police to actually show up when someone calls?” Lois inquired, tapping her hand on the tabletop. “Or are we just telling half of Metropolis ‘Too bad, so sad, you better just call Superman if you want someone to protect you?’”

Clark caught the mildly irritated expression that crossed the ADA’s face before he added, “I’m sure Superman doesn’t mind helping, but any insight your office could give on why the police aren’t showing up would help.”

“I’m sure Superman has everything under control, but you’ll have to check with the police chief on the officers’ response times.” Mayson rolled her eyes. “It’s not like he minds crashing into crime scenes and bragging about what a big hero he is...after all, he *is* Superman.”

“I’m sorry, *brag*?” Lois choked out with a critical tone at the same time Clark interjected with his own response.

“You heard Superman *brag*?” Clark glanced back at Lois, questioning if he’d heard Mayson right.

“Well, not in so many words... but you can tell...” Mayson began carefully.

“How about not *ever*.” Lois practically hissed out.

“Tell what?” Clark’s brow furrowed as he waited for Mayson’s response, wondering where she would have gotten the idea Superman was bragging about anything.

Mayson put the last of her things in her briefcase. “Look, I know he’s a... friend of yours. I’ve read the stories. He’s done a lot to help you both out over the years. But he also disappeared for months and left this city to fend for itself. Where was he when Lex Luthor was tearing this city apart? Where was he when Nigel St. John was taking out the police force in broad daylight? Nowhere. Then he comes back to town and expects everyone to fawn all over him as if nothing happened? No thank you.” She looked toward Lois then back at Clark. “Superman has helped this city. I’ll give him that, but you’re ten times the man he is, Clark. An ordinary guy, about to stand up in a courtroom and help put a known gang member behind bars. That takes guts. I’d like to see Superman try that without his cape.”

Clark chuckled, sharing a look with Lois before smiling.

“Well, maybe you will.”

“You seem to have a lot of resentment toward Superman,” Lois observed. “Yet he was the one showing up to help everyone today when your police officers didn’t. He was the one stopping muggings, and assaults, and providing backup on shootouts and apartment fires. He showed up!”

“For how long?” Mayson questioned, shaking her head. “How long before Superman moves on and this city is left to fend for itself?”

“What makes you so sure he’s going to disappear again?”

Clark asked.

“He’s done it before.” Mayson shrugged.

“Well, right now he’s the one protecting the areas of this city that the Metropolis P.D. won’t,” Lois snapped irritably. “A lot of people could have been hurt or worse if he hadn’t.” Lois flew her hands in the air and challenged the ADA. “What is up with your hostility toward Superman?”

“I guess I don’t like dealing with someone I don’t know anything about,” Mayson responded carefully.

“There was a pretty in-depth interview done with him when he first arrived on the scene,” Clark reminded her.

“And when he re-emerged after Lex Luthor’s downfall,” Lois prompted grumpily.

“And there are still things about him that remain a mystery and that worries me,” Mayson said haughtily.

“Such as?” Clark pressed, curiously.

“Such as why does he do what he does? Where does he go when he’s not rescuing someone?” Mayson began to list off the questions one by one on her hand.

“I think even Superman is entitled to his privacy,” Lois interjected, reaching over to grab Clark’s hand. “Even if there are questions that can’t be answered, isn’t the good he does worth something?”

“You might be willing to put your trust in him, but I’m not. He goes around catching criminals with this immense power and no way to control him. What happens if he loses control? What if he hurts someone?” Mayson continued. “Doesn’t that worry you in the slightest?”

“Well, I…” Clark began, but Lois cut him off.

“Superman would never hurt anyone,” Lois said firmly.

“How can you be so sure?” Mayson asked.

“How can we be sure *you* won’t turn around and do the same things you’re accusing Superman of being?” Lois challenged.

Mayson appeared to be taken aback by her statement before pointing out. “I’m licensed and insured by the state bar.” Mayson folded her arms across her chest. “I’m not going around acting like judge and jury. There are rules and protocols that have to be followed.”

“Superman is just there to help when the problem is bigger than the police can handle,” Clark answered gently, unsure how to respond to the attack Mayson was putting his alter-ego under.

“Well, I guess only time will tell,” Mayson said, swiping her hand across her cheek. “Thank you for taking the time to go over your deposition, Clark.” Mayson cleared her throat as she grabbed her bag. “I should get going.” She walked toward the door then seemed to hesitate, looking back. “I should warn you, it’s not going to be easy. This whole thing happening with the Lower East Side isn’t just about gang turf. There’s big money and big players in the shadows. I think Baby Rage knows a lot. Whether he’s willing to turn on those people is another story though.”

“Do you think he could be connected to the police suddenly disappearing?” Clark guessed.

“I should get going,” Mayson responded, not confirming nor denying anything. She gathered her things and exited the room.

Clark let out a low whistle, turning back to Lois. “Did she just…?”

“Blow you off and basically accuse your alter-ego of being an out of control enforcer?” Lois let out a long breath. “Yeah, I got that too.”

“This is who is taking Baby Rage to trial?” Clark let out a shudder.

“Yeah.” Lois bit her lower lip, standing up and reaching over to take Clark’s hand in hers.

“Superman!” The sound of a male voice with a Brooklyn accent reached his ears.

“Clark?” Lois stopped, glancing back at him with a curious gaze, noticing Clark’s attention was elsewhere.

“I’m contacting you on a hypersonic frequency that only you and a few bats can hear. I don’t know where you spend your off hours, but if I were you, I’d be at the Arboretum, east gate, inside of three minutes…or someone is going to *die*.”

“No…” He whispered before jetting off into the air, leaving a very confused Lois Lane behind.

Yusif grinned to himself as he carried the unconscious body of Ingrid over his shoulder and into an unmarked van. He fiddled with the keys in his pocket, unlocking the van and dropping Ingrid’s unconscious body into the back. He slammed the door shut and then turned to leave.

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“This is who is taking Baby Rage to trial?” Clark let out a shudder as he looked back to Lois. He had done his best to keep his personal thoughts to himself as far as the ADA’s position on not answering the questions asked regarding the police not

responding to calls for help. And despite his own personal stake in the argument for Superman to help, he tried to see things from Mayson’s view. But it was clear she was hiding – or possibly even covering up something.

“Yeah,” Lois reached over to take Clark’s hand in hers. Clark gave her hand a gentle squeeze, uncertain what to say. Lois had been worried sick about her uncle for the last few days. Mike was now staying with Ellen and would be traveling with her next week to one of the conventions she was involved with. Not an ideal place for Mike while his restaurant was forced to remain closed as a safety measure. Though he could continue to work and keep the doors open the threat of the Skins retaliating and not having the police there to respond was too big of a risk. He had been thankful Mike had been receptive to Lois’ pleas and taken Ellen up on her offer. Though he knew it had to be difficult.

“Superman!”

A voice echoed in his head and he winced, looking around in surprise, unsure what to make of the Brooklyn accented voice that appeared to be calling out to him not for help but as if he was having a casual conversation with him – in his head.

“Clark?” Lois called out to him and he held a hand up, motioning for her to wait a minute.

“I’m contacting you on a hypersonic frequency that only you and a few bats can hear. I don’t know where you spend your off hours, but if I were you, I’d be at the Arboretum, east gate, inside of three minutes…or someone is going to *die*.”

Clark felt his heart lurch in his chest as he heard the invading voice’s threat, looking panicked in Lois’ direction. He motioned for her to wait mumbling incoherently as he flew through the air, leaving her behind.

“No…”

Clark landed in front of a bench where a smarmy looking man sat with what looked like a small tape recorder in his hands.

“Hey, there.” He smiled, looking up at Clark. Clark moved to approach him. “Martin Snell. Good to meet you.” He waved the tape recorder looking device in his hand. “Some little piece of equipment…” He pressed a button and spoke into it, “Superman, let’s talk.” Clark heard the echo of it in his head. “Neat, huh?”

“If this is your idea of a joke, you’re going to need a lawyer.” Clark warned, glaring coldly back at the man.

“No, I won’t. Because A, I am a lawyer. And B, this is no joke. I’ll even give you the name of the person who’s going to die. I think you know her…Lois Lane?”

Clark glared at him, unsure how to respond to the tidbit of information he had just learned. He reached over and grabbed Snell by the front of his expensive suit jacket and hoisted him up, ready to propel him into the air at any minute as he growled out, “If you so much as breathe in her direction, I’ll…”

Snell let out a chuckle as he looked at his watch, unfazed by Clark’s threat. “Well, then you’d better hurry. I’d say she’s got about, *ohhhh*, ten seconds? Think you can get there in time?”

He dropped Snell against the bench and flew into the air, heading back towards the DA’s office where he’d left her moments ago.

Without a second thought, he flew through the DA’s office, scooping Lois into his arms as he flew her out of the office, flying higher and higher into the sky until they were floating above the clouds.

“Clark, what…?” Lois stammered, looking down at the shrinking city below. “Clark?” He wasn’t listening. He watched with his enhanced vision as a missile headed towards them. He grabbed it at super-speed, stopping it in its tracks. “Clark, what… Oh, my God!” Lois gasped in surprise as he tossed the missile in the air and fired his heat vision at it.

Yellow paint droplets exploded above them, and he let out a short mutter, “Paint…”

“Clark, you’re scaring me.” Lois reached over to stroke his

cheek. “What’s going on?”

Clark grew quiet, cradling her in his arms as Lois waited for him to respond. “Somebody’s idea of a sick joke,” Clark finally answered grimly. “I... I need to get back and take care of this guy.”

“Take care of who?” Lois pressed, running her hand across his cheek.

“Some lawyer... Martin Snell.” Clark frowned, shaking his head. “He seemed pretty certain those missiles were headed for you and were going to...” He grew quiet, unable to voice what Snell had threatened to do. “He won’t be bothering you again.”

Lois drew her hand through his hair. “Okay, I really don’t like the sound of that. I’m sure that whatever you’re planning or not planning to do is well deserved but before you fly off and do something incredibly reckless, just take a second and breathe.”

“He just...” Clark scowled as his jaw tightened, glaring back at her. “He is *not* going to get away with this.”

“I’m not saying he or whoever is behind this should, but...” She leaned against him, reaching up to stroke his cheek and pressed her lips to his. “Just be careful. That’s all.”

“I’m always careful,” Clark whispered, reaching over to stroke her cheek. Lois placed a hand on his chest, resting her head there as he flew them to the Daily Planet. He gave her one last reassurance before disappearing into the sky once more to confront Martin Snell.

At the arboretum, Clark found Snell still sitting on the bench, waiting patiently for him. Clark zoomed down at super-speed, landing in front of him. He folded his arms across his chest and hissed out with a warning glare, “You want my attention? You’ve got it.”

Every fiber of his being was telling him to grab this weasel by the ankles and hang him from the tallest building in Metropolis and give him a lesson in putting other people’s lives at risk, but he knew he couldn’t do that. An emotional reaction is what Snell wanted. He had to know what this guy’s endgame was. Without it, he couldn’t stop him and Lois, Jon and everyone he cared about could be at risk.

“Whoa! You get that look on your face, you remind me of a few judges I know.” Snell chuckled, crossing his leg across his lap as he stared casually back at Clark. “You certainly cut to the chase, don’t you? Like everybody else on Earth, you’ve got me dazzled. I’m a big fan—numero uno. So, I don’t want you to stop being the Man of Steel. It’s a beautiful thing, it gives us all hope. But what my partners and I want is for you to stay out of our business.”

“Partners?” Clark raised an eyebrow at him.

“Business acquaintances,” Snell acknowledged.

“Puppet masters?” Clark growled, jabbing a finger in Snell’s chest.

“I prefer to describe it as a mutually beneficial relationship,” Snell said smoothing his hand across his chest. “Either way, we want you to stand down.”

“I don’t stand down for anyone,” Clark practically snarled out. “Especially not some invisible partner with a sleazy lawyer I’ve never met in my life.” Clark narrowed his eyes at him. “If your puppeteer wants to give orders he can step out of the shadows and talk to me himself.”

“Non-negotiable, Supes,” Snell countered, straightening the lapels to his suit out. “He doesn’t like to get involved in these matters in person.”

“Oh, so you just do his dirty work?” Clark glared back at him. “That’s going to be a hard pass. I don’t know who it is you’re working for but if you so much as lay one finger on...”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, Supes, I don’t think you understand the deal here.” Snell shrugged. “Call it what you will. An order. A suggestion. A very strong suggestion.” Snell took on a sinister tone. “The next bullets won’t miss. And even as fast as you are, you can’t be two places at once, but our bullets *can*.”

Clark grabbed him by the arm. “How about we take a little trip downtown and talk this over with the DA.”

Snell nodded. “Sure, you could take me in. You’re Superman and I’m just a guy from Paramus. But do that and two things happen—A, someone you care about dies...” he pulled his arm free, “...and B, my replacement steps in. Now, you don’t want ‘A’ and I don’t want ‘B’ so I think what we need is a little attitude adjustment. By that I mean, be the best Superman you can be. Street crime? Wipe it out. Terrorists? Kick their butts. Carjackers? Hey, I drive a Ferrari myself, put those guys in orbit... But you stay out of the Southside. I don’t care if it’s a cat chasing a mouse, you flash that cape of yours in Southside, you’re going to find yourself singing the blues. This time it was that reporter friend. Maybe next time it’ll be those friends of yours at the police station. Or we could always aim for your friends at S.T.A.R. Labs. Unless you want to be planning their funeral, I’d think long and hard about my next move. Are we clear?”

“On one thing. This is not over,” Clark hissed before flying into the air once more.

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Bill Church Jr. stepped off the private jet, grinning ear to ear with the blonde and brunette on each arm. He descended the stairs leading to the tarmac and smiled his recognition to where Anwir was awaiting him. “Anwir, my friend, I take it you have some good news for me?”

“As I told your father last week, there are some rumblings just outside of Al Wakrah but nothing we can’t handle I’m sure.” Anwir responded as he gestured to the car awaiting them. “I took the liberty of arranging a car for you, Mr. Church.”

“How good of you,” Bill Church Jr. responded, looking to the girls on each arm. “I’m afraid this is where we go our separate ways.” He looked to Anwir. “Make sure they find their way back for my return trip.”

“Of course, Mr. Church.” Anwir nodded.

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*Present Day...*

Lois sat across from Bill Henderson, waiting patiently for him to look up from the file laid across the desk. She bit her lower lip, waiting for him to blink or react in some way. Instead, all she could make out was a grunt and ‘hmm’ escaping his throat as he read over the file.

“Well?” Lois prompted, finding herself unable to wait for Henderson to hrm his way through the file in front of him.

“Well, I’m sorry, Lois, there’s just not a lot here.” Bill Henderson apologized, waving at the file in front of him in dismay. “You have a young girl that left school at the same time she did every day and was probably followed somewhere between her bus stop and home. The police have scoured the neighborhood and of course you know how everyone in Southside just loves to be seen talking to Metropolis’ finest...” He tossed his pen across the desk in frustration and asked, “What do you want me to say, Lois? This happens every single day.”

“That doesn’t make it any less important to chase down the kidnapper,” Lois argued.

“I don’t even know that she was kidnapped,” Henderson argued. “How do I know she didn’t run away?”

“Her sister...”

“Look, I’m not saying there isn’t a case here, Lois,” Henderson interrupted her before she could get into a full tirade. “Lord knows you’ve brought enough to light over the years for me to know to trust your instincts on things, but there just isn’t anything to chase. I have no witnesses. I have nothing but a blurry photo from the crappy security camera at a bus stop and the word of a very worried older sister.” Henderson let out a heavy sigh. “If I had somewhere to look I would.”

“Who’s assigned to the case?” Lois asked, folding her arms over her chest as she leaned back in her chair, feeling the despair

and defeat threaten to overpower her.

“Detective Reed,” Henderson said with a frown. “She’s giving it a fair shake, Lois.”

“I’m sure she is,” Lois said standing up from her seat. “Thanks for your time, Bill.”

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Jack readjusted the bag on his back, looking over his shoulder as he made his way toward the terminal to make his awaiting flight. He swiped his brow, feeling a smile spread across his face as the reminiscent aroma that filled the airport teased his nostrils. He let out a heavy sigh, feeling his mouth water at the greasy, salt covered snacks that were being offered up in the food court. He checked his watch to make sure he had enough time to catch a bite to eat before his flight.

“Plenty of time,” he chuckled to himself.

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“What do you mean you don’t know anything, Bobby?” Lois pulled the sandwich out of his mouth.

“Hey!” Bobby glared back at her.

“I’m not feeding you for *nothing*,” Lois shot back in disgust.

“I didn’t say I had nothing.” Bobby eyed the sandwich in her hand appreciatively. “Taking food from a hungry man?”

“If you want to eat, you have to talk. That’s the deal. Got it?” Lois retorted.

“Motherhood has made you *cold*.” Bobby reached across the table to grab the sandwich back just as she pulled it away.

“You’re not helping your case.” Lois snapped, sliding the sandwich closer and closer to the edge of the table.

“I don’t know anything concrete.” Bobby shrugged his shoulders. “But there’s chatter...”

“There’s always chatter.” Lois rolled her eyes. “I’ve got a girl that’s been missing for three days and no one on the police force can get anyone around that block to care. What’s going on?”

“It’s complicated,” Bobby offered up half-heartedly.

“Isn’t it always?” Lois folded her hands across her chest.

“Why does no one want to find this girl?”

“Sandwich!” Bobby pointed to the empty plate in front of him.

Lois held the sandwich in the air. “I need a name.”

Bobby grumbled, eying the sandwich hungrily. “Police have been looking the other way on runaways and kidnappings for years.”

“They’re not looking the other way. People aren’t talking to them.”

“Well, they can’t trust ‘em.” Bobby said eying the sandwich she continued to taunt him with. “Some of it relates to Intergang as you know.”

“But Intergang is out of operation now,” Lois reminded him. “Right?”

“As far as I know, yes,” Bobby said hurriedly, “but the guys they were working with are still out there.”

“So, what, some sort of lone gunman?” Lois inquired, handing the sandwich back to Bobby.

Bobby took a bite of his food. “Remember, you didn’t hear this from me.”

“I never do,” Lois reassured him.

“No one can really pinpoint a name. So, I’m not able to help you there,” Bobby took another bite of his sandwich. “All I’ll say is the rumblings point to something more than police corruption.”

“Why do you keep bringing up police corruption?” Lois arched an eyebrow at him.

“I’ve said too much already,” Bobby said hurriedly, finishing the last of his sandwich. “These guys... they’ve got a lot of pull in a lot of powerful places.”

“What guys?” Lois pressed.

“The boogeyman.”

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Ingrid let out a labored sob as she leaned her head against the pane glass, watching the greenery fly by. She patted her head, feeling the bandage that had been placed there earlier. It had been a close call, but she had done it. She had escaped.

A tear trickled down her face as she watched the city fly by as she looked out of the window. The heavy weight that bore down on her felt as if it would never move. For years she had dreamed of this. Ached for that moment of clarity that would bring her the freedom to escape the clutches of Yusif and Tobias and hopefully find a way to start her life outside of their world. Outside of the torturous life of becoming nothing more than an accessory or plaything to be traded like livestock to the powerful men that moved in Tobias’ inner circle.

‘*Never again*,’ she promised herself.

She reached her hand up to wipe the tears from her eyes, looking on to the duffle bag on the seat next to her. She was free. That freedom came with a price but with it would also come the dismantling of the throne Tobias had planted himself on. Even if it was with her last dying breath, she would see him pay for his crimes.

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Clark searched the newsroom in an almost panic, trying to find Lois. He had spent an exhausting five hours buried in rubble and bricks and mortar remnants trying to fish out the victims from the Foster building bombing. He hadn’t seen or spoken to Lois in the last several hours and every second he went without seeing her sent his mind into a panic he couldn’t control. Finally, he found her holed away in the back of the smaller conference room going through a file box with the lights dimmed down.

He frowned, sensing there was something to the lighting she had set as he made his way into the conference room. He let out a heavy sigh as he sunk into the chair next to Lois’, wrapping his arm across her shoulders and savoring the much needed reassurance that she was safe. After the rescue in the Southside district, he had scoured the city for any sign of anything that could point himself and the police to the saboteur. Unfortunately, whoever had been behind the bombing had long disappeared. The initial investigation into the bomb found nothing that stood out that would help lead them to who was behind this. It was just another random act of violence that would be left unexplained while he and the other first responders would be haunted with the faces of the victims from the bombing.

Lois reached her hand over to squeeze his. “Jimmy said Superman was helping rescue all the victims from the bombing most of the day.” She leaned her head against his chest and whispered, “How are you?” He didn’t answer, unable to find the words to reflect the emotion simmering inside him. She let out a heavy sigh as he leaned over to press his lips against her forehead. “You saved a lot of people today. More than would have been saved if you hadn’t been there.”

“I just wish I’d gotten there before it went off.” Clark buried his face against the nape of her neck, savoring the feeling of having her in his arms. “Maybe some of this could have been avoided.”

“Hey.” Lois turned her head to look at him. “You can’t be everywhere at once, Clark. You can’t stop every disaster. You can’t be everywhere. It’s impossible.”

“I *am* impossible, Lois. Superman is supposed to...” Clark argued, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I should have...”

“Should have what?” Lois pressed, placing a hand on his chest. “You...have a lot of extraordinary gifts, Clark, but even you have your limits.” The words hung in the air blankly staring at him, waiting for him to accept them. Accepting it. That was always the challenge. A challenge he balanced between for quite a few years now. Lois patted his chest, leaning her head against him as she whispered to him, “There’s only so much one person can

do.”

He felt a lump build in his throat as he listened to her. She was right. She was always right. A scary reality he had long since accepted in their five years of marriage. It never ceased to amaze him, how fiercely Lois continued to fight for him even if it was a battle with himself. They had suffered through some of the most treacherous trials a couple could endure but through it all her devotion never wavered. Her unwavering faith in him was what continued to keep him going in the darkest of times.

Despite everything, he knew breaking himself from his unyielding need to take on the responsibility of bearing the burdens of the world on his shoulders was not something he could simply switch off. Defending those that couldn't protect themselves was a burden he had taken on at around the same time he had discovered his abilities. It had almost been an instinct, this desire to use his gifts to help those that couldn't help themselves. Using his gifts for good and helping those in need, but when he couldn't... the pain and guilt was all-consuming.

“How is it that you always know just the right thing to say at exactly the right moment?” Clark asked, glancing over at her with a gentle smile.

“Hmm.” She gave him a half-smile. “Well, I've had practice in helping put a broken Superman back together.” Clark allowed his smile to spread across his face and leaned over to kiss her. She reached her hand up to stroke his cheek. “At least that's one problem I can solve today anyway.”

“Getting bored with the Mayor's Tax Plans already?” Clark teased, wrapping an arm around her.

“No.” Lois shook her head. “I had this girl—she had to be at least Lucy's age I think—she was looking for some help to find her sister.”

Clark's brow furrowed. “Did she go to the police?”

Lois let out a yawn, readjusting her head on his shoulder. “Yeah, she isn't getting anywhere and no one's really telling her anything.” She sighed softly. “I spoke with Bill and he said Detective Reed is working the case, but no one is wanting to talk to the police. I talked with Bobby and all I got were whispers of chatter and him acting spooked about possible police corruption.”

“Police corruption?” Clark echoed, uncertainly. “Any idea what he's referring to?”

“No.” Lois shook her head. “I've tried going through the last few months of reports to see if anything stood out, but it's just a never-ending list of close call muggings and assaults mixed in with your white collar crimes.” She let out a frustrated sigh. “And no closer to figuring out what happened to this girl's sister.” She pushed the file toward him.

Clark flipped the file open, skimming through the few details that were in the missing persons report. “Looks like Reed and the reporting officers were covering most of the radius around where this girl went missing.”

“Bobby is hiding something,” Lois remarked sadly. “He seemed... jittery.”

“Well, that's just Bobby, isn't it?”

“No, this is different.” Lois shook her head. “I had to practically pry information out of him. The talk about police looking the other way on runaways and kidnappings... The chatter.” She waved her arm in the air in frustration. “Something's going on there, but I don't know what.”

“It wouldn't hurt to at least get some attention out there for this girl.” Clark suggested, “Maybe put some public pressure to help find this girl?”

“Maybe,” Lois sighed, “but if no one wanted to talk before, what's an article on the last page of the city section going to do?”

Clark frowned. “So, how do you get it on the front page?”

“I don't know.” Lois frowned, running a hand through her hair. “That's the problem.”

“Well, I think it's a problem for another night,” Clark sighed,

reaching over to close the file in front of them. “We need to pick up Jon.”

“I should bring this home,” Lois said looking around the files in front of her.

“Oh, no, you don't,” Clark shook his head, taking the file folder from her and tucking it inside the file box off to the side. “This can wait till tomorrow.”

“Clark...” Lois began to argue.

“You said it yourself,” Clark reminded her. “You don't even know where to look right now. Obsessing over it and chasing yourself into circles isn't going to help.”

“I'm going to do it anyway. I might as well have the file with me,” Lois argued.

“Yeah, but I'm not encouraging it.” Clark leaned over to kiss her. “Come on, it'll be there in the morning and we can run through some of the angles then.”

Lois' mouth twisted and she let out a heavy sigh. “Fine. I'll leave it here, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to be thinking about it.”

“I know.” Clark leaned in to recapture her lips once more. “But I can at least try to distract you.”

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#### *Four Years Ago...*

Lois ran a hand across her face as she paced around the conference room. She looked over at the board where a picture of Martin Snell was pinned along with other publicity photos they had acquired. Some of the officials Martin Snell had been linked to included senators, a few judges and even the police chief in Metropolis.

“We still don't have anything here that would link Snell to a supposed partner...” Lois grumbled unhappily as she took a seat in one of the chairs at the conference room table. “This is getting us nowhere.” Lois tapped her forehead on the table.

Clark placed his hand over hers, wedging his fingers through hers as she looked over at him. He let out a shaky breath, running his thumb across her wedding band. “I almost didn't make it. If that missile hadn't been a fake...”

“I know.” Lois gave him a watery smile.

“I don't know what to do, Lois. If I show up over there trying to put out a fire, they'll try to kill you... or Jimmy... or Perry... or even Ralph.”

“I'm fine,” she reassured him, resting her head against his shoulder. “We'll get to the bottom of this.”

“We have whispers of underhanded deals but nothing pointing us to who this mysterious partner Snell is working with... or for.” Clark let out a disgusted grunt.

“You think it could be that Intergang, don't you?” Lois asked, placing a hand on his chest.

“Yeah,” Clark whispered hoarsely as he reached over to stroke her cheek. “If those missiles had been real... You could have *died*... Jon would be left without a mother. I... Lois, I don't know what I would do if I ever lost you.”

Lois reached her hand over to trace his jaw line with her index finger. “I know. But I'm fine. It was a dud, and no one got hurt.”

“This time. We have to stop these guys... I can only imagine what all these officers have been threatened with in order to stay out of what this group is considering their territory.” Clark hung his head in dismay.

“Well, you've got one name right,” a familiar voice came from the doorway of the conference room. They both looked up, surprised to see Agent Jack Davenport with his briefcase in hand.

“Jack?” Lois smiled at the familiar FBI agent. “What brings you by?”

“What can I say, the wheels of justice turn slowly most days, but Director Talley was intrigued when I asked about briefing you two in.” He pointed to his briefcase. “Redacted of course.”

“Well, great,” Clark cheered, straightening up in his chair.

Jack closed the door behind him and began moving across the room, taking a seat at the table as he propped his briefcase up on the table. “Martin Snell is one of the many lieutenants used within Intergang to snake into a city and get a stranglehold on the very justice system used to stop crime. Pretty soon it won’t be a sigh of relief citizens will be feeling when they hear a police siren but a panic. It starts with a slowing down of enforcement and next the actual officers sworn to protect the city become the ones enforcing the criminal activity.”

“I don’t suppose there’s anything in that file that says who is behind all of this?” Lois wondered aloud.

“Nothing concrete.” Davenport shrugged. “But we have our suspicions.” He tapped the photo on the table and pushed it back to them. “CostMart founder Bill Church. Nice guy. Too nice.”

“The CostMart guy?” Clark prompted. “You think he’s connected?”

“We don’t know,” Davenport took a seat across from him and pulled two files out. “Most of this has been redacted to protect our agents, but the main stuff that can be printed is in here.”

The door to the conference room opened and Jack Davenport slammed the file in his hand closed, looking over his shoulder to where Jimmy was standing with a startled expression. “Uh, guys?” Jimmy looked around the room suspiciously. “What are you doing in here? You afraid Ralph is going to scoop you or something?”

“Or something,” Clark responded carefully, looking over at his friend who had barged in unknowingly into a classified meeting.

“Hey, Jack!” Jimmy smiled broadly at the FBI Agent, recognizing him from when they had worked together to bring down Lex Luthor. “Man, I haven’t seen you since Luthor’s trial. How’ve you been?”

“Hanging in there, Jimmy.” Jack let out an aggravated sigh, motioning to the door. “As much as I’d love to catch up with you and Perry, I’m afraid this meeting is classified.”

Jimmy’s face fell, seeming to put the pieces together. “Oh!” He blushed slightly, realizing he was intruding. “Sorry, I’ll let you guys get back to it.”

“Uh, Jimmy, what was it you needed?” Lois prompted, before he could back his way out of the door.

Jimmy turned back to Lois offering a half-smile her way. “Oh, um, I got that research you guys wanted on Martin Snell.” He held up a red file folder in his hand and leaned over to set it on the table in front of Lois.

Clark leaned over Lois’ shoulder to read through the file, looking over at the glossy photo of Snell with a beautiful woman on his arm - a super model from Paris. He flipped to another photo and revealed a photo of Snell and one of the CEOs to a new up and coming tech business that had emerged in the last two years. A quick flip of his wrist revealed yet another colorful photo. This one was of Bill Church with Martin Snell and Mayson Drake at some sort of formal gala. Clark pointed to the photo and commented with a low whistle, “Martin Snell certainly gets around, doesn’t he?”

Lois glanced at the photo and compared it with the redacted file Davenport had provided them with. “You seem to really like Bill Church for the head of Intergang.”

“Everywhere Intergang has hit a CostMart store has cropped up.” Davenport shrugged his shoulders as he leaned back in his chair. “The FBI is just following the data, but unfortunately, that’s as far as a correlation we could connect.” He frowned, shaking his head. “Kinda hard to stay on a case when all your agents keep disappearing.”

“Yeah.” Clark frowned. “I’d say it’s a place to start.”

“And maybe with the ADA that’s supposed to be prosecuting my uncle’s case.” Lois tapped the photo in front of her. “Mayson Drake worked under Snell in Bill Church’s acquisitions division.”

“For five years.” Clark grimaced, noting the dates in the file.

“First presence of Intergang was in Sydney, Australia.”

Davenport let out a deep breath. “We lost three agents out there and a delta soldier.”

“I’m sorry,” Lois whispered sadly.

“So am I,” Davenport grew quiet before adding. “Intergang has a deadly reputation.” He stood up from his seat and looked back at them cautiously. “Just do me a favor and don’t become another one of their casualties.”

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Ingrid felt the sharp pain in her throat as she began to come to. She heard the sound of water dripping and the echo of footsteps through the hollow space she was in. She let out a faint moan, lifting her head up as her lips parted, trying to find her voice.

A hard blow came across her face and she winced in pain, attempting to reach up to touch her face, only to find her hands were bound behind her. She let out a sharp yelp as the tears trickled down her face. Another blow came, and she felt her body fall over, trying to find her bearings.

“Wh...?”

She let out a yelp in pain as she fell back against the hard flooring. She struggled in her binds, attempting to gain some kind of leverage to escape. She attempted to open her eyes and winced when she felt the pain of something preventing them from opening.

‘Taped shut,’ she realized, feeling a weight press against her, grasping her throat with a firm grip. She opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out.

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Lois frowned as she folded her arms across her chest, watching Mayson suspiciously as the ADA paced in front of the courtroom, prepping Clark for his testimony against Baby Rage. The more they had begun to dig into her involvement with Bill Church the more she grew to distrust her. Unfortunately, it seemed as if there just wasn’t enough to implicate Mayson in any wrongdoing. Though every instinct within her was screaming not to trust her.

Admittedly some of that might have something to do with the way she kept catching the ADA gazing at her husband when he wasn’t looking. Lois shifted in her seat from the gallery, sitting up as she uncrossed and re-crossed her legs.

“And Mr. Kent, what exactly happened after you saw the defendant start the fire...?”

Clark cleared his throat and answered into the microphone at the witness stand, “Superman flew down, apprehended him and put it out.”

Mayson flashed him a smile. “Great. Just be sure to keep eye-contact with the jury.” She pointed to the jury box. “You’ll do great.”

Clark flashed a weak smile as he exited the witness stand and made his way to where Lois was seated in the gallery. He took his seat next to her, leaning in to give her a peck on the cheek. “I’m not sure why we have to run through this so many times.”

“I guess she likes being thorough.” Lois sniffed uneasily, watching as Mayson stopped midstride to take a call from a phone that had been brought to her by her assistant seated at the prosecution table. “Odd...”

“Oh, no,” Clark hung his head, leaning over to whisper in her ear. “Mayson just found out the officers who arrested Baby Rage never read him his Miranda Rights.”

“That’s absurd!” Lois practically shrieked. “I was standing right there when they took him into custody.”

“Try telling the judge that,” Clark muttered under his breath. “Someone *really* wants to tank this case.”

“Okay, thank you.” Mayson hung up the phone and set it on the table.

Lois watched the ADA with anger and turned her attention

back to Clark. “She’s probably in this up to her perfectly plastic sculptured chin.”

Clark let out a sigh and whispered, “The judge just gave her twenty-four hours to figure out who dropped the ball on issuing the warrant for Baby Rage’s arrest.”

“Think she’ll try to stop him from being released?” Lois wondered aloud. “Or is she as dirty as the police that didn’t show up?”

“Problem?” Lois asked, standing up and gathering her things as she prepared to pack everything up to leave.

“I’m not sure,” Mayson gave an uneasy answer, looking away.

“You’re not sure?” Lois asked, folding her arms across her chest. “Is everything okay with the case?”

“Yeah, fine,” Mayson said too quickly looking away from him. A classic sign of someone being dishonest if Lois had ever seen one. She let out a low breath. “Listen, apparently someone dropped the ball with issuing the warrant for Baby Rage. I’m going to see what I can do to see if I can save this case from spiraling down the toilet, but just a head’s up there may not be a hearing tomorrow.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Lois offered, feigning a fake smile as much as she could in order to get the story on Mayson.

“Not a whole lot unless you know which officer issued the warrant.” Mayson let out sigh. “I have a few friends with connections. I may reach out to them to see if they might be able to get something moving for me.”

“Like Bill Church?” Lois asked, folding her arms across her chest.

“Well, I...” Mayson frowned, staring back at Lois in surprise. “How did you know that?”

Clark placed a hand around Lois’ waist and explained with a sigh. “We’ve been doing our own investigation into what’s been going on in Southside. We’ve followed a few leads that led us from Baby Rage to Martin Snell. Martin Snell to Intergang.”

“Then from Intergang to Bill Church,” Lois finished for him, arching her eyebrow at Mayson, hearing the edgy tone in her own voice. The pretense of being concerned was long gone as she swiftly moved into accusatory mode. “How well do you know Bill Church?”

Mayson glared back at her and fumed at her in an admonished tone, “Bill Church is my friend. Martin Snell is a professional acquaintance...And I can’t even believe what it is you’re insinuating here. I have nothing to do with Intergang or anyone running it!”

Clark frowned, looking back at her with a curious gaze. “You don’t seem surprised at all to hear the name, Intergang.”

“Almost like you’ve heard of them before.” Lois glared back at her. “I asked you repeatedly if you knew who or what was behind the police slowing down around this city... You said nothing.”

“I am not your enemy,” Mayson fumed. “In this line of work, I have to know who I can trust and right now I’m not feeling like that’s either of you.”

“Trust me, the feeling is mutual,” Lois snapped irritably. “What was it exactly that went down, Mayson? A favor for a friend to look the other way? Maybe get a cop you knew was crooked take Baby Rage in?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Mayson fumed irritably. “I have spent my career trying to bring down these guys and everywhere I turn they are three steps ahead of me and I...” She held up her hand, waving her off. “Look I don’t have a soundbite for you. I don’t know what angle you’re aiming for but I’m not it.”

“My uncle has been forced into hiding while the restaurant he built nearly twenty years ago is getting deeper and deeper in debt.” Lois shook her head. “This is not just a story to either of us. This

is personal.”

“I am not letting them get away with anything.” Mayson grew quiet, then looked back up at Lois sincerely. “I’d like for you to trust me. I would never purposefully tank a case.”

“Well, trust is something I don’t exactly give out freely and I’ve yet to hear anything from you to convince me you’ve earned that right,” Lois snapped bitterly. “You’ve yet to be upfront about what’s really going on in Southside and your connections to very suspicious individuals aren’t winning me over either.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Mayson huffed, gathering her things and storming out.

Lois watched her leave, contemplating if she should have pressed further and caught Clark’s gaze. “What?”

“Did you really have to be that hard on her?” Clark asked, placing an arm across her shoulders.

“She’s as dirty as Snell is as far as I’m concerned,” Lois sniffed, tightening her arms across her chest.

“Maybe,” Clark shrugged his shoulders, “but if she’s not, we may have just killed our chances of getting any information from her on what she *does* know.”

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## Chapter 5: Held Me Down But I Got Up

*Present Day...*

Lois held her hand out for Jon, watching with a smile as he pointed his nub of a crayon to her palm, tracing the path from her wrist to her index finger as they waited patiently for Lucy’s flight to get in. Lucy had spent the last six months on the coast, finishing up her first year of interning at one of the more prestigious hospitals on the west coast. Though she missed her sister something awful, she held an immense sense of pride in watching the young woman Lucy had grown into over the last few years. Her decision to follow their father’s footsteps and attend transfer to MMU to finish her degree in their pediatric program had caught her by surprise. But seeing the way Lucy lit up when she spoke about the work she was doing told her this was the right move.

“Look!” Jon squealed when he saw the passengers entering from the arrivals terminal.

“There she is,” Lois beamed happily, reaching down to hoist Jon up when she saw Lucy from behind the slew of passengers that were climbing up the ramp toward them.

“Aunt Lucy! Aunt Lucy!” Jon squealed happily seeing the familiar brunette’s smiling face.

Lois’ eyes widened when she saw her sister on the arm of a familiar face. “Jack?”

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Ingrid took a long puff from her cigarette looking over her shoulder as she looked around the crowded bar. A familiar face poked its way through the crowd, and she feigned a smile, reaching up to tuck a stray strand behind her ear.

“Stefan.” she took another puff from her cigarette. “Long time.”

It had been nearly two months since she had found herself on the train tracks ready to end it all. She had been able to survive here and there with the generosity of others and getting by on the money she had successfully lifted from the mission’s safe, but in order to truly escape and remain off of Tobias’ radar she would have to secure a new identity. Unfortunately, the only person she knew to do this was deeply rooted in with Tobias and the thugs she was trying to escape from.

“You’re a hard young lady to track down, my dear,” Stefan remarked, taking a seat across from her. His hard, chiseled jaw squared as he jutted his chin out, stroking the rusty blonde hair of his goatee as he inched his chair toward her. Her eyes moved to the center of the table where he had set the small envelope.

She eyed it with intrigue, hoping she hadn’t made the wrong move in requesting his help. Stefan had helped her a time or two in the past during her time under Yusif’s thumb but he still worked

for Tobias. Stefan was his own wolf in sheep's clothing but the brutality she had been subjected to had never come from him. In part, she suspected he questioned the actions he was sometimes forced to commit.

Ingrid nodded, reaching her hand over to take the envelope from him. "Is that what I think it is?"

"It took some time, but yes," Stefan answered, tapping his hand on the table. "New identity with passport like we agreed."

She nodded, tearing the seal. "Abram works fast." She frowned when she saw the diskette inside. "What is this?"

"Yes, directions and your required documents ready to be printed." Stefan said, reaching his hand across her lap from beneath the table.

"You didn't bring the documents?" Ingrid hissed angrily, knocking his hand away.

"Do you really want me knowing your new identity, hmm? It's safer this way. Plausible deniability with Tobias," Stefan answered, moving his hand up her thigh.

She jerked his hand away. "How do I know you even have what we agreed to?"

"You don't." Stefan leaned over to take the cigarette from her hand. "But it does ensure our mutual agreement is adhered to." His gaze darkened as his brow furrowed. "Don't think I won't collect, my dear Ingrid."

\*\*\*

Clark set a mug of coffee on the counter, catching Lois' gaze out of the corner of his eyes. She was stewing. He had been just as surprised as she was to find Lucy exiting her flight with Jack on her arm. Neither one of them had heard from him since he had taken Pete Ross' offer to take an entry level position working with doctors without borders. At the time the Planet was still in ruins and after the work he'd done to help bring Luthor to justice, Jack was left wondering what the next step was. Pete had connections everywhere and had introduced Jack to a few friends that worked to help those in need - truly making a difference. To his surprise, Jack had taken the job with enthusiasm and signed on with the Human Rights Organization to travel around the world helping those in need, one city at a time. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined Jack and Lucy connecting.

He cast a glance toward the living room, noting the laughs coming from his sister-in-law as she joked with Jack, wondering just how close the two had gotten over the past five years. He turned toward Lois and broke the silence. "We stay in here any longer and your sister will send in a search party."

"She's been gone for six months," Lois said, running a weary hand across her face. She shook her head. "Sorry, this just took me by surprise. I mean..." She looked over her shoulder to glance in the direction of the living room and whispered, "Lucy doesn't exactly have the best track record. Look what happened with her and Jimmy."

"I know." Clark reached over to squeeze her shoulder. "But to be fair we don't know if there is anything going on."

Lois cast a 'yeah right' expression in his direction and grunted. "I know my sister."

"One way to find out." Clark pointed to the living room.

\*\*\*

Ingrid reached for the other half of her dress, trying to force the last hour and a half's events from her mind. She'd done it. Served herself up on a silver platter in exchange for the price of her freedom. She stared off into the darkness of the dingy office she had allowed herself to be dragged into. Though she had found herself in worse places, it didn't make this any easier.

She felt a twinge of relief wash over her as she finished fastening her dress. She felt she had reclaimed some sense of modesty come back to her as she glanced over to where Stefan was standing behind the desk she was propped up on.

Stefan let out an uneasy breath. "You'd be best to disappear

for a while. Tobias is raising the stakes on bringing you back into the fold."

Ingrid felt bile rise in her throat as she lifted her hand up to stroke her cheek and staggered to her feet, straightening the skirt to her dress as she self-consciously tugged on the collar of her dress, tugging it closed from where one of the buttons had popped off. "Tobias doesn't own me anymore."

"Hmm, try telling him that." Stefan snorted, straightening his jacket. "He won't stop."

"I know."

\*\*\*

Jack looked across the table to where Ellen Lane sat with a look that reminded him of some judges he had gone head to head with in his youth. He reached for his glass of water, wondering what he could have possibly done to find himself in her crosshairs. He noted his friends appeared less than forthcoming as they conversed, talking through some of the stories they had covered in the last few years as Lucy grinned ear to ear about her internship at Southern California. A half-smile peaked across his face as he looked over at her.

Never in his wildest imagination would he have dreamed he would find himself being grilled by the infamous Lois Lane over just what his relationship was with her sister. Her sister. How had he not put two and two together before now? The name of course had been familiar but given how common it was across the coast he hadn't thought anything of it. Not until he found himself being asked to join her on a flight back to Metropolis.

"So, Jack," Ellen said his name cautiously, stirring the sugar into the mug in front of her with a silver spoon with a sharp clang that sent every creature that knew better running for the hills. He glanced over at Jon who was oblivious to the tension at the table as he quietly ate his concoction of spaghetti sauce and macaroni noodles. "What brings you to Metropolis?"

"Honestly, not a whole lot." Jack shrugged his shoulders. "I figured I hadn't been out here for a while and just wanted to catch up and see how everyone was doing since Luthor's conviction." He took a sip from his water. "Lucy and I ran into one another working on a case for some orphans my group brought back to have emergency surgery." He smiled in her direction. "She was assigned to the case and we've stayed in touch over the last few months."

"I figured it would be fun to catch up with everyone." Lucy grinned sheepishly. "Once I realized who he was that is."

"We'd only been talking for a few weeks," Jack said hurriedly before adding. "By the way, you'd be surprised just how common the name 'Lane' is out there in Cali."

"So, how long are you in town for?" Clark asked, speaking up from the corner where he'd been somewhat brooding for the last half hour.

"A few weeks I think." Jack flashed Lucy a smile. "I wanted to catch up with everyone and there is some work I need to do for the HRO."

"HRO?" Ellen asked curiously.

"Human Rights Organization," Lois answered on almost auto-pilot. "They travel around the world to help bring light to some of the unjust conditions people around the world are forced to live in. They collaborate with the Doctors Without Borders organization you and Daddy used to work with."

Ellen smiled fondly at the memory and sighed. "Yes, I remember. It was on one of those trips your father actually proposed." The table grew quiet and Ellen then added sharply, "Well, we all know how that turned out."

"Mom..." Lucy glared in her mother's direction.

"What?" Ellen shrugged her shoulders. "We're all adults."

"Except for the J-O-N sitting at the table," Lois added with a disapproving look.

"Fine, consider the subject dropped." Ellen held her hands up

in defeat. “What is your group doing in Metropolis?”

“I’m not sure,” Jack said with a shrug. “There was a report a few weeks back of a call for help from a victim of human trafficking but no one was able to track down where the call came from.” Jack frowned, shaking his head. “At least not from across the country.” Lois and Clark exchanged a look seeming to silently be saying something to one another and Jack felt somewhat self-conscious. “What?”

“Nothing,” Clark said a little too hurriedly.

That was the same tone he had used over the years when covering for his super extracurricular activities. Jack silently mulled over whether to confront the denial head on or wait them out. Given how long it had been and the bumpy start to their first meeting in five years he chose to remain quiet.

“Well, at any rate, I’m supposed to check and see if we can track her down.”

“Her?” Clark’s brow furrowed and Lois reached a hand over to cover Clark’s hand.

“Unfortunately, all I’ve got is a first name. Not a whole lot to go on,” Jack responded a bit defeated.

“Do you recall her name?” Lois asked curiously.

“Ingrid,” Jack said, taking a sip from his water. Lois’ face fell and Clark frowned, tapping his hand on the table. “You heard of her?” Jack pressed.

“Maybe,” Clark said softly. “Though it’s a common name. There was a girl that was rescued a few months back by Superman and taken over to the Fifth Mission.”

“The girl that jumped in front of the train.” Ellen snapped her fingers recalling the story. “I read about that.” Her face fell with worry. “I hope that’s not the same girl.”

“Me too,” Clark answered, glancing over at Lois before squeezing her hand in his. A gesture that was not lost on Jack. Something told him they knew more than they were letting on and he was going to find out what.

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#### *Four Years Ago...*

Anwir fidgeted nervously from side to side as he felt himself being shoved forward, falling to his knees. He reached out to stop himself with his bound hands. The linen bag used to cover his face was pulled back with a jerk and he took in a deep breath, savoring the fresh air as he looked in front of him to see what appeared to be an unfazed Bill Church Jr. looking down at the binds his hands were in with amusement.

“You seem nervous, Anwir,” Bill Church Jr. commented, eying him with a narrow gaze. “For God’s sake get up.”

Anwir stumbled to his feet and found his footing, looking over his shoulder to the heavysset men behind him who were glaring at him with menace. The chirp of a walkie talkie startled him, and he lost his footing, catching himself at the last minute on the square corner of a table.

The swinging doors, leading into the back of the store swung open and a man in his late forties plowed through them with a hard shove. Anwir swallowed hard as he stared at the tall man with a wide-eyed gaze. This was him. This was the one he had been warned about.

“Mr. Church...” Anwir began only to have him waved off by Bill Church Jr.

“Elias,” Church beamed back at the tall man dressed in a pale yellow suit that highly contrasted with his dark tan skin. “Quite a show of force here, but don’t you think you’re skirting the line a bit here?” He held up his hands that were still bound to articulate his point. “I mean, really what is this? We’re so much better than this.”

“Mr. Church, please don’t lecture me. You are in my home,” Elias snarled with a low hiss. “My country.”

“Of course.” Church shrugged his shoulders. “I understand there is some miscommunication regarding the territory in Qatar.”

“There is no confusion,” Elias snapped back. “You bring your girls and dirty money through my country and they’re mine. Intergang has no place here. Are we clear?”

“Elias,” Church’s gaze darkened.

A rumble echoed through the room and fire burned through Anwir’s chest. He let out a staggered cry as he fell to the ground, clutching his chest. The world around him began to blur as he watched chaos around him erupt. Church broke his binds on the edge of the table and reached out to strike Elias with a broken glass. A flash later Elias was on the floor, hovering over Church brandishing his own weapon. Another flash and the images blurred into a pixelated mixture of darkness and colors as he heard Church give Elias a warning.

“This is far from over, Elias. I will destroy you.”

“Step foot in Qatar again and you’ll be leaving in a body bag.”

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The screams for help continued to multiply through the streets as Clark sped through the streets dressed in disguise. After the confrontation with Martin Snell, he couldn’t be too careful so he had obtained a police uniform for him to use as a disguise to continue protecting the parts of Metropolis that had fallen to the wayside of Metropolis P.D.’s radar. A scowl crossed his face as he came across a gang of thugs tossing bricks into one of the diners, laughing as they shot a firecracker through the window.

“Isn’t it past your curfew?” Clark called out, tugging the bill of his patrol cap down.

He looked over to where the gang was continuing to throw inanimate objects through the glass pane windows. On the ground was the store owner, huddled up in a fetal position as the gang surrounded him, attacking him with jabs, kicks, baseball bats and rocks.

It had been hard to make out, but his muffled cry for help had been unmistakable. “Get out of here you, punks!”

“We just wanna talk,” one of the gang members taunted, tossing a firecracker in the air deadly close to the store owner.

Another thug swung toward him with a knife in his hand coming inches away from his face when Clark, fully dressed in the police uniform, intervened, grabbing the thug’s hand back.

“You have the right to remain silent,” he said, ducking as the thugs began to turn on him.

One of the thugs began swinging the chains toward him, and Clark ducked again, “Anything you say can and will be used against you...”

As Clark ducked, the thug swinging the chains hit one of the thugs that was holding a baseball bat. The thug with the baseball bat struck the guy with the chains in the ribs causing him to groan in pain.

“...in a court of law.” Clark saw the baseball bat coming toward him and ducked, reaching for the bat in mid-air, jerking it and the thug that still held it toward him. With a healthy use of super strength, he jerked the bat toward the awaiting tin trash cans in the corner.

“You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you,” Clark said, advancing toward the thug that had tried to assault Mike with the knife earlier.

The thug screamed and went into a karate stance, then ran toward Clark. He smirked to himself, holding his hand out and allowing the thug to run into his palm. The thug fell to the ground, and Clark looked down at the now unconscious thugs. “Do you understand these rights as I have explained them to you?”

A low moan escaped from the thug he’d just dropped, and the store owner chuckled, placing a hand on Clark’s shoulder.

“Officer, I think that’s a ‘yes.’”

Clark smiled, readjusting his police cap to assure himself his face was covered. “I better call for a, uh...”

“Backup?” the wounded store owner guessed.

“Right.” Clark nodded, bending down to tie the wounded gang members up. It would have to hold them for now until the real police arrived. He then looked to where the store was in flames and checked to make sure the injured store owner was distracted and blew a blast of freezing breath toward the store, squashing the fire.

In the distance, he heard the sirens from the firetrucks approaching. Help was on the way at least.

\*\*\*

Yusif slammed the door to the unmarked van, securing the keys in his pocket. He let out a satisfied grin as he looked across the alleyway, seeing the police officer running away from what used to be a burning building. The recent disappearance of the police force on this part of town had made his job all the easier. He walked toward the driver’s side door and climbed in.

He looked over his shoulder, glancing through the rearview mirror to be sure no one was behind him as he backed out of the parking spot. He looked to the back where the two girls he had picked up were still unconscious. A chuckle escaped his throat and he reached for the flask in the door, taking a swig before pressing his foot on the gas and jetting out of the alleyway.

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Lois let out a deep breath, feeling the hot water from the showerhead beat against her. After a few rounds with Jon she had finally gotten him to settle down and stolen a rare quiet moment to indulge in a hot shower for more than five minutes.

Her mind kept drifting back to her showdown with Mayson Drake in the courtroom, kicking herself for losing her cool with Mayson. Any hope she had of coaxing information out of the ADA was long gone now. She reached out to grab the bottle of shampoo and poured the liquid in her hand. She let out a deep sigh, feeling the soapy suds lather in her hair.

“Lois?”

“In the shower,” she called out, backing up to allow the suds to wash down the length of her body, circling around the drain.

“Hey,” she heard her husband outside the shower stall.

“Hey.” Lois tugged the curtain back, poking her head out to see him still in the patrol uniform. Her gaze wandered over his body, admiring the way the dark blue uniform fit him so perfectly. “How was your patrol?”

“Frustrating,” he sighed, leaning his head back against the wall he leaned against.

“That bad?” she asked, reaching over to turn the water off.

“Gangs are running the streets, attacking businesses and just fanning the chaos. Fires are everywhere and everyone’s scared.” He let out a heavy sigh. “The police are noticeably absent and... I don’t know how much longer I can keep hiding.”

“Well, all the more reason for us to find this Snell character and figure out who he’s working with,” Lois said, pulling the curtain back and reaching for her towel. She caught his gaze as he watched her tie the terry cloth material around her. A warm smile spread across her face as she glanced over at him in the patrol uniform. After the threats from Snell they had agreed Superman couldn’t risk being seen in Southside. The patrol uniform was the perfect cover.

She stepped out of the shower onto the plush bath rug. Clark reached over to wrap his arms around her from behind, letting out a heavy sigh as he buried his chin into her damp hair. She reached up to pat his cheek, and he leaned over to press his lips against hers. “Did Jon settle down okay?”

“After a few rounds he finally gave in.” Lois glanced over her shoulder at him with a smile. He nodded, leaning in to press his lips against the nape of her neck. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” he murmured, tightening his arms around her as he pressed his lips to hers. “Cries for help I can’t show up to as Superman...” He let out a snort. “This is getting ridiculous.”

She smiled back at his reflection, noting the dark blue uniform he was still in, as his hands moved toward the front where her towel was knotted. “It’s a loophole,” she reminded him, reaching behind her to run a hand across his side, smiling to herself when he let out a low moan.

“It’s technically illegal to impersonate a police officer,” he reminded her, nibbling at the sensitive flesh against her throat.

“Sometimes you have to break a few rules to highlight an injustice.” She let out sharp gasp as his hands continued their treacherous path up the smoothness of her legs. She turned in his arms, looping her arms around his neck and fingering the edge of the police cap on his head. “I suppose if I hadn’t blown it with Mayson earlier, we might have an actual lead.”

“Or not,” Clark allowed, leaning into her as he brushed his lips against her shoulder blade. “If she is as dirty as you think she is, she may have just given us another wild goose chase to go down and we’d be no closer to stopping Snell than we are now.”

“I’m just not sure if she’s dirty or just untrustworthy,” Lois reached up to finger the top button to his patrol uniform.

“You seemed pretty convinced earlier,” he reminded her, running his hands against her upper thighs.

“Now I’m not so sure,” she sighed, hanging her head.

“Well, what do you want to do?” Clark asked, resting his forehead against hers.

She gripped the side of his collar, pulling him to her. “Maybe do a little digging in the morning.” She looped her finger through the top button of his uniform, smiling as she saw the bare skin peek beneath the dark blue material. She giggled, leaning into him as he pressed his solid frame against her. He ran his hands up the back of her thigh, smoothing its way past the terrycloth fabric that still hung draped around her.

She spread open the top half of his uniform and brushed her hand against the warm, smooth skin of his chest. She leaned her head back against the doorframe of the bathroom, reaching up to prop the cap on her head.

“You’re gorgeous,” Clark whispered in her ear. He leaned in to kiss her, running his hands up and down her terrycloth covered sides. She murmured her approval against his lips, draping her body against him. He let out a shallow breath as she ran her hands up and down his chest seductively.

His lips smoothed their way across her body as she folded her hands through his silky hair. She let out a low moan as she threw her head back, feeling the weight of his body pressed into hers as his hands smoothed their way up and down the back of her thighs, kneading the flesh as he inched himself closer and closer. An inaudible moan escaped the back of her throat as he hoisted her up, allowing her legs to wrap around his torso.

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out, forming an ‘oh’ as she felt the wooden door frame against her back. He fingered the knot that kept her towel securely wrapped around her, “I think you’re overdressed, Mrs. Kent.”

\*\*\*

Martin Snell felt his hand tremble as he reached the end of the hallway leading to Bill Church’s office. The news had come through an hour ago. An hour of pondering what to do as he weighed the pros and cons of sharing Anwir’s death with Bill Church. He finally summarized the point that there was no hiding what had happened. All that was left now was to get Church’s son home and exact Intergang’s revenge. He reached the end of the hallway and noticed the door leading into Bill Church’s office was ajar.

“Martin?” The door to Bill Church’s office door opened, revealing the man’s stern cold features as he stood in the doorway. He glared down at him as he stood in place, almost statuesque.

Snell felt a chill run down his spine as he met Bill Church’s gaze, feeling his insides shiver beneath his boss’ stare. “M-Mister Church, I thought you were attending the banquet tonight... Is

there something I can help you with?"

Large 8x10 photos flashed in Church's hand as he slammed them across Martin Snell's chest. "Why don't you tell me, Martin?"

\*\*\*

The monitors beeped a monotone ping and the semi-crowded hallway left Bill Church Jr. groggily listening in on half conversations. He lifted his arm, glancing over at the phone he had just hung up, wondering how many phone calls he should make before returning to Metropolis. He pinched the bridge of his nose, steadying himself as his mind flashed back to the previous evening and the close call he had with Elias.

One of Intergang's lieutenants had been killed.

That couldn't go unpunished.

For now, though he would have to wait.

\*\*\*

Jon clapped his hands happily as the red siren from his toy fire truck sounded. A soft giggle escaped his lips and Clark grinned down at his son, scooting closer to him as he helped push the truck along the tile floor. He cast a glance toward the dining room where Lois was sitting with the phone tucked neatly between the crook of her shoulder and chin. Most of the day had been spent reaching out to all of their sources to see if anyone knew anything about what had been going on in Southside. Not surprisingly, no one was talking, but that didn't stop Lois from grilling every last source she had.

"Well, fine! See if the Planet brings their business to your run-down dump anymore!" Lois screeched into the phone before slamming the phone down.

Clark winced, looking back at Jon who was giggling at his mother's outburst. Clark leaned in to whisper to Jon, "Mommy is mad."

"You're dan..." Lois clamped her mouth shut when she saw Jon looking at her with a goofy grin. She let out a light chuckle and turned to Jon. "Mommy is going to teach you how to write an expose when you get older." She took a seat on the floor, flashing a half-smile at Clark before adding, "No one's talking."

"Intergang is connected," Clark said gently. "No one wants to speak up."

"No one at the police department is returning my calls either," Lois remarked bitterly, leaning over to help push the small red and white fire truck. "Starting to wonder if anyone in this city cares about this corrupt justice system."

"They care, but probably just don't know what to do about it." Clark sighed, running a hand across Jon's back.

Lois let out a deep sigh, shaking her head. "Perry won't let us print our theory either."

"Hard facts," Clark said in his impression of the editor. "We don't have enough of them. The FBI isn't willing to back anything up without the Metropolis P.D. taking action."

"And the District Attorney's office is ignoring my calls," Lois added with a grunt. "I think my snapping at Mayson might have something to do with that."

"Well, maybe something will turn up," Clark offered weakly.

"This is insanity. Keeping law and order is what the police are supposed to do. Convicting criminals is what the courts are supposed to do," Lois vented.

"When someone is willing to speak up," Clark reminded her.

"I'm guessing you haven't heard anything about the hearing?" Lois asked, reaching over to pick Jon up as he let out a long yawn.

The phone in the kitchen rang and Clark stood up to answer it, crossing the path from the living room into the kitchen to answer the phone. "Hello?"

"Clark?" Mayson Drake's voice echoed through the handset.

"Mayson," Clark motioned to Lois to pick up the other handset to listen in.

"Hi," Mayson breathed into the receiver and was quiet for a moment before breaking the silence. "I, uh, know things got a little heated yesterday over Mike Lane's case." Clark bit back the impulse to remind her of just where the resistance had been coming from yesterday. Instead waiting for Mayson to collect her thoughts. "You're both right. Intergang has gotten its hold on this city and if someone doesn't do something fast..."

"Someone being?" Clark prompted calmly.

There was a pause on the other line and then Mayson cleared her throat. "Would either of you be willing to meet me at my office? It's better if I just show you?"

Clark looked to Lois who was shaking her head adamantly, pointing at Jon. Clark nodded and then turned back to the phone. "Mayson, unfortunately it's too late to be venturing out, but if you'd like to meet us here at home in about an hour we can discuss everything then."

There was another pause and then Mayson responded, "Sure." Clark gave her the address and then hung up.

Lois let out a hesitant breath. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"We'll find out," Clark shrugged.

\*\*\*

Martin Snell paced through the dark conference room, looking at the 3-D hologram that was displayed on the long table, showing Intergang's territory and the areas that had been compromised by this new threat. In the corner of the room, Bill Church Jr. sat with his arm in a sling and a bandage tied across his shoulder. Bill Church Sr. sat at the head of the table, examining the blue and white hologram with a focus that sent an eerie chill down his spine. He tightened his grasp on the glass in his hand and took a sip before claiming the seat a few chairs down from where Bill Church Jr. sat.

"Any word from Qatar?" Bill Church Sr. asked, unfazed as he ferociously typed into the keyboard in front of him.

"All of our associates have been relocated out of Qatar and Anwir's remains will be arriving in the States within the next two days," Snell answered, stealing a glance in Bill Church Jr.'s direction. "Elias is still not taking my calls."

"Elias doesn't negotiate." Church Jr. gestured to his arm that sat snugly in its sling.

"Well, he won't see us coming. He may have caught us off guard this one time, but we will avenge Anwir's death." Church Sr. grunted, turning his attention to Church Jr. "Have we heard anything from Nagano on the demands?"

"No word from the Minister yet," Church Jr. responded with a shrug. "He still has a few hours."

"Send him a photo of his wife and child and ask the minister if he thinks the extra time is worth the risk." Church Sr. scoffed bitterly and then pointed in Snell's direction. "Any word on locating this Elias? How deep are his connections?"

Snell tapped his hand on the table. "Elias Diederich has deep state connections in Qatar that spread into Germany and the Sudan." He grew quiet, shaking his head. "I...I'm not sure we can stop him, sir."

"The only one that might be able to take him on is Superman," Church Jr. commented half-heartedly.

"Well, what good does it do us to control Superman if we can't use him to our advantage?" Church Sr. let out a soft chuckle. His face darkened and he gave his order, "Call him here. It's time we had a heart to heart."

"Sir, are you sure that's a good idea?" Snell asked.

"Did I stutter, Martin?" Church Sr. glared back at him.

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Clark looked over the rim of his coffee cup, stealing a glance at the seat next to him where Lois leaned up next to him. He moved his attention to the file boxes sitting on the table in front of them, watching as Mayson Drake pulled out file jacket after file

jacket.

“So, all cards on the table?” Mayson prompted, pointing to the file jackets in front of them. Clark looked to Lois, and she nodded. “If this case gets thrown out and my office is implicated, I can kiss my career goodbye. I want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do, but I don’t know who I can trust anymore.”

“Seems to be going around,” Lois said, sharing a look with Clark.

“I guess if you want trust, you have to start by giving it,” Mayson said, softly. “I don’t usually make a habit of working with the press or let alone victims’ families, but I think if we work together, we might be able to prove Snell’s connection to Intergang. The Metropolis P.D. doesn’t necessarily elicit a lot of confidence from me these days.”

“I thought Snell was a professional acquaintance?” Lois asked.

“He is, but I still don’t trust him.” Mayson shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe if we work together, we can find the connection I keep missing?”

“If you are so suspicious of Snell, then why were you defending him?” Clark asked, frowning as he folded his arms across his chest.

“I wasn’t defending him,” Mayson argued half-heartedly. “I was...” She stopped herself mid-sentence. “Look, that’s not the point.”

Lois watched the ADA for a long moment, pondering if she could trust her and noting something she hadn’t seen there before. “You lost someone, didn’t you?”

Mayson frowned. “One of the investigators I was working with from the FBI.” She shook her head. “They don’t give you a gravestone to go visit when they’re agents like that.”

“I know,” Lois said solemnly.

Mayson finally spoke up, ripping off the band aid. “I have a secret file on Intergang and ...a personal file on Martin Snell.”

“We have a redacted file from the FBI on Intergang,” Lois acknowledged.

“The FBI?” Mayson echoed softly, her eyes widening at the implication.

“Superman!” Clark heard the familiar voice echo in his ear. Clark immediately recognized the voice as Martin Snell’s. “Your presence is requested at the CostMart headquarters. You wanted to meet the puppeteer. You got it.”

Clark looked to Lois who seemed oblivious to his distraction, leaning over to whisper in her ear, “I’ve got to go.”

She nodded, opting to make a big show about finding the file Davenport had given them and giving him the time he needed to make his exit.

Bill Church ran a hand through his thinning hair, taking a long puff from his cigar, looking around the deserted rooftop of CostMart. He looked to Martin Snell who was looking out on the city, waiting for Superman to make his presence known. The wind bristled across his face and he smiled, noting the presence of the man of steel.

“I do love it when the hired hands are prompt.” Church chuckled aloud, turning to face Superman with an arrogant sneer.

“Yes, Mr. Church.” Snell gestured to Church and smiled.

“Superman, you’re in luck. Your request for an introduction to what did you call him...?” Snell snapped his fingers, attempting to feign no recollection before turning to face him with a smile.

“Oh, that’s right! A puppeteer.”

“I prefer boss, or perhaps even the chief. I don’t really like to demean my position with nicknames so unbecoming.” Church pointed to his head. “I do love a good leader, don’t you?”

“When it’s not a leader of corruption, yes.” Superman’s eyes narrowed as he stared in Church’s direction. “Murderer. Criminal. Thief. Gangster...”

“Oh, please, I’m blushing.” Church chuckled proudly.

“You are destroying this city. Innocent lives are being put in danger every day for what?” Superman chastised, his eyes darkening with fury as he hissed out his accusations.

“I’m liberating the city from the stronghold they suffer from,” Church remarked proudly, puffing his chest out with an arrogant air about him. “Which brings me to the reason for our call.”

“I *don’t* work for you,” Superman growled.

“Oh, that’s still up for debate,” Snell chastised, tapping the remote in his hand. “If you recall there are still quite a few people in this city that could be taken out at a moment’s notice.”

“And if you know what’s good for you, Superman, you’ll be a good superhero and fly your little cape over to Qatar and bring this man to me so I can ensure he’s properly repaid for the welcome he gave my son.” Church held up the photo for Superman to examine.

Superman narrowed his eyes and before Church could stop him, he heated the photograph until it burst into flames, causing Church to throw it to the ground and stomp it out. “I don’t work for you,” Superman hissed out in slow breaths, leaning into Church’s face as he stared him down.

“I hear you’re quite close to those reporters at the Daily Planet.” Church took a long puff from his cigar. “Lois Lane?” Recognition crossed Superman’s face and Church chuckled. “I see I’ve hit a nerve.” He looked to Superman with a chuckle. “Last chance, Superman.” Superman stared at him with menace and then disappeared into a blur of red and blue. Church turned to Snell and ordered. “Fire away, Martin.”

“Here comes the headache,” Snell cackled, pressing his thumb to the red button on the remote, controlling the missiles.

“Initiate the compound’s self-destruct orders. I wanted Superman to know who he is facing, but I don’t want him to be able to prove it.” Church sniffed, straightening his tie as he made his way toward the door that led him to the emergency exit.

Clark zeroed in on the radio waves being sent to the isolated location just outside the city and zeroed in on the metal pistols erecting themselves from the stone wall that had opened up. Each pistol was melted into a pool of silver and white metal as the sound of a blast coming from behind the camouflaged weapon’s source shook the ground.

Clark flew inside the rocky entrance and found himself faced with a small room covered in computer screens and keyboards that appeared to be monitoring the city. Clark growled in fury when he saw his home on one of the monitors and ran his fist through the screen, turning on the tech in front of the monitor. “Shut it down! Now!”

The room erupted in flames and Clark flew the technicians out of the room and took them to the police station, intent on ensuring their arrest along with Bill Church and Martin Snell.

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## Chapter 6: Like Thunder Gonna Shake the Ground

### *Present Day...*

The streets were empty and the pier where Jack used to fish with his brother Denny had been replaced and rebuilt to be at least another foot out into the bay. Jack swiped a hand through his dark locks, stealing a glance over at Clark who followed behind him a few paces. The sun shone across his face, sprinkling warm rays on them as they approached what looked to be a neighborhood.

Jack struggled to recognize the street they were on, recalling the alleyway where he and Clark had first met. He stopped just outside of the run-down pool hall with the name “Louie’s” freshly painted on the side and pointed at the green trimmed building. “This place has certainly changed.”

“Well, not nearly as run down since they remodeled last year,” Clark responded, pointing to the brick building on the corner. “They built up a few offices and cleaned out the shipyard too.”

"I can't even recognize this place," Jack commented as he hung his head.

"Here we are." Clark pointed to the sign that read "Fifth Street" and gestured to the large red brick building surrounded by a small, well-manicured collection of bushes and trees.

"You sure this is a good idea?" Jack asked, looking around the perfectly kept sidewalk. "Boy, this place is so surreal."

"The mission is kept up by the sisters of Mary Catherine's on Eighth," Clark said following him up the hill. "They work closely with the police department and the Superman foundation taking in runaways and victims of child or domestic abuse and even homeless residents that used to litter the streets."

"Seems like you're pretty invested in this place," Jack said with a smirk.

"Seeing the difference this place has made is something I can get invested in," Clark answered, combing his hand through his hair.

"I can understand that," Jack looked over his shoulder as he reached the top of the hill looking around the red brick building uncertainly. "Are you sure this is where Superman brought this girl?"

"One hundred percent," Clark said leaning against the doorframe and knocking lightly on the door.

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Perry looked around the boardroom, unsure what to make of the somber tone as he looked across the executive suits that all carried stock in the Daily Planet along with himself at a whopping thirty percent. It had been a parting gift from Franklin Stern when he had stepped down as owner of the Daily Planet last year.

"Everything okay?" he finally asked, looking around the room.

"Sit down, Perry." Marcus pointed to the seat next to him.

"Why do I get the feeling I'd rather stand?" Perry asked, stopping in front of his friend. Though the previous board had been dismantled after Luthor's takeover, when Franklin Stern had stepped down, many of the original board members that hadn't had their votes bought by Luthor had returned.

Marcus ran a hand through his goatee, leaning back in his chair as he listed off the advertisers that paid for real estate at the Daily Planet. "WadeCorp, Metro Burger, Happy Tales, and even Metro Play... They all seem to have taken quite an interest in a story being investigated by one of your reporters."

"Well, nice to hear they're taking some interest in the newspaper business," Perry joked, taking the seat next to Marcus. "But judging by your face I'd say that's not the reason they're calling."

"No, Perry." Davis cleared his throat pulling out several memos and placing them on the center of the table in front of him. Each one had the colorful logos printed on the formal linen paper. "Some of our top investors are threatening to pull out of their contracts with the Daily Planet if we can't guarantee the story on this missing girl doesn't get front page attention."

"I beg your pardon?" Perry's brow furrowed as he tried to process what was being said. "They want us to bury a story about a missing girl?"

"Apparently it's a relative of a top official who has already hired a private investigator to look into the matter," Marcus explained with dismay.

"What's the girl's name?" Perry asked, tightening his grip on the side of the table.

"They didn't say," Davis responded solemnly.

"Oh, so now I have to guess which story I should be burying?" Perry spewed out in defiance.

"Perry, listen..." Davis tried to reason with him.

"No, you listen..." Perry argued, wagging his finger in Davis' face. "You want me to come down on stories and make sure we're covered so we don't get sued, fine. You want me to properly

allocate stories in their proper place on the paper, fine. But I will not be pushing newsworthy items into the back of the paper or be told how to be Editor in Chief of this paper. We print the news as we see it and we don't let anyone... no matter how big the purse strings... call the shots on how that is done." Perry stood up from his seat and brushed the lint off his jacket. "I saw someone try to control the news once before. I won't live through it again. If there is a story about a child missing it will be on the front page for as long as it is the leading story. That will never change."

"You're putting this paper in an awkward position, Perry," Marcus warned.

"Well, lucky for me I have a vote on this board," Perry sniffed back. "Along with a few members that aren't here."

"Giving votes to reporters is like handing a child candy before bedtime." Davis snorted. "It's going to ruin us."

"It keeps us honest," Perry reminded him. "Now if you don't mind, I'll be getting back to my job of making sure we have a paper to print."

Clark let out a shallow breath, looking around the semi-crowded coffee shop as he continued to reel from the news that the young girl he had thought had been given a fresh start two months ago was out there somewhere possibly in danger. He knew it to be a slight overreaction but given the state he'd found her in he knew it could very well be the reality for her.

Missing.

Maimed.

Murdered.

'Or worse,' his mind called out to him. He shouldn't blame himself. But he couldn't shake the sense of responsibility he felt over the safety of the young girl he'd rescued two months ago.

Ingrid. That was all he had to go on to help find her.

"Hey." Jack reached his hand over to cover Clark's. "I'm sure we'll track her down. It's not surprising she would have moved on by now."

"Moved on, yes, I'd expect that," Clark answered, taking a sip from his coffee. "I guess I was surprised to discover she went missing the same night she had been brought to the mission."

"Maybe something spooked her?" Jack suggested. "I know when I had been brought to some of those halfway houses by the social workers and police. They put on a good show for the outside, but Clark it's brutal in there. The slightest thing can set someone off."

"I just wish I could do something," Clark confessed, leaning his head back.

"You are doing something." Jack smiled at him, taking a sip from his own coffee mug. "You're helping get the right people looking at this." A smirk crossed his face. "Besides, there's only so much the Daily Planet or even you and Lois can do in situations like this."

Something flashed in Jack's eyes that sent Clark reeling back to that night in front of the Planet just after the almost-bombing from Fuentes and his gang. He had wondered for a long time if Jack knew or suspected anything after his slip in the stairwell so many years ago. Judging by the humorous expression on Jack's face he had to speculate there was at least a suspicion simmering within his friend.

"It's one of the more frustrating parts of being a journalist," Clark admitted with a half-smile.

"You could always take a trip with me out East and try your hand at building schools and fighting off insurgents." Jack grinned, patting his knee. "Though I'm not sure you'd appreciate the bloodshed you might see."

"No, I don't guess so." Clark grinned back. "I'd miss everything too much. The city, the Planet, Lois and Jon..." He grew contemplative. "Do you ever regret it, Jack? Dropping everything and traveling the world like this. It's noble and incredibly selfless, but do you ever wish for more for yourself?"

“Sometimes.” Jack shrugged his shoulders. “I mean, right after Denny got adopted, I was left in this weird hyperbole trying to figure out my next step. Luthor was brought down and you and Lois were safe. It’s not like I had a job to keep me around.”

“I’m sure Perry would have taken you on with the rebuild.” Clark smiled at his friend.

“He would have.” Jack nodded in agreement. “But being at the Planet and pushing paper and delivering mail wasn’t what I wanted. I mean, don’t get me wrong. It was a job and it paid the bills, but it wasn’t what I’d describe as a career or anything.”

“I get that.” Clark nodded, reaching over for his mug of coffee. “I guess, I just wonder if the danger you put yourself in is worth it.”

“I’m making a difference. You of all people should understand that.” Jack smiled across the rim of his coffee mug. “Do I miss out on the regular everyday life? Yeah, sometimes, but I know I’m doing my part to help society and fight for the people that can’t fight for themselves.” Jack grew quiet as he contemplated his next words. “You know you read about it in history books and think how in the world could people have been treated like that? Children sold into slavery. Families torn apart for profit. Gangs of militia overthrowing a government. But then you go to some of these places and realize... it’s not just in history books. Slavery still happens. Human trafficking is a real market in these third world countries. Even in the states, kids are at risk.”

“I know.” Clark grew contemplative, feeling the hard pain deep inside as Jack’s words hit home for him. He knew all too well how dark the world was in the third world countries Jack spoke of. In his travels and even in the rescues he’d been pulled into in recent years, he found himself faced with the horrendous tragedies of the world. Though he had done what he could to help in what ways he could, he knew he was merely one man. Even he had limits on what he could do.

Clark stared into his empty mug, pondering his next move. “You know, there have been quite a few kidnappings here in Metropolis this year. More so than the past few years.”

“You think there’s something more to it than runaways and drugs?” Jack asked.

“A girl reached out to Lois a few months back about her sister, Esma,” Clark recalled aloud. “Any chance you could look into it and see if anyone in the HRO has heard of her? A first name is all I have to go on.” Clark shrugged his shoulders.

“If you can get me more on how she went missing, I can probably track it down if the kidnapping is connected to any of the trafficking organizations we’re working on tracking down.” Jack tapped his mug down on the table.

“I’d really appreciate any help you all can provide.”

“Hey, we’re both fighting the same fight. Just holding different weapons, right?”

“Right.”

*Three Years Ago...*

***Snell Indicted on RICO Charges!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

***Murder of Martin Snell Goes Unsolved!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

***Police Corruption Exposed!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

***Urban Revitalization Begins!***

*By Clark Kent*

***Presidential Kidnapping Attempt! Prankster in Jail!***

*By Lois Lane*

***Valhalla Project Brings Terrorism to Its Knees!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

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Bill Church Jr. took a puff from his cigar as he leaned back into the leather chair, folding his hands in front of him as he read over the scientific reports that had been provided to him. His gaze

shifted up to the man standing in front of him with nervous sweat beads precipitating from his forehead. He felt a rush of adrenaline run through him as he saw the fear and uncertainty cross his guest’s face. He loved watching others squirm in his presence. The battle of wits was one of the many benefits he found with the new position he’d taken on since his father had taken leave from the business. With the close call they had with Superman last month it was decided that a change in leadership was necessary in order to ensure Intergang’s survival.

He stretched his arms back, resting his head against his folded hands, staring back at the balding man in front of him who continued to fidget nervously before him. “So, another project down the toilet thanks to Superman, eh? Between Superman and this Elias character we’re getting pressure on all fronts.” He gestured to the front page of the newspaper. “Wasn’t Valhalla *your* idea, Knox?”

Charles Knox tugged at his collar and let out an uncertain shrug. “Valhalla was out of our control.” He reached up to swipe his brow. “The Wilders had their own intentions and were unable to see when it was time to get out.”

“Excuses. Excuses. That’s what they all say,” Bill Church muttered.

“Valhalla was fool-proof and it would have worked if Superman hadn’t,” Mr. Knox apologized.

“Yes, of course...if Superman hadn’t shown up. If Superman hadn’t found out. I’d have gotten away with it if it weren’t for those meddling kids and that dog...” Church shook his head. “Please, Knox you sound like a broken record set on a Saturday morning cartoon special.”

“This is different, Mr. Church!” Knox argued, straightening up. “This project will cripple Superman and bring him to his knees. We just need the cash to make it happen.”

“Teams have scoured LexCorp and all of Luthor’s properties trying to scrounge up this mystical Kryptonite. No one has seen this mystical stone that can kill Superman. No one is even sure it exists anywhere other than Lex Luthor’s head!” Church pounded his fist on the desk and raised an eyebrow at him. “What makes you think you’ll do any better?”

Knox pulled out a small notebook from his inner jacket pocket. “According to this, Bureau 39 were the first ones to discover Kryptonite. I’m sending a team to survey the location they found it at and dig up the priceless commodity for us.”

“One month,” Church warned, holding his hand up in the air. “I’m giving you one month to produce results, otherwise I’m pulling the plug and holding you personally responsible. Am I clear, Knox?”

“Perfectly,” Knox nodded.

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A flashlight flickered in the dark behind the shield of overgrown trees and bushes. A man held up a shovel, motioning to the two men on his left and moved through the cloak of darkness until he reached the location he had been searching for. He wagged his index finger to one of the men and pointed to the ground covered in loose gravel - as if someone had been trying to hide whatever had been buried there. He smiled, taking a few steps to the right and wedged the shovel into the tight mixture of soil, grass and dirt. He twisted the shovel side by side until he felt the ground give away to him.

“Hey, I think I found something,” one of the men to his left called out.

He felt his own shovel hit something hard and looked down, spying a reddish glow beneath the thin layer of soil that covered it. He crouched down, looking to the man next to him, holding up a red glowing rock

“Well, boys, I think we’ve struck gold... or rather... Kryptonite.”

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*Present Day...*

Lois reached below the sink with a wrench, trying to loosen the pipe connecting the sink to the garbage disposal that had swallowed one of Jon's plastic figurines. Of course, had he not thrown his army men into the sink, it never would have swallowed the plastic toys. That reasoning was lost on her four-year-old. Between the very crabby tantrums Jon had been throwing and his upset tummy this afternoon she was at her wit's end. She hoped it was just a fluke but given the way stomach bugs flew around the daycare she suspected she wouldn't be that lucky.

It seemed everything today was a disaster. Jon had gone to bed mad at her. Lilith had left her feeling as if she had been punched in the gut. She knew Lilith's worry for her sister well. She herself had felt that way about Lucy for years. She still did. But having no news or progress for Lilith each time she reached out to see if there had been any news was heart wrenching. Her investigation into the young girl's disappearance was met with resistance everywhere. No one wanted to talk about it. The more they closed up, the more her suspicions grew, but she still couldn't do anything. She barely had anything to print.

For now, she just focused on what she could do. She could try to save her son's beloved army men. So that was where she would focus her attention. She continued loosening the bolt and felt a gush of water hit her in the face. "What the hell?"

"Lois?" she heard Clark call out from the other room.

"Clark?" she held her arm up, trying to block the water and disposal remnants that came flooding out as she held up the wrench, attempting to tighten the bolt back up and pulled herself out from under the sink, shaking her hands as she looked around the kitchen in dismay, noting the small pool of water form under the sink. "Great."

"What happened?" Clark asked, looking around the kitchen in shock.

She reached up to wring her t-shirt out where it had been soaked. "Jon lost a few army men when they landed in the tunnel. Also known as our garbage disposal." Clark held his hand up to cover his face as he let out a chuckle, and she gestured to the pool under the sink. "Water is everywhere and I can't get the garbage disposal out and if you keep laughing I'm going to make *you* go shopping all day with Jon tomorrow to pick out new army men and fight off the distinct squeals of why he can't have every toy in the store."

"Okay, okay, I surrender." Clark held his hands up in defeat. "Did you turn the water off?" he asked, pulling a few hand towels out from the cabinet where towels, dish rags and oven mitts were neatly stored."

"Of course I turned the water off," Lois fumed standing up and walking over to where the pipe that controlled the water to the sink was behind a sliding door. "What kind of idiot do you think I would be if I forgot to..." She stopped, mid-sentence when she saw the nozzle was still in the on position. She let out a frustrated growl and turned to twist the knob to the closed position then turned to see Clark stifling his laughter. She held up her index finger and warned him, "Don't even think about it."

"I didn't say anything," Clark chuckled, reaching over to help dry the side of her arm off.

"You were thinking it," she smirked at him, reaching her arms up to stretch them over her head. "It's been a long day."

"I see," Clark commented, giving her a leering gaze for a moment before turning his attention to the kitchen. "So, army men in the garbage disposal. That's a new one."

"Apparently they were rescuing a baby." Lois let out a muffled laugh.

"Of course they were." Clark sighed, moving at super-speed to dry up the water from under the sink and then unfastening the bolts to remove the garbage disposal. Lois smiled as he pulled out the metal appliance, rolling his sleeve up to fish out the eight army

men and a small plastic Lego character, setting each of them on the counter.

"Well, *three* are salvageable," Lois said, craning her neck to look at the disfigured toys.

"I think we're going shopping," Clark said with a heavy sigh. "After we have a talk with someone about their landing locations for these guys."

"I actually would have preferred the bathtub. Less messy." Lois sighed, reaching up to pat herself dry with the hand towel. She felt her husband's eyes linger on her as she smoothed the terry cloth material across the soaked cotton of her t-shirt. She caught his gaze, feeling her voice catch in her throat when she caught the heat in it. She tore her eyes away, noting the worry lines written across his face. She found her voice and asked, "How did everything go with Jack?"

"Apparently Ingrid went missing the same night she was taken to the Fifth Street Mission," Clark said, reaching over to loop his arms around her waist, allowing his hands to smooth their way over her hipbone as he nestled his chin into the crook of her neck.

"I'm sorry, Clark," she turned her head, leaning in to give him a peck on the cheek.

Clark shrugged his shoulders, reaching over to brush a loose strand of hair out of her face. "Nothing anyone can really do until she shows up again." He brushed his lips against her forehead. "Jack did say he is going to look into that girl you were looking for and see if he can find anything."

"I was just theorizing about the two being connected," Lois said, shaking her head. "There's nothing to suggest Esma was kidnapped other than her sister's pleas. Perry isn't even letting me print anything right now."

"Still, with Jack's contacts it wouldn't hurt to at least look," Clark reasoned, brushing his palm against her cheek, outlining her jaw with his thumb.

"I suppose not." Lois rested her hand against his chest. "Who knows, maybe it'll give us what we need to get this girl's picture on the front page." She let out a heavy sigh. "Her sister keeps calling like clockwork trying to see if we've found anything. I don't know what to tell her. Henderson is stuck. I'm stuck. Bobby's too spooked to help. I just want to help bring her home but it's one dead end after another." She reached up to stroke his cheek, noting the tortured expression. "You really think the two are connected, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do." Clark reached down, running his palm against the small of her back. He frowned shaking his head. "Jack said there had been a plea put out on the underground network. Asking for help the day before Ingrid jumped in front of that train. I just can't help but wonder if something similar might have been put out there when Esma was taken." He let out a heavy sigh, tightening his grasp on her waist as he leaned into her. "I just can't shake this feeling that they're connected somehow."

"Well, for Esma's sake I hope you're wrong, but it's a start I suppose." Lois leaned up, resting her head against his shoulder. She reached up to rest her hand on his now damp shirt and giggled. "Sorry. I should get cleaned up."

He smiled reaching out to take her hand in his. "Come here." "I am soaked with dirty sink water." Lois gestured to her soaked front with a smirk.

"So, we can get cleaned up together." His eyes danced as he pulled her to him, thumbing her waistband.

"Hmm, somehow I don't think you're too interested in helping me getting cleaned up." She smirked, raising an eyebrow at him as his hands slipped up the back of her soaking wet t-shirt.

"I like *watching* you get cleaned up." His eyes twinkled with amusement, fighting back a smile as he ran his hands up her back.

"Is that so? How exactly is that supposed to help?" She reached up to playfully thwack his chest. He wiggled his eyebrows

at her, leaning in to kiss her just before he scooped her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom at super-speed. She let out a stifled giggle and whispered, “Jon hasn’t even been asleep for an hour yet. You’re going to wake him up.”

“So, you’ll have to be quiet,” he whispered, running his hands up the back of her shirt.

“Oh, *I’m* the one that has to be quiet now?” she murmured mischievously, toying with the hem of his t-shirt as he helped walk them back toward the master bathroom to where the double shower stall was waiting.

“That showerhead can only muffle so much,” he murmured, tugging the t-shirt over his head and tossing it to the side. Her eyes darted across his smooth chiseled torso, thanking her lucky stars for the incredibly good judgement she’d had in taking this man as her husband, savoring one of the many benefits being his wife came with as his mouth crashed into hers.

“That shower is beginning to lose its intrigue,” she murmured, feeling the heat from his breath tickle her ear. His hands roamed up and down her back, pushing the cotton fabric up over her head and tossing it over his shoulder. Almost immediately she felt his arms wrap around her, sending a shiver down her spine as he reached out to caress the long white scar from where she had the markings Lex had left her with removed shortly after Jon’s birth. A necessary step in healing she had taken into her own hands post-partum.

A tingle ran down her spine as she felt his thumb brush across her side, tracing the smooth curve of the scar that was left, meeting her gaze as he leaned in, brushing his lips against hers. She tilted her head back, reaching up to trace her hands across his chest. His hands buried themselves in her hair, feeling their way through the damp strands. “Where’s all the bravado about what was it...?” he teased, brushing his lips against her cheek, “being covered in dirty sink water.”

“Hmm, yes, you do make a good point,” she reasoned letting out a heavy sigh as his hands moved across her body, feeling their way into the crevices that were hidden beneath the last remaining clothes she had on.

“And of course to conserve water we could take one together,” Clark murmured, nibbling at the voice box of her throat, dragging the tip of his tongue against the sensitive flesh as she let out a labored breath. Was it hot in here? It felt excruciatingly hot all of a sudden.

“Hmm, well, I guess we do need to do our part.” She giggled running her hands through his hair as he dipped his head lower.

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Kathy ran her hand through her short blonde hair, flashing a bright smile in the direction of the young Senator Harris, hoping he would follow through on his promise to give her the inside scoop on the latest bill to get stonewalled by Congress. “Now, Michael, you and I know there’s more going on here than just a little party rivalry.” Her eyebrows rose a half-inch as she tilted her head, tapping her hand across the wooden table in front of them. “There have been at least eight bills this quarter that have been killed by the Senate and another six by the House.” She clucked her tongue against her cheek. “Now, don’t make me resort to desperate measures.”

Michael Harris let out a heavy sigh, waving her off. “Kathy, there’s nothing to tell. The party lines are pretty clear on where we stand when it comes to certain policies and each side is trying to push their own agenda.”

“Normally, I’d agree with you Michael,” Kathy crooned, pursing her lips as she looked back at him with a shake of her head. “However, one thing did stand out his past week.” She pulled out an envelope and pushed it to him. “Why in the world would either party be killing a bill that is supposed to go tough on crime?”

“Second Amendment,” Harris breathed with an annoyed tone.

“Now listen, I don’t know how you got your hands on this, Kathy but you better watch your back. Washington is a cutthroat town and you might end up burned.”

“I need something to print.” Kathy narrowed her eyes at him.

“I need some guarantees.” He pushed a white envelope across the table to her. She smiled, taking the envelope and flipping through the cold, hard cash in front of her. He cleared his throat. “I have it on good authority that despite pressure from heavy weight investors, Perry White is still running with a story that could be detrimental for business.”

“I don’t tell Perry what to do.” Kathy sniffed, leaning back in her chair. “No one does.”

“I see,” Harris said, reaching across the table to take the money in cash back. “Well, then I suppose our business is done.”

“Now, let’s not be hasty!” Kathy began to back pedal. “I’m sure I can try to persuade Perry to see reason.”

A smile crossed Harris’ face. “See, now you’re talking the language I can understand, Kathy.” He placed a single photo on the table of a young girl. “You see this picture?”

“Yeah,” Kathy frowned, gazing at the photograph of a young girl exiting a public transit. She glanced up at Harris, not following what he was getting at.

“Young. Pretty girl up and disappears never to be heard from again.” He let out a deep sigh. “Tragic.”

“Of course,” Kathy agreed.

“But really, is it news, Kathy?”

“The Daily Planet reports runaways and missing persons all the time, Michael, what are you getting at?”

“Of course, and the Daily Planet should continue to do so, but not at the expense of our city,” Harris advised, leaning back in his seat. “There have been whispers that this Lois Lane has been seen talking to snitches and former employees of Intergang.” Harris’ gaze darkened. “Intergang is gone.”

“Is it?” Kathy arched her eyebrow at him.

“It is if we say it is,” Harris growled. “Certain agreements have been made to keep them out of this city. To keep them out of this state. I’m not going to put everything at risk because a nosy reporter can’t stay out of my business.”

“What do you want me to do?” Kathy asked, eying the cold hard cash on the table.

“We have just as many resources as the Daily Planet does, Kathy. Make a bigger splash on the front page. Bury the story. Burn the place down. I don’t care what you do, but whatever you do you do it fast. Because if I see even an inkling about organized crime showing up on the front page of the Daily Planet it won’t be just me having to explain things.”

He pushed her a letter sized envelope and she looked down at the print, *Multiworld Communications*.

“What is this?” Kathy asked, reaching for the envelope.

“Enough insurance to make sure everyone at the Planet takes the threat seriously.” Harris smirked back at her. “I’m not sure those Kerths will glisten quite as bright when everyone hears how you put yourself through journalism school.”

Kathy eyed the envelope then looked back to Harris. “Nice doing business with you.”

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Lois looked up across the table to where Alice and Perry White were seated, tapping her pen across her notepad as she toyed with how to voice her thoughts. She glanced over to the end of the table where Clark had laid out the screen stills she had been able to get her hands on from the local authorities. Still, it wasn’t much to go on.

“I’ve talked with everyone, Perry. No one knows anything or at least not that they want to admit.” Lois let out a deep sigh, reaching up to rub her temples. “It’s like everyone is spooked about finding this girl for some reason.”

“Kidnappings have been on the rise,” Perry commented,

shaking his head in dismay. “And now we have investors threatening us if we print anything about this girl’s kidnapping.”

“Print what?” Lois asked, pointing to the information in front of her. “I have nothing. I have a missing kid and police that don’t want to do anything about it.”

“Well, then maybe that’s the angle,” Clark interrupted, looking up from his end of the table where he had his chin resting against his folded hands.

“Come again?” Alice asked, drumming her fingertips against the table.

“Say you don’t print the story about this girl’s disappearance but rather focus on the police and district attorney and other public offices that are refusing to investigate.” He looked to Perry, “Technically the headline isn’t about the missing girl but rather the refusal to do the job these officials were hired to do.”

“We just happen to mention this girl’s name and last location in the article to get the public riled up about it.” Lois nodded, following where this was going.

“I think that’s all you can do for now. Until Jack is able to find more out from the guys he’s working with, I don’t see any other options,” Clark said, shaking his head. “It eats me up that we can’t plaster this girl’s story across the news and get some traction that way, but given no one wants her story told, I’d say that’s probably the story they don’t want told.”

“And that’s the one we want to print,” Perry agreed, jabbing his index finger to the picture in the center of the table. He looked to Lois. “I want you to keep on this. We’ll print the angle on the corruption and keep turning over stones until we find who’s behind this.”

Lois nodded, glancing in Perry’s direction with hesitancy. “Are you sure we don’t already know who’s behind this?”

“What do you mean?” Alice asked.

“I mean, there’s corruption and manipulation of the news. Stories being buried and crimes not being pursued. Sound familiar?”

“Bill Church is behind bars,” Perry reminded her.

“Lex Luthor was ordering hits on people from the interrogation room in the middle of a precinct full of officers,” Lois pointed out. “What’s your point?”

“This isn’t Luthor,” Perry advised her with a heavy sigh.

“No, it’s Intergang,” Lois said, rising to her feet. “And I’m going to prove it.”

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Senator Donald Schumer reached up to tug on his collar as he looked over the headline of the Daily Planet. He slammed his fist on the smooth wooden surface of his desk. Despite the warnings he had given his partners, there it was. The headline he had been warned about.

### ***Kidnapping in Metropolis: Police Coverup!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

He reached for his phone, dialing the number he knew by heart and preparing for the scathing threats that would come his way. After a few rings there was a click on the other line and heavy breathing. “Donald, I thought we discussed this blatant publication before. I am a very private man. I don’t like my business being aired in the papers.”

“I know, Tobias,” Donald replied nervously. “I... I’m going to take care of it. Unfortunately, getting the story retracted won’t do much good, though.”

“I believe you’re missing the point, Donald.” Tobias breathed heavily into the receiver. “My good name has been tainted. Now, so will these reporters.”

“I... These are well respected reporters,” Donald Schumer argued, not following. “They’ve helped bring down some of the biggest criminal minds and have covered everything from Superman’s arrival to the takedown of LexCorp. It’s not someone you can really smear in the public eye easily.”

“We’ll just see about that, now won’t we?” the line went silent and a click could be heard.

Donald stared at the handset, unsure what to make of Tobias’ threat.

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### ***Kidnapping in Metropolis: Police Coverup!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

Ingrid set the paper down, tucking her newly darkened hair strands behind her ear, staring at the image on the front page. The young girl was the right age. The right look. She fit perfectly in the type of girl that the underworld of sex trafficking aimed for. Easy target.

Anguish filled her mind as her time within Tobias’ dark world came flooding back. The torture had been ongoing for weeks. Her mind and body had been pushed to the brink as she was conditioned to do whatever was asked of her without protest. Her voice had been snuffed to mere whisper, left to scream into the void with no one to hear her pleas for help. She tapped her index finger over the girl’s picture. Then looked to the end of the article where the number to dial in anonymous tips was located. Did she dare point them in the right direction? She wasn’t even sure it was Tobias that had her. There had to be a thousand thugs just like Tobias scattered across the world. There was no telling who had their claws in this girl. Still, if he was involved...

‘No, it’s too dangerous,’ she quickly shut the thought down before it could come to fruition.

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### **Chapter 7: Get Ready Cuz I’ve Had Enough**

*Three Years Ago..*

#### ***Bill Church, Supermarket Mogul Head of Intergang***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

Perry White wore a broad smile, feeling a skip in his step as he pushed his way through the double doors leading into the hallway where Franklin Stern’s office was located. He nodded recognition to his secretary Beatrice and tightened his grip on this morning’s edition of the Daily Planet. Another big win for the Planet.

He reached the end of the hallway where Franklin Stern’s office was, noting the new finishings on the door before reaching his hand up to knock and make his presence known. A gruff bellow could be heard from behind the door, “What do you mean? Of course, I’m insured!”

Perry’s eyebrows rose as Franklin Stern’s voice grew more animated throughout the call. He reached his hand up to knock on the door again, noting the frantic waving Stern was doing from the corner as he beckoned Perry inside the office. “Well, I would love to see you try. You’ll be hearing from my lawyer!”

With that, Stern slammed the phone down with a ferocious growl. “Yellow-bellied crooks. The whole lot of them.”

“Crooks?” Perry’s jaw tightened as he stood awkwardly in front of Stern, unsure if he should be taking a seat or preparing to go into battle.

“The nerve of them,” Stern continued, tapping his chest proudly. “They want to accuse me of slander? *Me?* They run tabloid trash. I run organizations that report the *news*.” Stern’s face grew grim and he pointed to the door. “You may want to close the door, Perry.”

“What seems to be going on, Mr. Stern?” Perry asked, walking toward the door to close it.

Stern waited for the door to close and then took his seat, leaning back in the leather seat with a frown. “The Daily Planet is being sued.”

Clark felt a smile curl across his face as he watched his wife proudly gaze across the front-page headline exposing Bill Church as the head of Intergang. After months of investigating they had finally gotten what they needed to expose the criminal mastermind. It had been a long time coming but they finally had

enough to print the story that would expose Church to the world. He followed her inside the awaiting elevator car, taking a sip from his coffee cup. "I see the DEA finally got back to Perry."

Lois let out a short snort, shaking her head. "I still can't believe they made us hold this story for a *week*."

"Well, to be fair it was an international scandal what with Church's involvement with terrorists and drug smuggling. Project Valhalla was just the tip of the iceberg," Clark observed, looping his arm around her waist as she gave him an astonished expression. "You know as well as I do how hard it is to cut through the red tape."

"Well, at least it'll be a nice welcome back gift for Jimmy," Lois amended, twisting her mouth into a soft 'o' before changing the subject. "Either way, I'm glad Bill Church is sitting on the front page, finally exposed to the world for his crooked ways."

Clark's eyebrows shot up across his forehead and he let out a chuckle. "Gee, Lois, tell me how you really feel."

Lois bit her lower-lip, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'll just be glad when we're done working with the DEA on this one."

"Me too," he agreed, reaching over to stroke her cheek with the back of his hand. "These late nights with Agent McCord have been killing me."

"Well, I don't see Agent McCord here now," she whispered in a conspiratorial tone. She reached up to adjust the knot on his tie, chewing her lower lip as she quietly agreed with him and simultaneously drove him crazy with the simple gesture. He moved his hand to cover hers, quietly taking in the feeling of having her in his arms for the short elevator ride up to the newsroom.

The last two weeks had been hard on the both of them. Superman continued to be pulled into several different directions amid politicians hammering Murray Brown for a quick photo-op. Even the many, *many* he had turned down required his time to navigate how to turn them down without coming off too harshly. Then there was the day to day activities of keeping up with the criminal element in Metropolis. Superman lately had taken up more of his day to day activities which left him frustrated with the lack of hours in the day. Not a small task when he and Lois were both running on fumes from juggling the blur of a year Jon's first year had been, the Planet, and Superman duties. It seemed as if there was no reprieve from it all.

He and Lois had worked through the criminal element as if they were trading villains at a Comicon over the past year. Even in his hay day, Lex Luthor hadn't been quite as bold as some of the criminals looking to make their mark and prove their worth to the city. The last year had been hard on both him and Lois as they navigated through Jon's first year and attempted to figure out the balance between nurturing their marriage as newlyweds and giving one another the support they needed as they both learned how to navigate through his new adventure of parenthood together. For the most part he felt they had found a balance that worked for them, but there were, of course, the occasional weeks or months that stood out. Namely this last month as they struggled to work through the never-ending investigation into Intergang.

After his confrontation with Church just before the hearing against Skins gang member, Baby Rage, he had found himself faced with having his word under scrutiny when he went to the DA for help. It was then he knew that bringing Church down would have to be done by Clark Kent, not Superman. Martin Snell had eventually crawled out from the rock he'd been hidden under and was caught in a car bombing. Baby Rage had been killed by a shiv on his way to trial. Everyone surrounding the case had disappeared and continued to find themselves in harm's way. The threat continued to loom over the city, but for whatever reason the crime that had riddled the city to a crippling halt suddenly disappeared overnight. But he and Lois knew the danger was there, and now Bill Church was going to pay for the crimes he had

committed and the pain he had caused.

Lois fingered the silk of his tie with her index finger, meeting his gaze before leaning in to capture his lips with hers, tugging him to her by his tie. He felt her lips vibrate against his as a groan escaped her lips. His hand moved to cup both sides of her face, cradling her in his arms as he savored the quiet moment he had finally been able to steal away from the rest of the world.

He let out a low groan when he felt her hand move across his chest, tracing the outline of his tie against the fabric of his dress shirt. He let out a labored breath, resting his forehead against hers, stroking her cheek with his palm. "I love you, Lois Lane Kent." He let out a low chuckle as her index finger moved to the knot of his tie. "But if you keep this up we're going to be making a pit stop in the stairwell...and possibly be even more late than we are already."

She let out a soft giggle. "Perry will get over it." She looped her arms around his neck. "We could just stop on the next floor and..." Before she could finish her unnecessary coaxing, the elevator doors opened up on the newsroom floor and the booming voice of their editor reached their ears. She gave an apologetic smile. "Oops."

He let out a chuckle, leaning in to kiss her once more before extracting himself from her arms to face the bellows coming from their editor's office.

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Headlines soared off the newsstands. Every channel had something to say about the latest news piece. Theories and speculations were debated on every channel. Finally having enough, Bill Church Jr. clicked the television off as he paced around his office angrily.

He reached over to answer the phone and snapped, "Well?"

"Mr. Church?" came the voice of one of the engineers employed by Intergang, Gene Newtrich, and Bill Church Jr. let out an aggravated sigh.

"What is it, Gene? I've got to keep the phone lines open." Church tapped his hand across the desk irritably.

"Of course, Mr. Church." The line went dead and Church sighed, shaking his head as he turned to hang up the phone. A sharp grunt of frustration escaped his throat when he saw Gene Newtrich standing in the doorway of his office, holding up a small metal box. He waved him in, annoyed at the frustrating prospect of working with Gene. He had been hired on to research what they knew about this mystical Kryptonite that was rumored to have fatal effects on Superman. He still wasn't convinced of the meteorite's existence given that it had been nearly a year of Newtrich's firm working on this project with no fruition.

Church folded his hands across his desk, giving the best pretense of being patient he could sum up, and looked to Newtrich with a pained smile and gritted teeth as he muttered out, "Yes, Gene, what is it?"

"I thought you'd never ask, Mr. Church." Gene grinned back proudly, setting the dirty mud-covered box on the pristine surface of Church's desk, strewing dirt and mud across the surface.

Church was just about to argue when Gene flipped open the box and revealed a glowing red stone inside. A large, crystal-like stone that called to him in a way that sent goosebumps through his nerve endings and filled his heart with joy all at the same time.

Afraid to jump to conclusions or make too big of a fuss, Church cautiously examined the crystal-like stone sitting in front of him. "Is that...?"

"I've had three different labs examine it. Compared to the journals we surfaced from Bureau 39's warehouse, this has all the properties of what Jason Trask described as 'Kryptonite,'" Gene Newtrich responded happily.

"I thought Kryptonite was supposed to be green. This is red." Bill Church Jr. eyed the substance before him critically.

Gene Newtrich pulled out a report from his back pocket.

“The labs can’t determine what the difference in color means but it’s one molecular unit off from what Jason Trask described.”

Church raised an eyebrow at Newtrich unsure what to make of the admission. In any substance, one molecular unit could make all the difference. “Will it kill Superman?”

“We don’t know,” Newtrich sighed, raking a hand through his thinning hair.

Church nodded, pushing the box back toward Newtrich.

“Well, then I suppose we should find out. We’ll need a field test. Of course, that means we have to send someone expendable. Someone we at Intergang won’t miss if they wind up in jail.” He turned to Gene. “How about you, Gene?”

“My pleasure, Mr. Church,” Gene replied warily.

“Perfect.”

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*Present Day...*

Lois handed Jon the small plastic measuring cup filled with purple liquid, raising an eyebrow at him when he stared at it suspiciously. He opened his mouth to argue and she held up a finger. “Come on, Jon, you’re not going to get any better without taking your medicine.”

*For now,* Lois thought inwardly. So far, Jon had not taken after his father’s immune system, being just as vulnerable to the cesspool of sniffing noses and upset tummies as the next toddler. Over the weekend Jon had turned from having a mild fever to what her mother and his pediatrician had diagnosed as the flu. After a week he was feeling a little better than he had in the previous days but still had his lingering fever to battle. And battle he did.

“But...it’s yucky,” Jon argued with a harrumph.

“And you’re still sick.” Lois tapped on the measuring cup with her index finger. “Come on, bud, just get it over with and then you can curl up on the couch with cartoons and your Grammy.”

Jon peaked over Lois’ shoulder, spying where her mother had set up shop with Lucy to help watch him while she and Clark met with Jack this afternoon. Though she knew he was over the worst of it she still was nervous leaving him when he was sick. But given the promise that Lucy would call if he took a turn for the worse and the fact that Jack and his contact at the HRO might be her only shot at finding out what had happened to Lilith’s sister, she had talked herself into the arrangement.

The constant battle with parenthood and her career continued to put her at odds with herself lately. Last week she had worked mostly from home, trying to help nurse Jon back to health, and though she knew Perry understood, she couldn’t help but wonder if the choice would be met differently if she had a boss that wasn’t like a second father-figure to her.

“All done,” Jon grumbled, handing her the measuring cup back and making a grimace as he tried to get the taste off of his tongue by repeatedly patting at the taste buds with his hand.

“Here.” Clark walked up behind them and handed Jon a small plastic cup of water. “You be good for your Grammy and Aunt Lucy.”

Jon set the cup down and frowned, letting out a defeated sigh as he tried to debate internally about something he was mulling over. Lucy walked over and set a hand over Jon’s shoulder, “Hey, buddy.” She pulled out a stuffed Scooby-Doo from behind her. “I was out earlier and found this guy. Is he yours?”

“No...” Jon grinned back at his aunt.

“Are you sure?” Lucy asked, shaking the plush dog from side to side. “He seems to *rrreeeaalllly* like you.” She leaned the plush toy toward Jon to have it give him a peck on the cheek.

“Thanks for doing this,” Lois said, giving her sister a grateful smile. “If I could have put Jack off any longer, I would have.”

“It’s fine, sis, really,” Lucy flashed her a quick smile. “Mom and I’ve got this.”

“Have a good time with your Aunt Lucy and Grammy,” Lois said, leaning in to give him a peck on the cheek one last time before making her way to the door. She turned to where her mom had set up a small stack of movies. “Mom? Call if you need anything. We probably won’t be more than a few hours.”

“Go!” Her mom ushered her out. “I have watched my grandson before without incident.”

“I know.” Lois nodded, trying to voice the sudden hesitancy that had washed over her. “Just...call if you need anything.”

“I will.” Her mom held open the door for her and gestured to the front balcony. “Now...both of you...go.”

“Thanks, Ellen.” Clark gave her a grateful smile and took Lois’ hand in his, walking with her out the door.

“I think she was trying to get rid of us.” Lois harrumphed, walking down the steps leading to the walkway in front of their townhome.

“You may be right,” Clark said, following her down the steps.

She let out a sigh, making her way down the street to the corner which led to the alleyway Clark usually changed in. She looked over her shoulder, stealing a glance toward Clark who was a few paces behind her. She took one last longing gaze to the front door of the townhome. “I really hate leaving him like this.”

“I know,” Clark said, looping his arm over her shoulder. “But your mom used to be a nurse. Jon’s in great hands and we’ll be right back. It’s just a quick trip downtown.”

“On a Saturday,” Lois grumbled irritably. “I guess these non-profits never got the memo about weekends what with their whole save the world with everything on the line...”

“Hmm, sounds like a certain reporter I know,” Clark teased, tightening his hand around hers.

“I...took breaks,” Lois argued half-heartedly noting her husband’s teasing smile.

“Sure, between disasters, right?” Clark leaned in to give her a peck on the cheek.

“Hey, I’ll have you know some of those disasters got some pretty big awards.” Lois grinned back at him, toying with the collar of his blue polo shirt.

“Well, that just changes everything doesn’t it?” Clark chuckled, shaking his head.

Lois threw her head back, laughing as they stopped at the back alley at the end of the street, and Clark looked over his shoulder, checking to make sure they weren’t being watched before ducking inside to change into his Superman suit with the crest smoothly printed across the front. A few years back, Martha had opted to change the way the emblem was stitched on making it a cleaner look and lighten the fabric of the cape, so it was less resistant when he was flying.

“Ready?” Clark asked, leaning over to scoop her into his arms.

She nodded, resting her head across his chest, preparing herself for takeoff as she cast one last glance at the townhome. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust her mom. She did. She just hated having to leave Jon when he was sick, and she especially hated that he was missing out on the trip to the park with his friends he’d been looking forward to. Of course, his friends were probably where he had gotten sick to begin with. One thing parenthood had taught her was there were never enough days off in the year to keep up with flu and cold season. Daycares were like a cesspool, breeding new concoctions of the two at the worst possible times.

“Jon is in good hands,” Clark whispered, stroking her cheek as they flew through the air. “And hopefully Jack and his team were able to find something out about Esma.”

“I’d really love to have some good news to tell Lilith,” Lois sighed, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“Me too.”

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Dan Scardino ran a weary hand across his face, noting the

grim appearance in the mirror and let out a deep sigh as he leaned forward to splash some water against the rough skin surrounding the bottom half of his jaw. *‘That’s what happens when you let yourself get burnt, Danny-boy.’*

He shook his head, splashing the water against his face once more and squinting his eyes closed as the image of Jenna faded from his mind. The painful present never failed to taunt him with memories each day. A reminder of what had been taken from him day in and day out.

*‘No,’* Dan tightened his jaw as he patted aloe to the sunburned patches on his jaw and hissed out a painful grunt. *‘Not today. I’m not going to get lost in it today.’*

He reached for the towel on the sink, patting his face dry and then turning to the files spread across the bed from the evening before. He had been tracking his way through the better half of Europe for at least half a year, tracking this guy down, but had finally got a sighting. An ad for a singles column of all things had drawn him here.

Dan felt his blood boil as he stared at the faded black and white photo stapled to the scribbled notes he’d translated from the files he’d been able to extract from Turkey officials. The name Schiller was repeatedly mentioned by the individuals interviewed but no one seemed to know where this Schiller was or where he’d come from. He suspected the mysterious Schiller was involved but that hadn’t been what had drawn him here.

Omer.

Omer Demir.

The name had haunted his nightmares for years from the time he had heard the name uttered by Jenna in her investigation into the drug ring in Brazil and the eventual capture of a serial bomber that had been tied with the cartel. The name kept coming up. Demir had a special hold on the twisted individuals he pulled into his world.

Jenna had been convinced this guy was a bigger fish than Washington initially thought.

Now after nearly six years of radio silence he had popped up in a prominent city with an ad for a good time and casual listening. Dan’s grip tightened on the photo, wrinkling it under the pressure of his fist. He could feel his fury simmering beneath the rage-filled heart that boiled his blood each day.

‘I’m gonna get ‘em Jenna,’ Dan promised, stealing a glance over at the photo he had pinned on the nightstand.

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Clark walked through the open space of the Metropolis Museum of Art, gazing toward the tall glass windows that hovered over the gallery. The collection of art pieces from one of the local colleges was on display with a small plaque below the display with the school’s name. Just off to the corner he found the hallway where several classrooms were setup.

Jack had asked him and Lois to meet him here, hinting he had some information in both missing persons cases they were investigating. Esma – the young teenage girl that had gone missing just a few blocks from her home. Her sister Lilith was the lonely voice, screaming for justice from anyone who would listen. Thankfully she had found Lois, but finding anyone who could do something seemed to be the bigger challenge.

The justice system he had promised to uphold felt unrecognizable. Here was a child missing and yet the usual departments and organizations that should be clamoring to bring her home were silent. No one wanted to talk about it. No one wanted to bring attention to this innocent life that was at risk. Why would anyone try to help hide something like this?

Then of course there was the disappearance of the young girl, Ingrid he had rescued a few months ago. She had gone missing from the Fifth Street Mission nearly minutes after she’d been interviewed by the police according to the staff. It still felt odd that no one had thought to mention her disappearance to the police.

Then again, everything about these investigations into these two missing girls felt strange.

He couldn’t pinpoint it exactly.

Were they kidnappings?

Was it something more?

He had come across some of the more devastating tendencies of man when he’d first begun exploring different parts of the world after college. The world could be beautiful and amazing while at the same time being vindictive and cruel. Some of the worst parts of humanity could be found anywhere in the world, but one thing he’d come across was how desperation brought out the worst in people. Third world countries were where wealth didn’t come from fine minerals or materialistic things but rather one’s ability to inflict their power over those weaker than them.

Slavery had been abolished decades ago, but in its place was the black market of human trafficking and with it, children and other innocents being sold to the highest bidder. The pitch-black darkness that lurked in the shadows of the underworld were the things of nightmares and everything that went bump in the night. As much as he hated to even think it, the lack of ransom demand or even a public cry for attention from the captors made the kidnapping seem less about money or profit and much more about the empty darkness that lived inside the souls of the evil incarnates — heartless beings that saw a child as a thing to control rather than nurture. The deafening silence continued to gnaw at him, wondering if these two innocents had been swallowed up by the worst humanity had to offer. Though he had no proof he couldn’t shake the deep pit of his gut that told him they were missing because someone didn’t want them to be found.

‘There’s Jack.’ Lois reached her hand over to point to the end of the hallway where Jack was standing.

Clark nodded, seeing his friend in the doorway with an older Middle Eastern man who was wearing a traditional sherwani and a dark brown Chitralli cap. Jack motioned to the man behind him and nudged him ‘These are the friends I was telling you about.’ He then beamed back at Clark. ‘Glad you guys could make it.’ He pointed to the man behind him. ‘This is Mr. Demir. He’s one of the founders of the HRO chapter I work with.’

Lois’s eyebrows rose a hair as she exchanged a questioning gaze with Clark before responding with a quick smile. ‘Well, it’s nice to meet you, Mr. Demir.’

‘Omer,’ he corrected in a thick Middle Eastern accent. Omer Demir’s eyes twinkled as he flashed a half-smile in Clark’s direction gripping the wooden cane tightly in his palm and tapping it against the tile floor in front of him.

‘This is Lois Lane and Clark Kent. They’re the reporters I was telling you about,’ Jack introduced them as they walked inside the classroom they’d been standing outside of.

‘Yes, I see.’ Omer nodded, reaching over to turn the light on. The cane tapped in an uneven rhythm as he made his way across the room.

‘Mr. Demir teaches part-time to some of the children in the halfway houses up the block,’ Jack explained, pointing to the desk in the corner. ‘He’s been able to help us rescue a lot of at-risk kids.’

‘Children are our most vulnerable asset.’ Omer set his cane down as he took his seat behind the desk, digging through his desk drawers until he found what he’d been searching for.

‘An interesting way of looking at it,’ Lois commented, raising her left brow. ‘I would think they’re our strongest assets. Afterall, they are the future generation to inherit what we leave behind.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Omer’s face flashed between annoyance to this fake tolerance he was trying to portray.

Clark pondered for a moment if he should press Omer and size up just what he was trying to hide but opted not to pursue it. They needed information and even though the man helping them

might not be the most forthcoming person, he was at least helping them – for now. “So, you helped found the HRO group Jack’s been working with?” Clark tried to steer the conversation toward the HRO in hopes of drawing more information out of Omer. “What was that like?”

“I saw a need to reach out and help everyone in the world have the basic human rights protected. Every country has its own version, but no one really enforces it. So, I put together a small group and decided to do something about it,” Omer said proudly, picking at a piece of lint on his pant leg.

“And the treaties with other countries didn’t get in the way?” Lois inquired, resting her hands on her hips as she pursed her lips. “I mean, even the UN can’t get inside the borders of Iraq. How exactly do you expect your group to?”

“Well, it helps having this group scattered around the world.” Omer winked at her, sitting up in his chair. “I don’t need to break down any borders because I have people there already. There are no politics to negotiate. Just human rights being fought for and protected. A universal goal.”

“And an honorable one at that,” Jack added proudly. “It’s been amazing to watch the good this group has brought around the world.”

“Hmm,” Lois nodded, seeming to be sizing Omer up as she relented. “I suppose that’s one way to go about making a difference in the world.”

“Not all of us can go crusading in with a cape and big ‘S,’ Ms. Lane,” Omer offered a half-smile. “Not that I wouldn’t welcome the help if he ever offered it.”

Lois nodded, turning her gaze to Clark and then back to Omer. She seemed to be equally suspicious of him but remained quiet on her feelings. Clark followed her lead and cleared his throat. “Jack mentioned you two were able to find something on the two girls that went missing?”

“Yes, yes.” Omer tapped the file in front of him, flipping it open and revealing the familiar surveillance photos of the bus stop where Esma had disappeared from. “We have a few connections with the company that manages surveillance for banks and many of the corporations around the city. It’s not exactly clear, but we can see what happened.” He slid the top photo to the side and revealed the gut-wrenching image of the young Esma being grabbed from behind and a needle being lodged in her throat by a captor that didn’t even bother to cover his face.

“Oh, my God,” Lois breathed out eying the open file in Omer’s hand before clapping a hand across her face, trying to hide the obvious effect the photo had on her. Clark reached over to place a protective arm around her shoulders, holding her close just as she let her hand fall, finding her voice to ask. “Is there anything you can tell us?”

“This man.” He tapped on the photo. He pushed forward a black and white photo of a middle-aged man with piercings and a snake tattoo across his neck, matching the man in the photo of Esma being kidnapped. Clark grimaced as he glanced at the photo, wondering if his suspicions on Esma’s kidnapping were correct. “His name is Walter Kaplan. Low-life thug for hire.”

“Any idea where we can find this Kaplan?” Clark asked, fighting the urge to grab the file from Omer and find the answers out himself.

“Unfortunately, the only place you’d be able to find him is the morgue,” Jack answered, pulling out another file folder and handing it to Clark. “He was fished out of the bay last week.”

“Someone didn’t want him to be identified,” Lois noted, reading the file from over his shoulder as she pointed to the details listing out how Kaplan had been tortured by burning off his fingerprints.

“His *teeth* were removed?” Clark’s face tensed as he read through the sadistic torture Kaplan had been met with at his death.

“Tox screen found cyanide in his system,” Lois read aloud

with a grimace.

“Many of the human trafficking organizations condition their teams to accept resignations with a bullet to the head,” Omer said, leaning back in his chair. “I’m sure Kaplan was no different.”

“Human trafficking?” Lois’ voice cracked as she said the words aloud. “So, you think that Esma’s been...?”

“More than likely sold to the highest bidder,” Omer responded, tapping his cane on the floor in front of him.

“Where?” Lois breathed out her question holding back the floodgate of emotions that were flashing across her face as best she could. Clark reached his hand over to take her palm in his, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“There are a few,” Omer commented, “but the group that Kaplan was specifically working with has ties everywhere. This Intergang that once loomed the streets of Metropolis was taken over by them. Now instead of drugs and guns, it’s girls and children that are sold off.” He shook his head. “She was an easy target.”

“But where is she now?” Clark asked, growing frustrated with how much information Omer appeared to know about this Human Trafficking ring and yet the most important piece of information he and Lois desperately needed – where Esma – remained an open question.

“She could be anywhere,” Omer answered, shaking his head. “No one knows where the girls go.”

“Kidnapped on her way home from school on a crowded street,” Lois glanced at the photo on the desk in front of Omer. “How does something like that happen?”

“It isn’t the first,” Jack said solemnly, passing Clark another file.

“What’s this?” Clark asked.

“You asked about another young girl,” Omer answered. “It’s all in there.”

Swallowing back the lump in his throat from the frustration that flooded through him, Clark flipped the file open and saw an eerily similar looking image of a much younger twelve year old Ingrid exiting a coffee shop and being drugged and kidnapped in the same manner.

“Why didn’t I hear the cries for help?” Clark found himself chastising himself, carrying the guilt of the pain these girls must have been subjected to. How could something like this happen and he not hear it? How could he not know?

“Can we...take these?” Lois asked, her voice cracking from the weight of the emotion that hung over them both.

“Those are copies,” Omer answered with a nod. “I’m sorry I can’t be of more help to you. I wish you luck in your search.” He motioned toward the door. “I wish I had more time, but I’m supposed to be teaching the watercolor class in a few minutes.”

“Thanks for your help,” Lois said, tugging Clark by the arm as she gathered up the file on Omer’s desk and tucked it in her arm.

“Thank you.” Clark nodded, exiting the classroom with Lois, not sure what to say. He looked back at Jack whose expression was no better than his own.

“I wish it was better news, guys. I’m sorry,” Jack apologized.

“At least we know what we’re dealing with,” Lois said shakily, resting her head against Clark’s shoulder. “That’s a start.”

“Well, I won’t keep you guys, but just let me know if I can do anything. I’m still tracking a few other leads from pleas for help we’ve gotten.” Jack grimaced, running a hand through his hair.

“How many?” Lois’ voice cracked as the question escaped her lips.

“What?” Jack asked.

“How many children? How many are out there? Kids snatched off the streets like this and no one is looking for them...” Lois shook her head in dismay. She was quiet for a moment, clamping her hand over her mouth before bolting from the hallway

they were standing in, tossing the files she'd been holding to the ground.

Jack reached out to grab Clark's shoulder before he could follow and responded solemnly, "Clark, no one knows."

Clark's brow furrowed, unsure what to make of Jack's response and then Jack elaborated. "There are kids and even grown adults snatched off the streets every day and sold into this nightmare of a world. No one knows how many are out there. I wish I had a better answer."

Clark hung his head, patting his friend on the shoulder. "Just stay safe."

"Look, I want to find these missing girls as bad as you guys do. Maybe we can put our heads together and see what we can come up with?" Jack offered, leaning down to help Clark gather up the file Lois had dropped in her hasty exit.

Clark nodded in agreement. "I'm not going to turn down someone that's willing to help look for these girls." He gestured to the doorway Lois had sprinted out of. His super-hearing picked up his wife's heartbeat around the corner where the blinking light for the restroom was. He sighed, wondering momentarily if the sudden bout of illness was the same thing Jon had or if the information they had just uncovered had more to do with it.

"I've got to go check on Lois."

"Sure thing. See you around."

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Lois let out a heavy sigh, resting her arms across her knees as she stared out into the distance where the passersby moved across the street and buses turned around the corners, and the world continued to turn as she tried to make sense of the information she had recently discovered from Jack's friend, Omer. The trustworthiness of the information was still yet to be determined, but if even half of it was true that meant evil at its darkest core still lurked out there.

"Lois?"

She jumped, startled by the sound, then blew out a breath of relief when she saw Clark standing behind her. "You okay?" Clark asked, kneeling on the steps next to her.

After nearly ten minutes of her being holed up in the restroom she had made her way to the nearest exit. It seemed the close quarters with Jon over the last week had caught up to her. That or her mind had become so revolted by the idea that children were being sold as commodities in underground markets, her body had physically reacted.

Lois reached up to swipe a tear from her face. "I'm not okay. Not okay in the slightest." She breathed out with the shake of her head. "She was twelve years old when she was kidnapped. Esma was at least sixteen. I can't even imagine..."

"I know," Clark said hoarsely, reaching over to place a hand over hers.

"We can't be the only ones that are looking for them. We can't be." Lois shook her hand in fury, trembling as the tension from the tight grip she held shook it back and forth.

\*\*\*

*Three Years Ago...*

"Barry Barker is naming the Daily Planet as well as both of you individually in the lawsuit," Perry advised, taking his seat across from where both Lois and Clark were seated.

Clark looked over the summons Perry had handed them both when they had been called into Perry's office earlier. The short-lived victory of finally being able to name Bill Church as the head of intergang had hit a sour note almost immediately. "He's got to be joking," Clark scoffed. "We've got the evidence!"

"Well, I spoke with legal this morning and no one thinks this will stick, but there is some concern from Mr. Stern that this might turn into a drawn-out court battle."

"Don't tell me he's thinking of settling with this bottom-feeder!" Lois chastised. Her voice raising a few octaves with each

word she uttered.

"Like it or not, this is still a business, Lois and having the Daily Planet's name dragged through the mud – no matter how frivolous this suit might be is bad for business," Perry said letting out a heavy sigh. "Now, I know you two have been working on this story since November and have put a lot of work into it, but..."

"No, buts." Clark immediately cut him off. "Perry, this is exactly what he wants us to do."

"Clark, the evidence tying Bill Church to Intergang is circumstantial at best." Perry let out a heavy sigh, raking his hand through his thinning hair. "Now, I understand it was enough for us to print and the warrant for Bill Church is still active, but the fact of the matter is we are vulnerable."

"What do you want us to do, Chief?" Lois asked, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Print a retraction and say, 'Oh, sorry folks Bill Church only looks like he's completely compromised and running all the crime in this city for the last four months. Our bad. But the police are looking for him and he isn't returning anyone's calls.'" Lois leaned back in her chair, shaking her head. "I might as well start writing a column for the National Whisper about Oprah's latest diet!"

"What does Mr. Stern need to make the case stronger?" Clark asked, fighting back the frustration he was feeling.

"Proof. Real undeniable proof that Bill Church..."

"And his son," Lois interjected.

"Now, Lois you don't know that!" Perry argued, shaking his head adamantly at her.

"Perry, this is the same argument we had three months ago. Everybody on the street knows it." Lois threw her hands up in the air for emphasis. "Bill Church has been running Intergang through Southside for months with the help of his son. With Bill Church in the wind, who do you think is calling the shots now, his pet gerbil?"

Perry shook his head, refusing to listen to any more of Lois' arguments. "Lois, Billy isn't like that. He's a smart businessman that pulled himself up by his boot straps and helped build some of the biggest corporations in the world. Satellite cable. Dial Up Internet. Your first mobile phone carrier. That was Billy! He's just not a criminal. I've known him since he was old enough to spit up on me."

"And that's supposed to make him innocent?" Lois asked sarcastically, crossing her arms in defiance.

Perry wasn't budging, "Billy is a smart kid. He wouldn't allow himself to get caught up in all of this. I remember when he used to caddy for me and his dad. Heck, he wouldn't even take over the CostMart stores. He left those to be run by the board members. He's not a criminal, Lois. A smart businessman and a little ruthless in corporate takeovers but who isn't? He's one of the biggest philanthropists in the country."

"And the biggest fake," she snapped.

"Lo-is..." Clark reached a hand over to try and calm her down.

"Look, I'm not going to back down on this, Perry. It's not just the Planet at risk here. It's both of our reputations and everything we have worked for up until now," Lois fumed aloud. "I've worked too hard to overcome bullies like Barker and the Churches. I'm not just going to bow down and let them run over us and I don't think Mr. Stern should either."

"Then I'm going to need you both to put all your efforts into proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that Bill Church is completely complicit in the illegal activities performed by Intergang."

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Elena Johnson tapped her hand across the open file in front of her, skimming over the report that had just been sent over by the NIA on a suspicious death of one of the ambassadors in Qatar. She

glanced over the report, feeling a sense of déjà vu wash over her as she read through the very familiar details. Another unexplained death with vague details and nothing to go on.

“Hey, Johnson, you got a visitor.” Jack Davenport pointed to a scruffy looking man over in the corner waiting to be checked in by one of the agents.

Elena frowned, tucking her light brown hair behind her ear, pondering who the stranger could be. She pushed away from her desk, standing up from her seat, reaching her arms over her head to stretch before turning back to the front where she could see the visitor through the double pane glass that separated him from the back office where the rest of the agents were seated in their cubicles. She reached for her badge hanging from the corner of her cubicle and strung it around her neck before heading toward the reception desk to check on her unnamed guest.

“Oh, Elena, I was just about to call you,” Tracy, the front receptionist said, setting her phone back on the cradle and turning in her direction as she opened the glass pane door. She gestured to the unnamed guest. “Agent McCord, Agent Elena Johnson.”

“Agent?” Elena asked, reaching her hand out to shake the mysterious Agent McCord’s hand.

“DEA.” He flashed his badge, revealing his status as a field agent for the DEA. Elena took a quick glimpse at him, biting her lower lip as she hooked her thumb into a loose belt loop and looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to elaborate more. McCord cleared his throat and broke the awkward silence. “I guess you’re wondering why I’m here?”

“Given I’ve never met you before that’s probably a good place to start.” Elena folded her arms over her chest, awaiting his response.

“The DEA has been following some cases on and off with drugs coming into the U.S. by way of illegally entering citizens, shipments and even some carry-ons have been used to smuggle the drugs in.”

“Okay.” Elena tightened her jaw, not following where this was going.

“One of the leads we were chasing came up against one of the cases tied to you, Agent Johnson.” McCord shrugged his shoulders.

“How so?” Elena asked.

“You were investigating the disappearance of an ambassador in Germany?” McCord asked, looking in his notebook for information. “A Louis Myer?”

“The ambassador that was killed in the shootout in Yemen?” Elena nodded, recalling the name as another official that had been killed unexplainably in a location completely foreign to his sovereign nation.

“My sources place him in Qatar at the same time a large shipment of this mysterious new drug we’re tracking was supposedly shipped out.” McCord flashed her a quick smile. “I may be going out on a limb here but it’s a bit too coincidental for my book.”

“And what? You want the FBI to help track down your drug ring?” Elena asked, not following.

“I was hoping you might be able to help me figure out if there’s anything to it.” McCord shrugged his shoulders. “I can take it from there.”

“I’ve been working this case for over a year,” Elena argued.

“And have you gotten anywhere?” McCord challenged.

“Look, I don’t want to step on your toes. I just need to know if I’m barking up the wrong tree or not.”

Elena shook her head. “I’m unaware of any drugs being found at the scene of Louis Myer’s death. You’re welcome to talk to the Medical Examiner and the team that surveyed the dump site though.” She flashed him a scowl. “I hope you’re up to date on your Turkish.”

“Never mind.” McCord held his hands up. “I’ll take your

word for it.” He tucked his notepad in his jacket. “Thank you for your time, Agent Johnson.”

“Anytime.”

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Lois walked with Perry and Clark toward the elevator doors, still reeling from the bombshell that had just been laid on them. She stole a quick glance in Clark’s direction wondering just how they would be able to pull off what was being asked of them. If they had more time to work on this, she knew they would be able to find the physical evidence to prove Bill Church Sr. and Bill Church Jr. were running Intergang beyond a shadow of a doubt. Now, of course they were being forced to race against the clock.

A race against time that put both her and Clark personally on the hook which could potentially tap them both out for their coverage for the year. All of that to say if they were forced to settle or, worse, it was found that there hadn’t been enough evidence to back their theory. Both scenarios she knew were worst-case, but given the uncertainty that loomed over her, apprehension filled her thoughts at the potential hopelessness of putting her trust in the courts.

“Do we know what the Planet’s attorneys are planning to respond with?” Clark asked, stepping onto the open elevator with Perry.

Lois followed, noticeably quiet as she continued to mull over the news Perry had laid on them. Months. They had spent months trying to prove again and again that Bill Church Sr. was behind Intergang. Though Clark had received the confession from Bill Church Sr. as Superman there wasn’t enough evidence to help back him up. And putting Superman in that position when he was still trying to earn the world’s trust back wasn’t something either of them were willing to do.

Martin Snell’s murder had been a hard blow to the case they had been trying to build, and once his testimony was gone, their case had gone up in flames. Though she wasn’t sure how, she was determined to find the missing link they needed to put the final nail in Church’s reputation and put to rest any uncertainty of his criminal history.

“They didn’t really say much,” Perry grumbled, running a hand through his thinning hair. “Anyway, this won’t take too long. We’ll go over the investigation with them and see where we can expand to ensure no settlement comes to fruition.”

“You seem pretty confident there, Chief,” Lois remarked, letting out a heavy sigh, folding her arms across her chest.

“Well, I know with my top reporters focused on this, we have nothing to worry about.” Perry smiled, straightening his jacket as the doors to the elevator opened, revealing a circle of armed men with pistols aimed on them as Perry let out a short, “What in the Sam Hill?”

“Don’t move!” the man in the center ordered, training his pistol in Perry’s direction.

Lois glanced in Clark’s direction who nodded, seeming to be inching his way toward the open doors that were now being held open by a metal bar that one of the assailants had positioned between them. The first gunman waved his pistol in Perry’s direction before reaching into the elevator car and jerking him out forcibly.

Clark straightened up, seeming to almost stop mid-stride as he blinked, watching Perry be tossed to the ground like a rag doll. Lois yelped in surprise as she and Clark were soon to follow, being ordered to huddle in the corner of the lobby where Todd, the clerk that ran the newsstand was cowering next to Perry along with other patrons.

“Now, if everyone does as we say no one gets hurt. Got it?” one of the gunmen taunted, firing a shot into the ceiling.

The elderly lady next to her let out a shriek in surprise, and before Lois could react, she felt the blur of wind brush against her cheek. She looked back to the corridor where Clark had been

sitting next to her moments ago and then turned her head to where the gunmen were standing around the register of the newsstand, emptying it out.

"Where is he?" one of the gunmen whispered in an aggravated grunt, seeming to be looking for something.

She felt the pit of her stomach twist as she glanced toward the corridor where Clark had disappeared down, wondering if he was checking on Jon before taking care of the gunmen. However, her silent question of where he was was quickly answered when the blur of red and blue filled the room, and he appeared in the front of the Daily Planet lobby with his arms folded across his chest in his famous Superman pose.

"You boys are going to have to wait in line like everyone else," Clark called out as one of the gunmen emptied out the candy shelves. "I hear that stuff rots your teeth."

Lois bit back a chuckle as she glanced over to where Perry was seated, wondering what was going through his mind as he watched Clark race into action. She smiled to herself, watching Clark address the leader of the gunmen with certainty. "Drop the weapons and no one has to get hurt."

"What if we don't want to?"

"You've got to be kidding me," Perry grumbled under his breath.

Lois watched in horror as Clark stood there and shrugged his shoulders. "I..."

The gunman dropped the gun on the counter and pointed to the door. "No guns. Just taking our money and leaving, Superman."

Lois felt her jaw drop in shock as Clark just stood there and did nothing as the gunmen continued to empty the register and shelves of whatever they wanted.

"This is absolutely ridiculous." Perry shot up from where he was seated. "You don't get to storm into my paper here and call the shots." He looked at Clark and jabbed him in the shoulder. "Superman, do something!"

Lois watched as Clark looked around the lobby casually, seeming to be almost bored as he let out a yawn and asked, "Why?"

"Why?" Perry echoed in a shout as his face reddened. "They're robbing the Planet!"

"So?" Clark scoffed nonchalantly, looking around unamused as he added. "I'm sure the Planet is insured."

"They've got guns!" Perry argued, frantically pointing at the gunmen that were unfazed by Clark's presence while at the same time ignoring the commotion Perry was making.

"They've put them down." Clark pointed to the weapons that had been laid on the countertop in front of them.

"But...It's your *job!*" Perry's voice boomed with his disheartened plea as his face fell, watching as Clark backed away from him. Lois watched the scene unfold, unsure what to make of Clark's bizarre behavior and too shocked to find her voice or move from where she was crouched down on the floor next to the other hostages.

"Not really." Clark shrugged, disappearing into a blur of red and blue.

"What in the Sam Hill?" Perry shouted as Lois watched the gunmen disappear through the rotating glass doors, firing off shots into the sky as they laughed, taking the money and goods they had retrieved.

Lois blinked, looking around, unsure how to process what had just happened. Chaos erupted around her as sirens approached and she searched the lobby for a sign of Clark's return.

Lois frowned, gazing across the disarray of chaos throughout the lobby. Something had to have happened to Clark to make him not even try to stop the gunmen. She couldn't understand how he could just stand there and do nothing. It wasn't like him.

"What just happened? Where did Superman go?" the elderly

woman next to her asked, craning her neck to look over Lois' shoulder.

"I don't know."

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## Chapter 8: Dancing Through the Fire

*Present Day...*

Lucy frowned, staring at the small envelope sitting on the coffee table. She looked over to where her mother was seated, nervously wringing her hands as she kept her focus on the envelope.

"What exactly did the woman say?" Lucy asked, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"She said and I quote, '*Keep digging, and more will die.*'" Her mother let out a heavy sigh, shaking her head. "What exactly has Lois gotten herself mixed into?"

Lucy glanced over to where Jon was napping content on the couch. "I'm not sure Lois has gotten herself mixed into much of anything lately other than trying to find that girl that was kidnapped a few weeks ago."

"Should we open it?" her mother asked.

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Perry ran a hand across his chin, stroking the weary lines as he finished making his notes on the notepad in front of him. The assistant editor that had been hired typically worked the weekends. Still, given how much turmoil had been kicked up after the recent story, he figured it best to put in a few hours and give Marcus some guidance on how to handle any issues that may arise.

"Almost ready?"

He looked up from his notepad, smiling at Alice, who was dressed in a red and white sundress, waiting patiently for him to follow through on his promise for an afternoon together away from the stress of their careers and the everyday hustle and bustle. A smile spread across his face. "I'm just about done here."

"You're just supposed to leave him a few notes, not a novel," Alice joked, looking over at the half-page he had already written.

"I know." Perry chuckled. "There's a lot going on."

"There's always a lot going on," Alice reminded him, reaching over to pull the notepad away from him. "Come on, let's get out of here, you old hound dog. Everything will still be waiting here for you on Monday."

Perry nodded, standing up from his desk and making his way across his office to where Alice was seated. He held out his arm for her to take and turned toward the door to leave. She took his arm and leaned in to give him a peck on the cheek.

"Perry, leaving so soon?"

They stopped mid-stride, seeing the tall figure of Senator Michael Harris blocking their exit as he stood just outside Perry's office door. Perry's brows furrowed when he saw the senator, certain this visit was not a social call. "What is it, Senator?"

Harris held up a copy of the Daily Planet's latest edition with the story on the corruption covering up a missing girl's kidnapping. Harris let out a long sigh. "Perry, Perry, I thought the board made the stance on where they stood on this clear."

"You mean, *not* printing something that is considered *newsworthy?*" Alice interrupted, shaking her head at Harris. "You should be ashamed of yourself. Trying to hide that poor girl's kidnapping for what? Crooked politicians that are lining their pockets?"

Harris slammed his fist against the door frame. "The news is what we *say* it is. This is just another kid that's runaway..."

"But you don't know that unless it's investigated," Perry shot back. "If you read the article, it's not about the missing girl but the lack of coverage on her disappearance."

"We know what you're doing," Harris growled. "This won't end well."

"The Daily Planet prints the news," Perry said proudly, pushing past the senator. "You have a problem with that, then read

a different paper.”

“Perry, don’t you walk away from me!” Harris called after him, but Perry had already turned the corner to where the elevator doors were.

Alice glanced over her shoulder. “That didn’t sound good.”

“It never does with him,” Perry grumbled. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

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Lois felt her blood run cold as she stared at the images. One photo after another displayed girls blindfolded with duct tape across their mouths that couldn’t be any older than eleven or twelve. Each haunting image sent a rush of rage through her as she flipped through each photo and read the words carved into the glossy finish. *‘Back off or they die.’*

“Normally, I wouldn’t open your mail, sis, but that lady really creeped mom out,” Lucy explained, passing another stack of glossy photos toward her. “And it doesn’t look like the threat is just at those girls.”

“What is it?” Lois asked, noting both her sister and mother’s apprehension.

Clark reached over to unfold the paper the photos were wrapped in and almost immediately dropped them on the floor, allowing the black and white photos to scatter on the ground. Lois opened her mouth to inquire further and quickly closed it when she spotted the black and white images scattered on the floor. Images of Jon, herself and Clark going about their day to day life were strewn across the floor. Each image had a time stamp printed on the bottom of it. She felt a sick sense of dread wash over her as she reached down to pick up a few of the photos, noting the date at the bottom was as early as two months ago.

Two months.

They’d been stalking her son for nearly two months at least.

Clark was noticeably quiet, grinding his jaw with even breaths as he flipped through the photos he’d retrieved from what had fallen earlier. Lucy sat across from them and appeared to be waiting them out as the room had turned pretty grim since her mother and Lucy’s revelation of the unwelcome package’s arrival.

Her mother was uncharacteristically quiet, mulling over what to say or do. She reached a hand over to place it on Lois’ shoulder. “I, uh, put Jon down about a half-hour ago. He seems to have perked up from earlier in the week. His temp stayed within the normal range, so I think he’s in the clear now from whatever bug got in his system.”

Lois nodded, silently feeling the tears well up in the corners of her eyes. She could hear the fear and anguish in her mother’s voice as she spoke. What could she say?

Lucy cleared her throat. “Look, I can stick around if you need me to...”

Clark shook his head, tightening his jaw as he spoke up. “You’ve done more than enough, Luce. We’ll be fine and try to...”

“Of course.” Lucy nodded, standing up from her seat across from him. “Well, if you change your mind just give me a call.”

Lois nodded, unable to voice her thanks, or find a way to articulate the range of emotions she was feeling. She’d barely even mentioned the girl that was missing in her article. But that was apparently enough to trigger an onslaught of threats from the mysterious kidnapper who was not only threatening the girls they had in their possession already, but her son. Her beautiful son was now being threatened for exposing the corruption and cover-up in this case.

The front door closed, and she heard the click of her mother’s retreating footsteps against the pavement. She tucked her lower lip inside her mouth, biting down in frustration against the flesh as she choked out a strangled sob. Between each labored breath, she became aware of two strong arms cradling her and let out a whimper, resting her cheek against her husband’s chest.

“These people are not going to win, Lois,” Clark whispered firmly. “I don’t care if I have to go fly Jon to another continent to keep him out of their reach, but they are not going to get away with this.”

“They’ve been watching him for months.” Lois finally found her voice. The more she thought about it, the more her mind raced, trying to understand how they had known about this story for as long as they had. Nothing had been printed. The sources she’d spoken with were trusted people she had always done business with.

“I know.” She heard Clark’s voice crack under the weight of the emotion he was trying to hold back.

“I don’t get it. I haven’t talked to anyone out of the ordinary. I...How have they known about this for two months?” Lois let out a frustrated wail as she struggled to calm the nagging in the back of her mind. “I’m so sorry. I never should have...”

“Hey, hey, hey, don’t.” Clark reached over to cup her cheek. “We both made the decision to go to print with that story. For some reason these people have been made to feel like they’re invincible and continue to commit crimes with no consequences. Our jobs are to expose the truth and fight for those that can’t fight for themselves.”

“Not at Jon’s expense,” Lois argued, shaking her head adamantly.

“I refuse to let these people bully us into being another silent voice.” Clark scowled, resting his chin against her head. “We’re going to stop these guys. They’ll have to get through you and me both to get anywhere near Jon.” He ran a hand across her cheek and smiled. “And my money’s on you.”

Lois leaned her head back to gaze up at him with a smile. “I guess there’s no reason to hold back anymore. Let’s hit ‘em with everything we’ve got.” She blanched slightly, clamping her hand over her mouth.

“Lois?”

“I’m going to be sick,” she managed to mumble out before sprinting to the half bathroom to empty her stomach.

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*Three Years Ago...*

Bill Church Jr. sat at his desk with Gene Newtrich, watching the robbery’s playback from earlier that morning. The image showed the crooks storming through the lobby doors, holding the hostages at bay. A moment later, the elevator doors opened, and the individuals on board were forced off with the remainder of the hostages. A moment later, Superman was there, ready to stop them.

“This is where Superman comes in! I talk to him and then—” Gene froze the picture “—There! That’s when we opened the box. When he got within about ten feet, his mood changed. Suddenly, it was like he didn’t care.”

Bill Church Jr. let out a chuckle, clapping his hands as he burst out in laughter. “Oh. This is perfect! This is better than killing him! He just doesn’t care!”

“My team can do another job for you if you’d like, Mr. Church,” Newtrich added with a grin. He tapped the metal box proudly. “With this beauty of course.”

Church nodded, watching as the footage showed Perry trying to reason with Superman as Newtrich and his team made off with the safe. His head cocked to the side as he stared at the image, wondering aloud, “Is it me, or does it seem like Perry knows Superman a little better than an editor of a major metropolitan newspaper should?”

“Well, he did save his life a few times,” Gene commented, not following.

“Right,” Church nodded, unconvinced.

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Agent Patrick McCord tapped on each cubicle corner as he passed by each one, scanning for the infamous Daniel Scardino in

the Washington office. He'd heard his fair share of stories about the agent and had come across many that had crossed him and lived to tell about it. Many of the stories seemed too crazy to be true, but given the stories that had traveled through the agency, he was inclined to believe them.

Ever since Scardino's fiancée had died on assignment, he had become consumed with tracking down her killers and bringing them to justice. It was that devotion that he needed in order to catch the guy responsible for this new drug that had come on the market. He had hoped he would get somewhere with the FBI but found himself stonewalled.

"You tap on my door, and I'm going to knock you into next week," a voice grumbled from the corner at the end of the aisle.

McCord jumped back, seeing the scruffy looking agent with dark mangled hair and unkept goatee approach him with his fist wrapped around an aluminum bat as he dragged it against the tile floor.

"You makin' enough noise there or you want to go get a set of drums to go along with it?"

"You must be Scardino," McCord said, noting the nameplate outside the agent's office door.

"You must be an idiot," Scardino shot back, turning on his heel to go back inside his office.

"Wait!" McCord called after him. "I need your help."

"I don't work with others," Scardino called over his shoulder.

"It's about the case you were following last year. The one on Agent Blake," McCord continued, trying to grab Scardino's attention.

Scardino turned on his heel, glaring sharply at McCord. "What about it?"

McCord held up his notepad, waving it back and forth. "Ever hear of the name Schiller when you were in Turkey?"

Scardino let out a heavy sigh, crossing his arms over his chest. "No, should I have?"

"Well, the site you were investigating..." McCord began, running a hand across the back of his head trying to bide his time as he scrambled to find the words without triggering Scardino even further.

"Spit it out." Scardino rolled his eyes. "Let's start at the top. Where are you from, Agent?"

"How do you know I...?" McCord furrowed his brow, cutting himself off on his question when he noticed his badge was still hanging around his neck. "Right."

Scardino smirked, showing the first sign of a sense of humor since he'd stumbled across the disgruntled agent. "Patrick McCord. Field Agent. I was just recently transferred back to the states after a stint out in Quebec and am trying to run down an open case. I was hoping you might be a little more helpful than the FBI."

Scardino snorted at his last remark. "Don't count on it."

"Look, I think the same guys you're after are the same ones I'm after."

"What makes you say that?" Scardino asked, leaning back against the doorframe.

McCord sighed, running a hand through the back of his head as he explained his plight to Scardino. "This is where my sources were able to place my last person of interest before he disappeared completely."

"Who is your person of interest? This Schiller character?"

"Yes," McCord waved the photo in his hand. "We found traces of something... Something we've never seen before along with evidence Schiller had been there in the last six months."

"What makes you think this Schiller character has anything to do with my case?" Scardino asked, still unmoved by the information McCord had presented.

"This," McCord handed the photo to Scardino. The sound of the aluminum bat striking the tile floor echoed through the hall

just before Scardino reached up and pointed his index finger at McCord, motioning for him to follow him inside his office.

"Where did you get this?" Scardino asked, fishing for something out of his disarray of file folders spread across his office.

"Village just outside of Beğendik," McCord answered.

"That's the place," Scardino said, revealing his own photo of the same location from one of his files. He pointed to the chair across from his desk. "Take a seat. Let's see if there's anything else crossing paths before we get too ahead of ourselves."

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Lois fiddled with the silver knob on her Rolodex, uncertain what her next move should be. Who was she supposed to call? What was she supposed to do when she couldn't even explain what had happened? She stole another glance toward the elevators, noting that the same three people who had been there two minutes ago were still deep in conversation.

The phone sitting on her desk rang, and she practically jumped out of her skin, reaching over to answer it as she fumbled to keep her grip on the handset before finally answering it with a feigned calm she didn't feel. "Lois Lane."

"Lois?" The midwestern drawl of Wayne Irig came over the line before he added his introduction abruptly. "This is Wayne out here in Smallville. I, uh, think you might want to come and get 'im before he, uh..."

"Slow down, Wayne, what are you talking about?" Lois interrupted, trying to follow what he was going on about.

"Well, it's Superman. He's here," Wayne finally answered. "And he ain't himself." His tone went quiet before he added quickly. "Either of 'em."

A hand went to her mouth as understanding washed over her. He knew about both of Clark's identities. Of course, he did. Why else would he have been involved in helping hide the Kents when they were on the run. She quickly gathered her thoughts, unsure what to make of Wayne's plea for help.

"Wayne, where exactly is ...Superman?"

"Well, he ain't exactly in one place or another. He keeps uh sprintin' overhead like he's playin' chickin' wit' 'dem planes and then a couple of booms later he's gone. I ain't figured out how to get 'im down here long enough to talk to 'im." Wayne let out a chuckle. "I'm guessing you don't want the Smallville Press printin' a story on Superman flying around the cornfields doin' air donuts?"

Lois clamped her eyes closed, trying to comprehend what Clark was doing in Smallville of all places and why he continued to behave so out of character. "I'll um...I'm going to call the Kents and we'll figure something out."

Lois replaced the handset, trying to calm the panic that was slowly building up within her. "What the ever-loving...?"

"Hey, Lois," Jimmy walked up to her with a seemingly thick file in his hands. "Have you seen CK?"

"He, um, had to run out earlier to, um, check on his, um... source." Lois finally landed on a word that didn't sound completely insane. "Chasing down a lot of leads with the Intergang angle." She flashed a smile in Jimmy's direction. "You know how it is."

"Uh-huh," Jimmy stared at her for a long moment before finally patting his hand on the file in he held. "Well, while CK is checking on his, uh, source, would you mind holding onto this for him?" He handed the file to her.

"What is it?" Lois asked, taking the heavy file from her.

"Every case filed by Bill Church Sr. in the last twenty years," Jimmy said with a defeated sigh. "Every case," He emphasized for her.

"Thanks, Jimmy." Lois watched her friend retreat and shook her head. She still needed to call Wayne Irig back. She sighed, shaking her head as she reached over to dial his number. It looked

like she was making a trip to Smallville.

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Wayne Irig made his way down to where the old Kent farmhouse was, looking up into the sky to where Superman was continuing to soar through the open air. He looked over his shoulder, careful that they were indeed alone before he called out to him. “Clark, you need to come on down here. We need to talk.”

The red and blue blur soared through the sky, ignoring his pleas, and Wayne shook his head, fishing out the small metal box he’d kept hidden for so many years. After Bureau 39 and even Luthor traipsing through Smallville in search of what had been dubbed Kryptonite, he had dug up every last speck he could find, intent on never letting it surface again. This, however, seemed to be a situation that called for it.

He looked over his shoulder again, careful that he wasn’t being watched and called out to him, “Clark, come on, son, we need to talk.”

Nothing.

He let out a heavy breath, counting silently as the red and blue blur came up above him, and flipped the lid, revealing the collection of glowing green stones he had dug up, and picked up the small packet that was tucked into the side of the box. Bullets and shells they had retrieved from Bureau 39’s safehouse that had been molded from the poisonous rock. He held the shotgun out, examining it carefully as he dropped one of the glowing green shells into the chamber.

Wayne called out one last time, “Clark, we can either do this the easy way or the hard way...”

The shot fired just as Clark was soaring up above him. A loud crash echoed around him as the blur of red and blue disappeared from the sky, and Irig muttered under his breath, “Always got to do things the hard way.”

He glanced over to the pond where the bridge had been cracked in two with a gaping hole in the middle where Clark had crashed.

Wayne let out a heavy sigh. “You gonna talk, son, or are we gonna keep doing this?” He peered into the hole where Clark was now covered in shards of wood and the murky pond water.

Clark shook his head, reaching his hand up as he looked around uneasily. “Wayne?”

“He speaks.” Wayne tapped his head. “Well, at least we know that thick noggin there is still invulnerable.”

Clark fumbled with his words, reaching down to touch the shoulder which was bleeding from where Wayne had struck him, and then looked back at Wayne in surprise. “Did you just shoot me with Kryptonite?”

“Yes, sir,” Wayne replied matter-of-factly with a stern gaze. “Aren’t you supposed to be stompin’ around Metropolis?”

“How did I get here?” Clark asked, staggering to his feet as Wayne leaned over to examine the hole that had been left in his Superman suit.

“I’m guessin’ the same way you always get here,” Wayne replied, tugging at the glowing green bullet that had been lodged into Clark’s shoulder with his switch blade. A load groan escaped the superhero’s throat as Wayne finally extracted a long glowing shard from Clark’s shoulder. He turned to tuck it back into its secure lead-lined box as he apologized, “Sorry about that. I did try to ask nicely.”

Clark groaned, running his hand against the newly healed skin. “I think I probably deserved it.” He shook his head, aiming a beam of heat vision at his now soaked cape, and steam rose up from it as it dried.

“Hmm.” Wayne snorted. “I suppose I better go call everyone back before they end up on a flight they don’t need to take.”

Clark placed a hand on his forehead, hanging his head as he looked around. “I’ll...clean this up and get out of your hair.” He looked toward the box in Wayne’s hand with a frown.

Wayne followed his gaze. “Took me awhile to dig it up. I fished out every last piece I could after Luthor stormed through here a few years back. Wanted to make sure there wasn’t anything for them to get their grubby hands on again.”

Clark’s face relaxed, “I...appreciate that Wayne.”

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Perry looked across the newsroom, noting the empty desks in the corner with a worrisome frown. Both Lois and Clark had disappeared after the fiasco in the lobby. Lois had eventually returned to the newsroom, but he hadn’t seen Clark since the incident with the gunmen. Lois claimed he was out looking for Superman. He let out a heavy sigh, not wanting to dwell too long on where the other half to his reporting duo had disappeared to. He had bigger fish to fry.

He turned the corner to re-enter his office and was greeted by the smell of heavy cigar smoke and the sight of Bill Church Jr. seated comfortably on the couch across from his desk. “Perry.” Church nodded in his direction as if it were his own office Perry had barged into. “Well, it took you long enough.”

Perry frowned, looking down at the proofs in his hand as he crossed the distance to where his desk was, recalling Lois and Clark’s suspicions surrounding Billy’s involvement with Intergang. “Billy, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, just checking the place out,” Bill Church Jr. commented as he looked around. “This place really could use some sprucing up. When Stern is forced to sell the place after I win my lawsuit, I think I’ll get a fresh coat of paint up in here.”

“Mr. Stern is not selling the Planet,” Perry barked irritably.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk... Really, Perry, I’m disappointed in you. You should know better by now not to print stories that aren’t true.”

“We printed the facts.” Perry crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m sorry you can’t accept the truth, but Billy, your dad got himself mixed up in some dangerous business.”

Something flickered across Bill Church Jr.’s face, and he sauntered toward him. “Is that so?” Church’s face tensed as he slammed his hands down on the desk, knocking the cup of pens down on the floor. “Your friend Superman isn’t here to save you anymore, Perry. How lucky do you think you’ll be coming up against me without little boy blue there to save the day?”

“Are you threatening me, son?” Perry narrowed his gaze at the young man.

“Call it what you will. A friendly suggestion.” Church snorted as his gaze grew dark. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with Perry.”

“I’ve known you since you were old enough to spit up on me, son.” Perry flashed a disappointed gaze in the young man’s direction. “You cannot threaten me into compliance.”

“Well, then I suppose trying to extract exactly what hold it is you seem to have on the pesky caped thorn in my side wouldn’t be met very well then.”

“Superman is not your enemy.”

“Well, not that he knows, I suppose,” Church commented with a snort. He straightened up, smoothing the wrinkles on his jacket out. “I don’t take too kindly to those trying to shut my business down. You understand, right?”

“Your...” Perry stopped mid-sentence, putting the pieces together from the silent message Church was hinting at. “Of course.” Perry hung his head. “That’s why you’re here.”

“I’m just a businessman having a conversation with an old friend, right Perry?” Church shrugged his shoulders.

“Get out of my office,” Perry ordered in a hoarse whisper.

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The slamming of Perry’s office door followed by the muffled shouts coming from within grabbed Lois’ attention as she set her coffee mug down on the counter, watching as Bill Church Jr. stormed out of Perry’s office. Lois shook her head, feeling her jaw tighten as she saw the philanthropist and possible criminal

mastermind ascend the staircase leading to the elevator doors.

“Olsen!” Perry hollered across the newsroom as Lois reached over to pick up her mug of coffee and made her way back to her desk. She stole a quick glance toward the elevator and caught sight of a very irritable Bill Church Jr., who was intent on leaving the newsroom as quickly as possible, force his way onto the crowded elevator car.

*‘Good riddance,’* she thought to herself.

She had spent the better half of the morning fending off Perry’s questions and requests to meet up with the Planet’s attorney in hopes that Clark would make his way back through the Daily Planet’s doors before anyone became wiser to his noticeable absence. Unfortunately, the morning had quickly melted into the afternoon with her no closer to tracking down her husband or hearing anything more from Wayne Irig. If her mind wasn’t filled with so much anguish, she might even have time to find humor in the situation. Wayne Irig certainly didn’t seem to be amused about Clark’s impromptu visit to Smallville. She still couldn’t understand how or why he had made his way out there of all places.

She leaned down, taking a sip from her mug as she reclaimed her seat at her desk, wondering if she should try to call Wayne Irig once more. He had said Clark was nursing a wound from Kryptonite exposure earlier. She’d barely gotten a chance to ask how he’d been exposed to Kryptonite when Irig had abruptly ended the call. The questions continued to push their way through the forefront of her mind again and again, but she had yet to find any answers. It wasn’t like she could just pack up Jon and fly out to Kansas on a whim.

She stared at the phone on her desk, pondering if she should dare try Irig again or just bide her time a little while longer. She had called Martha and Jonathan and tried everyone she knew in Smallville but still nothing.

Jimmy skirted by her desk and placed a yellow manilla envelope on her desk and patted it before backing away. “The, uh, surveillance tape you asked for.”

Before Lois could gather anything else from him, Jimmy disappeared in the direction of Perry’s office. Lois glanced toward her editor’s office, wondering what had happened between him and Bill Church Jr. She could satisfy her curiosity, but given her husband and partner was still missing and Wayne Irig had yet to return her calls she thought better of it. She grabbed the envelope, tucking it in her bag as she prepared to head out. The longer she stayed here, the more frustrated she found herself. She hooked her hand inside the latch of her bag, tightening the clip and giving the leather a hard tug.

The sound of Perry’s bellow across the newsroom reached her ears and she looked up, noting the furious expression on her editor’s face as he charged toward the center of the bullpen. “All right, everyone! Whatever you’re working on consider it reassigned. I want everyone, and I mean everyone pulling every last piece of dirt you can find on Bill Church and everyone he is connected to. I don’t care how sleazy or mundane you find the information. You have until this afternoon to get me everything you can find!”

A low murmur filled the newsroom, and Lois turned to follow Perry into his office, folding her arms across her chest as she leaned against the door frame to his office. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and say your meeting with Bill Church Jr. didn’t go as planned.”

“Aw, hell, he might as well have come out and said it himself,” Perry said, running a hand across his face as he sunk into his chair. His eyebrows moved up his forehead, and he planted his hands across his desk. “I’m ashamed I ever let him spit up on me.”

Lois nodded, tightening her jaw as she jutted her chin out and asked, “What do you need us to do?”

“Get everything you can on Church and Intergang. Let’s bolt

them to the floor and start firing every shot we’ve got.” Perry let out a heavy sigh. “And be careful. Apparently, we can’t rely on Superman right now either.”

“Chief,” Lois opened her mouth to argue, and he waved her off.

“No, I’m not saying it’s intentional, Lois, but you saw what happened.” Perry wagged a finger in her direction. “He’s not himself. You need to be *careful*.”

She wanted to argue further but thought better of it when she saw the concerned expression on Perry’s face. She nodded. “I’m going to see what I can find out and take Jon home early.”

Perry nodded, reaching over to pick up a pen from his desk. “Is Clark still trying to find Superman?”

Lois felt a lump in her throat and swallowed it down as she responded, “Still no sign of him.”

Perry stared at the pen in his hand, swaying it back and forth. He cleared his throat. “Just...let me know what you find out.”

“Will do, Chief,” Lois called out before turning to leave.

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*Present Day...*

Clark was jerked awake by the sudden movement from Lois, bolting out of bed and sprinting to the bathroom. His super-hearing picked up on the distinct sounds of her emptying her stomach into the toilet bowl, followed by the flushing sound. He made his way to the bathroom after the second flush, bringing a damp cloth to place on the back of her neck with him.

“Honey,” he placed his hand on her shoulder, rubbing it against the back of her shoulder.

“I don’t have time to be sick,” Lois muttered in an almost whine, leaning her head back against him. “It’s so not fair. I always get the crud he brings home.”

“I’m sure if I wasn’t invulnerable, I’d be catching it too,” Clark whispered, leaning in to press his lips against her forehead. “But you need to get yourself into the doctor, so you and Jon aren’t passing this back and forth any more than necessary.”

“That would require getting up,” Lois argued half-heartedly.

“If I call and make the appointment will you go?” Clark asked, chuckling against the damp locks of her hair from where the washcloth had fallen.

“I guess I don’t have any more excuses, do I?” Lois sighed, turning to rest her head against his knee. “This is not fair.”

“Come on, why don’t you try and go back to sleep, and I’ll get Jon settled this morning,” Clark urged, placing a hand on her shoulder and reaching his other hand out to help her up. Her footing was still a little uneasy, but she gripped his arm for balance. “Here.” Clark leaned over to scoop her in his arms and carried her to the bed, setting her down on her side and handing her the washcloth. “Try and get some rest,” he instructed, leaning in to give her a peck on the cheek.

Thankfully she didn’t try to argue, instead opting to roll over on her side and press the damp cloth across her forehead. Clark placed a protective arm around her, cradling her in his arms for a brief moment before leaving her to get Jon ready for the day.

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The voices around her echoed from down the hall. She bit down on her lower lip, feeling the dry, chapped texture of her lips. She dipped her tongue down to apply some moisture in hopes it would relieve the pain. She shifted her weight from side to side, feeling the plastic binds press against her skin and let out a hiss when the plastic brushed against her open wounds.

“Watch it! You don’t want them coming back in here, do you?”

She turned her head around, blindly seeking the voice as she whispered back, “I’m sorry. Reflex.”

“You have to control those if you want to survive here.”

She could feel the heavy weight behind her eyes as a lump filled her throat. She let out a whimper and clamped her eyes

closed when she felt a sharp jab in her side. “Sorry...”

“You can’t let them see you broken. They see it, and they win.”

“I just want to go home.”

There was a pause from the voice beside her, and for a moment she thought she had said something wrong. The movements and voices around her had become a blur. She couldn’t place time or location. All she knew was the darkness she was forced to endure...and pain.

So much pain.

“I... I have a little sister.” The voice wavered slightly. “I was on my way to pick her up...and I have no idea if I’ll ever see her again.” There was then a harsh whisper as she added, “Everyone here wants to go home. Everyone here wants to escape. The only way to do that is to survive.”

“I don’t understand any of this... What do they want?”

Another voice cut through from the other side of her, “They want to break you. Breaking you is how they...”

“You don’t know what they’re doing.” The voice from before cut in.

“You and I both know exactly what those men are in their negotiating. We’re a means to an end. That is all. You miss your family? Your home? Everyone here does. But when you get out of here you won’t ever be the same. They will break you. Just like they broke everyone before you.”

A hard sob escaped her throat.

“My name is Isabel.” The first voice said softly.

“Esma.”

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Lois glanced in Clark’s direction as he drove through the parking garage. Her stomach had been in turmoil for the better part of the morning, and she’d made more than her fair share of sprints to the bathroom to empty her stomach, but the fever she had felt earlier seemed to have subsided. Clark had left Jon with Martha and Jonathan this morning while Clark took her to her appointment. He had insisted on driving her to ensure she made it to the doctor in one piece, and she suspected his motives were more in making sure she actually made it to her appointment. His super-immunity came in handy at times like this. She didn’t have to worry about getting him sick when she desperately needed the help.

“I don’t recall there being quite so many turns to get here,” Lois miserably complained, leaning her head back against the headrest.

“We’re just about there,” Clark said, pulling into a parking space a few feet away from the elevator that led up to the office. He put the car in park and turned to her. The worry lines and concern on his face were evident as he reached a hand over to brush it against her forehead. “Are you going to be okay to walk, or I can fly us in through the stairwell...” He pointed to the staircase on the other side of the parking lot.

Lois followed his gaze to the bright yellow painted arrow pointing to where the staircase entry was and shook her head, “No, I’ll be fine. Just give me a minute.” She closed her eyes, hanging her head as she ran a hand across her face.

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Ingrid took a sip from the mug of coffee, tapping her other hand against the table as she read through the headlines in the newsstand behind the barista. She blanched at the flashy headlines and photos plastered all over the colorful pages, grabbing attention from potential readers.

Her gaze shifted to the Daily Planet’s cover story where the plea for help on a girl named Esma took up the entire real estate of the paper. She pondered if the two were connected as she gathered her things, preparing to leave.

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Lois peeked across the waiting room, noting the collective

stares that appeared to be directed in her and Clark’s direction. She shifted her elbow out from her side and tapped it against Clark’s side, “Hey, is it just me, or is there something going on with all these stares?”

“Maybe they recognized your picture?” Clark commented, unfazed by the attention as he skimmed through the copy of the Daily Planet’s morning edition.

“Huh.” Lois shrugged her shoulders, unsure if she completely bought Clark’s explanation. She leaned over and whispered, “So, there’s nothing those super ears are picking up?”

Clark chuckled, leaning toward her. “I do not make a habit of tuning into other people’s private conversations.”

“Sure, but sometimes you can’t help it. Sometimes it just happens, right?”

Clark threw her an admonished look. “When someone is in trouble, yes.”

“You see those two over there?” Lois gestured to the middle-aged woman in the corner with her teenage daughter. “What are they whispering about?”

“Mother’s telling her daughter this is what happens when she doesn’t take her vitamins.” Clark raised an eyebrow as he glanced back at Lois. “You think maybe you’re being just a little paranoid?”

“It’s weird.” Lois harrumphed, leaning back against the waiting room’s padded chair. “They’re staring and ...”

“Lois Kent,” the nurse called from the doorway.

Lois let out a sigh, reaching down for her purse. “I’ll be back.”

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Clark let out a heavy sigh, watching Lois disappear behind the windowless door and turned his attention back to the waiting room. A grimace crossed his face when he shifted his gaze to the middle-aged woman Lois had been gesturing to earlier, hearing the conversation the woman continued to have with her daughter.

*“I just don’t see how she can even bring herself to show her face out in public. She has no shame...”*

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose, quelling the guilt rising up within him. He had lied through his teeth to Lois just now. It was a necessary blatant lie, but he still couldn’t seem to squash the guilt stirring within him.

He knew her too well.

If she had heard even one of the whispered conversations he was picking up, she would have begun to obsess over it and tried to throw herself into every effort to set the record straight. Then knowing her luck she’d end up making herself even sicker than she already was. She was already struggling to fight off what he suspected was the flu.

*“Think he knows?”*

*“No way...”*

Clark sighed, running a weary hand across his face, wondering if he would have been better off going in with Lois than waiting out here. From what he could pick up from the whispers there appeared to be some kind of story printed about Lois. What the contents of that story were seemed to not come up as much as everyone’s surprise that Lois would dare show her face in public.

*‘I’ll figure it out and put a stop to whatever it is later,’* he told himself, trying to quell the guilt that continued to gnaw at him. *‘She’s too sick to deal with whatever it is anyway.’*

*“Did you read that article in Tattletale Weekly?”*

*“No, but I did catch Top Copy last night...”*

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Lois grimaced as she rubbed her forearm where the gauze and tape had just been applied by the nurse. She caught another less than friendly expression from the woman as she went to leave the room. The door slammed behind her, and Lois shook her head. Something was definitely off about everyone’s behavior. It was

weird.

Before she could ponder on it too much longer, the door opened, and her doctor re-entered with a clipboard. “Well, it’s definitely the flu.”

Lois groaned, leaning her head back. “Great.”

“We’ll let you know if anything comes back on the blood tests.” A disapproving look crossed her doctor’s face as she raised an eyebrow at her. “Next time, let’s try to *keep* the appointments for the physical. You skipped your flu shot this year.”

“I... got busy,” Lois replied weakly.

“And now you have some time to rest,” her doctor retorted with a smirk. “Water and rest... If you can’t keep water down let me know, and we’ll get you in to make sure you’re staying hydrated.”

Lois nodded, taking the papers the doctor handed her. “Thanks.”

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Jimmy stood by the elevator doors, pacing in front of them as he waited for Clark’s arrival. Perry said Lois wouldn’t be in today. Given what the talk of the newsroom was, it was probably for the best. Still, he needed to prepare his friend and hopefully curb any potential blows between Clark and the less than subtle staffers. He tightened his grasp on the rolled-up copy of the National Whisper, pondering how to start this conversation.

The doors opened, and he was confronted with an agitated Clark Kent as he stepped into the newsroom. “You better be standing there because you found something on these missing girls,” Clark remarked uncharacteristically abruptly as he motioned for Jimmy to follow him.

“Uh, Lois, not in today?” Jimmy asked, feigning ignorance as he tried to gather his thoughts.

“She’s not feeling well,” Clark said, glancing around the newsroom that had just grown completely silent upon his arrival. “What is going on here? Did I grow a second head or something?”

“Yeah, about that,” Jimmy stammered, loosening his grip on the tabloid in his hand. “So, uh, Lois isn’t feeling well?” He asked the question louder than he should have earning a look of annoyance from Clark.

“No,” Clark replied evenly as he added sharply. “She’s got the *flu*.” He gestured to the newsroom. “Mind telling me what’s going on here, or should I go press Ralph for whatever scuttlebutt is going around that has everyone staring at me like I kicked a puppy?”

“It’s not you, CK.” Jimmy unfolded the tabloid in his hand. “There were a few unsavory articles printed this morning and over the weekend that have picked up circulation.”

“Articles?”

Clark’s eyebrows rose, and Jimmy finally unfolded the cover of the National Whisper. *‘Daily Planet’s Hottest Reporter of Shame: Exclusive Scoop with Claude Moreau!’* “Before Jimmy could argue, Clark grabbed the tabloid from him, flipping through it and scanning it for what felt like a few seconds before handing it back to him.

“That is nothing but sour grapes from a washed-up, talentless weasel and isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on,” Clark fumed angrily, clenching his fists as he pointed to the paper. “You don’t actually believe this nonsense!”

“Hey, hey, I know Claude’s a slimy worm. Unfortunately, it’s been picked up by a few networks...” Jimmy let out a heavy sigh. “And your uh more liberal news stations are calling for investigations into some of the awards Lois was awarded.”

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” Clark raged in a harsh whisper.

“Clark?”

Perry motioned for Clark to come to his office and his friend quickly disappeared behind the glass door that was hidden behind the blinds that had been closed on all of the windows of Perry’s

office, keeping ally prying eyes away.

“Man, I ain’t seen Clark that burned up since Luthor took over.” Ralph took a big bite from an apple as he walked up to Jimmy with a smile. He nudged him in the side and asked, “So, what’d you find out?”

“Beat it, Ralph...”

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## Chapter 9: You’re Gonna Hear Me Roar

*Three Years Ago...*

Lois cradled the phone between her neck and shoulder, listening to her mother gush her thanks for letting her watch Jon for the night. She let out a heavy sigh as she replied, “Well, I’m sure Jon will have fun. Thanks, Mom, I have a few leads I’m trying to run down and really appreciate the help.”

“Well, of course, what are grandparents for?” She heard her mother’s tone change to baby gibberish and fought back the laughter.

“Well, I’m going to let you go. Thanks again,” Lois said before her mother could argue and then pulled the keys out of her purse to unlock the first set of doors leading into the townhome. Something felt eerily different about the small space of the outdoor entryway. She craned her neck to fumble for the light switch, flicking it on.

Nothing.

She let out a long breath, shaking her head and then turning her attention back to the front door she was trying to unlock. The wood panel flooring she stood on creaked beneath the weight of her body, and she jumped, startled by the sound. She turned around, checking once more to ensure she was indeed alone.

This time she wasn’t alone, though.

She felt her heart lurch in her chest when she saw Clark standing in the doorway behind her. The strain from the day weighed heavily on him as he met her gaze just long enough to turn away.

“Are you okay?”

Her voice cracked under the enormous pressure she felt, staring into his dark chocolate brown eyes and wondering what to say or ask after his disappearance this morning.

Clark shook his head, burying his hands in his pockets. “I honestly have no idea...” He looked around the foyer, frowning before asking, “Where’s Jon?”

“Staying the night with his Grammy.” Lois sighed, taking a step toward him. “I figured the two of them could catch up while I worked on trying to figure out what happened this morning...”

His eyes clouded as he cast them downward, unable to stay eye-level with her. He reached his hand up to rake his fingers through his dark locks, turning away from her as he allowed an admission to escape his lips. “Somehow I ended up in Smallville, and I can’t remember how I got there. The last thing I remember is getting on the elevator this morning.”

“Wayne mentioned you were at the farmhouse earlier.” Lois folded her arms across her chest, trying to feign patience she didn’t feel at the moment. “He also said you were nursing a Kryptonite injury?”

Clark nodded, gesturing to his right shoulder. “He shot me with Kryptonite... seemed to jog me out of whatever had made me think flying around Smallville was a good idea.”

“I’m sorry, he did what?” Lois gasped, trying to process what he had just told her.

“It’s fine.” He waved his hand through the air as he paced in front of her. “Well, there is the whole part about Wayne digging up every piece of green kryptonite he could find in Schuster’s field and burying it under his barn...”

“What?!” Lois let out a sharp growl as she lowered herself to the floor, leaning her head back against the wood panel against the wall behind her. “I’m gonna need you to repeat that.”

Clark stopped mid-pace in front of her. His jaw tightened as

he reached up to tap his hand against the side of it and let out a long breath. “After Luthor’s trial, apparently he and my dad sat down and mapped out where the Kryptonite could have been according to where the ship landed. He dug it all up and stashed it with the remains of the Kryptonite that had been left at his place from Bureau 39.”

“So, he knows?” Lois ventured, putting the pieces together.

“Yeah,” Clark nodded. “He put the pieces together after the incident with Trask...”

Lois buried her face in her hands. “Great. That’s just... great.” She shook her head. “And so I guess I should thank him for shooting you with... Kryptonite? No, I’m still not okay with that. He shot you.” She slammed her fist on the floor beneath her. “How long were you stuck in Smallville? Why were you in Smallville of all places? Your parents don’t even live there anymore...”

“I honestly have no idea. I was there for a few hours,” Clark admitted, glancing downward. “It was cloudy out, so it took a little longer to build up the speed I needed to get back without being seen.”

“You have been gone all day,” Lois whispered harshly, burying her head in her hands. “Do you have any idea how worried I was? Could you seriously not pick up the phone and call me?”

Clark sighed, hanging his head. “I’ve been trying to figure out what happened. I’m sorry. You’re right. I should have called.” He lowered himself down on the floor next to her. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I just... have no idea what I’m dealing with here.”

Her tone softened when he took a seat next to her. “We’re dealing with,” she corrected him, reaching her hand over to squeeze his kneecap through the dark slacks he was wearing.

He let out a labored breath. “I went to see Pete and had him run some tests to see if he could find anything.”

“You didn’t want to have Dr. Klein check you out?” Lois asked, surprised.

“Nebraska was closer, and I was still nursing an injury from Kryptonite poisoning,” Clark answered. “Anyway, he wasn’t able to find anything.”

“I had Jimmy pull the security tape from the lobby to see if there was anything on there. I haven’t watched it yet.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Bill Church Jr. decided threatening Perry was a good thing to add to the list of things to do today.”

Clark nodded, seemingly distracted until he finally asked, “Lois, what happened this morning?”

Lois glanced to where Clark was seated and let out a shallow breath. “You really don’t remember?”

“I remember Perry telling us about the lawsuit and then leaving to go meet with the Planet’s legal team and then everything after that is blank.” Clark shook his head in frustration.

Lois reached her hand over to take his hand in hers. “There were gunmen in the lobby. You disappeared down the corridor to change, then arrived to stop them as Superman. Then, all of a sudden, it was like you were just a different person. Perry was arguing with you to stop them, and it was like you just didn’t care...”

Clark bit his lower lip, shaking his head. “He must hate me.”

“No, he was just worried about you.” Lois gave his hand a squeeze. “We all were.”

The anguish that covered his face tugged at her heartstrings as she pondered how to pull him out of the turmoil filled fog he appeared to be trapped in and force him to focus on the here and now. His fingers threaded through hers, tightening into a fist as he held her hand in his, rubbing his thumb against the diamond that shimmered beneath the lights from up above.

“I guess the important thing is that whatever happened seemed to have been temporary.”

“We can only hope.” Clark let out a heavy sigh, withdrawing

from her touch.

“Clark.” Lois reached her hand out to touch him, and he held his hand up.

“I have no idea what happened, Lois. No memory. What if it happens again?”

“What if it doesn’t?” Lois argued, trying to draw him out of the mental prison he was insistent on locking himself into for his actions, which she was sure were brought on by the unwelcome guests that took over the Daily Planet. “Look, I have the tape. Let’s just go through it and see what we can find out.”

His anguished expression tore at her, leaving her feeling helpless as she sought to find an answer somehow within the abyss of self-doubt Clark had buried himself in. Finally, his resolve seemed to crack as he took her hand in his and allowed her to pull him into her arms. She let out a sigh of relief when she felt the familiar warmth of his body against hers and felt the intoxicating assault on her senses as he rested his head against hers.

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Clark lowered his glasses, leaning on the edge of the couch, holding up the remote to playback the surveillance tape in slow motion. The masked men moved inside the lobby and waved their guns in the hostages’ faces as they seemed to be ordered to the wall. A few frames later, the elevator doors opened, revealing himself, Lois and Perry.

He scanned the entire frame, looking for anything out of place as he watched the scene unfold. The three of them were ordered to the wall, and a moment later, Perry was seen arguing with the gunmen. Clark disappeared out of the frame and reappeared as Superman.

“About there is when you started acting different.” Lois reached over to pause the footage. She got up from her seat on the couch, standing in front of the television, trying to find something in the footage to explain the change in behavior.

Clark nodded, setting his glasses down on the table as he examined the frame for anything out of place. He craned his neck, frowning as he got to the middle of the screen where the gunmen were surrounding the desk in the middle of the lobby.

“Do you see anything?” Lois inquired, looking back at him with a hopeful expression.

“Maybe.” Clark took the remote and backed the footage up a few frames and then paused it. “The guy on the left. It looks like he’s got something in the corner there.” He stood up, crossing the distance between himself and the screen, so he was an arm’s length away from it. He tapped on the screen and pointed at the blurry looking box sitting on the back counter of the desk.

“That’s the cash box, isn’t it?” Lois asked, kneeling forward to get a closer look.

“No, look...” Clark clicked the remote to play the footage, and for a brief moment, they saw the box open and then get moved off-screen. He rewound it again and paused it just as the box was opening. “That’s not cash.”

“Is that...?” Lois frowned, shaking her head.

“Kryptonite?” His nose scrunched up as he reached a hand up to comb through his hair with his fingertips. “But what I can’t figure out is why the usual side effects weren’t there. No pain. No nausea...”

“Well, whatever it is seemed to have changed your entire behavior,” Lois frowned, shaking her head.

“Well, if it is Kryptonite, then we at least have some explanation.” Clark let out a heavy sigh. “Even if it isn’t an explanation I like.”

“I wonder if Jimmy’s gotten anywhere on running those license plates.” She glanced toward the clock. “It’s too late to call...”

Clark reached over, wrapping an arm across her shoulders. “Probably a good idea to follow up in the morning.” He pointed to the time. “I doubt Jimmy’s up this late.”

She gave him a half-smile. “Yeah, I suppose. I guess we should put some hours in on finding a way to tie undeniable proof that the Churches are running Intergang, so we don’t get sued.”

“Superman could always testify,” Clark offered with a shrug. “I know it’s not the most ideal solution, but Church did admit to running Intergang to Superman.”

“I’d prefer to keep that as an Ace we can pull out at the last minute if needed.” Lois sighed and placed a hand across his chest as she rested her head against his shoulder, letting out a heavy sigh.

The faint hint of lavender from her shampoo and the light fragrance of her perfume teased his nostrils as he held her in his arms, savoring the rare quiet moment of just the two of them. Jon had spent a few nights with both his parents and Lois’ mother off and on – usually when they were covered up in an investigation. But that usually meant the two of them were pulling long hours in order to continue with the normal duties that came with their jobs when working on an investigation. Stakeouts, late night meetings with sources, and research that sometimes lasted into the late hours were just a few of the things they had learned to juggle over the last year.

The last year had brought its own challenges as they had learned to navigate their first year as newlyweds and parenthood. There were no assassins lurking in the shadows or criminal masterminds hunting them down, but the multitude of changes that had taken place over their relationship had their own challenges. It seemed life still wasn’t done throwing him curveballs. Just when he thought he had found the right balance between his dual-professional life and his role as father and husband, he found himself at the mercy of the many changes thrown his way.

“It’s getting late,” Clark whispered against the silky strands of her hair.

She lifted her head up from his chest, gazing into his eyes as she reached up to stroke his cheek. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I am now,” he insisted, leaning over to cup her cheek. Her face broke into a grin as he drew her closer, capturing her lips with his.

“You know, it isn’t that late...” she murmured, running her palm up and down his chest as she looped her other arm around his neck.

Catching onto where she was going with her train of thought, he let out a low moan, scooping her into his arms, preparing to carry her upstairs, intent on forgetting the events that had transpired today. His hands wandered up and down her back, hooking her legs around his waist as he cradled her in his arms. He turned the corner, opting to take his time, savoring each caress as her hands roamed through his hair, savoring each open-mouthed kiss as he carried her toward the staircase.

The phone in the kitchen rang, and she groaned. “Let the machine get it...”

His hands wandered up the smoothness of her back, lifting the soft cotton of her blouse as the phone continued to blare in the background, demanding attention. She let out a soft giggle as his breath tickled her ear.

The final ring to the machine echoed in the background, and he sighed in relief when he heard the machine click on, playing the pre-recorded message. “Hi, you’ve reached Lois Lane and Clark Kent. We can’t get to the phone right now but if you leave a message at the beep, we’ll get back to you as soon as we can.”

Her ankles crossed against his backside as he sunk down at the base of the stairs, forgetting his earlier thoughts of carrying them upstairs. A low moan escaped the back of his throat as her body pressed against hers, allowing himself to be pulled into her warm embrace.

“Hey, Lois, CK, I know it’s late...” Jimmy’s voice echoed in the background.

“Not tonight, Jimmy...” Lois called out in-between open-

mouthed kisses, running her hands up and down the back of his head.

“We got a hit on that license plate the Chief wanted me to run. You know the one from those robbers this morning?” Jimmy continued with the message, and Clark let out a groan.

“He can’t have gotten a response from the DMV already,” Lois murmured breathlessly as his hands moved up her sides, helping to tug the cotton blouse out of her dress slacks as her body moved with intoxicating precision against him.

“A Newtrich Engineering came back, and we got a partial image from the driver on the street cam. Seems to match a Gene Newtrich. I’m sending it over to you. We can go over everything in the morning.”

Clark let out a groan, lifting his head up from his current position as he murmured, “Newtrich Engineering? Didn’t they co-sponsor the CostMart Charity Ball?”

“And the founder, Gene Newtrich, was a big donor to all the same politicians Bill Church was backing.” Lois flashed him a weak smile. “We could just follow-up in the morning.” Her index finger tip-toed against the top button of his dress shirt.

“Or we could just chase the lead down now and spend the rest of the night uninterrupted by Jimmy’s calls.” Clark let out a long breath, knowing full well that, now that the information was out there, Lois wouldn’t be able to think about anything else.

“Hmm, see this is what makes us such a great team,” Lois purred, leaning in for one last kiss. “I’ll grab the camera. You get the tape recorder.”

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Perry held his breath, flattening himself against the hallway as he waited for Bill Church Jr. to make his next move. He had followed him through most of the afternoon from a banquet at the country club to the local strip joint across from Bibbo’s. Now here they were at the old Metro Club with nothing but scantily clad women and obnoxious music as Billy worked the room, passing money from one powerful hand to another.

He grimaced when he spotted the Police Chief rubbing elbows with Billy just before being granted a trip behind the red curtains with a woman young enough to be his granddaughter clad in a white bikini. A man in a dark suit and carrying a metal box with him approached and led Church to the corner of the room, and Perry followed. He waited the acceptable time frame and craned his neck to spy if the duo were within his sight. He found the duo had disappeared behind another red curtain, but this one seemed different. He noticed the space between the curtain and wall appeared to be nearly non-existent. Curious, he pulled it back and found two doors. One led to an elevator with a keycard scanner that appeared to open it. The other was to a stairwell.

Perry smiled to himself, reaching over to pull the handle to the door and heard a click release when he turned the knob. He noticed the keypad on the wall inside the staircase that read ‘Unarmed’ and smiled to himself. Someone had forgotten to set the alarm.

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Lois fiddled with the lock leading into the office of Gene Newtrich at the small engineering firm located in the heart of downtown Metropolis. She looked over her shoulder, ensuring that Clark was right behind her. “Looks like the coast is clear.”

“So, any idea what exactly we’re looking for?” Clark asked, scanning the office as he lowered his glasses and looked around, taking a super peak behind the locked cabinets.

“I’m not sure,” Lois said with a heavy sigh. There were plenty of blueprints spread out on one of the desks, along with disarrayed files scattered all around the office. She wasn’t entirely sure where to begin looking. “Anything showing up with your scan?”

“That desk is painted in lead-lined paint,” Clark pointed to the desk in the corner.

Lois followed him to the desk and glanced over it, noting the file on top. “What’s he doing with a file on Bureau 39?”

Clark picked up one of the rolls of blueprints and tapped it. “I don’t know, but did you know CostMart has an entire underground bunker?” He unfolded the plans, pointing the plan out he had apparently picked up on the scan.

“That’s a whole lot of storage,” Lois commented. “Something tells me they’re not storing printer cartridges down there.”

“So, apparently, Church knows Newtrich well enough to trust him with building secret lairs in the CostMart stores,” Clark summarized, skimming through the blueprints. “But where does Bureau 39 fit in?”

“And how does it connect to Intergang?” Lois scrunched up her nose as she flipped through the file in her hand. “All that’s here are Trask’s ramblings about a Superman invasion.”

“Don’t remind me.” Clark rolled his eyes, shaking his head. He lowered his glasses, staring at the ground with intense concentration.

Lois looked at him, perplexed by the sudden shift. “What is it?”

“Just step back,” Clark instructed, motioning for her to take a few steps back. Effortlessly, he reached down to pull the desk toward him, pulling it away from the wall and revealing a digital panel on the wall.

“What in the world?” Lois wondered aloud. Clark focused on the area on the wall just above the panel, and it began to smoke just as the wall next to it slid open. Lois smiled, leaning up to give the collar to his shirt a flirtatious tug. “You’re pretty handy to have around.”

“After you,” Clark gestured to the dark entryway before them.

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Perry looked around the dimly lit room the staircase led him to. Inside it were digital monitors with faces of some of the most notorious criminals plastered on the wall. He moved to the main monitor, noting the cryptic symbol that read ‘Intergang’ just below it. A rush of adrenaline ran through him as he fished out a small USB drive from his pocket and plugged it in.

A prompt on the desktop asked for a password.

He frowned, looking around the room in search of what the password could be, and then his gaze shifted to the photo Bill Church kept of Billy’s late mother. ‘*Bingo*,’ he thought to himself and typed her name in.

‘*Password Accepted*,’ the computer prompt greeted him, and he quickly navigated through the directory searching for as much hard-hitting information he could that would tie Bill Church to the deadly organization once and for all.

He opened file after file, taking a photo of the screen with the pocket camera he had brought along with him. The photo quality might not be the best, but it would help serve as a backup if he needed it later. Then he found it. The motherload of information he had been searching for. A directory of all informants and paid off officials as well as lieutenants and officers for Intergang. He looked over his shoulder for the umpteenth time taking photo after photo of the file as it saved to the USB. He let out a heavy sigh, feeling his hand tremble as he reached down to pull the USB from the computer and make his escape.

He reached inside his pocket, pulling out his phone to message Alice. He frowned when he noticed the low bars on his phone. He’d have to message Alice later.

A sound came from the stairwell, and he quickly ducked behind the nearest cabinet, hiding his presence from the intruders. The voice was unmistakable as he entered the room. Bill Church Jr. stepped into the room, turning to his guest. “Once this deal with the Planet has been put to bed, we’ll see what we can do about mass producing that gold mine you’ve discovered, Gene. Rendering Superman apathetic with just a quick exposure is sure

to rake in the millions for Intergang.”

“Of course, Mr. Church...” the other man agreed.

Perry looked down at his handheld recorder, smiling when he noticed the red blinking light, indicating it was recording. Alice always was prompt about changing out the batteries.

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The dark corridor led them into an underground bunker. Clark looked around the hallway, noting that the cemented walls were reminiscent of the underground shelters around Metropolis. He turned to Lois. “Which way now?”

“You’re the one with the super senses.” Lois gestured to his glasses. “You tell me.”

Clark scanned the underground bunker they were in and shook his head. “I’m guessing they’re not keeping extra paper down here.”

Lois gestured to the familiar emblem on the wall and the high-tech security. “No, but I think it’s safe to say we’ve found Intergang’s headquarters.” She pointed to the photo of a younger Bill Church Sr. and much younger Martin Snell shaking hands in front of an older CostMart store with an inscription of ‘*Intergang Sector 1 – 1973.*’

“Lois, someone’s coming,” Clark whispered, pulling her back behind a large cemented column.

She craned her neck to look and gasped when she saw who it was. “Perry?”

“Lois?” Perry’s eyes widened as he approached them, ushering them back. “You need to get out of here now. Run!”

Before they could begin their retreat, Clark turned and found himself facing the barrel of a very large pistol with Bill Church Jr. holding it uncomfortably close to Lois. Another man came from behind and grabbed Perry, holding his own pistol on him.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” Church crooned, bringing the barrel of his pistol closer to Lois and then pulling it back, taunting them as he called out, “Now, Perry really I thought you were better than this? Stalking?”

“It’s called being a reporter,” Perry shot back, unfazed by the weapon being held on him.

“Look around you, Perry.” Church gestured to the enormous space around them. “Does this look like a criminal organization? We’re just like any other business. We’ve found a market, and we’ve made it work.”

“By exploiting people’s weaknesses for your gain,” Clark remarked bitterly. “Not the most legal business model.”

“Well, the offer is only open to one of you.” Church turned his attention to Perry. “I’m a sentimental man. You and dad go back a long time, and well, we all know I can’t very well let you leave here with that USB drive.” He flashed him a sinister smile. “Join the Intergang family, and you and Alice will be taken care of for life.” He gestured to Lois and Clark. “Now, of course, you two will have to die. I can’t have Intergang’s headquarters being plastered on the cover of every media outlet.” He stopped in front of Perry, holding the pistol on Lois as he asked, “So, what do you say, Perry? Are you ready to join the Intergang family?”

“Perry, don’t,” Lois called out to him. “He’s a snake, and you know it. The minute he gets his hands on it, he’ll come after you and Alice.”

Perry was quiet for a long moment before finally breaking the silence “All I have to do for all this is, what? Give up my pride, my integrity? Throw away the public trust I’ve earned through thirty-five years of hard work? ‘Back off’ on my responsibility to give the American people the truth?”

Bill Church, Jr. nodded. “Basically.”

“Yeah, well, I won’t do it.” Perry snapped back, glaring at Bill Church Jr.

Lois gestured to the elevator a few feet away. “Clark, do you think you can get us over there to take cover?”

“Not without blowing my cover to Church,” Clark whispered

back.

Church stared at Perry for a long moment, wearing a slightly amused smile as he finally spoke up. “You know, I talked to your mom today.”

“My mom?” Perry echoed, slightly confused.

“What’s he up to?” Lois wondered aloud.

“I don’t know, but whatever Perry’s got on him has got to be big.” Clark gestured to the man standing behind Perry. “There are two more gunmen around the corner.”

“Love the rest home. Very tasteful. She’s in great shape for a woman her age. She cheats at bridge, but she’s in great shape. She sends her love.” Church smiled broadly, keeping the pistol trained on Lois as he spoke, and Clark edged his way in front of her, trying to ensure she was out of the line of fire. Church waved the pistol in Clark’s direction. “Nice try, Mr. Kent, but Ms. Lane’s time is up...” His gaze grew dark. “No one is walking out of here alive.”

“My mother would twist your head off if she knew what you’d done,” Perry growled back at Church.

Bill Church Jr. nodded. “No doubt.” He laughed to himself. “Oh, and I’ve been meaning to drop by and see Alice’s new office. She’s in television now, right?” Perry just stared blankly back at Church. “Don’t you think she deserves a new car? After a few years, things start to go wrong... like brakes.”

Perry’s face turned red as he glared back at Church, hearing the underlying threat. “Now, Billy, you and me.... We go way back. Listen to what you’re saying, son...” His tone turned hysterical as he lunged toward Church. “This is Alice you’re talking about! This is Alice!”

“Run!” Lois tugged on his arm, pulling him with her toward the elevator doors, he aimed a beam of heat vision at the elevator panel, forcing the doors open.

“Run, Lois! Get out of here!” Perry hollered after them.

Clark glanced over his shoulder and spotted Perry heading toward them at full speed. He slowed down, realizing the elevator car was missing. A gunshot fired, and he stopped in front of the elevator shaft, staring at the lonely cable. Perry came to a stop next to him, and he turned to see Church and Newtrich, making their way toward them with their weapons drawn.

“I guess this is the end of the road, boys, and girls.” Church chuckled.

Newtrich patted a metal box in his hands and added, “And with this baby, Superman won’t be here to help you.”

“What are you talking about?” Lois fumed, feigning ignorance.

Clark grimaced as the box opened, and he found himself face to face with the glowing red stone. Church chuckled as he pointed it out. “Red Kryptonite. My boys guarantee it’s genuine. Only difference is instead of killing Superman, it makes him apathetic. He just doesn’t care.”

The pistol moved toward Lois, and Clark felt the strong impulse to just fly away. He didn’t want to be here. He didn’t want to worry about Church or having to capture him and deal with the lawlessness of Intergang. He just wanted to go home.

The shot fired, and before he could think about it, he grabbed Perry and Lois and took them into the elevator shaft with him, stopping at the last second, floating just above the elevator car that was several feet down.

“Superman?” Perry called out to him.

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Lois stole a glance to where Clark was standing about a foot away from her, trying to assess options for how to get both herself and Clark away from Church, and to also finagle Perry from the goon training a gun on him. A scowl crossed her face as she stared at the goon’s face, recognizing him from the partial image Jimmy had sent over. Gene Newtrich.

“All I have to do for all this is, what? Give up my pride, my

integrity? Throw away the public trust I’ve earned through thirty-five years of hard work? ‘Back off’ on my responsibility to give the American people the truth?” Perry asked, slow to answer Church’s ultimatum.

“Basically,” Church shrugged with an egotistical grin that made her sick to her stomach.

“Yeah, well, I won’t do it,” Perry snapped. Lois felt an immense sense of pride rush through her as she watched Perry stand up to Church.

Lois craned her neck, looking across from where they were standing, wondering how hard it would be to sprint to where the elevators were. She whispered to him, just barely audible, hoping not to draw attention to herself. “Clark, do you think you can get us over there to take cover?”

“Not without blowing my cover to Church,” Clark whispered back.

“You know, I talked to your mom today.” Church’s words caught her attention as he continued to sway the pistol in his grip.

“My mom?” Perry’s face scrunched up in confusion.

“What’s he up to?” Lois barely got the question out in an audible tone as she shifted her gaze to where Clark was, wondering if he’d heard her.

“I don’t know, but whatever Perry’s got on him has got to be big.” Clark raised his eyebrows, gesturing to where Newtrich was standing behind Perry. “There are two more gunmen around the corner.”

“Love the rest home. Very tasteful. She’s in great shape for a woman her age. She cheats at bridge, but she’s in great shape. She sends her love.” Church smiled broadly, waving the pistol around as he kept it trained on her. She noticed Clark kept moving closer in an attempt to get between her and the pistol in Church’s hands. Church seemed to have figured him out and finally stopped, pointing the pistol at Clark. “Nice try, Mr. Kent, but Ms. Lane’s time is up...” His eyes darkened as a sinister expression washed over him. “No one is walking out of here alive.”

“My mother would twist your head off if she knew what you’d done,” Perry growled out, drawing Church’s attention back to him.

Church Nodded. “No doubt.” He let out a laugh, more to himself than anyone. “Oh, and I’ve been meaning to drop by and see Alice’s new office. She’s in television now, right?” Perry just stared blankly back at Church as he continued. “Don’t you think she deserves a new car? After a few years, things start to go wrong... like brakes.”

Lois gasped out in surprise when she saw fury flood across Perry’s face before he stepped forward, placing a hand on Church’s shoulder. “Now, Billy, you and me.... We go way back. Listen to what you’re saying, son...” His tone turned hysterical as he lunged toward Church. “This is Alice you’re talking about! This is Alice!”

“Run!” Lois reached over to grab Clark’s arm, pulling him with her as she lunged toward the elevator doors. She knew he couldn’t do anything super right now. But if they could get to the elevator car, then Clark could get the cover he needed to change and stop Church and Newtrich.

“Run, Lois! Get out of here!” Perry hollered after them.

Lois glanced over her shoulder, relieved to see Perry rushing toward them at full speed. She let out a shriek when she heard a gunshot sound and then stopped when she reached the open elevator shaft. There was no elevator car. What were they supposed to do now?

She craned her neck, stealing a glance toward the approaching assailants wondering what to do now. Clark could stop them, but then he’d be putting their entire family at risk. They still didn’t know how connected Intergang was in the criminal world. Risking their family wasn’t a bet she was willing to make, and she suspected that was the only reason he hadn’t whisked

them out of there already.

“I guess this is the end of the road, boys, and girls.” Church chuckled.

Nertrich patted a metal box in his hands and added, “And with this baby, Superman won’t be here to help you.”

“What are you talking about?” Lois fumed, feigning ignorance as she eyed the box.

‘*Kryptonite*.’ She realized as he lifted the box lid open and revealed the glowing red stone.

“Red Kryptonite. My boys guarantee it’s genuine. Only difference is instead of killing Superman, it makes him apathetic. He just doesn’t care.” Church chuckled as he moved the pistol toward her.

The shot fired, and she closed her eyes, certain Clark knew what he was doing. She felt a strong force press against her, plummeting her down the elevator shaft. Her eyes fluttered open, and she stared into her husband’s eyes, feeling a rush of adrenaline course through her as he cradled her in his arms.

She opened her mouth to speak but found herself unable to vocalize the thousands of thoughts racing through her mind. They were safe. She knew that much. Clark had stopped them from plummeting down below to where the elevator car was. Judging from the lack of anything she felt below her, she could assess they were floating above the car.

Perry’s voice intruded on her thoughts. “Superman?”

Lois immediately went into protective mode, racking her brain for a way to explain this away. Try as she might, she couldn’t think of an excuse that would explain how Clark – not Superman – was floating a few inches from the elevator car below them. There was no other explanation to give him.

All that was left was the truth.

“Perry, I can explain...” Lois began quickly, watching as Clark spun into his Superman suit after setting them down on their feet.

Perry held up a hand. “Lois, I know.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “I didn’t become editor of a great metropolitan newspaper because I can yodel.”

Clark looked at him with a surprised expression. “You know?”

“Since the beginning,” Perry nodded, running a hand through his thinning hair. He looked around. “We can do this later.” He pointed to the still open elevator doors above them.

“Right,” Clark quickly went to action, and they heard a scuffle above them as Lois turned her attention to Perry.

“You’ve known since the beginning?” Lois finally asked.

A moment later, Clark was standing in front of them in his Superman suit with a proud smile across his face. He quickly gathered them up and flew them out of the elevator shaft. Lois had to choke back laughter when she saw Clark had hogtied the assailants and laid the weapons in the middle of the floor.

“They won’t be threatening anyone else anytime soon.”

Lois smiled, letting out a chuckle. She turned back to Perry. “So, Perry, you think this is enough to take care of the lawsuit?”

“No, but this is,” Perry patted his pocket and pulled out a camera and USB.

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Perry White poured the fine red wine into the crystal wine glass and handed it to his wife, Alice. He let out a heavy sigh of relief, sinking back in his chair as he reached over to hand Alice the salad bowl. “I, uh, can’t tell you how good it feels to sit down and have a quiet dinner at home with you, honey.”

Alice flashed him a quick smile as she served herself the salad and pushed the casserole dish toward him. “I still can’t believe Billy went so far as to try and throw you down an elevator shaft.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Is there anyone in this town that isn’t secretly running a criminal organization?”

“I’m beginning to wonder...” Perry let out a chuckle, shaking

his head as he recalled the fiasco with a pained expression.

“I was able to hold off Russel from running anything tonight,” Alice said, scooping the chicken casserole onto her plate.

Perry reached his hand over to cover her hand with his. “Do I want to know what that cost?”

Alice shrugged her shoulders, “I’m going to have to scrounge my way through some fluff pieces at some point.”

Perry let out a chuckle. “Well, print and televised news have one thing in common. There’s always the fluff pieces to dish out.” He let out a long breath and ran a hand across his brow, pondering his internal musings as he tried to put into words the heavy emotions that had been weighing on him for the past few days. “Lois and Clark have been trying to drill into my head for months to look harder at Billy and ...” Perry felt the hard lump in his throat as the moment he’d been slapped with the reality that Bill Church Jr. was running Intergang. He leaned over to take a sip from his wine glass and found his voice again. “I didn’t listen. I’ve seen this story unfold countless times before, and still, I didn’t listen.”

“You’ve known Billy his entire life,” Alice soothed softly.

“How were you supposed to know he was running Intergang? Now, of course, there were the rumblings with Bill and CostMart but nothing about Billy until after he admitted it to you.” Alice let out a sigh, running her hand across Perry’s cheek. “You helped break this story and expose him for the police.”

Perry nodded, recalling how close he came to meeting his maker at the hands of the young man he’d seen grow up from birth to corporate takeover and eventual arrest. The close call hadn’t been his first, and, given his tendency to attract threats from what the Planet had dubbed “super-villains,” he knew it wouldn’t be the last. Superman coming to the rescue just before Church got a chance to carry out his murderous intentions had been his *Hail Mary*. Of course, he could never tell Alice how Superman had come to his rescue. No, that would have to remain a mystery to everyone but Lois and Clark.

“I’m beginning to think your investigation pieces may not be as life-threatening as the Planet printing the tear-down pieces Lois and Clark keep digging up,” Perry commented with a shake of his head.

“Well, I like to think Jimmy’s come a long way too,” Alice noted, pulling out a copy of the Planet’s evening edition. “Co-writing the piece on your takedown of the Churches with him was very sweet. I’m sure he appreciated the chance you gave him.”

“I figured I owed him,” Perry shrugged, shaking his head. “I couldn’t let him write up any of what he helped dig up on Luthor or Nigel.”

“I still can’t believe you gave that to Ralph of all people.”

“He had me pulling all-nighters cleaning up his copy, but he can dig up dirt anywhere.”

Alice nodded and reached her hand over to take his. “For the record, I’m glad you’re still around to edit Ralph’s copy. Even if it does mean all-nighters.”

“Me too, Alice.” Perry gave her a weak smile. “This one hit a little too close, you know?”

Alice tightened her grip on his hand and quietly stared back at him. He met her gaze and let out a shaky breath, feeling the emotion from the last few days overtake him as a few stray tears trickled down his cheeks. “It’s okay,” Alice reached over to wipe the tears away, leaning in to kiss him.

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“Where’s Mommy?” Lois teased, hiding her face behind her hands. “There she is!” Jon giggled happily, propping his head up as she leaned in to kiss him. “You are such a sweetie.” She touched his cheek with her thumb, looking at him as he held his teddy bear snugly against him, looking over at her with a mesmerized expression. He tossed it in the air, and giggled then sat up, reaching for the table to help him stand up.

“Look at you!” She grinned at him as he wobbled, trying to find his bearings. “You’re getting to be a big boy.” She smiled at him as he reached for his blue blanket that was folded neatly on the table. It was amazing to watch how quickly Jon learned new things each day. She was sure he would master walking on his own any day now.

“I’ve never seen anything more perfect in all my life.”

She looked up in surprise and saw Clark kneeling behind her. “Hi, when did you get home?”

“A little while ago.” He shrugged, lying down on the floor with her, wrapping an arm around her. “How are you doing?”

“Good,” she said softly. “After the fiasco with Perry yesterday, I figured we could take a day and appreciate the small stuff.” She grinned back at Jon. “Like someone’s little laugh and cute little button nose...”

“You sure you’re okay?” he murmured in her ear.

“I don’t know.” She leaned her back against him as he tightened his arms around her. “I mean, it makes sense, right? Perry had never pushed for more than a flimsy excuse when you’d disappear on a rescue. It certainly explains a lot but still... I don’t know. I guess it scares me a little. More people knowing. I know he’d never dream of doing anything to hurt you or Jon, but that’s one more person that could be at risk...”

“Perry’s made of tougher stuff than we both probably realize,” Clark whispered in her ear, tightening his arms around her. “He was asking about you...wanted to know if he had done something. You should call him...”

“I will. I’m just... processing,” Lois said with a heavy sigh. “Yesterday was just a lot to process. I kept convincing myself I was fine and then...” She motioned to Jon’s smiling face as he tried to roll to his side and look at her. “I couldn’t. Like I know, the teachers there are wonderful, and I trust them, but...” She could feel the tears glisten in her eyes.

“It’s okay to not be okay, honey.” Clark pressed his lips against her forehead. “I might have told Perry something similar about needing to take the afternoon off.”

“What’s happening to us?” She let out a deep sigh. “I used to be able to just brush off a brink with death like nobody’s business and just keep working through it.” She pointed to Jon. “Now, I find myself stuck in this never-ending cycle of ‘what-if’ and can’t seem to shake it off. Another side effect of parenthood, I suppose.”

“And having something more than your next deadline to look forward to.”

“And having a lethal meteorite erect its presence and land in Intergang’s hands... I thought we got rid of it all after Lex was sent to Arkham. I thought...” She turned to look at him, “What in the world is red kryptonite?”

“I... have no idea, but we’ll find it and lock it away just like how Wayne locked away the rest of it.” Clark let out a heavy breath. “I can only guess that’s what caused my apathetic behavior yesterday but can’t be sure.”

“Yeah, well, let’s not test that theory,” Lois said, craning her neck back to brush her lips against his. “As far as I’m concerned, that stuff needs to stay buried far away from both you and Jon.”

Clark reached over to brush his thumb against her jaw, cupping her cheek with his hand. “What would I do without you?”

She smiled, resting her head against his shoulder, savoring the calm of just being in her husband’s arms. Her gaze shifted to where Jon was stretching his chubby little arms over his head before letting out a long yawn. He rolled himself from side to side.

“He’s quite the ham, isn’t he?” Clark chuckled, pointing over at Jon.

“Tell me about it,” Lois said with a long sigh. “Just like his daddy.”

“Are you calling me a *ham*, Ms. Lane?” Clark pretended to be insulted as he chuckled against her.

“If it looks like a duck...” Lois shrugged her shoulders,

giggling when he leaned in to kiss her cheek. She grew quiet, glancing over her shoulder at Clark. “Am I losing my edge?”

“No,” Clark reassured her, nuzzling her ear as he held her close. “You’re just as tenacious as you’ve always been. I think you just have different priorities now.”

Lois snickered. “Like wanting to lay on the living room floor and do baby talk rather than deal with the Planet’s legal team?” She let out a deep breath, turning to look at Clark. “By the way, Agent McCord needs us to give a statement on everything that happened with Valhalla for his case.”

Clark groaned against her ear. “I thought we were done with Agent McCord.”

“Jimmy mentioned he’d been temporarily stationed in Metropolis by the DEA to watch over Hobb’s Bay’s illegal shipments.”

“Great.” Clark rolled his eyes. “I’m sure that won’t cause any issues.”

“Uh-huh.” Lois laughed, noting the look of displeasure on her husband’s face. “Well, hopefully, he won’t be camping out at the Planet now.”

“One can only hope.” Clark nuzzled her ear as he held her close. “Agent McCord is a pompous jerk that needs to have a long overdue surgery to remove that stick that got shoved up his...”

Jon squealed out in laughter, and Lois chuckled. “I know! Daddy almost said a *very* bad word in front of the b-a-b-y.”

“Daddy was not.” Clark shook his head in denial. “And he’s not a b-a-b-y anymore. He’s one now.”

“Uh-huh, well, he’ll always be my baby. Won’t you, sweetheart?” Jon grinned sleepily back at her, resting his head against the carpet as he sleepily fistfisted the blanket next to him. Lois giggled, turning in Clark’s arms to face him. “Well, does this afternoon off include Superman rescues or just chasing down leads?”

“Changing the subject,” Clark noted, leaning in to kiss her.

“You didn’t answer,” she replied, fingering the bridge of his nose with her index finger.

“If the police can handle it, then I’ll let them handle it,” he whispered, leaning over to nibble on the sensitive skin of her throat, running his upper lip against the curve leading to her shoulder. “An afternoon away from everything is ever so appealing.” His hands moved up and down her ribcage as he whispered in her ear, “And maybe later we can take Jon over to the zoo?”

“That’s a lot of walking,” She whispered, moving her hands to cover his as they glided up and down her ribcage. She traced the outline of his wedding band, smiling to herself when she noticed Jon’s sleepy face. “I think someone’s getting sleepy.”

“Well, a nice afternoon nap can get him ready for a trip to the zoo,” he teased nuzzling her ear as she let out a soft giggle. “Or maybe a picnic in the park.”

“Hmm, a picnic does sound nice.” She leaned her head back against him, concentrating on the feeling of his palms as they moved up and down her sides, moving her knit top further and further up as he did so. She smiled, glancing over at Jon, who had sleepily drifted off into dreamland. “We need to put him in his bed.”

“Don’t move,” he whispered, running his hand down her cheek as he got up and carried Jon to his crib in the next room. Before she could finish rolling onto her back, he was behind her, whispering in her ear, “I told you not to move.”

She let out a low moan as he rolled her on her back and moved between her legs, massaging the front of her cotton pants as he ran his lips up and down her neck and moved her arms up over her head, intertwining his fingers with hers.

“Oh, God, please, please don’t let him wake up...”

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**Chapter 10: Louder Than a Lion***Present Day...*

The door to Perry's office closed and Clark felt the tension from his overwhelming anger flood through him as he stood in front of his editor, willing the simmering rage inside him down. Across his desk, Perry had the clippings from the different tabloid publications with red markings where Perry had scribbled his notes across them.

"Clark, why don't you take a seat, son." Perry gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

"I'd rather stand." Clark raked his hand through his hair. He gestured to the papers in front of Perry. "I've gotta hand it to them. They certainly work quick. Not even twenty-four hours after going public with this poor girl's information and they've already..."

"I know, I know..." Perry nodded, holding the headline up with a grunt. "Classic distraction tactic. You don't like the headline you attack the person writing them." He hung his head, running a hand across his face.

"And apparently get help from this dirtbag," Clark gestured to the headshot of Claude Moreau.

"Now, Clark, anyone worth their press pass knows this is just tabloid trash that isn't worth the paper it's printed on." Perry tried to console him.

Clark glared sharply at Perry. "And what, I'm just supposed to sit back and do nothing while they tear Lois' credibility apart with this garbage because... well, everyone should just know better?"

"Clark, I know you're angry. Hell, I am too. I've got the senator storming in here threatening the paper about this story." Perry grunted his discontent.

"They've been following us for months," Clark muttered irritably. "I just can't figure out how they knew we'd go to press about this when there was no story three months ago."

"Say what?" Perry's brow raised.

Clark shook his head. "Someone left a package threatening Jon and other girls that they had..."

"Jesus." Perry let out a low whistle. "What in Sam Hill have we uncovered?"

"I don't know," Clark replied grimly, jabbing his finger at the headline in front of Perry. "But I'm going to get some answers and I'm going to start with Claude."

"Now, Clark, don't..."

Clark quickly cut him off. "That low-life is trying to use my wife as a stepping stone to get his five minutes of fame. I am not going to let him get away with it. I sure as hell am not going to let him tear down everything she's worked for because he can't handle being second best to her."

"Just be careful," Perry reminded him. "It, uh, wouldn't be helping anyone to have to bail Superman out of jail."

Clark let out a heavy sigh. "I can't promise anything, Chief."

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The heavy weight of her eyes pressed against her as Esmara tried to focus on the voices around her. The sounds of screams and shouts from the room at the end of the hallway rang through her ears. She felt a shiver run through her spine as she lifted her hand up to her face, shifting against the binds.

A blood curdling scream rang in her ears and she straightened up in her chair. Her eyes blinked against the cold air, and she fidgeted in her chair. A loud slap echoed through the hallway followed by a muffled sob.

Another blood curdling scream rang from the distance and tears trickled down her cheeks. A heavy fog covered her as she struggled in her binds. Slowly but surely the heavy fatigue took over her and she drifted off.

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The city of Nimes was full of activity as Clark flew overhead, searching for the small post office he had been able to track

Claude Moreau to. He landed behind the run-down building, changing into his suit and tie from earlier as he exited the back entry and made his way into the rundown office that connected to the postal office

Clark tapped his hand against his chin, summing up as much calm as he could before coming face to face with Claude Moreau. He entered the office, noting the rundown equipment and furniture. In the corner was an old lady, tapping at an old typewriter. Across from her was a slender man with dark brown hair that reached his shoulders and a cloud of white mist surrounding him from the cigarette he kept puffing at. Clark's gaze narrowed as he centered on the figure of the slender man.

He stopped in front of the man's desk, noting his presence was barely noticed as the man was too consumed with his phone call. The older woman seemed to take heed of Clark's stern features and stance, quickly gathering her things and excusing herself out the door Clark had entered through.

"Oui, oui je l'ai vu..."

Clark reached over to press the switch hook on the phone to end the call Claude was on.

That got his attention.

Claude set the phone down and turned to Clark, an amused expression across his face as he turned toward Clark and responded in English. "Ah, I know who you are."

Clark's jaw clenched, giving Claude his best threatening glare as he stood in front of him, not daring to give Claude the satisfaction of breaking the tension that hung in the air. His right hand tightened into a fist as he stood there, biding his time and Claude grew increasingly nervous, looking away and then back again.

"I, uh, I'm busy..."

Clark raised his left brow, continuing to glare at Claude with his stern features, until finally Claude nervously stammered out, "If this is about the interview...?"

Unable to listen to the smug French man another second Clark reached over and grabbed him by the collar, slamming his face against the now empty desk, holding him in place with barely any effort as he hissed out. "You're sitting in a hole in the wall like this barely able to keep the lights on and you happened to get interviewed by the likes of Leo Nunk?" Clark growled in his ear. "Who hired you?"

"I don't know what..."

"I am barely touching you right now and you can't even hold it together..." Clark pressed his hand against the back of his neck, pushing him further into the desk. "You're a smart guy, right? I mean, you were smart enough to get out of town before the Kerth Committee put two and two together and realized you stole that story you got an award for."

"I did... not."

"Rule number one, don't lie to the guy that could snap your neck in two. It wasn't a question," Clark growled out. "I want to know who hired you... I think that's the least you owe Lois after what you did."

"She..."

"Ah, ah, ah," Clark warned, tightening his grip on his neck. "Choose your words very carefully."

"I... didn't..."

"Didn't what?" Clark growled, leaning closer as he hissed in his ear. "Your picture is all over the place along with the sordid trash you call an interview. Please tell me how in the world you supposedly know all of these imaginary stories that took place in your interview when you were only working with Lois for six months and have had zero contact with anyone at the Planet in the last ten years."

"She destroyed my... career and that little..."

"Ah, ah, ah," Clark hissed in his ear. "I will not think twice about dropping you and leaving you to rot in your own filth like a

mangy dog. That's the mother of my children you're talking about. Watch your mouth."

"Proving my point," he snapped back haughtily. "You're just the idiot that married her."

With a flick of the wrist Clark turned him over and hoisted him up against the wall, slamming Claude against it and holding him in place by his throat. "I didn't quite catch that. You want to repeat that?"

"I..."

"Who hired you?" Clark hissed out slowly, feeling his anger bubble over. His gaze shifted to the front of the man's pants where he had soiled himself. "Don't make me ask again."

"I... I don't know., Claude stammered out. "I never got a name." He pointed toward his desk. "It was just an envelope with directions on what to say and who to call. The next day I had a quarter million deposited in my account."

Clark released him, tossing him to the ground with a grunt. "I'm going to need that envelope."

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*Two Years Ago...*

A light mist covered the water in Hobb's Bay. A small ship inched its way through the mist, navigating its way through the darkness. A single beam of light shone in the distance and the dark shadow of a man could be seen on the port.

The captain bit down on his cigar, taking in a deep breath as he inched closer. A sonic boom came from above and he let out a muttered curse, reaching over to open the escape hatch - an opening in the floor board below him. He held his breath as a rush of air blew across him, helping to funnel him through the escape hatch. He let out a muffled shout as the cold water washed over him. His teeth chattered as he flopped through the water, trying to escape before...

"Going somewhere?"

A hard jerk from behind him startled him and he let out a strangled yelp, looking over his shoulder to the stern gaze from the caped superhero. "Uh, Su-superman, th-thanks."

"Interesting way of departing your ship, Captain," Superman remarked with raised eyebrows.

He was caught.

Panic filled his eyes as his hand closed over the small handheld remote, fumbling for the button to ignite the self-destruct function on the shipment. If the shipment got into the authorities hands the boss would have his head.

"Not so fast..."

A burning sensation covered his fingertips and he let out a yelp when he pulled his hand back, wincing when he saw the melted plastic against his fingertips. They landed on the dock, his feet dangled a few inches off the ground, and he turned to look at a mildly amused Superman.

"What exactly are you trying to hide, Captain?"

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Lois closed the door behind her, holding the towel that was still wrapped around her in place as she opened the closet door, searching for a dress for tonight's dinner. Her gaze crossed over the array of silk and tulle trying to find something to change into. She had nearly forgotten about tonight's dinner.

How had she forgotten?

Her hand finally landed on a long navy blue dress with a simple cut. Nothing too constricting. She blanched slightly, wondering if this was a good idea. There of course would be free flowing drinks and co-workers there and she could potentially end up in the bathroom most of the evening.

'It's fine,' Lois told herself, not willing to give into the uneasiness churning in her abdomen. She reached her hand up and tugged the dress off the hanger and carried it with her into the bedroom to finish getting ready.

Intergang had finally been torn down and exposed in the

headlines. Yesterday, Bill Church Jr. and his father, Bill Church Sr., had been convicted of their crimes and were awaiting their sentence. She and Clark had been working with many of the other Daily Planet staff to bring the infamous criminal organization down. Now she finally felt like she could breathe after nearly a year of taking on the father-son criminal masterminds.

Her hand drifted to her abdomen as she leaned back against the bed, letting out a long breath. Everything felt so different. Life had snuck up on her again. It seemed she would never be able to have that moment to savor the relief she felt. The world would continue to turn and change no matter what.

A low whistle came from the doorway and she turned her head, smiling in her husband's direction. He was already dressed in his tuxedo. "You look absolutely stunning..."

A slow smile spread across her face as he crossed the room, sinking on the bed next to her. "Patrol ran a little longer than normal," Lois commented, rolling on her side to look at him.

"Superman found a ship full of illegal shipments in Hobb's Bay." He rolled his eyes. "All the questions that I have no answers to were asked."

"Any idea what the illegal shipment was?" Lois asked, her interest piqued.

He shook his head. "I'm sure they'll figure it out by tomorrow." Clark brushed his lips against hers, reaching his hand over to cup her cheek. "You about ready?"

"Yeah." She flashed him a weak smile. "How long is this thing supposed to last?"

"Coates Orphanage Annual Charity Ball." Clark shrugged. "We don't have to stay long if you don't want to." He leaned in to brush his lips against hers again.

"Well, with Jon staying with his grandparents for the night, it might be nice to not spend the whole evening listening to stuffed shirts and eating greasy appetizers." Lois murmured against his lips.

Clark chuckled, fingering her silky hair strands. "They really should get a better chef." He brushed his lips against her jaw. "So, we'll make an appearance and then come back home? No chasing down information from the governor on the prison reform story or cornering the mayor on her tax hikes?"

"It's the weekend," Lois purred, fingering his bowtie. "I'm sure they'll be unavailable for comment anyway."

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Tobias cracked his knuckles as he paced in front of his new desk. The expansion of his empire had increased profits ten-fold. With the competition being taken out of the picture he had been able to swoop in and redistribute the resources the Churches had so graciously relinquished after their legal troubles. The best part yet was despite working in plain sight the city's neighborhood superhero still had no idea they were in operation.

Knowing he remained below Superman's radar amid the recent crackdown on corruption within the city thrilled him. With the takedown of Intergang, all the politicians had to talk the talk of city clean up and crime still unaware of his presence and the thriving drug and prostitution ring that operated unscathed under their noses.

He reached behind him, picking up the small glass from his desk. He let the warm liquid swirl around in the glass before bringing it to his lips and taking a sip of the cool liquor. He turned to the man in front of him smiling as he finally spoke.

"I consider myself a patient man..."

"Yes, of course, Tobias," the man replied, looking around him self-consciously.

"Do you know how long it took me to build up this operation? When I first started, I was nothing but a lowly second tier in Lex Luthor's criminal underworld. Far enough down on the totem pole to be dismissed and yet high enough to learn what not to do. After his takedown someone had to pick up the pieces.

Someone that wouldn't let the power go to their head. That person was me. I didn't get where I am by allowing incompetence and recklessness to destroy everything I had built."

He reached over, grabbing the man by the throat as he hissed out, "What were your men thinking bringing the shipment in a day early? We have a schedule for a reason!"

"I... I'm sorry. They acted on their own."

"I want them taken care of. There better not be a speck of evidence linking back to me."

"But the betäubenal..."

"Will be destroyed and another shipment made." Tobias growled out, tossing the man to the ground. "Screw up again and it's your head."

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Lois looked across the array of familiar faces, nursing a ginger-ale in her flute as she and Clark worked through the crowd. Perry had insisted on introducing them to just about every newscaster or copy editor on staff with Alice over at Stern Media. Many of the faces were new and others were seasoned journalists she'd come across before. Her feet were growing tired and the food was not appetizing but the annual speech and concert the Coates Orphanage put on still had at least a few more minutes to go.

Clark leaned in to whisper in her ear, "You sure you're okay?"

"Just tired," she managed to smile weakly. Now was not the time to tell him. They had too much going on and she still wasn't even sure entirely. It was a feeling. A feeling that had been nagging the back of her mind for at least a week now.

"Champagne?" one of the waiters stopped in front of them with a tray of champagne flutes.

"No thank you," Lois shook her head and he moved off.

She saw Clark's questioning gaze and shrugged. "I get a headache when I drink champagne this late."

He gave her a perplexed look but didn't say anything. She pointed to the stage where the children dressed in red and white were stepping onto the stage. A man in a grey suit stood at the front of the stage, helping guide the children into place.

"Looks like they're getting ready."

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Rufus "Bad Brain" Johnson tightened his grip on the metal dial, amping the electrical bolt through the cell bars with a muffled cackle. He heard the rhythmic tapping from down the hall, waiting the guard out.

"Johnson, what are you doing out of your cell!?" the guard fumed as he moved toward him.

Bad Brain chuckled as he saw the guard finally touch the cell bars that were rigged to light up like Christmas morning. A maniacal snicker escaped Bad Brain's throat as he dialed the electricity up and watched the entire cell door leading to his freedom light up like the Fourth of July. The guards flooded in one after another and each one of them flew up to the ceiling as the electrical bolts ran through them. Bad Brain hooked the strap to the large silver cylinder of his electro-shocker, tightening his hand on the trigger.

"I hate to cut and run boys, but I think I've worn out my welcome..."

Bad Brain let out a whistle as he walked unprotested through the hallway leading him to the exit.

Freedom.

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Clark's hand wandered up and down Lois' bare back, enjoying the unobstructed access he had in the seemingly rare quiet moment he had like this with Lois. Her hair spread across his chest haphazardly as her hand wandered up and down the front of his chest. He leaned his head back, craning his neck to look out at the moonlit sky.

Whatever fatigue had taken over Lois during the Charity Ball tonight seemed to have subsided and given her the burst of energy she needed after the Coates Orphanage concert. One minute, Lois had been ready to crawl into bed and call it a night and the next she had been reenergized. Near the end of the night Lois took to focusing her newfound energy in convincing him it was time to call it a night. A slow smile spread across his face as he recalled the torture she'd put him through earlier in the evening. Looking across the bed, noting the disarray from earlier discarded clothing he let out a content sigh, pulling her to him, enjoying the feel of her soft skin against him.

The last few months had been insanely busy. Intergang had finally been unceremoniously brought down to its knees and he and Lois were coming to terms with the fact that not only did Perry know about his alter-ego and himself being one and the same, but reconciling the fact that he had known since the beginning. How often had he breathed a sigh of relief thinking Perry had just dismissed his lame excuses? Now, he looked back on it wondering if Perry had just been humoring him.

It was a lot to absorb.

Perry had taken the opportunity to toast the downfall of Intergang. A once provoking subject due to the involvement of the Churches was now all anyone could talk about – even Perry. The challenges over the last few months with balancing between father, husband, journalist and superhero coupled with Jon's one-way trip to the terrible twos had left him scrambling for some semblance of normalcy. Whatever was normal for them anyway.

Jon's discovery of walking and running had been one of the bigger milestones he'd recently reached and with it came new challenges. Jon had taken to each of his milestones like a champ, and with each one, he felt the bittersweet reality that his little baby wasn't much of a baby anymore. The impulse to wrap him up in bubble wrap while at the same time celebrating each milestone was torturous. So far Jon was just like any other little boy his age. Finding ways to get into everything and tugging at his and Lois' heartstrings with that infectious laugh that made you melt all over.

The world finally felt safe again. Anything was possible and with the recent discovery of red kryptonite, he had given Dr. Klein the go-ahead to begin analyzing the poisonous rock to find a way to stop its poisonous radiation so he and Jon and any other potential children he and Lois might have weren't at risk. He would do everything he could to ensure his children's safety.

A long sigh escaped Lois' lips as she lifted her head up and looked up at him. "You know, I was thinking..."

"I'll alert the National Guard..." he teased her with a haphazard grin.

"Not funny," she smacked him across the chest.

He leaned in to kiss her. "You were saying?"

"The next milestone Jon has is learning his ABCs and numbers and starting kindergarten." She stopped mid-sentence, letting out a heavy sigh. "He's not a baby anymore. How did that happen?"

"He'll always be our baby," he reassured her, pressing his lips against hers, "and he'll always need his mom."

"He's getting so big." Lois gave him a pained smile.

"We could always try for another one." he ran a hand down the curve of her hip. "If you're that torn up about it."

A perplex expression crossed her face as she mulled over the thought for a brief moment before responding, "How exactly is having another baby supposed to help?"

"Well, it won't stop Jon from growing up, but it might be fun to practice." he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

She let out a soft giggle, leaning in to kiss him. "How about we just focus on enjoying him while we can still call him our baby and get away with it."

"Deal," he grinned back at her.

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**Chapter 11: I Am A Champion***Present Day*

Clark scooped Jon up in his arms and carried him down the sidewalk to the red and white awning where his favorite ice cream cart was setup. Jon giggled with excitement when he saw the red lettering and clapped his hands. "I want double chocolate chip, Daddy."

Clark fished out a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to Jon to hold. "This one's on you, bud."

Jon looked at the crisp green bill and smiled, holding it up as he looked around, smiling at the clerk as he pointed at the picture of the ice cream flavor he wanted. Clark smiled at the clerk, nodding his thanks as he scooped out Jon's usual double scoop of double chocolate chip ice cream into a white cup with a plastic spoon and handed it to Jon. The clerk handed Jon his change and a sweet squeal tickled Clark's ears.

"Yum!" Jon reached out to take a heaping spoonful of chocolate ice cream and took a big bite.

"Slow down there, kiddo," Clark warned, waving a quick good-bye to the clerk as he dropped a few bills into the tip jar and turned to leave. He held Jon close as they crossed the street to where he had parked earlier, checking that they weren't being followed.

After his trip to France earlier he had checked Jon out of daycare early. There wasn't much he could do after dropping the information off with Dr. Klein to examine for some sign of who had sent the letter to Claude. Entrusting the police or anyone else wasn't a chance he could take right now.

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Omer leaned back in his leather chair, spinning it from side to side as he lit his cigar. He winked at the rugged man in front of him, pointing to the newspaper clipping. "I see the stakes have been risen with those reporters."

"All this attention is bad for business." The rugged man growled as Omer took a puff from his cigar. "I believe Elias might be willing to negotiate the release of this girl in exchange for business returning as usual."

"What's his price?" Omer asked.

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Lois rolled over in bed, reaching her hand over and brushing against Clark's arm. Her eyes flickered open in the dark and she felt a pain pulse behind her eyelids, letting out a groan. Clark reached over, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, you okay?"

"Headache," she groaned, stealing a glance over where the digital clock blinked the early hour of four a.m. at her.

"Here." Clark handed her a bottle of Aspirin and a second later had a glass of water for her to take it with.

"Thanks." she chuckled softly, wincing as she sat up in bed. She took a swish of water and threw her head back to swallow the small caplets.

"How are you feeling?" Clark asked, reaching over to stroke her cheek.

"Like I have the flu." Lois shot him a half-smile. "I don't even remember you and Jon coming home last night."

Clark smiled. "You were pretty out of it. There's some leftover pizza if you're hungry."

Lois shook her head. "I think I'll pass." She reached over to the side table and set her glass down, sinking down into the bed again. Clark reached over and wrapped a protective arm around her, taking a deep breath in. Lois turned her head to look at him. "Everything go okay yesterday?"

"Yeah, Jon and I got some ice cream and had pizza." He pressed his lips against her cheek. "And from what I could tell there weren't any prying eyes watching either."

Lois shook her head. "What are we going to do about that?"

"I... might have a lead, but you're really not going to like how I got it," Clark whispered in her ear.

"Does it have anything to do with the name Luthor or Church?" Lois joked turning and resting her head against his chest.

"No, not that I know of," Clark shrugged his shoulder.

Lois looked up at him, noting the mixture of hesitancy and anger in his eyes. "I guess this is the part where I ask what I missed?"

Clark's fingers ran through her hair and he murmured, "You... weren't over-reacting in the waiting room. People were acting funny because the tabloids ran with a smear campaign targeting you."

Lois pursed her lips, narrowing her eyes at him. "And you knew this the whole time we were sitting there?"

"Not the whole time and I didn't know about the story until I got to the Planet later," Clark explained. She relaxed slightly but kept a frown on her face as she waited for him to continue, silently prompting him with a hard stare. "So, apparently the smear campaign was being paid for by a mysterious backer that planted fake stories with interviews being provided by different..."

Lois shook her head. "Just spit it out already. What's going on?"

"They're saying the awards you won were received under..." Clark looked away, not wanting to finish his statement. "Look, it's really not important. It's just tabloid trash. Anyway..."

"Clark," Lois called his name sharply, sitting up and crossing her legs beneath her. "Just tell me. What is going on?"

"It's not important." Clark shook his head. "You don't need to worry about it right now. Just focus on getting better. I'm taking care of it."

"You're taking care of it." Lois crossed her arms over her chest and demanded, "How is that *exactly*?"

Clark looked away, not meeting her gaze as he managed to mumble out, "I might have flown over to France and threatened... coaxed some information out of the person that started talking to the paparazzi."

"France?" Lois' brow rose a half-inch as she stared him down.

His eyes closed and he hung his head. "Leo Nunk did an interview with Claude Moreau who has basically tried to claim ownership of all the stories you won awards for and... Look, I'm taking care of it."

"What are they saying?"

"What does it matter? It's just tabloid trash and just a distraction tactic..." Clark reached out to place a hand on her shoulder. "There isn't anything anyone can do right now but try and find out who is behind all this."

"What are they saying?" Lois repeated, practically hissing the words out as she glanced back at him with a scowl.

"Claude's interview claimed you got exclusive interviews by sleeping around..." Clark scowled as he muttered the words out. "When I confronted him, he said he was paid to plant the story and had a letter show up telling him what to say. I've got Dr. Klein working on trying to trace it..."

Lois reached up, running her hands across her face as she let out an aggravated growl. "That low-life has a lot of nerve."

"Lois, this is just another distraction tactic. A way to scare us off from digging into the people behind these kidnappings. It's no different than the photos that were sent or the visit Perry got from that senator."

"What senator?" Lois' brow furrowed.

"We're looking into it," Clark said gently, wrapping a protective arm around her. "I know you want to go storming in and demand answers but right now there's nowhere to storm into. We don't know who is calling the shots here. As difficult as it is to just sit back and wait, I'm afraid that's what you're going to have to do."

"Right, because how do we argue the story that everyone's

probably thinking in the back of their mind every time a woman advances in her career?" Lois grumbled irritably as Clark tightened his arms around her.

"That is not true," Clark whispered in her ear. "This is why I didn't want to tell you."

"Because you knew I'd get mad?" Lois fumed, cracking her knuckles in her hand.

"Because I knew you'd try and second guess everything and take this... lie they're spewing to heart," Clark answered, holding her close. "It doesn't matter what they say or what anyone out there believes, Lois. Everyone that knows you knows you've earned every accolade that's been awarded to you. You're tenacious and incredibly intelligent. Capable of going toe to toe with some of the world's most renowned scholars and leaders. All this is is just an attempt to try and throw you off your game because they know how determined you are to bring them down."

Lois tightened her jaw, leaning her head back against Clark's chest, trying to process everything he'd told her. She leaned her head back to look at him. "You threatened him, huh?"

"Strongly encouraged... and might have made him soil himself." Clark chuckled, leaning closer to her as she let out a giggle. "He was still in one piece when I left though."

A smile spread across her face as she gazed into his eyes, reaching up to stroke his cheek. "My hero."

He leaned in to kiss her, outlining the frame of her face with his palm as he whispered, "I wasn't going to let him get away with trying to use you to get his five minutes of fame."

"I love you," she murmured against his lips. A mixture of uncertainty and self-doubt crowded her mind for a moment, gazing into his eyes as she finally found the nerve to voice the uncertainty in her mind. "You know the things they're saying... You never even asked."

"I don't have to," Clark pressed his lips to hers. "I know you and that's all that matters."

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#### *One Month Later ...*

Dan Scardino bit into his bagel, looking around the crowded train as he gazed across the headline of the Daily Planet.

Corruption seemed to follow this city's government like a bad habit. He let out a heavy sigh, pondering if this was really the best move.

After nearly a month of runaround with the mayor, the feds mand even his own department, he was pondering if he could ever get justice for Jenna. Then he'd seen it. The articles that continued to cover the front page of the Daily Planet. Kidnappings unsolved and government officials that refused to talk about them. It was the story of Jenna's murder all over again.

He tightened his jaw, gazing at the headshots of the two reporters' by-lines by the articles. It was a long shot, trusting a journalist with the fate of this case, but he had run out of options.

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Lois brushed a hand through her hair, readjusting the strap of her purse on her shoulder as she walked purposefully back to the Daily Planet. Clark and Jack were supposed to be running down leads on this missing girl, Ingrid, while she continued to work on tracking down the sender of the letter Claude had received. Not an easy task when she had been branded persona non grata.

It had been nearly a month since the story had broken among the tabloids and rather than die down with time it seemed to only grow traction. No matter how many holes Clark and others pointed out to discredit the lies that were being spread it came across as nothing more than a spouse or friend in denial. She wasn't sure exactly how to stop it as the original story seemed to have been morphed into something unrecognizable. No one appeared to care how outlandish the accusations were, but rather just continued to help spread them through the different outlets. The Daily Planet and even the Metropolis STAR appeared to be some of the few

news outlets ignoring the smear campaign. Though she suspected it was more indifference than anything that motivated the STAR. Mentioning the campaign would only draw attention away from their paper.

"Lois?"

Lois looked over her shoulder, letting out a sigh of relief when she saw Alice White approaching her with a large tote bag in hand. "Alice, what are you doing here?"

"I came to surprise Perry with lunch." Alice tapped the bag in her hand. "It's been a bit crazy with both of our schedules this week. How are you doing?"

"Who knew they could keep a smear campaign alive so long, right?" Lois tried to joke. Alice cocked an eyebrow at her and she sighed. "I'm fine, really Alice. Just tired of the paparazzi."

"Have you and Clark gotten anywhere on finding out who's behind this?" Alice asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Suspicious but no name to tie to all this." Lois let out a long breath. "It's... getting harder to investigate when no one will talk to you."

Alice nodded, pointing to Perry in the lobby. "That's my lunch date. I'll catch up with you later."

Lois nodded her thanks and waved back at her, then reached out to push her way through the entrance to follow. She walked through the rotating door and headed toward the elevator. Just as she reached the end of the lobby, she heard a familiar voice call out to her.

"Well, well, well..." the voice called out from Lois' left and she turned to see none other than Leo Nunk. He was a scrawny man with tight bone features and a slithering walk that made one feel dirty just being in his presence. He was also one of the National Whisper's top journalists. "What do we have here? I thought only real journalists worked at the Planet."

Lois held up her briefcase, blocking Nunk's photographer from getting her picture. "Didn't you miss your stop? The pet store is two blocks that way..." Lois pointed to the long street a city bus was driving on toward the next stop just outside the Planet.

"Pet store?"

"Well, I just assumed they let you out of your bird cage," Lois snapped irritably as Nunk held out his tape recorder to catch her remarks.

"A bird cage," he chuckled. "That's a good one, Lois. Say, how many senators did you have to take on for that piece on Luthor's takedown? Eight? Ten?"

Lois bit her lower-lip, fighting the urge to tell him just what she thought of him and instead chose to fight back with her wit. "No, see, unlike some people I actually research my stories before hitting the print button. How many lawsuits have you had this year?"

"Well... I actually work for my exclusives!" Nunk shot back half-heartedly.

"And still nothing to show for them." Lois rolled her eyes. "You know, you should get yourself to Harvard. That's a college in Boston. There's a map at the Metro Station if you need directions. Then turn yourself over to the Science Lab."

"Science Lab?" Nunk stared at her with a dubious expression.

"Well, isn't that where new discoveries go?" Lois held her hands out for emphasis as she shouted. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have for you the newly discovered one of a kind lowest form of life." With that she turned on her heel and stepped into the elevator car that had arrived. "This is my stop." She pointed to the guards approaching them from behind. "And something tells me those boys are looking for you."

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Clark walked down the long bookshelves filled with files from cases that had gone cold. He glanced at some of the dates on the file boxes, grimacing at some of the dates. He looked over his shoulder to where Jack was standing. "These cases are decades

old.”

“Well, Bill Henderson said we only have half an hour down here so let’s see what we can find before the ol’ warden comes back.”

Clark nodded, lowering his glasses to scan the file boxes, searching for files on missing persons or runaways that might fit the time period of the young girl, Ingrid, they were searching for. He had a sinking suspicion that the young girl Esma’s disappearance was connected to Ingrid’s disappearance. If he could find her maybe she could help lead them to Esma.

Clark pointed to the back shelf at the end of the aisle. “There’s some unnamed files down there.”

Jack followed him to the tall shelf where Clark found file jacket after file jacket crammed into the shelf with dates on them. He pointed to the one that looked least worn and picked it up, flipping through the missing person reports with a grimace.

“What exactly are we looking for? A lot of these are Jane Doe or runaways from halfway houses,” Jack commented, pulling out a stack of reports that seemed to have been organized by the case worker that filed the reports.

“Society’s lost is always the easiest target,” Clark commented, continuing to flip through the file jacket in his hand.

“Hey, this girl looks kinda familiar, right?” Jack asked, holding up a photo of a girl that couldn’t be more than twelve with a pink sweater and headband.

Clark’s jaw squared as he stared at the image, recalling where he had seen the photo. “She is. She was in that photo that was sent to Lois and me.” Clark turned back to the file in front of him, feeling a sinking feeling churn in his stomach as he noted the number of missing girls appeared to grow with time. He glanced at the file jacket in his hand. “These start from three years ago.”

“This one’s from four years ago,” Jack commented, waving the file jacket in his hand.

Clark gritted his teeth, scanning the file jackets on the shelf, trying to find something...anything that could help him find the missing person file he was looking for. “There’s nothing here.”

“Well, maybe it’s somewhere else.” Jack shrugged his shoulders, looking over to the side. “Just keep looking I’ll keep digging.”

Clark nodded, fighting the urge to fly across the room and search for the file. He knew it had to be here. There had to be something here. She couldn’t have just disappeared and no one have noticed. Someone had to have missed her. Someone had to have realized she was missing.

“Hey, Clark!” Jack called out to him. “I think I found it!”

Clark looked over his shoulder to where Jack was standing over a file box and pulled out a photo that looked like an eight-year old version of the girl that he had rescued months ago. Though her face had aged with time those eyes remained the same. The haunted, damaged eyes that cut you to the core.

“That’s her.”

Jack frowned, shaking his head. “Her story’s pretty tragic.” He pointed to the headshot clipped to a red folder with the name Ted Vaughn printed in bold print. “Abused by her grandfather and placed in foster care where she was abused again and then ran away.” Jack tapped on the single sheet of paper in his hand. “Reported missing by the caseworker assigned to her case.”

Clark frowned, looking over the single page that he was supposed to use to try and track this poor girl down. “This says the case worker reported her missing from the Fifth Street Mission. So, she knew where Ingrid had runaway to...”

“Maybe she was trying to look the other way?” Jack wondered aloud.

“Maybe.” Clark looked back at the file jackets behind them. “We need to make some copies of these too. This many missing persons...” He gestured to the slender files next to the overflowing files on the shelf. “Eight, ten years ago...look at the size of these.”

He tapped his hand on a file that was overflowing. “This is just this year and the year isn’t even over.”

“It certainly looks suspicious,” Jack agreed. “Maybe we should check with Omer and see if he has any information on these missing person cases. If he doesn’t know he might at least know someone that could point us in the right direction.”

Clark thought it over for a moment and then nodded his agreement. He didn’t entirely trust Omer but right now he was the only one they had to work with.

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Lois stepped into the newsroom, feeling all eyes on her. She let out a heavy sigh, uncertain what to make of the unwelcome stares. She looked herself over self-consciously. “What?”

Jimmy approached, quickly ushering her into the nearest conference room without a word. He closed the door behind him and then looked back at her with quiet pause. “Lois, have you seen the papers this afternoon?”

“No, I’m going out of my way to avoid them,” Lois replied firmly. “What now? Am I drowning kittens?”

“No, nothing like that.” Jimmy’s tone was solemn. “You might want to go pick up Jon.”

Lois’ face went pale as she looked back at Jimmy. “What’s going on?”

Jimmy pulled out the cover of the Tattletale Weekly which read, ‘Who is Jon’s Real Father?’ Photos of Clark, Claude, and Lex were below the headline. Lois grabbed the paper out of his hand, feeling her blood boil as she read the sub-heading pointing at Lex being Jon’s father with a red arrow and a question mark above it.

“Lois...” Jimmy placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s absolute garbage. There’s no way that...” He stopped mid-sentence as she squinted her eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears while she sunk down into the chair at the edge of the table.

“I... I need a minute.” Lois let out a shaky breath.

“I can call down to the daycare for you if you want,” Jimmy offered.

“No, pulling him out will only upset him,” Lois responded running a hand across her face. “I... he needs to... This is never going to end, is it?”

“It will,” Jimmy said, kneeling down in front of her. “These vultures will move on eventually.”

“When? When there’s nothing left to attack?” Lois blanched slightly, feeling her stomach churn.

“What’s wrong?” Jimmy asked.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Lois muttered, reaching for the trash can an arm’s length away.

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*Two Years Ago...*

Lois tucked her hair behind her ear, skimming through the headlines of the morning edition. Though she’d been staring at the text for over five minutes she couldn’t necessarily say she’d been reading it. She had spent the better half of the weekend obsessing over the what-ifs, trying not to obsess over something that wasn’t even confirmed yet.

The corner of her desk vibrated, and she looked up, startled from her thoughts as she gazed at an unfamiliar face that was staring back at her. A young woman with shoulder length blonde hair leaned against the tabletop edge of her desk. A quizzical expression covered the woman’s face as she leaned in. “You’re that reporter, aren’t ya?”

Lois blinked, looking around the newsroom in confusion. “I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific, you’re surrounded by reporters at the moment.”

“The one that wrote all the Superman exclusives.” The woman drew out the ‘s’ on Superman with a sharp bite that was like fingernails screeching across a chalkboard in the most aggravating way. “You’re her, right?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “I guess.” She looked around the newsroom, trying to see if she could catch Jimmy or someone to get some assistance with whoever this was that had just plopped herself down on her desk. “I don’t really cover the Superman stories anymore unless it’s related to an investigation Clark or I are working on.”

“Probably for the best.” The woman shrugged her shoulders. “I mean, I wouldn’t want to be drawing out the big green eyed monster with tall, dark and obnoxious.”

“Wh...?” Lois started to ask and found herself cut off.

“I mean, you got to admit it’s kinda weird. What with the way you used to chase down red and blue then all of a sudden you show back up with that husband of yours and nary a Superman exclusive in sight?” She flashed a big grin at Lois.

“What are you talking about?” Lois finally choked out, trying to find the right words. “Who are you?”

She extended her hand for Lois to shake. “Name’s Willis. Leslie Willis. New columnist for the Planet. I’m sure you’ve heard of my segment on WGBS – ‘Keepin’ it Real With Willis.’”

“No, I can’t say I’ve heard of it.” Lois gritted her teeth.

“So, seriously just between the two of us you never got exclusive with big blue?” Leslie leaned in closer and Lois blanched, smelling the hint of onions on her breath.

Lois shook her head. “It’s not...like that.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw Clark approaching and she craned her neck, trying to motion to him to help her.

“It’s not, huh?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met.” Clark walked up behind her, extending his hand to Leslie. “Clark Kent.”

“Ah, yes, the other half of the Super Boy Scout Club.” Leslie nodded, reaching over to shake Clark’s hand.

“Sorry?” Clark frowned, not following.

“Big, blue, flies around in a cape inflicting his will on the world.” Leslie stood up, straightening her jacket. “See ya around.”

Clark shook his head watching Leslie disappear off to her next unsuspecting victim. “She seems... uh, nope can’t think of anything.” He turned to Lois and asked, “Who exactly is that?”

“Apparently, the Planet’s newest columnist.” Lois shook her head. “I swear we’ve been trading columnists like trading cards ever since Cat left.”

An amused expression crossed Clark’s face and he grinned. “Why Lois, do you actually miss Cat Grant?”

“No.” Lois harrumphed, leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed over her chest. “I... just am noticing the low quality of talent among the columnists for hire in Metropolis.”

“Uh-huh,” Clark teased.

Lois shook her head, opting for a necessary change of subject. “What did Roger Templeton want to meet about so early?”

Clark’s smile melted away and he leaned down, taking the seat next to her desk and pulling it closer so he was seated next to her. “You remember how Wayne said he found everything he could that Bureau 39 left behind?”

Lois’ eyes clamped closed and a shallow breath escaped her throat. “Please don’t tell me you mean...?”

“There was a locker located in a secure location under the protection of the FBI,” Clark explained with a heavy sigh. “The space craft, files he had on the landing...”

Lois’ eyes flickered open as she looked back at Clark expectantly, self-consciously placing a hand over her midsection as she asked, “Kryptonite?”

“That’s what Roger suspects,” Clark whispered, glancing over his shoulder cautiously.

“He doesn’t know for sure?” Lois tried to keep her voice from rising above a whisper for fear they’d be overheard.

“Wouldn’t they know?”

“I’m just a journalist talking to a source within the FBI,

remember?” Clark reached over to cup her cheek. “No one has ever confirmed the existence of Kryptonite in the press. It was just the ramblings of a lunatic and a sociopath as far as the rest of the world knows.”

Lois nodded, holding her breath as she let his words sink in. Despite Clark and Robert’s long history there was no real way to find out if the FBI had Kryptonite in its possession without first confirming its existence. Confirming its existence outside the small circle of trusted individuals that currently shared the knowledge of Clark’s secret identity.

“Any idea who broke in?” Lois finally broke the silence, reaching her hand over to cover his palm with hers.

“Whoever it was appeared to know their way around tech.” Clark sighed, shaking his head. “The guards that were on duty were found unconscious from some kind of electrical shock. The locks on the three different layers of security had been jammed and completely wiped out.”

“Well, that narrows it down,” Lois remarked sarcastically. \*\*\*

Scardino swiped at his brow, crouched down in the tall grass blades as he surveyed the property from his vantage point. Countless excursions across the globe and back again had led him here. Schiller’s name and what he would lead him to was the only thing that drove him these days. He’d long since moved past the denial and self-loathing of his grief and was now moving onto the all-consuming hate and anger funneled at the scum of the earth that had ordered the hit on Jenna.

He had teamed up with Agent McCord a few months ago and found himself forced into the center of the investigation that would hopefully bring Jenna justice. They had traced the drugs coming from Qatar to countless locations across the globe. With them came of course other crimes and drugs alike. One by one, some of the more notorious crime lords were being taken down. Still, he felt it wasn’t enough.

Schiller was a ghost.

Yet he was still the only name to come up in connection to Jenna’s death.

McCord cleared his throat, pointing to the heavily guarded property below them where Hamil had setup his estate on the waterfront where black market shipments from the Middle East were suspected to be coming in. “This place has got more guards than Fort Knox.”

“Well, according to Raz, that shipment’s due within the hour.” Scardino shrugged, sinking down below the grass blades. “Make yourself comfortable McCord.” \*\*\*

The newsroom felt different when Lois looked across the array of desks as she made her way back to her desk that afternoon. Her hand self-consciously moved to the bandage on her forearm from where the doctor had drawn her blood earlier. She spotted the brochures and samples the doctor had given her poking out of her bag and quickly tucked them back in.

‘Later,’ she thought quietly as she reached her desk, tucking her purse in the bottom drawer and then turned her attention to the notes she had left earlier. Extracting any information on the break-in at the FBI had been near impossible. The FBI refused to even admit to possessing anything from the elusive Bureau 39 or admit the agency even existed.

“Hey, Lois.” Jimmy walked up to her with a distressed look on his face, quickly taking the seat next to her desk and looking over his shoulder as if he was hiding out from someone.

“Something wrong?” Lois asked, narrowing her gaze at him.

He gestured to the bleach blonde haired Leslie Willis who was propped up on the edge of a seemingly terrified Ralph’s desk. “What is up with that columnist? She is like Captain Opposite. You say the sky is blue, she says it’s gray. You say something is great she says it’s awful...”

“You noticed that too, huh?” Lois asked, shaking her head.  
 “She seems to be making friends,” Jimmy remarked dryly, standing up from the seat he had claimed.

Lois frowned, shaking her head as Jimmy headed back to his desk. It seemed Leslie Willis had the same effect on the rest of the staff as she had with Lois earlier. Her gaze shifted to the television where coverage of an escaped inmate was being reported by Stern Media.

“An entire block of inmates was freed of some of the most notorious criminals in Metropolis...”

Footage of Superman with the police in front of the prison displayed on the screen and Lois shook her head. She reached across her desk, noting the grim expressions on everyone’s faces. The phone rang a few times and she finally got an answer. “Hey, Bill, what can you tell me about this prison break...”

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Scardino held up the sleeve of his jacket, keeping the fabric against his nose and mouth as he made his way through the smoky hallways of the compound. He looked through the thick ash scented air that filled the hallway. He turned the corner, waving his hand in the air, and opened the door.

Inside, McCord was waving his arm to clear the mist from where the fire extinguisher had gone off. They had barely crossed the threshold of Hamil’s front gate when the place had erupted in flames. The fire fighters had already contained the destruction. Now all that remained was to get the information out of Hamil.

McCord tapped his tongue against the inside of his mouth and made a clucking noise. “You tried to give us the slip, Hamil.”

“I was just lighting up the fire for you, boys.” Hamil grinned with his sparkling gold tooth reflecting against the dim light above. “It’s not my fault your friends put the bon fire out before we could get this party started.”

“Ah, a party,” McCord looked over at Scardino with a chuckle, “You hear that? He threw us a party, Scardino.”

“How many parties you have out on the port back there?” Scardino asked, pointing outside where the flames on Hamil’s back port were still in flames.

“Fire on the water,” Hamil chuckled.

“Fire on the water, huh? Like what, uh, fireworks, Hamil?” McCord chuckled, glancing over at Scardino.

“Yeah, yeah, fireworks...” Hamil grinned back at him.

“Or maybe something else?” Scardino scowled, pinching the bridge of his nose. He peeked in the corner and pulled out a brick of C-4. “You know what this is?”

“C-4?” Hamil chuckled. “Of course not.”

“Bombing your own place. Tsk, tsk, tsk... That’s pretty desperate,” McCord commented.

“Yeah, what are you trying to hide?” Scardino hissed out, pulling a pistol out and putting it to Hamil’s head.

“You fire that shot this whole place blows up,” Hamil sneered. “You along with it.”

“And I’m willing to bet you don’t want to go up with it.” Scardino cocked the trigger. “So tell me this, why are you bringing shipments in for a drug that has no street value?”

“You’re such a gambler. Why don’t you figure it out for yourself?” Hamil chuckled.

“Seven drug lords have been locked up, Hamil. You wanna be the eighth?” McCord challenged.

“You still have nothing,” Hamil taunted them.

“They brought us to you, didn’t they?” Scardino’s finger angled on the trigger. “You blew up your own port in order to protect Schiller. I want to know why.”

“You won’t be able to stop him,” Hamil sniffed.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Scardino shot back. “Tick tock tick tock... You have a four-year-old, right, Hamil?” He waved the pistol in the air. “He know you sell your soul to the devil?”

“Leave my son out of this!” Hamil shouted with a snarl.

“Where do the shipments come in from?” Scardino asked, placing the barrel of the pistol against Hamil’s forehead.

“Lebanon! The containers get picked up in Lebanon and come in with the rest of the shipment in Hamburg.” Hamil shouted as Scardino pulled the pistol back. “You’re insane.”

“That’s what they keep telling me,” Scardino tapped his forehead with a smile.

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Lois felt a sick sense of dread wash over her as she scanned the names that were on the list in front of her. She stared at the name at the top unable to look away as the memories from the prisoner’s capture lingered in the back of her mind.

Rufus “Bad Brain” Johnson.

He had terrorized the city shortly after Lex Luthor had been sentenced to Arkham. His crime spree had been unique and terrorizing as he had no rhyme or reason behind each attack. His end game was merely drawing out the fear in the innocent Metropolitan citizens. Bad Brain had created his own brand of weapons that put the Metropolis P.D. and the National Guard’s weapons to shame. Many had been killed in the wake of Bad Brain’s crime spree and others severely injured.

Her hand instinctively went to her midsection, recalling the fear she had harbored during the early months of her pregnancy with Jon during his rampage. Two strong arms wrapped around her from behind and she turned her head to where Clark was leaned over her. She offered him a half smile and he pressed his lips against hers.

“I saw the news.” Lois ran a hand across his face.

Clark nodded, shaking his head. “Two guards are in the hospital from electric shock injuries.”

Lois sighed, running a hand through her dark hair. “Your dad was asking about Jon going with them to mom’s beach house. It might be a good time for him to spend the last week of summer at the beach... and avoid any possible danger from the latest sociopath.”

Clark nodded in agreement. “It might not be a bad idea for you to go with him.”

“I’m not going to just run off in the middle of an investigation.”

“Lois, this guy’s dangerous.”

Lois spun around in her chair, glaring at Clark with a frustrated hiss. “You cannot be seriously trying to sideline me on this. I’ve got just as much skin in the game as you do to make sure Bad Brain is brought in.”

“You’re also more at risk of being put in the hospital if you run across him,” Clark reminded her, placing a hand across her cheek.

“I’m also at risk for getting into a car wreck, falling off a ladder, oh and getting hit by a cab,” Lois shot back, waving her hands in the air.

“Lo-is...”

“Don’t,” Lois cut him off, shaking her head. “I am more than capable of handling myself against any of these lunatics and you know it.”

“This isn’t the same as Luthor,” Clark warned in a hushed whisper.

“Isn’t it?” Lois folded her arms across her chest. “I’m not going into hiding again. I won’t do it.”

Clark hung his head. “This is reckless and insanity...”

“Lois, CK?” Jimmy interrupted, holding up the phone from across the newsroom where he was standing at his desk. “Break-in at STAR Labs. Dr. Klein is on line two.”

Lois reached across her desk and answered the phone, holding it out for Clark to overhear easily. “Dr. Klein?”

“Lois, I’m so glad I was able to get through. It’s very urgent that Superman comes by STAR Labs. There’s been a break-in and...”

“Superman?” Clark repeated curiously.

“Something... very important for him to see,” Dr. Klein whispered.

Lois glanced over at Clark, nodding at him as he loosened his tie. “We’ll see if we can get a hold of him for you.”

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Patrol cars surrounded the front entrance of STAR Labs as the police questioned the scientists in separate corners of the front of the building. Clark eyed the uneasy gaze from Dr. Bernard Klein as he touched down in the parking lot. He met Dr. Klein’s gaze from across the walkway, nodding in his direction before turning back to Lois. “I’m going to go see what Dr. Klein needed and... see what you can find out from Henderson.” He pointed to the patrol car where Bill Henderson was crouched over helping one of the scientists who was being looked over by one of the EMTs.

“What do you think’s going on?” Lois asked, looking around. “Whatever it is seems to have drawn quite the crowd.”

“I don’t know,” Clark shook his head, gesturing to where Dr. Klein was standing, “but I’m going to find out.” He watched Lois disappear through the crowd to where Henderson was and then met Dr. Klein on the corner of the front entrance to STAR Labs.

“Superman, I’m so glad you were able to make it...” Dr. Klein ushered Clark toward the side entrance of the laboratory, away from the front entrance where the police were still assisting those injured.

“It seemed urgent on the phone,” Clark said, looking over his shoulder. “What’s going on?”

“It was horrible,” Dr. Klein stammered, his face paled and his eyes widened. He looked toward his feet then back up at Clark. “One minute I’m working in my lab and the next I’m on the floor.” He rubbed his head with a grimace. “Electrical shock.” He pulled out a card from his pocket. “This was left out. I wasn’t sure if you wanted anyone else to know this was his work.”

Clark took the white card with the black etching on it, recognizing the calling card immediately. “Bad Brain.”

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose, recalling the Kryptonite he had entrusted to Dr. Klein’s care while they worked through trying to come up with a way to stop its deadly effects on both himself and potentially Jon. After the fiasco with the Churches he had opted to enlist Dr. Klein’s help.

Dr. Klein glanced toward his feet then back at Clark. “He took all of it, Superman. The vault the Kryptonite was being kept in was the only thing missing. I’m so sorry.”

“Dr. Klein, it’s fine. I’m just glad you’re okay.” Clark felt the anguish inside him pulse through his veins. Bad Brain Johnson had terrorized the city for months until he was finally captured two years prior. It had been the last case he and Lois had worked on together before she’d gone on maternity leave. Bad Brain Johnson had been one of many criminals to try and make their mark on Metropolis after Luthor’s downfall. Like many others to follow he had failed. Now with Bad Brain on the run with Kryptonite in tow it made his already sadistic nature all the more deadly.

Dr. Klein took his silence as his cue to continue, “Hardly anyone knew it was being kept here. The STAR Labs board of directors and myself were the only ones. Not even my assistant knew...” Dr. Klein stopped mid-ramble. “Superman, I’m so sorry... I was so close to perfecting the new suit...”

“Dr. Klein,” Clark interrupted, drawing the scientist out of his tirade. “Look, it’s not going to do anyone any good to rehash something we can’t change. Let’s start with what happened here...” He gestured to the front entrance where the police were still on the scene.

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Lois looked over at the blue and white suitcase sitting by the front door, feeling a hard lump in her throat pulse. She frowned, crossing her arms over her chest as she looked over at Clark who

wore an equally torn expression. After they had left STAR Labs, Clark had called his parents and asked if they could change their plans by a few days and take Jon out of town earlier. It absolutely petrified her. The idea of that poisonous rock being anywhere near Jon. Let alone in the hands of Bad Brain Johnson. As much as she hated to be away from him, she knew this was a necessary step in order to keep him safe.

“When I mentioned Jon taking a trip with our parents to the beach, I didn’t think it would be today.” Lois shook her head. “He’s going to know something’s wrong.”

“It’s safer for him this way,” Clark reminded her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. “With Bad Brain out there with Kryptonite...”

“I know.” Lois heard her voice crack as she ran a hand through her hair. She let out a heavy sigh.

Squeals of laughter came from the kitchen and Lois turned to the doorway, spying Jonathan carrying Jon over his shoulder as he made a sputtering noise imitating an airplane as he helped Jon fly into the living room.

“Mommy, Mommy, I’m an air-o-pwane!” Jon squealed happily, raising his arms up over his head, imitating his grandpa.

Lois allowed a bittersweet smile to cross her face, meeting Jonathan’s gaze briefly before turning back to Jon with her arms wide open. “You are going to have such a good time with your grandparents.” She leaned in to give him a peck on the cheek. “Did you remember your bucket?”

“Right here.” Jonathan held up the red bucket with Jon’s favorite beach toys inside it.

“Check!” Jon squealed happily.

“Hey, bud, you have a good time and we’ll meet you there in a few days.” Clark reached over to cup Jon’s cheek, leaning in to press his lips to Jon’s forehead.

“And be good for your grandparents,” Lois reminded him.

“Uh-huh,” Jon shook his head, leaning in to give Lois a peck on the cheek. “I love you Mommy.” Just as quickly as the embrace came it disappeared as Jon ran to the front door, jumping up and down with excitement for his road trip with his grandparents.

“Thanks for adjusting your travel plans,” Lois said with a heavy sigh, looking at Jonathan with a worried expression.

“We were planning to take him with us anyway,” Jonathan offered her a half-smile. “It’s just a day early is all.”

“We’ll try to fly out as soon as we get this Bad Brain situation handled,” Clark said softly, trying not to draw Jon’s attention to what they were discussing.

“He’s in good hands,” Jonathan reassured them.

“I know.” Lois flashed him a weak smile. “I’m still gonna miss him.”

Clark tightened his arm around her, and Jonathan nodded. “We’ll call you when we get there.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Clark leaned closer to her as they watched Jonathan carry Jon out to the car. The sound of Jon’s giggles grew more faint and Clark let out a heavy sigh, turning to her and whispering in her ear, “He’s going to be fine.”

“I know,” Lois sighed, leaning her head against his shoulder as she contemplated the turbulent thoughts roaming in her mind.

In her head she knew Jon was safer this way. He would have a blast with his grandparents and in a few days they’d fly out to meet him and enjoy some much needed time away from the hustle and bustle of the city. She knew all of these things, but she also knew it killed her inside having to send Jon away because it wasn’t safe for him to be in his home.

The fact that at such a young age Jon was being ushered out of his home and away from everything he held precious pained her to the depths of her soul. For the most part, she and Clark had been successful in keeping Jon out of the limelight and ensuring he would not be put on any of their potential enemies’ radar. They had gone so far as to keep all photos of Jon out of the

announcements of his birth and any milestones in his life that were mentioned in the Planet's Lifestyle promotional pieces on their partnership and growing family. Even with all of the effort they had put into keeping Jon out of harm's way, it still wasn't enough.

"Let's just nab this guy so we can get things back to normal." Lois turned to look at Clark, resting her hand against his chest. "I know you wanted me to go into hiding too, but I can't. I can't sit back and do nothing while that sociopath is cooking up some crazy way to come after my family."

Clark reached out a hand, stroking her cheek as he pulled her to him. "I'm just trying to protect you both the best way I know how. If you won't go into hiding just try to be careful." His forehead rested against hers, running his hands through her hair as he whispered, "Lois, I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you or Jon."

A gentle smile crossed her face as she patted his chest, leaning her head toward him and capturing his lips with hers. An inaudible moan escaped his throat as she smoothed her hands across his shoulders, looping her arms around his neck, and they separated. Lois tilted her head back, looking him in the eyes as she whispered, "Clark, I'm not going to go rushing into danger, but neither should you."

He opened his mouth to argue and she cut him off. "Look, I get it. You have a job to do as Superman, but there is Kryptonite in the hands of Bad Brain. I just pray he doesn't put two and two together." She shook her head in dismay, feeling the fear that had been eating at her for the last few hours threaten to bubble to the surface as she spoke. "After all the hard work we put in to hide Kryptonite's existence, it is absolutely mind-boggling that this cretin could destroy everything and... I won't sit back and do nothing. I might not be invulnerable, but I can stop him from using Kryptonite against you."

"Bad Brain nearly killed the guards he overpowered at the prison, Lois." Clark let out a heavy breath and he offered her a half-smile. "I guess you do have a point though."

"Of course, I do," Lois grinned back at him. "Now, maybe instead of focusing on how to get me to back off of this investigation you just let me help you so we can wrap this case up and focus on more important things."

"Such as?" Clark asked, looping his arms around her waist. "Oh, I think we can find something..."

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## Chapter 12: I Got the Eye of the Tiger

*Two Years Ago...*

Bad Brain was a menace. Each act of violence was getting worse. The hangar where his self-engineered weapons had been held was broken into. The weapons that had been in possession of the FBI were gone. Then of course there was the fact that Bad Brain was suspected of being behind the break-in of the FBI's file on Bureau 39.

Clark was convinced that whatever Bad Brain had discovered in that abandoned locker had led him to STAR Labs in search of Kryptonite. Someone had to have tipped him off that it was there, but he wouldn't have been looking for it unless there was something in that Bureau 39 file to point him there.

"Hey." Lois' hand clasped over his shoulder and Clark looked up from the coffee mug he'd been staring into mindlessly.

"Hey," Clark offered her a half-smile.

"Any luck?" Lois asked, taking a seat across from him at the table.

"Not much to go on." Clark pinched the bridge of his nose as he let out a heavy sigh. "Bad Brain is just another name shuffled through the prison and I can't find anything that would have triggered the breakout all of a sudden. He seemed to be getting good reviews from the warden..."

Lois grinned happily, pulling out a single sheet of paper from behind her back. "Well, I was able to find something." She pointed

to the highlighted line. "Bad Brain got a new roommate the day before he broke out. Look familiar?"

"Gene Newtrich," Clark grimaced at the name, recalling his encounter with him and Red Kryptonite.

"I'm guessing that's who clued him into Kryptonite's presence." Lois let out a sigh. "I'm thinking he started sniffing around STAR Labs because of the work that's been publicized about their work with the Superman Foundation."

"Still, it's a lucky guess." Clark raised his eyebrows. "Dr. Klein said the Kryptonite was the only thing taken, and he knew exactly where to go."

"So, maybe someone on the board is connected to him?" Lois guessed with a shrug.

"Where's the list of Bad Brain's relatives?" Clark asked, looking around the table that was now covered in Lois' disarray of organized chaos as they dug through everything they could on Bad Brain.

"Here." Lois reached over to pull a single sheet of paper from the file and set it in front of him. "Mother, Rowena Johnson and brother, Herkimer Johnson."

"Poor kid." Clark shook his head. "That's a brutal name and kids are cruel."

"Well, Bad Brain didn't fair too well either." Lois rolled her eyes. "Rufus isn't exactly going to earn you any friends on the playground."

Clark pointed to the sheet of paper in front of him. "Says here Rowena is a nurse at New Troy Extended Living?"

"You think he'd be dumb enough to reach out to his mom?" Lois wondered aloud.

"Maybe." Clark shrugged. He opened his mouth to continue his thought and quickly shut it when his super-hearing picked up a call for help.

"What is it?" Lois asked.

"Jumper on the Metropolis Bridge." Clark stood up from his seat. "I've got to go."

"Be careful." Lois leaned in to kiss him while simultaneously loosening his tie.

"Always," he whispered back before making his exit out of the back door.

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"Where's the list of Bad Brain's relatives?" Clark looked up from his notepad, scanning the table in front of him where she had the research on Bad Brain scattered in their own piles to sort out later.

"Here." Lois reached over to pull a single sheet of paper from the file on Bad Brain's family and set it in front of Clark. "Mother, Rowena Johnson and brother, Herkimer Johnson."

"Poor kid." Clark shook his head. "That's a brutal name and kids are cruel."

"Well, Bad Brain didn't fair too well either." Lois rolled her eyes. "Rufus isn't exactly going to earn you any friends on the playground."

Clark gestured to the paper in front of him. "Says here Rowena is a nurse at New Troy Extended Living?"

"You think he'd be dumb enough to reach out to his mom?" Lois wondered aloud.

"Maybe." Clark shrugged his shoulders and then seemed to drift off somewhere else as his facial expression wore a familiar distracted look that told her he was being called away.

"What is it?" Lois asked.

"Jumper on the Metropolis Bridge." Clark stood up from his seat. "I've got to go."

"Be careful." Lois reached over to loosen his tie, simultaneously leaning over to kiss him good-bye.

"Always," he whispered back before disappearing out of the back door.

Lois watched him disappear then turned back to the paper

Clark had been looking over. Her focus settled on the name of Rowena Johnson. She leaned over to pick up the phone from the table and began to dial, waiting for the phone to ring.

“New Troy Extended Living...”

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Rowena Johnson cackled lightly as she watched her eldest son, Rufus, shine and polish the strange green stone, he was hard at work molding into the perfect ammunition to power his latest invention. Her heart leapt with joy as she watched him work. She glanced over her shoulder, careful that the door was still closed.

“Almost there,” Rufus commented, biting his lower lip as he expertly twisted the nozzle on as it emitted a white blue light. The large barrel of the souped-up metal rifle he was working on glistened in the dimly lit room and he let out a howl of satisfaction as he lifted it up in the air to cheer his victory.

No matter what, they would always target Rufus. Just like they had when he was younger. Her darling Rufus had always been such a smart boy. So much brighter than the other kids. No one – not even his teachers had understood how special her boy was. Everyone was always out to get him.

His teachers.

The police.

Reporters.

Even Superman.

No one cared how it affected her boy. But he was resilient. With that beautiful mind came clarity on what he would have to do in order to make them listen. And listen they would.

A light knock came from the hallway and Rowena turned to Rufus, ushering him toward the back closet. Before she could finish helping him to his corner in the office the door jerked open and she found herself face to face with the head nurse, Elaine.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Rowena replied with a sickly frown.

“Rowena, what are you doing? There are police looking for you...”

Before Elaine could finish her statement, a white and blue light filled the room and she fell to the ground with a hard thud. Rowena looked back at Rufus who had strapped the newly crafted rifle around his chest, holding it out as smoke billowed from the barrel with a broad smile planted across his face.

“Perfect.”

\*\*\*

Lois tapped on her notepad, looking around the crowded nursing home. The front desk clerk had disappeared nearly twenty minutes ago and by the looks of it given her the brush off. She let out a heavy sigh, growing more and more impatient as she paced in the front.

She craned her neck, looking toward the corridor the clerk had disappeared through, wondering if she should try to find her. It wasn’t like there was anyone else she could ask. She glanced over her shoulder, noting the empty clerk desk among the crowded front entrance where several families were waiting.

*‘It’ll just take a minute.’*

She turned the corner where the corridor was leading into a small green door which hopefully would take her right to the missing clerk. She frowned when she turned the handle to the door and it opened with ease. An uneasy feeling washed over her as she stared at the open doorway, wondering where everyone was.

“Hello?” she called out.

Nothing.

She took a cautious step forward and glanced over her shoulder, noting the crowd behind her seemed oblivious to her quick exit and then turned her attention to the abandoned hallway in front of her.

“Anyone there?”

“Lois? What are you doing here?”

“I...” She turned and saw Clark standing in his Superman

uniform at the end of the hallway, looking around the empty nursing home equally confused. “Ca-Superman, I was following up on a lead. Bad Brain’s mother works here. What are you doing here?”

“There was a bomb threat called in. I picked up the call on the police radio.” He pointed to the empty hallways, shaking his head. “Has everyone evacuated already?”

“No,” Lois shook her head. “There are families up front.” She frowned feeling the heavy feeling of uneasiness plague the back of her mind. “This isn’t right.” She looked over her shoulder warily.

“If there was a bomb threat there would have been police swarming this place...” Her eyes met his and she shook her head. “You need to get out of here.”

“What?” he practically laughed at her.

“I’m telling you I have a bad feeling.”

“Lois, I’ll be fine,” Clark said, looking around the empty hallway. “I need to make sure there isn’t...”

“Clark,”

“Superman,” he quickly corrected her.

“Whatever.” She fumed irritably, gesturing to the empty hallways. “Don’t you see there is no bomb. It’s a trap to lure you in here. Why do you think someone would want to do that?”

“And what if it’s not?”

“Can’t you just trust me on this?”

“Even if you’re right, there’s not a whole lot they can do.”

Clark raised his eyebrows at her, giving her a stern gaze. “If it is a trap then you need to get out of here.”

“You are such a hypocrite...”

“Lo-is...”

“No, how is this any different than you warning me not to go rushing into danger?” Lois harrumphed irritably, hearing her voice rise another octave. “Do you hear any sirens? No! Because you got duped into coming here and are a sitting duck for that sociopath who is ...”

“Now, now, now, let’s watch our language, Ms. Lane,” a voice came from the other end of the hallway and Lois gasped in surprise.

“Bad Brain.” Lois’ eyes narrowed as she glared back at him with a scowl.

“Lover’s quarrel?” Bad Brain looked between the two of them with a chuckle.

“What do you want, Bad Brain?” Clark called out to him, unfazed by the comment.

“Oh, I just want to... light up... Metropolis... and you.”

Lois let out a gasp as she found herself shoved to the other side of the building at super-speed with the words “Get out of here now” whispered in her ear before the room lit up in a white and blue blinding light. From the distance she could hear the sirens approaching as she looked up from the corner, she was crouched down in.

A hand clasped over her mouth and she let out a blood curdling scream as the green light emitted out of the barrel of Bad Brain’s weapon struck Clark in the chest. She could feel the tears trickling down her cheeks by the sudden wave of emotion that filled her mind.

“Get him!”

“He’s getting away!”

The room filled with a misty smoke as water from above came raining down, sprinkling the floor. Lois looked over her shoulder, feeling a wave of relief wash over her when she saw the familiar face of Bill Henderson behind her. He gestured toward the exit and whispered, “Get out of here now.”

\*\*\*

The empty office was bleak and dimly lit. Rowena sat uncomfortably in the middle of the room with her hands folded across the table, watching as the man in front of her paced back and forth. A sharp look from the man here and there was directed

toward her but he remained quiet.

She glanced over her shoulder, noting the two officers that stood by the door, holding up her Rufus' discarded weapon. The man pacing in front of her stopped and pointed to it. "Put that back. Dr. Klein will be here any minute to have it logged into custody."

"You really think you can just take things that don't belong to you?" Rowena snapped haughtily as she wiggled in her seat from side to side.

The man pacing stopped in front of her, pulling up a chair as he crouched down so he was eye-level with her. "I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation here, Mrs. Johnson."

"It's Ms. Johnson," Rowena corrected him. "Roy and I never did get married."

"My mistake." The man gave her a stern gaze as he leaned closer to her, "Your son, Rufus is a wanted fugitive, Ms. Johnson. You helped hide him from the authorities and if I was a suspicious man, I'd say you helped him escape both times."

"I was nowhere near the prison!" she shouted, turning away from him.

"No, but a car just happened to be driving by when he jetted out the prison gate, right?"

"I'm done talking." Rowena sniffed, poking her nose into the air in defiance.

"Well, maybe you'll feel more comfortable downtown." the man gestured to the door. "Take Ms. Johnson into custody for harboring a fugitive. Perhaps a few hours downtown will reshape her thinking..."

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Clark placed a hand on the table next to him, reaching for Lois' white knuckled hand that was gripping the edge of the table. She pursed her lips, glancing at him for a brief moment before tugging her hand away and turning away from him.

He bit his lower lip, feeling the tension in the air as she folded her arms across her chest, going out of her way to avoid looking at him. If he had to guess, she was still stewing over their argument from earlier. The run-in with Bad Brain had distracted them both just long enough, but Lois was still angry.

She had called him a hypocrite. The accusation still was hard to digest. True, he did tend to warn Lois to not go rushing into situations without looking, but that was different. This was different. Even as he sat here with singe burns on his skin from the deadly blast Bad Brain had delivered, he knew the collateral damage would have been worse for her or anyone else if Bad Brain had been given the chance.

Clark felt a sharp pain run through him as he watched the red burn marks disappear under the sunlamp. He flashed a weak smile in Lois' direction who was still avoiding eye-contact with him for the moment. A mixture of concern and anger covered her face. He wondered momentarily how long she would continue to stew over what had happened with Bad Brain.

Dr. Klein frowned, pressing against his side. "You're lucky this didn't do any further damage."

"You said that weapon was loaded with Kryptonite?" Lois spoke up, voicing her concern over the poisonous meteorite that had been found inside the weapon Bad Brain had been wielding earlier.

"Indeed." Dr. Klein nodded, pointing to the large glass case where the weapon in question was under lock and key for observation. "These panels here are powering an electrical circuitry to, in essence, electrocute the victim and this..." he pointed to the chamber at the end with a frown, "is where he loaded the Kryptonite to power it." He flashed a reassuring smile toward Lois. "Don't worry. It's a double pane glass with lead mixed in. He's safe."

"For now," Lois commented.

Clark frowned, catching the miffed expression on Lois' face.

He glanced back at Dr. Klein. "And you don't think it's a bad idea to have this here where Bad Brain can get to it?"

Dr. Klein pulled out a slim metal remote from his drawer and tapped a few keys on it and the table with the case holding the Kryptonite laced weapon lowered into the floor. Dr. Klein tapped the remote with his hand. "We've taken extra precautions this time."

"Thank you, Dr. Klein," Clark responded, slipping his shirt back on.

"Well, that takes care of Bad Brain getting his hands on this device, but are we sure there isn't any more Kryptonite in Bad Brain's possession?" Lois asked, tapping her foot against the floor.

"I can't be certain, no," Dr. Klein responded.

Lois opened her mouth to chime in and Clark chose that moment to cut in. The reality was Dr. Klein didn't have enough information to say beyond a shadow of doubt whether there was still Kryptonite in Bad Brain's possession or not. However, Lois' current mood prevented her from seeing that, and rather than having her get riled up over the fact that Dr. Klein couldn't quell their fears about the Kryptonite, he thought it better to try and steer the conversation elsewhere.

"Thankfully my powers don't seem to have been effected. I just seem to be stunned more than anything."

"Well, that's because you weren't struck with the Kryptonite at full force. Another run-in like that with Bad Brain could kill you," Dr. Klein warned.

Clark glanced over at Lois as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The anger that had been simmering across her face earlier was quickly replaced with fear and anguish. He reached over to place a reassuring hand across her face, but she pulled away.

"Well, I guess that's that then," Lois said, heading for the door. "I mean, it's not like he's actually going to listen to anyone's advice right now. Looking over your shoulder only applies if you don't have superpowers apparently."

Dr. Klein shook his head, not saying a word as Clark watched her leave. He glanced toward the window, pondering if he might be better off to just start his patrol early.

\*\*\*

Fifth Street Mission was full of activity as usual. The crowded house helped home hundreds and many of them were out for their own selves. Too busy to bother themselves with someone they weren't familiar with or another face amid the disheartened. In the corner just beyond the crowd, Rufus "Bad Brain" Johnson sat among a few rebels, biding his time as he thought out the next move.

With his mother in custody and the police looking everywhere for him the only place to go was truly where you could disappear among the lost. The strategic location within the warehouse district helped ensure he could continue his work in secret without making his presence known to that tiresome detective that continued to stalk his every move with those reporters and that pompous caped menace that proved to be nothing but a kill joy.

He needed to bide his time for now and figure out his next move. Most of the inventions he had resurrected out of federal custody had been dissected into dusted paper weights. A travesty he would make sure they would pay dearly for. But for now, he would bide his time. He needed to get the upper hand somehow and he knew exactly how to do it.

He glanced at the clock, watching as the minute hand shifted closer to the nine. *'Almost time.'*

He watched as one of the nuns that ran the place skirted to the corner he was in with a dark cloaked figure. The man had beady eyes and a scar across his face that told him he had seen the dark side of society one too many times. An envelope was handed to the nun by the man and the nun opened it, revealing several

hundred dollars of bills inside it as they stood a few feet away from him. The nun smiled, pocketing it before disappearing down the long corridor that led to the rooms for the runaway girls. He shook his head in disgust. It seemed even the morally superior could be corrupted with the greed of cold hard cash.

The minute hand fell on the nine and he smiled. *'Time for some fireworks.'*

\*\*\*

Lois set her glass on the counter, glancing out the window at the dark clouds that loomed up above. Clark still hadn't come home after their visit to STAR Labs and she wasn't sure she was ready to talk to him if he did. Frustration and anger fueled her thoughts as she tapped her hand on the counter, feeling her anger flood through her.

Kryptonite.

The deadly meteorite had wreaked havoc on their lives more times than she could count and now it had reared its ugly head once more. Not only did she have to worry about Bad Brain using the lethal poison on Clark, but, given the latest news from the doctor, she had to make doubly sure she didn't come anywhere near the toxic meteorite.

<< *"At least ten weeks if I had to guess."*

*"You're positive?"*

*"We'll have you schedule an ultrasound at your next visit, but according to your test results you're pregnant." >>*

Her hand instinctively moved to her abdomen. Jon was out of harm's way, but this new life was at risk as well. And today's events had only proven her point of having to stick around because, despite promising her he would be careful, Clark still was storming into situations that put him right in Bad Brain's crosshairs.

The phone on the counter rang, and she jumped, startled by the sound. She reached over to answer the phone with a defeated sigh. "Lois Lane."

"If I were you, I'd make a trip down to the warehouse district." A muffled voice crackled through the earpiece of the phone.

"Who is this?" Lois asked, gripping the phone.

"You want to stop Bad Brain and find the missing Kryptonite, then you better check out the old Carlin warehouse. Lots of deadly weapons in there... lots of evidence."

"How did you get this number?" Lois tightened her hand on the handset.

"What's wrong, Ms. Lane? Don't you want to stop Bad Brain?"

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Bad Brain slammed the phone down, smiling to himself as he turned on his heel. He leaned over to set the timer, whistling to himself as he looked across the array of explosives he had rigged to go off. He chuckled to himself as he headed for the exit.

"One down, two more to go."

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The rain beat against the concrete as Lois fought back a wail of frustration, watching as the building in front of her seemed to sway in the distance. She tucked the damp hair behind her ear and reached her other hand up to block the rain from blurring her vision. This was it. The warehouse she'd been tipped off about. She just had to go in and see what was in there then she could figure out what to do next. The caller had warned her not to bring the police.

A hand clamped on her shoulder and she whirled around to confront the would-be assailant only to find herself face to face with her husband's concerned gaze. "Don't do that!" she hissed back, letting out a sigh of relief.

"I just finished my patrol and spotted you down here." Clark gestured to the rain still coming down. "It's pouring down rain, Lois. What are you doing out here?"

Lois pointed to the warehouse with her rain covered hand. "I got a tip that Bad Brain's stashing the Kryptonite and the stolen weapons here."

"You cannot be serious," Clark practically shouted, shaking the rain off his glasses. Through the droplets, his glasses seemed to fade away, exposing the hidden mixture of Clark and Superman to her as he reached a hand out to pull her to him. "You can't just go running into danger when you feel like it. This is a trained assassin that wouldn't think twice about killing you or anyone else who gets in his way."

"Pot meet kettle!"

"That was different!"

"How?" Lois challenged, glaring back at him as she jabbed her index finger against his chest angrily. "Please tell me how it's any different for me to run into danger versus you when we know the one thing that could hurt you is in that mad man's possession," Lois shouted, feeling the fear well up inside her as she stared back at him.

She wanted desperately to share the unending fear that had risen up inside her the moment she had discovered Bad Brain Johnson had taken possession of the one thing that could not only hurt Clark, but possibly kill him. She had seen what that poisonous rock had done to him firsthand after rescuing him from the depths of the hell hole Lex Luthor had trapped him in. She would be damned if she would see that ever happen again.

Then there was Jon. Her innocent beautiful boy who was susceptible to having the same reaction to the poisonous rock. She couldn't let the same thing that had happened to Clark happen to Jon. She refused to allow the criminals in the world intent on taking on Superman get the upper hand and bring harm to her family.

"Lois, this is insane! You cannot take on Bad Brain by yourself." Clark fumed angrily as he pointed back to the Jeep that was parked a few feet away. "You saw what he did to those guards. What kind of chance do you think you have taking on someone like this?"

"He has Kryptonite," she heard her voice tremble as the tears trickled down her face. "I'm...I can't..."

"Please, Lois, I'm begging you. Let the police handle this," Clark whispered in her ear. "It's not worth the headline." He pressed his lips against her forehead. "Just call the police and let them check it out."

"The tip said no police," Lois argued half-heartedly. "What if this is our only chance?"

"What if it's a trap?" Clark reached down to cradle her face in his hand. "The entire building is painted in lead-lined paint. Why do you think that is?"

Lois bit down on her lower-lip, pondering her next move as she stared back into his eyes, feeling herself waver from the intent she had earlier to storm inside and find where Bad Brain had hidden the Kryptonite and his stolen weapons.

Clark leaned in to capture her lips with his, stroking her jaw with his thumb as he murmured against her rain-covered lips. "I can't lose you." He shook his head. "It might be hypocritical and whatever else you want to call it, but I can't lose you, Lois. You're everything to me and if I have to get down and beg you not to go in there then I will."

Lois felt tears well up in her eyes as she reached up to stroke his cheek. "You don't have to beg."

"Let's go home," Clark urged, cradling her in his arms. "It's pouring down rain and we look like a couple of lunatics arguing in the middle of the worst part of town..." He trailed off as panic filled his eyes and he lunged back with her in his arms and a deafening sound filled her ears. She opened her mouth to ask and he whispered, "I've got you. It doesn't look like anyone was inside thankfully."

Lois craned her neck up to look behind him and gasped when

she saw the warehouse in flames. In the distance, she could hear sirens approaching, and she let out a labored cry. "I just want to stop him."

"I know," Clark murmured in her ear, "but I can't let you put everything on the line to do that. You mean too much to me and I would fall apart without you."

"You would not," Lois heard her voice waver as she choked back a sob.

He helped her to her feet, keeping a hand across her back. "Yes, I would." Her gaze shifted to the fire crackling then back at Clark, who still kept a protective hand on her as he followed her gaze to the smoldering warehouse. "Thankfully there's nothing nearby." He pointed to the fire engine that was approaching with the blaring horn announcing its presence. She silently watched as the fire fighters descended the truck and went to work to put the fire out.

She let out a heavy sigh and turned back to Clark. "So, no Superman to the rescue tonight?"

"I think he's put in enough hours," Clark whispered, tightening his arms around her waist as he drew her to him. "Can we go home now?"

She took another glance toward the burning building feeling a sense of dread fill her as the reality of how close she had come to being inside that warehouse when the bomb had gone off. A heavy weight pushed against her chest as she found herself unable to control the sobs that escaped her throat.

"Hey, it's okay. You're fine. Everything's fine." Clark brushed his lips against hers.

"No, it's not." Lois shook her head, swiping the tears and rain droplets away. "I hate this. I just want that poison locked away as far away from you and our kids... I wanted so badly for this to be the break we desperately needed. I ignored all the signs..."

Clark cocked an eyebrow at her, grasping onto her minor slip within her ramblings. "Kids?"

She allowed a half-smile to cross her face, "I'm pregnant."

His lips crashed into hers with an electrical storm of emotion as she lost herself in her husband's embrace.

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Thunder clapped in the background as Rufus "Bad Brain" Johnson tapped his hand on the countertop of the bar he was seated at. A chubby man with grayish hair around his ears and chin stood behind the bar, cleaning glasses while the television played up above his head. Bad Brain glanced toward the television, admiring the flames that flashed on the screen.

"Lucky no one was hurt, huh?" the barkeep muttered, pointing to the red ticker at the bottom of the screen displaying the message, 'Abandoned Warehouse Bombed! No Victims!'

Bad Brain slammed his fist on the counter, feeling the frustration flood through him. He had planted just enough information to make that Nosey Lane come running. He stood up from his seat at the bar, tossing a few bills in the barkeep's direction and then made his way toward the exit.

The door swung closed behind him and he turned the corner, heading back to the Fifth Street Mission when he felt a hand clamp on his shoulder. "Hey, you're him, aren't 'cha? That crazy guy that broke out of the prison and keeps electrocuting everyone."

Bad Brain scowled, jerking away from the sharp toned female that had dared make contact with him. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, I do." She pulled a card out of her pocket and handed it to him. "How's about an exclusive on your takedown of Super Duper? You too good to speak out to the fans?"

He blinked back in disgust as the rain drizzled down around him, swiping his fingers through his hair. "You got some kind of a death wish? I kill people. I don't do exclusives."

"And I write about people who kill people and make them

famous," the woman seemed unable to take a hint as she crossed her arms over her chest.

He glanced at the card, reading the name to himself. '*Keepin' It Real With Leslie Willis*' was printed along the top and below in script text was the title, '*Staff Columnist*.'

"You want to talk or you want me to call the police?" she held out a phone, threatening to start dialing. "It's your choice, Rufus."

"How about I just shut you up?"

From the pocket in his coat, Bad Brain pulled out a hand-held taser and fired it at her as a loud clap of thunder boomed, followed by a bolt of electricity that struck her at the same time as the taser. He dropped the taser, feeling the white-hot pain singe his hand as she fell back against the brick building. Her blonde hair turned a bleach white from the blast, and he backed away, startled by the surprise blast.

He had to get out of here.

Blue and Red lights emitted from the distance, and he reached inside his jacket, searching for another round to load his suped up electrical pistol but found it was empty. Anger flooded across his face and he felt a blast from behind him and then heard a voice taunt him.

"I didn't get my exclusive, Bad Brain."

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### Chapter 13: Stinging Like a Bee

#### *Present Day*

Lois laid in Jon's bed next to him and fingered the silky strands of his hair, holding him to her as she hummed a lullaby to him. His soft breathing whistled through his little nose, and she smiled to herself, cradling him in her arms as she shifted carefully out of the small wooden bed to make her way out of the room.

She ran a hand across her wrinkled blouse and reached her arms over her head, stretching her tired muscles out. After the confrontation with Nunk and the latest attempt from the tabloids, she'd taken Jimmy's advice and checked Jon out early. Perry had let him set up in the small conference room, playing cards and coloring while she and Clark finished typing up their follow up pieces on what she really considered fluff pieces. The mayor's stance on crime in Metropolis and song and dance about how she would be putting a stop to the warehouse district's drug ring. They'd heard it all before, but until they had something to print on the kidnappings and city corruption, this was the best she could do.

Perry did write an editorial shaming the paparazzi for their blatant disregard for journalistic ethics and even going so far as to accuse them of being in the pocket of whoever was trying to destroy a respected journalist with nothing but innuendos. It ran on the front page of the evening edition, but she doubted it would do much good given the current climate was to believe the most outrageous scandals first and ask questions second.

She closed the door behind her, careful not to make a sound as she tip-toed away from Jon's room, heading carefully toward the staircase that led downstairs. Most of the evening had been filled with Jon's retelling of his adventures with Uncle Perry and figuring out what to make for dinner. Clark had left for patrol just after dinner and probably wouldn't be back for another hour.

She hadn't brought up what was being splashed on the tabloid covers, and she was tempted not to. There wasn't anything to discuss. It was another smear attempt. Just like the one before it and the one she was sure would come after. This one felt different. More painful and sickening as the story in itself insinuated a physical relationship with Lex and Claude that never was.

The mistake she had made in allowing herself to be seduced by Claude had been a one-time mistake she swore she would never make again. What she'd mistaken for the blossoming of a new relationship and love had been met with betrayal and callous disregard for everything she had thought they had. It was that

mistake that had kept her from taking a risk on any future relationship.

That of course had been ‘B.C.’

Before Clark.

Burying herself in her work had been second nature to her, and it had taken nearly a year of being partnered together to realize he had slipped past her barriers. He had gotten to her despite her attempts to keep him at a distance. Every investigation they worked on together brought them closer to one another, so when faced with losing the Planet and their partnership, they both had reacted to the loss with despair. She had been in denial over it all until the truth had been staring her in the face.

Flashes from her assault at the hands of Lex flooded through her mind, and she sank to the floor just outside Jon’s room. She let out a shaky breath as she waited for the memories to subside, feeling tears burn in the corners of her eyes. The other mistake she had made had nearly cost her her life. Denial was a powerful tool that could cloud your judgment to even the most obvious things. She’d found out the hard way just how powerful it could be.

After months of listening to Clark warn her about Lex and blowing it off as him being jealous or just not giving him a chance, she had finally come face to face with the side of Lex Luthor Clark had tried to warn her about. She found herself face to face with a cruel monster she couldn’t even recognize, fighting for her life as she endured the cruel tauntings. It was by pure happenstance that he hadn’t gotten the opportunity to force himself on her. He’d certainly threatened it enough. Even now years later she found herself haunted by that night.

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

<<“Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I’ve had you?”>>

<<“Well, it’s no matter. His interference has been taken care of permanently. Mrs. Cox saw to that.”>>

<<“How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis... and fail?”>>

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

<<“That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I’m unstoppable.”>>

“Lois?” Clark’s voice called out to her, pulling her out of the mental walls she had found herself in. She looked up, staring at the familiar walls of her home and saw Clark knelt down on the floor next to her. “Hey, honey, what’s wrong?” Clark’s hand brushed against her cheek.

Lois shook her head, gripping the collar of Clark’s shirt, pulling him to her, and resting her head against his chest. She could feel the tension inside her grow as panic swarmed through her mind, reminding her of just how close she had come to losing everything.

“It’s okay, I’m right here,” Clark soothed, cradling her in his arms, smoothing his hands against her back, and he whispered in her ear, trying to coax her out of the full-fledged panic attack she was on the brink of. “Everything’s fine. Jon’s asleep in his bed, snoring like a little chainsaw.”

A soft chuckle escaped her throat, and she felt the pins and needles run through her as she smirked at him, reaching up to swipe her hand against her cheek where the tears had trickled down her face. “He doesn’t snore like a chainsaw.”

His lips brushed against her cheek, and he murmured, “You feeling okay to stand up?”

“Not yet,” Lois responded, looping her arms around his neck. He let out a grunt just before lifting her up in his arms and carrying her to the bedroom. She smiled her thanks and placed a

hand across Clark’s cheek. “That was a quick patrol.”

“It’s...eerily quiet tonight,” Clark murmured, leaning in to kiss her.

“Maybe the mayor isn’t all talk?” Lois wondered aloud, resting her head against his chest.

“Could be.” Clark let out a heavy breath, settling on the bed next to her.

She caught his gaze, seeing the silent question across his face. She shook her head. “I had a panic attack.”

“I know,” he said gently, reaching over to stroke her cheek.

She let out a long breath. “I think maybe all this paparazzi stuff is getting to me a little more than I was willing to admit.”

“Or maybe they pushed things too far,” Clark responded grimly, resting his hand against her hip bone. “Jimmy showed me the cover of *Tattletale Weekly* earlier.”

“Oh.” Lois frowned, letting out a heavy breath.

“Lois, they’re not going to stop unless we make them stop,” Clark pleaded gently. “I know you don’t want to draw more attention to this, but now they’re going after Jon.” He squared his jaw. “He can’t hang out in the newsroom forever. What are we going to do when he starts Kindergarten?”

“I know, but the more we push back, the more attention we give this... garbage,” Lois argued halfheartedly. “Nunk is nothing but a bottom-feeder nobody trying to cling on to this temporary bit of notoriety he’s gotten from this scandal he’s cooked up with that low-life that couldn’t write his way out of a paper bag.”

“And if it weren’t completely disrupting yours and Jon’s lives, I’d agree with you.” Clark reached over to cup her cheek. “This is the second panic attack you’ve had this month.”

“This...” She gestured toward the window, letting out a heavy sigh. “It just brings up a lot of things I don’t like to think about.”

Clark was quiet for a long moment, resting his hand against her back before he finally broke the silence. “We both know this isn’t just Nunk or even Claude. What happened...”

“Almost happened,” Lois corrected.

“Almost happened,” Clark clarified, leaning in to kiss her. His forehead pressed against hers, and his hand brushed against her cheekbone. “You made sure it was a matter of public record thanks to your stunt at Luthor’s trial. The fact that it is a part of public record makes it even easier to push back. It’s blatant defamation.”

“That would require me getting on the stand again and going into morbid detail of...” Lois clamped her mouth shut, shaking her head. “I did it once, and I just don’t think I have it in me to do it again.”

“So, maybe we see if we can scare them off with just the threat of a lawsuit,” Clark reasoned aloud, tightening his arms around her. “Maybe that’ll be enough to scare off whoever is behind this and dissuade any paparazzi from escalating this smear campaign any further.”

“I won’t testify again,” Lois said shakily, recalling how hard it had been to admit into record the worst mistake of her life and how close she had come to losing everything. Even now, years later, she found herself reminded of how that terrifying night when Lex had tormented her, assaulted, and nearly killed. Reliving it for any reason other than to ensure his forever sentence in whatever hole the courts opted to lock him away in was too much to bear.

Clark’s thumb brushed against her jawline. “I’m not asking you to.” A frown crossed his face, and he murmured, “I just hate standing back and doing nothing while these vultures continue to attack you and now, Jon.”

She visibly relaxed against him, resting her head against his shoulder. “I love you, you know that, right?”

“I seem to recall you mentioning it a time or two,” he teased, leaning in to kiss her.

His lips pressed against hers, and she let out a soft moan,

reaching up to stroke his cheek. The heel of her foot skirted against the ankle of his slacks, tugging him to her as she craned her neck to brush her lips against his in featherlight kisses.

“I love you, Lois.”

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The headlines scattered on the table, and Donald Schumer pinched the bridge of his nose, leaning back in his chair as he propped his feet up on the desk in his office. Across from him was the editor from *Tattletale Weekly* nervously stammering his unimaginative explanations for the day’s events. “Do you know why your paper was selected to run with this exclusive on Lois Lane?”

“Because we’re the best,” the editor responded smugly.

“Because you’re expendable,” Schumer remarked coldly, flicking the lighter to his cigar and taking a long puff. “If I wanted just anyone to print just anything, I wouldn’t need you. Would I?”

“You said you wanted the smear campaign. This is just nature taking its course.”

Schumer held up the latest headline with a picture of Lois Lane’s son and Superman on the cover. “How exactly do you think you’re going to continue that campaign with a super target on your back?”

“Look, it’s been talked about...”

“I decide what goes to print,” Schumer growled angrily. “I didn’t get where I am by making mistakes like drawing the attention of the neighborhood boy-scout.” Schumer took a long puff from his cigar and reached over to press the burning end against the print in front of him, singeing off the photo of Superman in a round, burning sphere. “Get every last print before it makes the morning news circuit. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly.”

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Omer Demir tapped his hand on the table in front of him, contemplating his next move. Those reporters were getting closer and closer to uncovering much more than this missing girl’s location. If they kept pressing, it could entirely dismantle the entire organization. He tapped on the cardstock business card in his hand, wondering just how much goodwill he could scrounge up from his dear friend Jack.

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Lois leaned over the conference room table, looking over the thousands of photocopies Clark and Jack had been able to make of the police’s missing person reports in the last ten years. A chill ran down her spine as she stared at the youthful faces of children that had been taken from everything they knew and planted into the dark abyss of wherever they had been taken.

“These are the last of them,” Clark said, pointing to the haunting image of the young Ingrid in the corner of the table. “But this is the girl Jack was looking for.”

“The same one Superman rescued a few months back.” Lois shook her head in disgust. “There have to be thousands of kids here.”

“But one of them got out.” Jack pushed the photo toward her. “We find her. We will find the others.”

“Maybe,” Clark added half-heartedly. “We still don’t know that she was kidnapped by the same people.”

“We don’t know that she wasn’t,” Jack argued. “It’s a long shot. I get it. But it’s the only lead we’ve got.”

“You weren’t able to get anywhere with your friend Omer?” Clark asked, raising an eyebrow at Jack.

“No.” Jack shook his head. “He was... anything but helpful when I mentioned the other kids missing. He seemed to be discouraging me more than anything, which was a bit surprising.”

Lois glanced in Clark’s direction, wondering if they should voice their suspicions of Omer to Jack or not. Clark shook his head, signaling for her not to. She took a shaky breath, pulling herself away from the images and turned toward the newsroom

where she saw Jimmy at the window, motioning to the phone for her and pointing to her with two fingers up.

“Lois Lane.” Lois reached over to answer the phone, wondering if she shouldn’t have asked for more information first before answering. Clark and Jack continued with their discussion on Omer and the young girl, Ingrid, as she tried to make out the recorded message playing in her ear.

“You have a prescription ready at Metro Pharmacy for PrimaCare ONE.” The recording then continued in its robotic voice. “If you have questions about your prescription, please call your Primary Physician.”

Lois hung the phone up a little sharper than she should have, catching both Clark and Jack’s attention. Clark’s brow furrowed as he looked at her in surprise. “Everything okay?”

“Just a mix-up at the pharmacy is all,” Lois said hurriedly, ducking out of the conference room and heading back to her desk. She could feel his eyes on her as she sunk down in her seat, noting the blinking red light on her phone.

Without a word, she picked up the receiver and dialed the pin to listen to the voicemail messages.

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“Weird,” Jack commented, looking back at Clark. “She doing okay with all this tabloid stuff?”

Clark shook his head, glancing toward the window where Lois could be seen dialing a number from her desk phone. “About as good as can be expected.” Clark pointed to the case file in front of Jack. “What did you mean by your friend Omer not being helpful at all?”

“It was weird,” Jack admitted, taking a seat at the table. “I showed him the data on how many unsolved kidnappings were originating in Metropolis and he wasn’t surprised by it but rather kinda dismissive. Like trying to brush it off like there was some other reason for all those kids to be missing.”

“Which there could be,” Clark admitted, shrugging his shoulders. “We don’t know enough to be pointing the finger at anyone.”

“Yeah, but this guy’s job is to help rescue kids from these sex trafficking and black market child slavery rings.”

“You’d think he’d be the last one to dismiss data that supports his cause.” Clark snorted offhandedly.

“Exactly.” Jack shook his head.

“What?” Clark asked, noting the perplexed expression on Jack’s face.

“I don’t know. I guess I just expected more from him.”

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*Two Years Ago...*

Clark’s arm lazily reached across the bed, slipping around Lois’ waist. A deep satisfied sigh escaped his throat as the rumbling from the construction a few blocks away reached his ears, nudging him awake. His hand moved to her abdomen, noting with a smile when he saw Lois’ hand was already there.

A smile crept across his face as he cradled her in his arms, trying to focus on the faint but rapidly beating heartbeat that thumped in unison with Lois’. The rapid thumping was like music to his ears as he laid next to her, focusing on each twitch of her lips and flutter of her eyelashes. So often, he found himself pulled away at the most inconvenient of times, making the small moments like this all the more precious.

His face broke out into a mega-watt grin as his mind drifted into the wonderful world of ‘if’ that came with the news Lois had shared last night. One minute he’d been pleading with her not to go barreling into that warehouse in Hobb’s Bay, and the next, she had been in tears changing his entire world with two words. Suddenly the frantic almost desperate need to protect both him and Jon from the Kryptonite poisoning made sense. Here was this new life they both wanted more than anything to safeguard from the chaotic world around them.

It was terrifying.

He had thought Kryptonite had been long gone for so long, and then when it had crept back up, he thought he was doing the right thing having Dr. Klein find a way to counteract its effects. Now it was possibly in the hands of Bad Brain. Unlike Luthor, Bad Brain had no rhyme or reason for the way he went after his victims. That was what made him so deadly.

"You're awake," Lois mumbled softly, fluttering her eyes open beneath the moonlit sky that peeked through their bedroom window.

"It's still early," Clark whispered, tightening his arms around her and burying his chin into the space between her neck and shoulder. "Go back to sleep."

She turned her head to look at him, reaching her hand up against his face and tracing the outline of his jaw. "What are you doing up?"

"Just... thinking." His hand settled against her abdomen, and he brushed his lips against her cheek.

"Yeah?" her face cracked into a smile. "Anything in particular?"

"Just... how much I love you," he murmured, placing another kiss to her cheek.

She smiled, rolling over to face him and reached up, hooking her arms around his neck and pulling him to her. He found himself immediately reminded of how they had fallen asleep last night as her naked body pressed against him.

"I still have to have the ultrasound to confirm the pregnancy." A throaty whisper escaped her lips as she lifted her right leg, brushing it up against his hip.

"So, let's call now," he sighed, nudging the curve of her neck with his nose.

She giggled, fingering the hair on the back of his neck. "It's almost five in the morning."

"So?" Clark chuckled, lifting his head to meet her gaze.

"So, scheduling an ultrasound with the on-call isn't exactly a good use of time this early in the morning." Her arms hooked into a tight fold, tugging him closer and allowing him to settle his weight on her as he felt his body immediately react to hers.

"Hmm, well, then what would be a better use of time?"

Her leg lifted, gradually brushing against the back of his thigh as she murmured in a soft whisper, "Well, I have a few ideas... I mean, if you're not preoccupied."

"I can't think of anything..." he whispered, lowering his mouth to hers in a soul-shattering kiss.

\*\*\*

Dan Scardino tucked the boarding pass into his pocket, tightening his grip on the carry-on bag he had on his back. His gaze moved across the semi-crowded terminal, where he was awaiting the announcement to board.

Hamil's information seemed to have panned out with the powers that be, but unfortunately, McCord hadn't weathered as well through the scrutiny on their methods of extracting the information from Hamil. The bombing of the port and subsequent dead end as they had put it had all been planted on McCord's shoulders and with it the strong encouragement to retire from the agency.

Though it wasn't unusual for the higher-ups to weigh in from time to time on an investigation, it did seem strange that the one lead they'd received was the one where Washington decided to flex its muscles and prove who was in charge.

*'Sudan here I come,'* Scardino thought to himself.

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Lois wrapped an arm around herself, staring at the footage on Stern Media Network with Alice on the screen relaying the recent development in Bad Brain's reign of terror. "Scooped," she muttered with a sigh, looking over at Clark, who was standing next to her with a hot travel mug of coffee.

"Authorities are saying the recently escaped prisoner Bad Brain Johnson was found unconscious with several patrolmen. How he or any of the officers got that way is unknown at this time, but the Police Chief of Metropolis has issued a statement citing all officers are undergoing care at MetGen along with Bad Brain. Once recovered, Bad Brain will be returned to custody."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure there's a lot more to the story," Clark commented, taking a sip from his mug. "The entire alley they found Bad Brain in looked like it had been completely consumed in some kind of high-powered energy. Even the bricks on the building were stained with impressions from the blast."

"Anything jump out on your patrol this morning?" Lois asked, taking a sip from her travel mug.

"Nothing outside of the signs of something high powered exploding." Clark shook his head, pulling her to him. "Maybe Bad Brain crossed the wrong person, and they got their revenge."

"Maybe," Lois placed a hand on his shoulder. "I just hate that those officers got caught in the crossfire."

"Me too." Clark frowned. "I wasn't able to get a definitive timeline out of the Police Chief. They're guessing sometime before the warehouse in Hobb's Bay went into flames, but until the doctors finish their tests, no one really knows for sure."

Lois nodded, noting the somber expression on his face. She knew that look. He was beating himself up over not getting there or hearing the cries for help that could have never even come from whatever blast had taken them out. She moved her hand to his chest, toying with the end of his tie. "You know this isn't your fault, right?"

"I know." Clark sighed, unconvincingly looking away from her.

"You can't be everywhere, and you can't do everything," she reminded him, looping her arms around his neck and pulling him to her.

"I still feel guilty when someone gets hurt." Clark frowned.

"Well, you're going to have to set that aside for a rainy day because we have an appointment after Perry's staff meeting to confirm the pregnancy at Met Gen." She flashed him a half-smile. "I mean, I guess I could reschedule if you're still brooding..."

His lips captured hers, and his hand cupped her face, murmuring softly, "Don't you dare."

A grin crossed her face as she looked back at him, expectantly. "So, I take it you're coming with me?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Clark promised, brushing his lips against hers. "You couldn't keep me away." His hands moved to her midsection, smiling at her before resting his forehead against hers. "I can't wait to tell Jon he's going to be a big brother."

"Think we can talk Perry into letting us leave for that long overdue vacation a day early?" She asked, toying with the knot to his tie. "I mean, Bad Brain is in custody..."

"And what about the Kryptonite?" Clark asked, stroking her cheek.

"Dr. Klein said he thought he had it all back," Lois reminded him. He raised an eyebrow at her, and she gave him a pleading look. "I miss my boy."

He let out a heavy sigh, nodding with her. "Me too." He leaned in to kiss her. "You still need to be careful."

"I need to be careful?" She cocked an eyebrow at him. "I'm not the one that walked into Bad Brain's trap."

He let out a heavy sigh, nodding in defeat. "No, but I am going to be more cautious too." He ran his hand across her midsection. "We both need to be more careful. We got lucky. Bad Brain is in custody and out of commission, and neither one of us had to take any unnecessary risks to capture him."

"Are you calling my investigative skills *unnecessary* risks?" Lois asked.

"Maybe." He leaned his head down to press his lips to hers.

“You know what I was thinking?”

“That we’re going to be late?” Lois pointed at the time.

“We’re already late.” Clark shrugged.

“We’re always late,” Lois corrected, tugging him by the end of his tie with her toward the door.

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“Authorities are saying the recently escaped prisoner Bad Brain Johnson was found unconscious with several patrolmen. How he or any of the officers got that way is unknown at this time...”

An electrical spark came from the screen of the television, crackling the image into multi-colored pixels. The store clerk tapped on the screen, looking around for the source to the sudden short circuit. He looked to the wall where the television set was hooked up to and pulled out the melted power cord.

“What in the world?” the clerk wondered aloud, holding it up in dismay.

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Lois tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she skimmed over the cover story for the warehouse bombing from last night. “I think this one’s just about ready to send over to Perry.” She craned her neck to look back at Clark, who was standing behind her. “What do you think?”

“That’s not how you spell ‘*assess*.’” Clark pointed at the screen, leaning over her shoulder to give her a quick peck on the cheek.

She smirked at him, making the change on her typo and then hitting the send button before spinning around in her chair to where she was face to face with him. “Any word from Henderson on Bad Brain’s condition?”

Clark shook his head. “No, they’re staying pretty tight-lipped about it.”

Lois twisted her mouth, folding her arms across her chest as she looked back at him with a frown. “Sociopath like Bad Brain ends up unconscious in an alley with two squad car units, and no one seems to know why.” She shook her head. “Someone knows something. They’re just not talking.”

Clark shoved his hands into his pockets, nodding his agreement. “You’re probably right.” A grin crossed his face as he leaned in to whisper, “You know they are under observation at Met Gen.”

She chuckled, leaning in closer to him as she toyed with the end of his tie. “Why, Mr. Kent, are you insinuating we should use our ultrasound appointment as an excuse to investigate a story?”

He grinned back at her, pressing his lips to hers. “It is a big building. Easy to get turned around.”

“Hey, hey, you two cut that out!” Perry barked, passing between the walkway of their desks. He stopped, mid-stride, looking back at them with a concerned expression. “Either of you hear from our new columnist this morning? Leslie?”

“Not a peep,” Lois responded with a shrug. “Why?”

Perry grunted, shaking his head. “This is the last time I hire a radio host to work on a column. Can’t even string two thoughts together without a comma splice...” He pointed toward the conference room. “Staff meeting in five. Try not to be late...” he glanced toward the desk off to the corner with Leslie’s nameplate on it and grumbled, “...like some people around here.”

Clark grimaced, watching Perry head back to his office. “I’m guessing he’s not a fan either.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Trying to combat everyone’s opinion on the person that’s saved just about everyone here on her first day isn’t a good way to make friends. Then again, why would you take a job at a place that supports the very thing you supposedly are against?”

“I’ve heard money talks.” Clark shrugged his shoulders, pointing to the clock on her computer. “Better not be late.”

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Bill Henderson tapped his notepad, looking over at the pale skinned officers that were hooked up to what felt like a hundred monitors. He turned to where the doctor heading up their treatment was standing, taking note of the officers’ condition.

“Hey.” He waved his hand up in the air to capture the doctor’s attention. “You got a sec?”

The doctor looked at his watch and nodded, motioning for him to follow. Henderson tucked his notepad in his pocket and followed him out into the hallway. “Tell me something, doc, you’ve been doing this what...?”

“Twenty-five years.”

“You ever seen injuries like this before?” Henderson asked, glancing toward the room they had just stepped out of.

“No,” the doctor responded grimly.

“What do you think caused it?” Henderson pointed to the room with his arm. “You’ve seen them. They’re completely drained. Pale and on death’s door. What the heck happened to them?”

“As I told you before, detective, it’s electro-shock. We did have an electrical storm last night...”

“Really, when’s the last time an electrical storm did that?” Henderson argued.

“Bill?”

Henderson looked up, spotting the familiar reporting duo a few feet away. He glanced toward the doctor who quietly nodded and made his exit. Henderson folded his arms across his chest, looking back at both Lois and Clark, who somehow managed to talk their way past security “A bit early in the day for interviews, isn’t it, Lois?” He nodded toward the guards that were on duty. “How’d you get past security?”

Lois pulled out a visitor’s badge. “We’re not here for a story.” She frowned, looking over at Henderson. “But something tells me maybe we should be.”

“How are they?” Clark asked, keeping his arm around Lois.

“About as well as can be expected,” Henderson explained with a defeated sigh. “I have no idea what we’re dealing with here.” He admitted with a shrug before adding, “And that is completely off the record.”

“You guys have any leads on who might be behind this?” Lois asked.

“All our evidence seems to be pointing to Bad Brain.” Henderson shrugged, pointing to the secured room behind him. “And he’s not exactly talking.”

Lois and Clark exchanged a look seeming to silently be deciphering what he had said in some secret code between them. Clark opened his mouth to ask something further when they were approached by a nurse.

“This is a restricted area. Can I help you?”

Henderson smirked as he watched the duo fast-talk and feign a bad sense of direction as the nurse pointed them toward the sign that led to ‘Ultrasound.’ The curious side of him wondered just how much of their display was for show and how much of it was genuine as he spotted Clark place a hand on Lois’ midsection before disappearing down the hall.

Henderson turned on his heel to head back into the room and frowned when he saw the screen outside the room flicker. “Hey, what’s going on here?”

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The wand moved against Lois’ abdomen filling the room with the rapid thudding coming from the unborn life growing inside her. A giggle escaped her throat, and she looked over at Clark, who was beaming from ear to ear with a mega-watt grin.

“I love you,” she whispered, reaching out for his hand.

“I love you,” he whispered back, pressing his lips to hers.

The technician handed her the prints of the ultrasound and wished them well before handing her a disposable cloth to wipe the gel off her abdomen. So many thoughts wandered through her

mind, and she let out an elated sigh.

Pregnant.

This was really happening. There was really a little baby growing inside her. A little life that would grow into a brother or sister to Jon. She felt her face stretch to accommodate the smile that had continued to grow across her face.

“We’re going to be parents again,” she whispered softly to Clark as he helped her up.

“I know,” he murmured, leaning in to kiss her.

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Clark wrapped his arms around Lois, unable to wipe the smile off his face. His hands intertwined together as he held her in his arms, placing a kiss against her forehead. “I love you, you know that?”

“I think you’ve mentioned it a time or two,” Lois teased, tugging on the lapels to his jacket and pulling him to her. Her lips pressed against his and she murmured softly, “So, now that it’s officially confirmed, how do you feel about all this? I mean I know we didn’t exactly plan this out, but Jon is getting older and...” She paused, looking back at him shyly, unable to hide the elated grin that had crossed her face. “I know he’s going to be such a great big brother.”

“Lois, I’m ecstatic,” Clark murmured against her lips, running his hands through her hair before adding with a chuckle, “If I didn’t make that abundantly clear last night or this morning, I can keep trying...”

She swatted at his chest, playfully and gestured to the open elevator car. “I think this is our floor.”

Clark let out a heavy sigh, stepping out of the elevator car and seeing the yellow number two painted on the cement column just outside the elevator doors and walked with her to the corner parking spot they had claimed earlier.

A buzzing noise reached his ears, and he turned to see the lights overhead flickering, followed by a loud pop. The underground parking garage then turned dark, and he turned to Lois, who was gripping his hand with an unusual amount of pressure. “Lois, why don’t you go ahead and head back? I’ll meet you at the Planet.”

She opened her mouth to argue but seemed to think better of it, nodding her agreement and heading toward the Jeep. Another crackling noise emitted, and this time he saw a bright glowing light emitted from the corner of the garage over where the generator to the parking lot was located.

A figure in black with pale white hair stood over it, seeming to draw the electrical energy from the generators. A quick change into his Superman uniform and he was face to face with the mysterious figure approaching with caution as he called out, “I’m no expert, but I don’t think the generator is included with the parking fee.”

A hard blast filled the room, and he flew back, hitting the cement column behind him. He quickly reached up to stop it from falling and then turned to see the figure in front of him that appeared to be emitting a white light.

“Blah, blah, blah, Super Duper don’t you have a cat to save?”

The blast hit him across the chest, and he fell back again. She let out a snort. “You think that’s bad just wait till I finish chargin’ up...”

A scream from the other end of the parking garage reached his ears, and he growled back at the figure, “You’re hurting people. You need to stop.”

“Make me.”

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Pain.

Excruciating nerve-ending pain.

It hit her like a wave.

A painful, irreversible electro-shockwave with such deadly consequences. Lois had barely made it to the Jeep when she felt

the painful aftereffects hit her. Her head hit the pavement, and her teeth hummed as every nerve ending in her body cried out in agony. Every limb locked up and with it any chance she had of bracing herself for the inevitable fall that was to come.

A cry of agony escaped her throat, and panic filled her mind.

The whirlwind of images from the day flooded her mind in a scattered maze of uncertainty. Her hand trembled, and she stared at the flickering overhead light, wincing as she felt the weak tingling run through her body. Her hand brushed against the cold concrete beneath her, assessing her surroundings.

Hospital.

She needed to get to the hospital.

No.

Yes.

No, she was at the hospital.

She needed to go back to the hospital.

Yes, that sounded right.

She turned her neck, feeling a hard cramp run through her abdomen as a labored sob escaped from the depths of her soul, echoing in the empty space she was in. Her arms trembled as she held them around her abdomen, trying to will the pain away.

“Clark,” she called his name in a hoarse whisper that barely made it past her lips. A blood curdling cramp consumed her, and she felt her body go limp from the pain.

Her eyes drifted to the space behind her. There was an elevator. She could get to the elevator and get help. She was still at the hospital.

She just had to get help.

She needed to get out of here.

Needed Clark.

Another cramp seized her and she felt tears trickle down her cheeks from the pain as a dampness between her legs flooded out.

‘No...Please God no...’

“Cl...”

Her legs buckled when she tried to stand, and she rolled over, cradling her abdomen as another gush of warmth ran down the inside of her legs. She gritted her teeth, trying to keep them from chattering as she crawled toward the elevator, dragging her limp body to the panel. A sickening feeling washed over her as she looked back at the dark pool of blood that had fallen.

It was too much blood.

‘Please, no...’

She reached the elevator doors, planting her hands on the floor as she propped herself up, trying to will a calm over herself she didn’t feel. She placed a hand over her abdomen, taking in a labored breath as she whispered out, “Please don’t leave me.”

Her hand floundered above her head as she flailed it around, trying to find the single button to call an elevator to the underground parking garage. Her teeth chattered as she sat there, clutching her abdomen as the labored cries escaped her throat. A million thoughts raced through her mind as she waited for the elevator doors to open.

The pain was all-consuming.

The physical pain she could bear.

The pain would heal, and she would be stronger for it.

She always was.

But this.

This excruciating pain that ran through her, knocking the wind out of her and crippling her mind, body, and spirit -this was something she was sure would destroy her. There weren’t enough tears to sob or pleas to cry. She felt the world itself stop around her as she cradled her body, waiting for a miracle.

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Everything hurt.

Every muscle.

Every nerve.

A taunting tone came from the electrical villain that

continued to use the generator as her power source to continue her electrical assault on the innocent patients, and Clark, as he staggered to his feet, gritting his teeth dared to challenge her.

“Oh, please, Super Duper, you’re really pathetic. I’ve barely touched you, and you’re already whining like a little girl...”

“You need to stop, Leslie,” Clark called out, trying to reach the woman behind this mask of bitterness in hopes that he could convince her to stop since his strength was nothing compared to pure energy.

He caught the familiar bite in her tone and the face behind the bleach white hair and pale skin tone. Another wail reached his ears as another blast of mind-numbing electrical energy pulsed through his veins. He gritted his teeth, summing up all his strength as he barreled his way toward her as the entire level of the parking garage was washed in a bright blinding light.

Another shot came at him as she taunted him, floating in a ball of energy and aiming the blasts of electrical energy around him and crumbling the building around him. He quickly aimed his heat vision toward the building, looking for anything that would stop her.

“Oh, you know my name, do you?” She grinned back at him, holding her hands out and shoving a wall of electrical energy in his direction. “Why don’t you have a seat, Supers, and stay awhile?”

“What’s wrong, don’t you answer to your name? Or maybe you don’t want the world knowing who is responsible for all this destruction?”

“You don’t know anything about me, Super,” she shot back with a wall of energy thrust on him again. “If you’re going to quote me, at least get it right. It’s LiveWire now.”

His brow furrowed as he growled back at her, “It was you, wasn’t it? Those officers. Bad Brain.”

“Hey, I can’t help it if they don’t know how to get out of my way!” LiveWire shoved another wall of energy toward him, crackling her hands in the air and pushing him down against the corner wall of the parking garage. “And this is Metropolis’ hero?” she scoffed. “Pathetic.”

The wall behind her continued to crack, and he aimed his heat vision at the wall again, but this time he aimed the beam at the pipe behind her, striking it and spraying LiveWire with a gush of water and fizzling her out. He stood over her shaking his head in dismay. From the distance, he could hear the police approaching through the stairs.

“Superman!” one of the officers called out to him over by the painted number that read ‘LL’ for lower-level. “All clear?”

Clark nodded, motioning the officers to approach. “I think she’s subdued now.”

A crowd of officers approached in hazmat suits, prepared to take her into custody. Clark let out a heavy sigh. At least now, he had somewhat of an explanation for what had happened to Bad Brain. Still, what had happened to Leslie might forever remain a mystery.

A blood-curdling scream reached his ears, and his face went pale, recognizing the voice immediately. He scanned the path of destruction from which he had followed Leslie from and panicked when he saw the white stains on the walls leading up to the level Lois had been on.

‘Lois...’

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“Lois?”

The parking garage was dimly lit with a buzzing overhead light that barely lit the corners of the cemented space. Each step he took toward the Jeep filled him with a sense of dread Clark couldn’t quite explain.

“Lois?”

Something was wrong.

He could feel it with every fiber of his being. The pain inside

his chest hit him like a wave from somewhere he couldn’t quite describe. Pins and needles roamed through his body as he fought against the overwhelming sensation of dread that continued to paralyze him in place.

He looked down, noting the blue spandex uniform was still on him. He was still dressed as Superman. Why was he still dressed as Superman? Why hadn’t he changed yet?

He closed his eyes, trying to focus on the sounds around him. Lois. He couldn’t find Lois. He had to find her. He had to...

It wasn’t a huge amount.

A droplet.

Maybe two.

More than two.

Still, it was fresh.

“Lois?”

His heart hammered against his chest as he stared at the droplets, noticing the small trail that seemed to grow darker and more concentrated.

Then he saw it. The handprint. The very clear handprint covered in deep blood red smeared against the pavement. The lines of the smear grew more intense until they finally stopped just outside the elevator doors.

There.

“No, no, no, no...”

The trail of wheels running through a large pool of blood could be seen just outside the elevator. The elevator panel had a bloody handprint on it from where it had been slammed with a few failed attempts.

‘Lois...’

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Clark barely made it through the elevator doors, feeling the sick churning in the pit of his stomach as he turned the corner to where he had been what felt like moments ago. He looked down at his hands, seeing the dried red stains on his hands and blanching inwardly at the sight. He reached the counter where a nurse and doctor were standing there just staring at him in disbelief.

He pointed to the elevator behind him and finally found his voice to utter out, “There was a woman in the... parking garage. Blood.”

The doctor nodded. “Yes, Superman, we have her under observation.”

“C-can I see her?” he stammered out, not quite following why the doctor was calling him Superman.

“Well, we have a call in to her husband right now. Only immediate family right now. You understand, Superman.” The nurse smiled back at him.

He was about to argue when he saw the blue spandex on his arm, covered in the red blood from where he had found the bloodstains in the parking garage. He’d forgotten to change. He needed to change. Then he could come back and see Lois. It seemed so trivial right now...to change his wardrobe at a time like this.

He looked down at the yellow and red crest across his chest, trying to assess what it was the doctor and nurse were saying. He needed to change. He had to change in order to see Lois. He looked around the crowded waiting area and backed away until he found a door leading to the exit.

He ducked inside the bathroom just outside the door, checking there was no one else in there and quickly changing back into his suit and tie from earlier. He stopped in front of the mirror, seeing the bloody smear across his forehead. The water was icy cold as it hit his palm. He quickly scrubbed at it until it was gone, then, as quickly as he entered, he exited the small bathroom.

A weary hand ran through his dark hair, and he braced himself, reaching out to take the doorknob in his hand and pulling it toward him. Inside he found the waiting room in the same condition it had been in moments ago. The woman from earlier

flashed a somber frown in his direction and pointed him to the hallway behind them.

He barely got Lois' name out of his mouth before he found himself face to face with a doctor that was placing his hand on his shoulder and offering his condolences. The same doctor that had been offering congratulations not even an hour earlier was telling him how lucky Lois was to be alive. How lucky...?

The word felt like a sick taunt as if he was to be grateful for the fact that the small glimmer of hope for a life he and Lois had been promised barely an hour before had been snuffed out. Luck had nothing to do with this.

His hand moved across his face, trembling beneath the pressure of having to stand in front of these people and listen to all the different excuses they tried to give him for why his child's life had been taken. He could hear the remorse in their voice, and he was sure they probably thought they were helping with their pamphlets and clinical description of calling his child a fetus as they kept straight faces explaining how much pain Lois would be in and how lucky she was to be alive. The words felt hollow as they kept referring to his child as a fetus and referring to the miscarriage as 'natural.'

There was nothing natural about what had happened.

"Where is Lois?" he finally interrupted, unable to listen to their excuses for another second.

The doctor's face sombered and she pointed down the hall, motioning for him to follow. A swipe of the badge later and they were walking through the same hallway he'd been in over an hour ago, only this time they weren't going toward the sign that read 'Ultrasound.' But toward the sign that read 'Post-Op.'

"She's still pretty out of it," the doctor explained, opening the door for him.

He stepped inside the room, hearing the door close behind him and let out a labored breath, fighting back the rage that threatened to consume him. The room was dimly lit with a single window by the bed where Lois laid hooked up to what seemed like a thousand machines. Each step felt like a monumental defeat as he inched closer and closer to Lois' bedside.

A hard lump that felt unmovable sat in his throat as he propped himself on the edge of the hospital bed, gazing over Lois' pale body. She looked so fragile, hooked up to all these machines, keeping track of her heart rate, oxygen intake, and blood pressure. He placed a hand over her left hand, noting it was covering her abdomen.

*'Oh, God, does she know?'*

Her lips parted ever so slightly, and her voice cracked with a single word escaping her throat, "Ow."

"Lois?" Clark leaned closer, trying to assess if he had heard her or simply imagined the small sound that escaped her lips.

"Ow..." she repeated, more forcefully as her eyes fluttered open, gazing at him with tears in her eyes. She clamped her eyes closed and gritted her teeth. "It hurts."

His hand brushed against her cheek, and he whispered, "I know, honey, you..." He felt his voice tremble as he tried valiantly not to allow the rage inside him escape. The last thing Lois needed to be doing was trying to console him. "You were struck by..." His head lowered as he fought back the tears, trying to find the words. "Lois, I'm so sorry..."

Tears trickled down her cheeks as she croaked out the question he knew was coming. "The baby... Clark, is our baby...?"

He bit down on his lower-lip, hanging his head as he leaned closer, cradling her in his arms as he cupped her face with his palm. "I'm so sorry..."

"No." She shook her head adamantly as the tears streamed down her cheeks, flowing freely as a weak wail escaped her throat, crushing what little resolve he had left. "Please, no..."

"I'm so sorry..."

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## Chapter 14: Already Brushing Off the Dust

*Present Day...*

"I'm sorry Ms. Lane, I thought the lab had called you already..."

Lois quickly cut the nurse off, "Well, there was a voicemail to call them back, but it's not like they spelled anything out for me." Lois paused, hearing the bite in her tone. "I'm sorry. It's just a little surprising is all."

"Well, it's still pretty early. That's to be expected," The nurse advised happily. "You said you stopped taking your contraceptive three months ago?"

"Five," Lois said, looking over her shoulder to be sure her conversation wasn't being overheard. Her and Clark's private life was already under scrutiny and this would only add fuel to the fire.

Pregnant.

She was pregnant.

<< "You were struck by ...Lois, I'm so sorry..." >>

<< "Clark, is our baby...?"

"I'm so sorry..."

"No... Please, no..." >>

<< "Please don't leave me." >>

They had all but given up hope after they'd been told how difficult conceiving would be after her injuries from her run-in with LiveWire and the after-effects of her miscarriage. They had tried of course. Almost desperately until it became too painful to stare at the single pink line every month, taunting her with its rejection.

There had of course been the off handed thought, a whimsical wonder of what it would be like to have another baby. The reality of it seemed to be an unattainable beacon she never could quite catch. The pain that had consumed her and Clark after their run-in with LiveWire two years ago still lingered. She doubted she would ever truly recover from it. Now here she was faced with the reality of an impending pregnancy amidst the chaos that continued to ravage their lives.

"Any idea how far along I am?"

<< "Clark, is our baby...?"

"I'm so sorry..."

"No... Please, no..." >>

<< "Please don't leave me." >>

"It's hard to say exactly without a definitive last period date. I'd like to get you in as soon as possible to help narrow down the date of conception and begin prenatal care," the nurse advised gently. "It looks like we can get you in this afternoon for an ultrasound."

Lois blanched slightly, interrupting the nurse, "I think maybe let's try for later in the week. Today's already a little crazy." She eyed Clark exiting the conference room with Jack. "Could you send over the dates and times you have and I'll confirm tomorrow?"

"Sure thing, Ms. Lane," the nurse replied adding a quick, "Congratulations."

Lois hung up the phone, feeling her hand tremble as she released it from the receiver. She let out a heavy breath, still reeling from the news she'd received. Her hand instinctively reached down to her abdomen, placing it protectively over her midsection.

<< "You were struck by... Lois, I'm so sorry..." >>

<< "Clark, is our baby...?"

"I'm so sorry..."

"No... Please, no..." >>

<< "Please don't leave me." >>

"Lois?"

She heard her name being called, pulling her from the painful memories that continued to haunt her. She looked up and saw Perry standing next to her with a concerned look on his face.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine,” Lois said hurriedly, flipping the notepad over in her lap she had been using to jot down her notes during her call with her OBGYN’s nurse.

Perry’s brow furrowed but he didn’t say anything. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a card for her. Lois took the business card from him, spotting the Daily Planet logo across the top and the script writing at the bottom which read ‘General Counsel Staff.’

“You and Clark will need to stop by her office to sign some papers to get the defamation suit filed,” Perry explained finally after she glanced at him with a questioning gaze. He cleared his throat and added, “That is... you’re still wanting to file the suit, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lois nodded, though her voice was less than convincing when she spoke up, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear and flashing him a quick smile. “I, uh, guess I was surprised with how quickly things move is all.”

Perry gave her a pained expression. “Well, truth be told the Planet has been holding this card close to the vest, but it wasn’t something we felt comfortable moving forward with until you and Clark were onboard.”

“Well, I guess I can understand that.” Lois tapped her hand across her desk. “So, what exactly is the plan? Go after every media organizations continuing to spread this untruth to their subscribers and readers and then what?” Her thumb brushed against the ink on the card, still apprehensive of this step.

“Well, we hit ‘em where it hurts until they stop.” Perry laid a hand on her shoulder. “You’re doing the right thing.” He patted her shoulder with his hand and then moved toward his office.

Lois let out a heavy sigh, watching him leave. Her attention shifted back to the card in her hand, wondering what her next move should be. She turned back to the conference room, catching Clark’s gaze as he navigated his way through the array of desks in the newsroom and stopped in front of her.

“Find something?” Lois asked, gesturing to the conference room he’d just exited out of.

“Maybe,” he said, perching himself on the edge of her desk. “Jack’s friend Omer might be finally showing Jack his true colors.”

“You mean the fact that he’s suspiciously creepy and something isn’t adding up with his story on what he’s doing teaching art history when he’s supposedly so connected?”

“Hmm, more along the lines of him discouraging Jack to look at the trend of more kids going missing in the recent years.” Clark tapped the side of his chin. “I still don’t trust him.”

“Hmm, well, then who do we trust to help find these girls?” Lois asked, leaning back in her chair, subconsciously tapping the card in her hand against her abdomen.

“The FBI?” Clark snorted, shaking his head in dismay. “I don’t know. I can’t understand how so many kids could disappear and nobody do anything to stop it.” He pointed at the card in her hand, changing the subject. “What’s that?”

“Card for the Planet’s legal counsel,” Lois said, handing it to him. “I take it you talked to Perry already.”

“I called him this morning,” Clark said, glancing over his shoulder before adding in a hushed whisper. “I wanted to be sure we go about this the right way, so we don’t put him in a tough spot.”

Lois nodded her agreement. “Well, Perry said there’s a few documents we need to sign before they can file the suit.”

Clark held out his hand for her, helping her up from her seat. “I guess now’s as good a time as any to head downstairs and sign everything.”

Lois walked with Clark up the ramp leading to the upper balcony by the elevators. She let out a heavy sigh and shook her head. “I’m still not entirely convinced this won’t come back to

bite us some way,” she said as they reached the top of the ramp.

They walked over to the elevator panel, and he reached over to press the call button. The elevator pinged and they stepped onto the elevator car as he murmured. “Well, it might, or it might get these guys to back off.”

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*Two Years Ago...*

The floorboards creaked ever so slightly as Clark landed in his living room. He winced inwardly, looking through the ceiling above him to where Jon and Lois were fast asleep, thankfully oblivious to the late hour he had returned. He glanced at the clock, pondering if he should even bother with the pretense of attempting sleep or not. Sleep had been elusive these last few weeks.

He spun out of his Superman suit and discarded it into the laundry basket, running a weary hand across his face. The oil tanker fire that had erupted thankfully had minimal damage to the Metropolis Bridge and the captain and crew had all been brought to safety with no injuries. It was a good rescue.

Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he should have done more.

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<<“That idiot Kent never could figure that out. I was always twelve steps ahead of him. I’m unstoppable.”>>

<<“You were struck by... Lois, I’m so sorry...”>>

<<“Do you really think Superman will take you back once he knows I’ve had you?”>>

<<“Clark, is our baby...?”

“I’m so sorry...”

“No... Please, no...”>>

<<“How does it feel to know how close you were to bringing down the boss of Metropolis...and fail?”>>

<<“Please don’t leave me.”>>

“No! Jon! No!”

Lois shot up in bed, screaming from the invisible threat that plagued her mind. Sweat poured down her face as she looked around the dark room, trying to place the familiar surroundings with the painful images from her recent nightmare.

Her hand instinctively reached for her abdomen, reaching out for the life that had been lost. Painful tears escaped the corners of her eyes and she let out a muffled sob. She glanced at the clock, running a hand through her tangled hair. Her heart still pounded against her chest as she instinctively reached for Clark, feeling a hallow pang in her chest when she felt the cool sheets against her fingertips.

Clark still wasn’t back from his patrol.

The haunting images from her recent nightmare plagued her mind, reminding her of her loss, and the fear of losing so much more pushed its way to the forefront of her mind. Tears trickled down her cheeks and she reached up to wipe them away. Her entire body ached as she rolled over in bed. She let out a low breath, wincing as she sat up, wobbling to her feet and padding her way toward Jon’s room.

She just needed to see him. Reassure herself that he was okay and then she could go back to bed. Maybe Clark would be home soon. She let out a heavy sigh. The patrols were getting more and more frequent in the past few weeks. A part of her wondered if he was avoiding her or if it was simply just his way of dealing with the miscarriage.

Her hand tightened around the doorknob to Jon’s room, taking in a shallow breath as she carefully twisted the knob. She poked her head inside his room, sighing in relief when she saw Jon asleep in his bed with his arm tucked around his favorite teddy bear. A smile peaked across her face and she softly closed the door, careful not to wake Jon up.

She turned to head back to bed and almost ran straight into her husband’s chest. She let out a low hiss. “Don’t do that.”

“Sorry.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s two in the

morning. What are you still doing up?"

She twisted her mouth, shaking her head as she mumbled out, "I woke up. Just wanted to check on him." She glanced up at him and added, "Are you just now finishing up patrol?"

"No..." He frowned and let out a half-hearted, "Sort of." He let out a heavy sigh. "There were a few muggings, a break-in, and then an oil tanker caught fire..."

She reached her hand up, brushing it across his cheek, watching as his eyes clamped closed at her touch. Her lips pressed to his, then she leaned her head against his shoulder and whispered, "Sounds like a busy night for Superman."

"Eventful," he allowed wrapping his arms around her and pulling her to him. "Come on, honey, it's late. You need your rest."

"And you don't?" she murmured, lifting her head up to look at him.

He let out a long shallow breath, leaning in to lift her up in his arms as he leaned in to kiss her. He then whispered in her ear, "You win."

A grin crossed her face as he leaned over to kiss her, cradling her in his arms as he carried her back to bed. She let out a contented sigh, feeling his weight press against her as they sank onto the bed. His arms wrapped around her waist and she noted the soft breaths coming from him. She joined him shortly afterward, praying the nightmares that had awoken her earlier wouldn't return.

\*\*\*

Sweat poured down Dan Scardino's back as he made his way through the crowded bazar looking for the red tin roof of the booth he'd been told would be run by a man of the name Omer Demir who could take him to Schiller. He had been searching for this Omer for nearly three days. He was soaked from the never-ending sweat that poured over his body and felt a fatigue that shook him to the bone.

Still, he remained vigilant, ready to take on whatever was thrown at him. He had come so far and faced the many demons this world had to offer. With each challenge, he knew he was getting closer.

Finally, he reached the red tin roof at the end of the bazar and saw a figure sitting in front of a small round table with a heavy red cloth over it. The figure was covered from head to toe in the traditional Middle Eastern attire he'd come to expect. He bit his lower lip, lingering in front of the makeshift station that had been setup and called out, "Are you Omer?"

The figure reached a hand out, motioning for him to enter. "You seem lost," a feminine voice called out to him.

Scardino let out a sigh of defeat, realizing this woman couldn't possibly be Omer. "You're not Omer," he said simply.

"No." Her voice was quiet and subdued as she looked back at Scardino. "You're American. A long way from home."

"I just need to find Omer. I have some business to discuss with him."

"Yes, I'm sure you do." Her voice was cold with a sharp bite. "I can't help you." She waved him off. "Your streets are littered with the desperate and willing. You need not come here, American."

"Is that what you think I'm after?" Scardino growled out casually.

"Isn't it?" She pointed him toward the door. "Already exposing yourself within the first five minutes. I would have expected better, Agent."

He did a double-take, realizing his mistake as he stared at her with a questioning gaze, "How did you...?"

"No one comes looking for Omer, Agent. They come looking for the girls and the drugs." Her face broke into a thin smile that sent a chill down to his toes. "What are you really looking for, Agent?"

"I'm not a..."

"You cover your shoes with extra sand to wear them down faster and hide the fact that you haven't spent a lifetime in this desert. Your hands are cleanly trimmed and your face is nothing like the degenerates that darken my door looking for their weekly fix." She pointed to the crystal behind him and whispered, "And I can see your camera bag from here."

Scardino looked behind him and pulled on the golden rope behind him to close the curtain. He let out a shaky breath as he spoke up. "Okay, I'll bite. What makes you think I'm an agent, though?"

"Local police have no business here and I've met one of you before," her gaze grew dark as she quickly looked away.

"An American Agent?" Scardino asked with intrigue.

"You would never make it past the front door. Your country does nothing to prepare you for how things truly are here," she scoffed at him with a sinister laugh. "Go back to America where you belong."

"I can't do that," Scardino said, taking a step toward her, placing his hands on the red cloth covered table. "You seem to know a lot about America's covert operation practices. Why is that?"

She looked away, seeming to contemplate her next move before finally pulling back the scarf that covered her face and revealed a reddish brown scar covered the left half of her face, drawing a clean line from her ear down to her chin. She pointed at the scar and shook her head. "How about we start with how exactly you found your way here?"

"I wasn't searching for you, Miss..."

"Yvonne," she answered sharply, pointing to her face. "I don't help Americans. Too much bloodshed."

"I don't want any trouble," Scardino let out a heavy breath.

"You mess with Omer you have nothing but trouble," Yvonne shot back coldly. "You have no idea what he's capable of." She gestured to the scar on her face. "Go ahead, take it in. This is what happens to people that cross paths with the likes of Omer and Elias."

"I just want answers," Scardino said gently. "There's a man. Goes by the name of Schiller. He was funneling drugs to Omer Demir and I'm trying to stop him." She grew quiet, looking back at him uncertainly with a haunted expression. He ran a weary hand across his face and pulled back the turban, revealing his face. "I lost my fiancée to these animals. She was working undercover and then one day she went silent. We found her body months later in Qatar." He could hear the crack in his voice as he spoke, trying to keep his raw emotions at bay but allowing this woman to see his desperation in the hope that she would give him the grace to point him to where he needed to go.

"I'm sorry about your fiancée," Yvonne said softly, tucking her chin into her chest. "I lost someone who was a very dear friend to me to these animals. I am cruel because I won't stand for the bloodshed to continue if I can help it."

"Then help me stop them," Scardino pleaded. He reached in his pants pocket, pulling out the last photo he had of Jenna. "Her name was Jenna. She was amazing and smart and she fought with everything she had in her to save those that didn't have a voice of their own... Bringing justice to her is all I have left."

Yvonne frowned, reaching over to take the photo in her hand and gasped out, "Mira?"

"No, no, Jenna," Scardino corrected.

Yvonne's face went pale and she shook her head. "I knew her as Mira."

"You knew her?" Scardino frowned, feeling the hair on his back stand up as he stared back at her in surprise.

"She helped me." Yvonne answered with a shaky breath. "If it weren't for her I would have died that night and become just another one of the girls these degenerates seek out when the weight of the money in their pocket and the idle hands lead them

to the devil's doorstep. Unfortunately, my escape was short-lived. Anwir was much less brutal though." Her face softened as she added. "I still have nightmares over what Elias did to him." She sneered at his attire and shook her head. "As I said before you will never get past the doorway. They will kill you on the spot."

"Then help me," Scardino pleaded with her. "Help me stop them."

\*\*\*

Clark placed a hand across Lois' hip, gently nudging her awake as he leaned over to kiss her. He smiled against her lips, reaching over to cup her face. "Coffee's ready," he murmured, pointing to the coffee on her nightstand.

A lazy grin crossed her face and she whispered back, "My hero."

She winced as she changed positions, trying to sit up in bed to claim the coffee mug. He placed a hand on her lower-back and looked at her in concern. "Still sore?"

"Achy," Lois answered, taking a sip from the mug of coffee. "I'll survive."

"Maybe I shouldn't go back to the office just yet," Clark began, moving his hand across her back with a gentle squeeze. "It's only been a few weeks and you're still..."

"Clark, I'll be fine," Lois gave him a quick smile. "Look, you can't stay with me every second of the day." She placed a hand across his cheek. "The rest of the world needs you too."

He nodded his agreement, letting out a heavy sigh. "I'll come by after the staff meeting to check on you."

"Fine," she relented with a sigh.

"Love you," he murmured, leaning in for one last kiss before pulling away and gathering up his things at super-speed to leave.

\*\*\*

Detective Zymack placed his notepad in his pocket, looking across the semi-crowded dining hall of the Fifth Street Mission. His heart was heavy as he looked around the open room where the faces seemed to blur into one another with a piercing haunted stare that chilled him to the bone.

This was one of the few places in Metropolis the kids that had run away from their homes could find shelter. The sisters that ran the place worked with the police to help find them assistance. It wasn't seen that way by some of the patrons of the mission. Many of the runaways that came through here often disappeared before they could be transferred into the smaller shelters that were geared for the younger kids that often found themselves on the mission's doorstep.

He let out a heavy sigh, heading toward the door and nodding in Sister Tracy's direction. Half her conversation reached his ears and he looked back at her, trying to understand what she might be referring to.

"Yusif, I have another one. That'll make three this week."

The radio on his belt chirped, "All units please respond..."

\*\*\*

Yusif ran a sharp blade against his thumb, feeling the metal brush against the edge of his worn nails as he listened to Sister Tracy barrage him with her incessant nagging through the phone. "That'll make three this week, Yusif. You'll need to be careful. Superman's been patrolling at least three times a night now."

Yusif reached over to grab the syringe and cigarette packet from the table in front of him. He extracted a single cigarette from the package and inserted the needle into the nicotine that was tightly packed into it and squeezed the syringe needle, pressing the liquid betäubend into the contents. "I'll be there in a few."

\*\*\*

Clark stood outside the stairwell door - two offices down from Senator Donald Schumer's office, waiting patiently for the senator to appear. He glanced at the time on his watch, tapping his foot on the green and white carpet below his feet, wondering how long the senator would continue treating himself to a morning

rendezvous with his secretary before finally showing his face.

His gaze shifted to the door, hearing more than enough with his enhanced hearing as the senator indulged himself in activities with his secretary that were unbecoming of a state senator that had an ailing wife and children at home. Clark shook his head in disgust, pondering momentarily if he was ready to jump back in the game so soon after his run-in with LiveWire.

The rational side of him would say he had to start somewhere, and a crooked, philandering senator was as good a place to start as any. Clark fought against his impulse to give into the overwhelming urge to beat the senator's head in and remind him of the many promises that had been made and been broken by indulging in his sordid affair. He wasn't here to talk about the senator's indiscretions.

According to the information that had been leaked hours ago, Senator Donald Schumer's campaign was funded by Intergang. Rather than running with the information and letting it go to print he was trying to give the senator a chance to share his side of the story before sending the story to Perry. A chance he clearly didn't deserve.

"You sure you don't want me to stake out his office?" Jimmy asked, letting out a heavy sigh, looking around the fine linen wallpaper that covered the walls around them. "Just because the story leaked doesn't mean he won't try a more obvious exit."

Clark tapped his ear, hearing the unwelcome noise from the stairwell finally come to an end. '*Add that to a million things I wish I never have to hear again,*' he thought to himself and then turned his attention to Jimmy. "He'll be looking for a way to avoid the press. This is the only stairwell that puts him close enough to his office to make a quick exit or entry."

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders, leaning up against the door to the stairwell, looking down at the chair that was propped up against the door. "Well, denying him entry is one way to make him talk."

The door handle jingled, and a muffled voice Clark recognized as Schumer's came through the door. "What the...?"

"It's locked!" a feminine voice followed Schumer's as Jimmy removed the chair and swung the door open.

The photographer, Tim, got a quick shot before either could react and the frantic voices of both the secretary and Schumer filled the hallway as the two tried to find an exit from the precarious situation they'd stumbled into.

"Senator Schumer, I'm James Olsen with the Daily Planet. We'd like to ask you some questions about your campaign fund..."

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Senator Michael Harris made his way through the crowd of press that surrounded the state capitol, trying to find his way to the secured exit with his security team. A hand clamped on his shoulder and he looked behind him, seeing an unfamiliar face in the uniform his security team members wore, helping push past the crowded press.

"Harris, is it true you've been accepting bribes?"

"What do you say to the voters that have been betrayed by you?"

"I'm...I don't know what you're talking about," Harris stammered out, pushing his way to the end of the walkway where the rest of his detail was waiting for him.

\*\*\*

Donald Schumer pointed to the headline across the front page of the Daily Planet, slamming his fist on the table as he growled back at Tobias. "What exactly am I paying you for if my personal matters are going to land on the front page of the world's most respected news organization?"

Tobias leaned back in his chair, unaffected by the news, glancing at the headline that read, '*Philandering Senator on the Take?*' He chuckled at the image of Schumer launching toward the

photographer with his clothing in an obvious disheveled state. "You're lucky. Had it been any other paper they'd have put a camera in the stairwell with you and your little mistress here."

"Yes, I should write them a thank you note." Schumer scowled back at Tobias. "This needs to go away."

"I'm not sure I follow," Tobias remarked with a shrug of his shoulders. "What exactly do you expect me to do about this?"

"What you always do." Schumer grunted with a disgusted look. "Make it go away."

"Well, then I suppose you should think real hard just how much this unfortunate incident is worth to you and double it," Tobias replied with a chuckle. "Then put it all in a very large duffle bag and donate it to our friends at Fifth Street Mission. You do care about those poor children they help over there, don't you, Senator?"

"Of course, I do," Schumer muttered through gritted teeth. "So, after I make this donation...?"

"Make the donation senator and then be sure to light a candle for those poor children that have nothing." Tobias let out a chuckle. "Unmarked bills of course."

"Of course," Schumer agreed.

\*\*\*

Lois helped Jon readjust his helmet, checking that it was strapped below his chin correctly. She reached over to stroke his cheek and whispered, "Snug as a bug."

He giggled back at her and laughed, holding up his painted toilet paper roll he had dubbed his Excalibur and waved it in the air. "Look out, mommy! The dragon is coming!"

"Oh, no." Lois pretended to be scared ducking her head and hiding beneath her arms as she let out a, "What are we going to do?"

"I'll save you, mommy!" Jon called out, holding his red and white painted toilet paper roll to the sky and calling out. "No one's going to get through me you bad dragon!" He let out a fit of giggles when two arms reached out to lift him up. "Daddy, no, I'm not done fighting the dragon."

"You're not, huh?" Clark tucked Jon on his shoulders as he took a seat next to Lois. He lowered his voice to low rumble.

"Well, then Sir Jon continue the good fight." He reached up to set him down on the ground and reached over to place an arm around her shoulders, chuckling as Jon ran off chasing the imaginary dragon in their backyard.

Lois smiled, looking back at Clark. "Our little Jon has now entered the school of Knighthood."

Clark tightened his arm around her and whispered to her, "Could be worse. He could be running around in a cape and underwear."

A soft giggle escaped her lips at the mental image, shaking her head. "That day will probably come soon enough." She looked over at Clark, leaning over to rest her head against his chest. "I saw the story on Senator Schumer you and Jimmy printed." Lois placed a hand on his chest. "Eventful first day."

"Something like that," Clark muttered, shaking his head. "I hate writing about politicians. They promise their constituents the moon and then turn around and lie, steal and cheat..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

She eyed his tortured expression and murmured, "Something tells me you're not just talking about his constituents?"

Clark shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Donald Schumer is nothing but a no-good, philandering scumbag." He bit his lower lip and snorted out in disgust. "The guy is unbelievable. Uses his wife's ailing illness as a way to sway more votes and then turns around and..."

Lois grimaced, resting her hand against his chest. "Well, I guess after that story broke this afternoon, family values isn't a platform he'll be using in the election next year."

"Not if he knows what's good for him," Clark muttered under

his breath. He flashed her an apologetic smile. "Sorry."

"Well, your day sounds much more eventful than mine," Lois murmured, leaning her head on his shoulder and letting out a sigh. "I'm in between the whole everything hurts stage but not quite in enough pain to not yearn for something to keep my mind busy."

"The doctor said eight weeks," Clark reminded her gently.

A pained expression crossed her face and she looked back at him frowning at the reminder of just how far away she was from recovery. The first few weeks she had spent recuperating she found herself relying on everyone around her to help as she struggled to find the strength to do even the simplest of tasks. The mental block combined with the lingering pain from the after effects of the electric shock she never should have survived and the DNC that was performed after her miscarriage left her in a constant battle with herself. She wanted to do so much more than what she was.

Her patience was wearing thin with the required restrictions she was on as well. She had four more weeks until her appointment with the OB that she was dreading and yet at the same time yearning for as well. Though there was no baby her body was still left recuperating after everything which meant the intimacy they had enjoyed throughout their marriage was temporarily put in a holding pattern, creating a frustration within them both. For now, however she was content to focus on the small glimmer of hope that came with signs that she was healing.

Being able to hold Jon on her own was a tremendous feat compared to where she had been a week ago. A soft sigh escaped her throat as she nodded sadly. "I know. I guess I just miss spending the day chasing down stories with you."

"Well, I miss working with you too." He pressed his lips to her forehead and added in a teasing tone. "Jimmy just can't make those skirts work for him." Lois thwacked his chest playfully and he added in a more serious tone, "In all seriousness, he is doing well. I just prefer working with you."

A slow smile spread across her face and she chuckled softly. "Glad to know I'm not in danger of being replaced."

"Never." Clark grinned back at her. He pointed over toward the swing set where Jon was running around with his imaginary sword drawn, pretending to fight the imaginary dragon. "How about we wrangle our little sword fighter over there and figure out something for dinner?"

She nodded her agreement, as she spotted Jon heading toward them with a stern expression on his face. "The dragon is sleeping." He informed them with a tone that reminded her of the tone Clark used when he was addressing world as Superman.

"Well, thank you, Sir Jon." Lois grinned back at him. "How about we get cleaned up and eat some dinner?"

"Pizza?" Jon asked with a hopeful tone.

"Sure, why not?" Clark relented, grinning as Jon jumped on his lap.

"Pizza!"

\*\*\*

Michael Harris glared at the unfamiliar man across from him, looking around the deserted parking garage they were parked in as he glanced toward the locks of the limo he was seated in, wondering if this would be his last moments. It was too far to make a run for it. The gun his potential assailant held on him was too close for comfort.

"What do you want?" Harris stammered out, hearing the wavering in his own voice with a cringe.

"You've enjoyed a lot of perks with your new position, Mr. Harris." The man across from him breathed out calmly. "Luxury cars and elite memberships."

"I have a lot of partnerships with very powerful people," Harris hissed out, looking around nervously. "People that will go to great lengths to find me if anything were to happen to me."

"Oh, relax, Harris, I'm not going to shoot you." The man

rolled his eyes.

“You’re not?” Harris winced, suddenly unsure what to do with himself after the recent revelation.

“Not yet anyway.” The man shrugged his shoulders. “We’ll see how things go.”

“How what goes?” Harris heard his voice squeak under the pressure he felt to stay cool. “What do you want? Money? I’ll have a Swiss account set up for you in an hour. Just tell me how much.”

The man chuckled. “You certainly have learned how to play the game, Harris.” His eyes grew dark and added, “But the game is over. It’s time to pay up.”

“P-pay?” Harris stammered out confused.

“There’s a bill the House voted on last week. A bill that will make things awfully difficult to do business for my partners.” The man’s face grew grim as he stared him down. “You’re going to block the Border Control bill from passing the House. Am I clear?”

“But I can’t just change my vote!” Harris argued.

“Oh, yes you can,” the man hissed back with a dark growl. “You’re going to block this bill otherwise your sister – What’s her name, Sandra? Well, she’s going to get a visit from some very not nice people who will teach her just how dangerous it is to cross people like me.”

His face grew grim as he added with a sinister laugh, “She’s on disability, right? Car accident that left her paralyzed.” He shook his head, clucking his tongue as he added, “Tsk, ts, ts, Harris. With all the money you’ve got at your fingertips, you didn’t think to invest in a better security system for your sister? Anyone can just walk into her house on Lakewood Avenue and do whatever the hell they want. It’d be a shame if something happened to her, wouldn’t it?”

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Clark let out a heavy sigh, looking down at where both Lois and Jon were curled up against him. Jon’s sleepy face was pressed up against Lois’ shoulder and her head was snugly resting against his chest. He reached over to brush a loose strand of hair from Jon’s face.

“Don’t wake him up or he’ll be fighting dragons for the rest of the night,” Lois murmured softly.

Clark chuckled, reaching over to stroke her cheek. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” He looked down where Jon was tucked securely in her arms and whispered, “I’ve never seen anything so perfect.”

He watched as a sad smile crossed her face and her hand moved to her abdomen, twisting his insides into knots at the silent reminder of what they’d lost. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake the memory of Lois’ tortured cries from his mind. He wanted so desperately to cleanse his mind of the horrific way he’d found Lois, pale and weak, struggling through the injuries and the loss.

Everything had changed in that moment.

<< “You were struck by... Lois, I’m so sorry...” >>

<< “Clark, is our baby...?”

“I’m so sorry...”

“No... Please, no...” >>

Her hand brushed against his, drifting down to where his kneecap was and giving it a gentle squeeze to grab his attention. “I think he’s out. Can you help me up?”

“Yeah,” he flashed her a half-smile, helping her sit up and reaching an arm out to support Jon’s neck so as not to wake him. Lois smiled at him as he hoisted Jon up effortlessly in his arms, patting his back and turning back to Lois with a chuckle. “He’s out like a light.” He flashed her a quick smile and then whisked Jon upstairs, tucking him in bed, placing a hand across his son’s cheek, taking a moment to count his blessings as he whispered ‘good-night’ to him before turning off the light.

When Clark returned to the living room, he found Lois leaned

over the coffee table, skimming over the afternoon edition of the Planet—namely his and Jimmy’s article on Donald Schumer. He let out a groan when he saw the paper flipped open. “No, no, no.” Clark shook his head, pulling the paper away from her. “I’ve had enough of that guy for one day.”

“It’s a good article,” she offered with a shrug. “Even if the guy is a philandering, rotten scoundrel that should be raked over the coals with pitchforks.”

“You’re mocking me.” He nodded, folding the paper up and setting it on the other side of the couch. “Go ahead. I just happen to think people should do what they say they’re going to do.”

“Clark, you may find this surprising, but no one in Congress does what they say they’re going to do.” Lois flashed him a teasing smile. “The politician jokes are worse than the lawyer jokes for a reason.”

“Well, maybe they should start,” Clark argued half-heartedly as she looped her arms around him, hugging him as he continued to grumble about Schumer. “If Jimmy’s source is right then Schumer got there by the Churches paving the way for him.”

“If that’s true then I’m sure you’ll expose him,” Lois whispered, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“Are we done talking politics?” Clark groaned, helping her to her feet. “I can think of so many things I would much rather would do.”

A wicked grin crossed her face as she leaned against him, looping her arms around his neck and she whispered back to him, “Easy there. I’m still on a restricted physical activity order from the doctor.”

A knowing look crossed his face and he chuckled, leaning in to kiss her, knowing full well just where that invisible line was which kept him from holding her the way he wanted. He reached down for the remote to the stereo and flicked it on, adjusting the volume on the radio station it was tuned to.

Lois looked at him curiously as he set the remote back down on the table and reached a hand out for her to take. “What are you doing?”

“Dance with me,” he whispered as the commercial break came to an end and the faint chords to a familiar tune filled the air and she grinned back at him, allowing him to pull her into his arms. The guitar chords slowly picked up and the faint tune of ‘I Shall Believe’ began.

*Come to me now*

*And lay your hands over me*

*Even if it’s a lie*

*Say it will be alright*

*And I shall believe*

Her arms linked around his neck as they began to sway to the slow tune. “I love you, you know that, right?” Her head lifted as she gazed up at him, catching his eyes in a magnetic pull that told him she needed to hear him say the words.

He reached his hand down, stroking her cheek. “I know.” His forehead rested against hers and he murmured, “I love you, Lois Lane Kent. Nothing will ever change that.”

*I’m broken in two*

*And I know you’re on to me*

*That I only come home*

*When I’m so all alone*

*But I do believe*

His hands slid down the smoothness of her cotton shirt, tracing soft fabric against the waistband of her pants as he swayed to the music with her. He cradled her in his arms, letting out a heavy sigh as he floated them a few inches above the floor.

“Show off,” Lois grinned up at him.

“Well, I’ve gotta find some way to keep things interesting.” He cracked a smile and she leaned closer, hitting him with the faint fragrance of her lavender soap.

*That not everything is gonna be the way*

*You think it ought to be  
It seems like every time I try to make it right  
It all comes down on me  
Please say honestly you won't give up on me  
And I shall believe  
And I shall believe*

“Yes, it’s just so boring living in Metropolis we may start counting ceiling tiles,” she teased.

He chuckled, pulling her close as they swayed together, listening to the chords of the familiar tune. Holding her like this he almost forgot about how close he had come to losing her. The memory of how he had found her, so frail after being struck by an electrical current from LiveWire. The doctors themselves couldn’t pinpoint exactly what had happened or even how Lois had survived. The aftereffects had left her weak both physically and emotionally coupled with the grief of having lost their unborn child in the electrical assault.

He wanted so badly to wrap her in his arms and never let go. He had promised himself he would never be the one to hurt her after how close he’d come to losing her during their time on the run. The cruel words he had cut her with out of fear had nearly cost him his life with her and that solemn promise had been something he had held himself to for the entirety of their relationship once they had reclaimed their lives after Luthor had been taken into custody.

He had kept that promise until a few weeks ago when he had been forced to deliver the heart-wrenching news that their unborn child’s life had been cut short. Her hysterical cries and pleas had shaken him to the core. Though they didn’t have any definitive answers on how the miscarriage had happened he couldn’t help but blame himself.

*Open the door  
And show me your face tonight  
I know it's true  
No one heals me like you  
And you hold the key*

He had been the one to confront LiveWire.

He had been the one to challenge her there in the middle of the hospital without trying to get her away from the innocent patients and families coming and going through the isolated parking garage.

His own arrogance of being able to handle the situation had cost him their unborn child.

“Hey.” Lois placed a hand on his chest, looking up at him with a half-smile. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He smiled back at her as he reached over to cup her cheek. “Just thinking about how lucky I am to have you.” A deep sigh from the depths of his diaphragm escaped his throat and he murmured softly, “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

*Never again  
would I turn away from you  
I'm so heavy tonight  
But your love is alright  
And I do believe*

Her face softened as she gazed back at him, cracking her mouth into a smile. “Is it really that awful working with Jimmy or is something else going on?”

A sad smile crossed his face and he shook his head. “No, I... I’d be lost without you, Lois. I am lost without you. I guess I’m just kicking myself for taking each moment for granted.”

A knowing look crossed her face and she leaned up to kiss him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know,” he let out a shallow breath.

“I’m right here,” she murmured, running her hand against his chest, leaning her head against his shoulder.

*That not everything is gonna be the way  
You think it ought to be*

*It seems like every time I try to make it right  
It all comes down on me  
Please say honestly  
You won't give up on me  
And I shall believe  
I shall believe*

The heavy weight of guilt that consumed him continued to weigh him down as he cradled her in his arms. She lifted her head up, brushing her lips against his, softly at first then slowly building up with more urgency as she encircled his neck with her arms. Each caress of her lips grew more insistent, fogging his mind as he allowed the sweet serenity of losing himself in his wife’s arms to consume him.

He should slow down.

The thought crossed his mind, but his body and mind refused to allow that thought to enter his brain as he allowed himself to fall back on the couch with Lois, never breaking his mouth from hers.

They sunk down into the cushions and her hands ran through his hair, encouraging each caress as his lips smoothed their way down her throat. “Clark...” His hand reached behind her, pulling her body to his as he settled his weight on her. She let out a soft moan. “Oh, God, Clark, we’ve got to slow down,” she whispered breathlessly. “We can’t...”

He let out a shallow breath, immediately recalling why they couldn’t push things any further. “I know,” he let out a labored breath, cradling her in his arms and still not pulling himself out of her arms just yet.

“I miss you,” she murmured with a breathy whisper that teased his senses with the intimacy they both wanted – needed – but were being denied.

He reached his hand out to stroke her cheek, murmuring his own plea, “I miss you too.” His lips closed over hers before he tore them away and he resigned himself to brood over another thing the fates had robbed him of.

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*Present Day...*

Stefan sat in the corner booth of the country club, watching the red-haired woman in the distance smile at her guests as she poured another drink for them. The jovial laughs coming from the table and flirtatious giggle rode on his nerves as he watched her. His Ingrid.

He lifted his eyebrows up as he saw her glance in his direction. Panic covered her face and he felt the adrenaline run through him, reminding him of his last encounter with her. He licked his lips, feeling his mouth go dry as she neared.

“What are you doing here?” she practically shouted, slamming her palms on the edge of the table.

“Ingrid,” Stefan murmured, unfazed by the sudden jolt on the table, “don’t make a scene. You wouldn’t want to draw a crowd, would you?”

“Get out,” she hissed in a low whisper, glaring at him.

“I haven’t even ordered yet.” He chuckled staring back at her with a knowing look, glancing at her nametag. “New name now, hmm? Natasha?”

“I couldn’t trust you,” she snapped back.

“I never could resist temptation,” he chuckled, reaching his hand out for her.

“Is there a problem over here?” a man with balding hairline approached them and Ingrid took a step back.

“Nothing, Mr. Travis,” Ingrid said quickly. “Our guest was just leaving.”

“I won’t tolerate anyone being disrespectful to my staff,”

Travis remarked with a glare.

“Of course,” Stefan smiled, standing up from his seat. “See you, Natasha...”

\*\*\*

Lois finished signing her name on the last document and looked over at the Daily Planet's staff counsel who nodded her thanks as Clark gave her hand a gentle squeeze. A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she turned back to him.

"I'll have the paperwork filed within the hour and let you know when we hear something," the staff counsel explained, smiling as she tapped the edges of the paperwork into one another until they were all stacked neatly together.

They both offered their thanks and then Lois tugged on Clark's coat sleeve, pulling him with her toward the exit. They reached the long corridor that split into two directions. One leading further into the building floor of offices and the other leading into the lobby where they had entered.

"So... lunch?" Lois prompted, slipping her hand inside Clark's turning to look back at him playfully.

"Sure," Clark wrapped an arm around her waist. "Any special requests?"

They turned the corner to where the lobby was located and Lois shrugged her shoulders. "Surprise me."

They walked hand in hand out the rotating glass doors and stopped on the corner outside the Planet. Clark leaned in to capture her lips with his, reaching a hand up to stroke her cheek.

"I thought you didn't like surprises?"

"Maybe they're growing on me," she murmured against his lips with a smile.

"There they are!"

Clark's arm tightened around her and she heard the clicking of a camera shutter and the loud obnoxious voice of Leo Nunk from a few feet away. "Care to comment on the questions surrounding your son's paternity?"

Lois' brow furrowed and her jaw clenched, raising her fist, ready to give Nunk a piece of her mind when Clark clamped a protective hand over her shoulder to stop her. Clark jabbed his index finger in the paparazzi's face. "No comment. You can talk to our lawyer."

"Lawyer?" Nunk scoffed, laughing nervously. "What's wrong, you can't handle the truth coming out?"

Lois bit her lower lip, glancing back at Clark who was shaking with rage as he tightened his jaw, grinding his teeth before snapping back at him. "Just keep digging yourself deeper, Nunk. You're only making the case stronger."

"You know, it sounds like I hit a nerve there..." Nunk shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever sells, right?" Clark continued to glare Nunk down who nervously chuckled, "You... I have a little thing called the First Amendment that says I can do what I want cuz I'm a reporter. Maybe you heard of it?"

"I must have missed that amendment in American history," Lois muttered with a roll of her eyes. "Maybe you should read up on it. Freedom of the press does not guarantee you the right to do whatever you want without consequence."

"We'll see where the cards fall," Nunk shot back cockily, shaking his head happily, tapping his camera. "Can't wait to see what tomorrow's headline will be..." he called out to them as he backed away, flinching as Clark threatened to move toward him.

Lois patted Clark on the chest, grinning at him. "Remind me, who is supposed to be calming who down?"

"The guy just brings it out of me," Clark grumbled as Lois pulled him to her, gripping the lapels of his jacket.

"He's not worth it," Lois muttered unhappily. She pointed to the crosswalk. "Weren't you promising me lunch?"

"After the morning I've had I could certainly go for a meatball sub," an unfamiliar voice called out as a dark-haired man with curly hair approached her. He pointed at them with a camera in his hand. "You're Lois Lane and Clark Kent, right? The reporters?"

Clark shot the man a questioning glare. "Who wants to know?"

Lois rolled her eyes, jabbing her finger in the stranger's direction. "Look, I don't know who you are, but you can take your camera and just turn around. We're not going to stop printing that poor girl's name and exposing the truth you're so desperately trying to help hide."

A smirk crossed the man's face. "I know you won't. That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

"You do?" Lois eyed him quizzically.

He pulled out a badge from his pocket and showed his identification. "Agent Dan Scardino with the DEA."

"DEA?" Clark's brow furrowed as he eyed the man suspiciously.

"I'm following a case I think might be connected to your kidnapping story." Scardino flashed a pained expression. "I think we might be after the same guys."

That caught both her and Clark's attention as they glanced between one another and then back to Scardino. "I'm listening," Clark ventured cautiously.

"First, let's talk over that meat sub." Scardino placed a hand on his stomach. "I'm famished."

\*\*\*

Stefan was never going to leave her alone.

They would always find her.

Ingrid tapped her hand on the brick building behind her, watching from the corner as the cars drove up the crooked path just past the sign that read 'Fifth Street Mission.' A bitter bile burned her throat and she looked toward the shrubbery that worked as a cover for what really happened in this awful place.

<< "Five thousand dollars as agreed upon."

"Pleasure doing business with you, Sister Tracy." >>

Tears burned in the corners of her eyes as she flashed back to the last moments she had just before everything had gone dark. Five years of unfettered rage had kept her going. Her first instinct had been to end it all and rid herself of this cruel world. There was only so much pain one could bear.

Shortly after her close call with death and finding herself plucked out of her captors hands by the hero she had heard so much about only to be brought back into the hands that had betrayed her she planned out her revenge. Tobias and Yusif were culpable in their abuse but they were not alone. It was here that she had experienced the ultimate betrayal.

<< "No one wants you. I saved you." >>

<< "The forgotten girl." >>

<< "Stick with me and you'll become a star." >>

The painful fragmented memories flooded her mind and she reached up to brush away the tears that trickled down her face. She felt drawn to this place and the torture that came from it. She squinted her eyes as she walked up the pathway, keeping her distance from any open areas for fear of being recognized or seen.

Off to the side, she saw her.

Sister Tracy waiting by the front door with a man that had his face turned from her, shaking the sister's hand and tipping his hat to her.

'Traitor.' Ingrid thought with disgust.

Her heart lurched in her chest as he turned away from Sister Tracy and she caught a glimpse of his face.

<< "No one is coming for you. No one even knows you're missing." >>

<< "You're mine."

"Please no!" >>

<< "Another girl was found and is being prepared for transport."

"Don't screw it up, Yusif." >>

She stared at the cold expression along his hard features, immediately recognizing him.

"Omer..."

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**Chapter 15: Hear My Voice**

“Order up!”

The smell of peppers and freshly fried potatoes hung in the air. Clark glanced over the rim of his glasses, catching a glimpse of Agent Dan Scardino taking a messy bite of his meatball sub as he pulled out a file jacket that was worn and torn along the edges, a dribble of dark red and brown stains along the binding.

“Your story on these kidnappings...” Scardino cleared his throat as he unwound the file jacket string and tugged a yellowish sheet of paper out of it and slid it across the table to Lois. “Look familiar?”

Clark craned his neck to glance over Lois’ shoulder to scan the page Scardino had handed her. It was a case summary of a missing girl from five years ago. “What’s the DEA doing investigating kidnappings?” Clark asked, frowning as he skimmed through the page.

Scardino took a sip from his drink and answered, “The Agent on this case had been working undercover to expose a drug ring. She inadvertently stumbled upon something... much bigger.”

Lois pointed to the name on the top corner of the page. “Agent on the case was a J. Blake? Any chance we could speak with her?”

Scardino’s face went pale, tapping at the tabletop as his face twisted before speaking up. “She, uh... Unfortunately, she died on an undercover assignment.”

Lois pursed her lips and tapped her hand against the page in front of them. “Let me guess? This case?”

A sad smile crossed his face, and Scardino nodded. “You, uh, never know when a case is going to become too big for you, you know?” He cleared his throat, pointing to the page in front of them. “Your... Esma, was it?” His face scrunched up as he pulled out a photo. “Meet Yvonne. Bright, funny, top of her class, and disappeared on her way home from school. No one saw a thing.”

Clark’s jaw tightened, looking at Lois, who nodded. “Sounds familiar.”

Scardino nodded. “Here’s where it gets different, though. Yvonne disappeared and was never heard from again until Jenna... err Agent Blake ran across her on assignment tailing this case. She, uh, endured a lot.”

“This Yvonne, did she make it out?” Lois asked, reaching over to grip Clark’s hand from beneath the table.

Scardino shook his head. “No, she paid with her life for trying to help me.” He grew quiet, “Look, I’ve been chasing this case for almost eight years trying to find these people. Every time I get close, something happens.” His jaw tightened. “I think the same people that kidnapped this girl you’re trying to find are the same people that kidnapped Yvonne and killed Jenna.”

“Well, let’s say you’re right, Agent Scardino,” Clark began cautiously. “Even if these are the same people... I’m not sure what you expect us to do about any of this.” He gestured toward the newsstand outside. “We’re already taking a lot of heat for daring print this girl’s name. Wouldn’t it be better to turn to the FBI on this?”

“The FBI won’t help,” Scardino scoffed and gestured to himself. “I was a decorated agent and had accolades and dreams before this. Now I’m just holding on by sheer will and defiance until they try to force me out.” His hand tapped at the table with a bang. “Don’t you find it just a little convenient that these stories keep cropping up every time you print something on this kidnapping... or the corruption to hide it?”

“We’ve received threats.” Clark shrugged his shoulders, still uncertain about the man sitting across from him and how much they could trust him. His story, while moving and heart-wrenching, was convenient. No one was around to help vouch for any of it, though.

“I’ve seen it happen before. It’s only a matter of time until I outlive my usefulness. A top agent was forced into retirement for

helping me.” Scardino shook his head in disgust. “And McCord was one of the good guys.”

Lois’ brow rose, and Clark glanced over at Scardino again. “McCord?”

“We got caught in a bombing with one of these guys’ movers and shakers, and McCord took the fall,” Scardino explained sadly. “I’ve been chasing this case for years, and everywhere I go, it’s another bureaucratic door slammed in my face because no one wants to talk about what’s happening to these kids.”

“Makes you wonder what they’re trying to hide,” Lois agreed, squeezing Clark’s knee and giving him a silent look, signaling to him to give Scardino a chance.

He relaxed, unfolding his arms and nodded in agreement. “Or who they’re trying to cover for.”

“Look, I’m not one’s prize, I know that,” Scardino grunted out. “But I know this case better than anyone. I’ve been reading your work. You’ve been chasing the same leads and are getting nowhere. Maybe if we put our heads together, we can stop these guys and save these kids.”

“I suppose working together wouldn’t be a terrible idea.” Lois tapped her hand on the file in front of her.

Clark glanced at Lois, nodding his agreement. “No, but just so we’re clear, you double-cross us, and that sad little story you offered up will look like a fairy tale when I’m through with you.” Clark’s jaw clenched, and he narrowed his gaze across the table. “I even think you’re in cahoots with these animals and I will string you up by your toenails and unleash a firestorm like you’ve never seen. Got it?”

Lois jabbed him in the side, but Clark didn’t look away, keeping his gaze steady on Scardino. Lois chuckled nervously. “What my... Clark is trying to say here is that...”

“You two are tight with Superman, and I won’t be able to hide if I tried to double-cross you.” Scardino chuckled and then tapped on the table. “Noted.” He blinked, unfazed by the threat as he stared back at Clark, lifting his glass. “Well, now that we’ve got that settled, how about we... move onto the actual case?”

A buzzing sound jumped in Clark’s ear, and he looked down to see Lois’ phone lit up in her purse. He nudged her gently, and she lifted it, glancing at the screen. “It’s...”

“It’s me,” Jack called from the doorway, rushing toward them, looking over his shoulder. “I’ve been looking all over for you guys.”

“French Fry?” Lois held out a basket for him as Jack leaned over, slightly flushed with his hands on his knees, knelt over trying to catch his breath.

“I...need a minute,” Jack stammered out.

Lois pointed to him and introduced Jack to Scardino. “Agent Scardino, this is our colleague Jack. He’s been working with us on the case along with his team at HRO.”

“HRO?” Scardino’s brow furrowed, glancing toward Jack curiously.

“Human Rights Organization,” Jack explained, glancing over at Clark. “Th-there’s a ransom.”

“What?” Clark echoed in surprise.

“Ransom?” Lois repeated the word with intrigue.

Jack handed over a notecard he had jotted the message down on. “For the missing girl. Pay it, and she’s free.”

Clark exchanged a look with Lois, who wore the same skeptical look. “I don’t know, Jack. This doesn’t seem right.”

“Look, I can work with HRO to get the funds. We just have to make sure we don’t involve the police, and we’re home free. We have the account information. We have everything we need.”

Scardino shook his head. “No way. These guys don’t do ransom. You pay it, and you’re just funding their operation.”

“Who are you again?” Jack asked.

A badge landed on the table, and Scardino looked to him with a firm introduction. “Dan Scardino. DEA.” He looked at Lois and

added, “You want this girl back, don’t pay the ransom. They know they can get money out of you, they’ll never let her go.”

“But this is the first lead we’ve had,” Lois argued.

“And why do you think that is?” Scardino asked. “You’re making them nervous.”

“Look, I know it’s not common, but this could be our only chance,” Jack insisted.

“Says who?” Lois shot back irritably. “Your friend Omer? Jack, you said it yourself he seems untrustworthy when it comes to this.”

“He’s our only lead,” Jack argued.

“Omer?” Scardino interrupted, snapping his fingers. “What’s his last name?”

“Demir,” Jack answered. “Why?”

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<< “Five thousand dollars as agreed upon.”

“Pleasure doing business with you, Sister Tracy.”>>

<< “No one wants you. I saved you.”>>

<< “The forgotten girl.”>>

Ingrid felt her hand tremble as she fiddled with the card in her hand, wondering what her next move should be, or even could be. If Omer was here, then there had to be a reason. He didn’t stick around for long unless he was inflicting his torture on another unsuspecting victim.

<< “No one is coming for you. No one even knows you’re missing.”>>

\*\*\*

Phones were ringing off the hook, and voices were raised as journalists struggled to speak over one another. Lois reached her hand over to take Clark’s hand in hers as they ventured down the ramp and into the pit of the newsroom floor, stopping by her desk to pick up the file box she had left in her bottom drawer.

When the three of them had connected Omer Demir – Jack’s mentor and founder of the HRO – as the same man Dan Scardino was after in connection with the sex-trafficking ring Scardino was in pursuit of, Jack had stormed off. Jack was unwilling to indulge the angle they were trying to pursue; however, she and Clark hoped he would come around soon and help them. They both understood he needed time to process the bombshell that had been dropped in his lap. The more they discussed and compared notes with Dan Scardino, the more convinced she was that Omer Demir was involved in the kidnappings.

Jimmy walked up to them excitedly, grinning from ear to ear. “Boy, you guys certainly like to keep things interesting, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?” Clark asked, helping to pull the file box out of its snug location in her bottom drawer.

“The defamation suit,” Jimmy raised his eyebrows at them and grinned happily. “I’m glad you’re finally fighting back, but the place has been going crazy with everyone trying to get a comment.”

“You know what’s good for you, you won’t comment,” Scardino interrupted, tapping the file in his hand. “Believe me, I know.”

Clark pointed to the conference room. “Jimmy, is the conference room still available?”

Jimmy nodded. “As far as I know. Jacks’ stuff is still in there.”

“Great.” Lois let out a sigh of relief as they made their way toward the conference room.

Clark looked over his shoulder. “You sure this is the same guy?”

“It’s not a common name, Kent.” Scardino let out a grunt. “It’s the same guy.”

“Okay, so here it is.” Lois pulled out a headshot of Omer Demir from the paperwork they had gathered so far.

Scardino nodded, jabbing his finger at Omer’s face. “That’s

him.”

Clark let out a heavy breath. “Well, then I guess Omer owes us some answers.” He placed a hand on Lois’ shoulder. “Why don’t you stay here and wait for Jack and Scardino, and I’ll go down to the museum to see what we can get out of Omer?”

<< “You were struck by... Lois, I’m so sorry...”>>

<< “Clark, is our baby...?”

“I’m so sorry...”

“No... Please, no...”>>

<< “Please don’t leave me.”>>

A flash of memories crossed through Lois’ mind, and she quickly argued, “No, I’m coming with you.”

“Lois, Jack might come back. Someone should be here.”

“And Perry and Jimmy are more than capable of talking to him.” Lois placed a hand on his chest. “I’m not letting you go alone.”

His expression was torn, but he finally relented, placing a protective hand across her shoulder. He nodded, uttering a quick, “Okay.”

“You two sure you’re ready for this?” Scardino warned, shooting a warning gaze in both their direction. “This guy is bad news.”

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*Two Years Ago...*

Lois bit her lower lip, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for Senator Donald Schumer to appear. The appointment had been set to begin nearly half an hour ago and still no sign that the senator planned to keep the appointment.

His assistant looked in her direction with a frown. “I’ll try him again...”

Lois folded her hands across her chest, staring at the clock. “Well, I hate to interrupt his afternoon with something as trivial as an explanation to his constituents.”

“He really is coming, Ms. Lane,” his assistant tried weakly.

“Uh-huh.” Lois huffed, feigning a patience she didn’t feel.

Donald Schumer had been one of the hold outs on the recent vote for a bill intended to put tighter restrictions on the country’s borders. Despite assurances from both sides that this bill would make its way to the Senate, it never got past the House. Her sources said Schumer had been for the bill until recently, and she wanted to know why he had a sudden change of heart.

So far, all attempts to meet with him had been greeted with the classic game of avoidance as she was left playing cat and mouse with the senator that remained elusive to the public in recent weeks. She ran a weary hand across her face, feeling the tension within her begin to rise.

She glanced at the time once more.

She could wait ten more minutes before she would have to leave.

She glanced toward the secretary, who was eying her nervously and let out a heavy sigh, jotting her number down on the back of the card and handing it to her. “Tell your senator he has until the end of today to respond before I write up my scathing expose on his hypocrisy, and I’ll include this game of making appointments he doesn’t show up for in it as well.”

With that, she turned on her heels and headed toward the door, smiling to herself when she saw the secretary reach for the phone and begin to dial. ‘*Gotcha.*’

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Dan Scardino stood outside the worn-down building, watching as men came and went. His insides churned with disgust as he stared at the smug, superior expressions that covered their faces. He wanted more than anything to barrel through the door and take every last soulless monster into custody, but he couldn’t.

This was just another stop on his way into the dark world of Schiller and his cohorts. So far, he had been warned of a man named Omer and another man by the name of Elias, but he still

had yet to find a face to match either name.

That would change once he stepped into the lion's den.  
It was a risk.

A dangerously deadly risk that could end up getting him killed.

It was also a risk that could give him the answers he sought and help save the lives of the girls Yvonne had warned him about. Children as young as twelve forced into a life of prostitution by their captors and subjected to abuses the world could only imagine.

He couldn't fathom such atrocities.

His days as a field agent had brought him to some of the darkest parts of the world, seeking to bring in the deadly scum that pushed drugs on the streets. It was his job to stop them, and he had been the best. Or so he thought until Jenna had run across a lead that led them here.

<<“Any word on the girl?”

“She didn't make it... Just be careful, Jenna.”

“When am I not careful?”

“You sure you're up for this, Jenna?”

“Hey, Danny boy, you getting sentimental on me?”

“Dan's right, Jenna, if you're not up for this...”

“We'll waste another week training another agent up. I can do this.”

“Be careful.”

“I'm always careful, Dan. You're the one that needs to tighten the reigns before jumping in head first... I'm fine. I still have a ring to pick out.”

“Count on it.”>>

Qatar had many painful memories, but the one that seared into his mind was that of his last conversation with Jenna. The last time he had seen her, she had been scared. Terrified but resiliently brave and willing to put herself on the line in order to protect the innocent lives at risk.

This was for Jenna.

\*\*\*

Lois dialed the familiar number as she sat outside the doctor's office door, waiting until the last minute to enter. Here she was in the same hospital she had found herself nearly bleeding to death months ago, waiting to be released from her doctor's care and hopefully able to reclaim some semblance of normalcy. She had completed her Post-Op two weeks ago and finally been given the freedom to return to work on a restrictive basis. It wasn't the best news, but it had been something.

Then there had been the concerned ‘hmm’ and the referral to a specialist, which led her here.

She glanced at the frosted glass in front of her, feeling her hand tremble as she heard a voice come over the line.

“She hasn't moved since you left, Lois.”

“Just... keep an eye out. I have a feeling she'll be calling senator Schumer or meeting up with him.”

“Yeah, I'm sure she will,” Jimmy chuckled over the line.

“I'll be back this afternoon. Just call me if anything changes,” Lois instructed, pressing the end button on her phone. She tucked it back in her purse, letting out a heavy sigh.

Her gaze shifted to the door in front of her. Her appointment at the Post-Op had been so much easier. It was in a different building. Far away from the reminder of everything she had lost nearly three months ago. Her hand instinctively reached out to cover her abdomen, and her lips trembled, fighting back the raw emotion that was stirring within her.

She had found herself in life-threatening situations before. Survived from the depths of darkness and come out stronger for it time and time again, but this had been different. The danger had been lurking in the shadows and struck her as innocently as it had struck officers and security guards that had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It felt so cheap to summarize her loss

with such an overused saying.

There had been a heartbeat.

There had been a dream.

A life that she'd envisioned the moment she saw the two lines appear on her pregnancy test.

That life had disappeared as quickly as it had been conceived, maybe even faster.

Now all that was left was an aching empty void which left her longing for what had been taken from her, and the painful aftereffects from her injuries. Injuries she was still nursing even twelve weeks later.

Still, the thought of sitting in that waiting room with all the sympathetic stares and other families that hadn't had their lives turned on its axis with one cruel moment in time left her painfully aware just how little she had healed from everything.

Her muscles still weren't nearly as strong as they once had been. She felt the occasional spasms make themselves known after an extra tiring day. The burns from the electrical current she'd been struck with had recovered thankfully. Though her body continued to struggle to catch up with her, her mind so desperately ached for the chance to return to normalcy.

“This seat taken?”

Lois smiled, turning her head to see Clark standing over her with a coffee in hand. “Hey, I thought you had that interview with Senator Harris...”

Clark took a seat next to her, leaning over to capture her lips with his. “I rescheduled.” He ran his hand against her cheek. “I didn't want you sitting here alone.”

“It's just a doctor appointment.” She shrugged.

“No, it's not,” he whispered, cupping her cheek.

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An MRI image was taped up on the screen for review. A red marker circling the scar tissue along the uterine wall on the MRI image. Clark tried to focus on what the doctor was saying. The words were important, but he just kept looking at the red markings. That was where she had been struck. The electrical current from LiveWire had literally run through their unborn child's helpless body and out again. And he was to blame.

He hung his head, feeling the weight of his guilt press down on him as he focused on the words the doctor was saying. “Between where you were struck and the complications with the surgery right after... there's a lot of scarring around your uterine wall here, which will make it very hard to conceive naturally.”

The pressure from Lois' hand tightened around his as the doctor uttered those words, and he reached his arm around her, holding her close as he continued to process what it was the doctor was saying.

“I'm not saying it's impossible, but if you do decide to try again, you may want to consider consulting with a fertility specialist...”

The words felt like a hard slap across his face as he stared at the MRI image once more. The loss of their unborn child and Lois' subsequent injuries from after her run-in with LiveWire had pushed both himself and Lois' mental and emotional strength as they fumbled their way through the grief that had overtaken them both. The possibility that they might have lost their only chance of conceiving another child seemed ludicrous to him.

It seemed inconceivable that Jon would never have a brother or sister. Or that he would never look into a newborn face that was the perfect blend of both himself and Lois. Jon's conception and that of the unborn child had been miracles in themselves. Miracles neither he nor Lois had considered even thinking about twice. Each of those precious miracles had caught him and Lois by surprise with an overwhelming joy that had consumed them both to the depths of their soul. Now, to be told, they would never experience that again seemed like a cruel twist of fate.

“I'll give you a moment...”

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*Present Day...*

Jeremy Novak sat across from Senator Michael Harris, tapping his hand across the tabletop of his elegant wooden desk. He stared at the senator, trying to gather what Harris wanted from him. His jaw tightened as he looked over the colorful images across the many publishing media powerhouses. Many of them with the same story that he'd heard over the last month.

"I agree with you, senator, it's troubling behavior, but it isn't criminal." Novak reached over to take a sip from his glass.

"What if I told you I had a witness willing to testify that the star witness the FBI used to put Lex Luthor away was just as guilty for the crimes he's been charged with?" Harris asked, seeming to tremble as he set his glass down. "Isn't it your job to prosecute all criminals, Jeremy?"

Novak leaned back in his chair and then nodded. "Bring me your witness, and we'll open an investigation."

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Clark grimaced as he looked around the empty office, looking over his shoulder at the open door that was split along the side. The desk had been moved against the wall, and the ceiling panel had been moved, resting above them with the gaping hole revealed. He focused his attention toward the ceiling, noting a missed file up above.

"He's gone," Lois hissed out in dismay.

"Son of a..." Scardino slammed his fist against the desk, shaking his head as he looked around. "Always one step ahead of me."

Clark frowned, observing the trembling of Scardino's body as he ground his teeth, looking across Omer's office in dismay. It was clear this wasn't his first time of being given the slip by Omer Demir. The emotion coming from the DEA Agent told him this was personal.

"Something tells me this isn't your first run-in with Omer," Clark observed, placing his foot on the edge of the desk to climb up and investigate the open ceiling panel.

"Not my first rodeo," Scardino muttered, shaking his head.

Clark stepped up on the desk, reaching above him to slide the ceiling panel out of the way. He put up the act of searching above his head and then felt his way toward the file he'd seen in his scan earlier.

"What is it?" Lois called out to him.

He gripped the file in his hand, lowering himself down to the desk and handing the file to Lois as he climbed down. "He left this behind."

Scardino shook his head, stepping over toward Lois and peering over her shoulder. "Omer doesn't do anything by accident."

"Clark?" Lois let out a sharp gasp.

"What's wrong?" Clark approached, noting the concern on Lois' face.

"It's Esma," Lois uttered in a harsh whisper, holding up a photo with a gagged girl that matched the photo of Esma. She shook her head in dismay, reeling from the evidence staring back at her as plain as the nose on her face.

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Ingrid sifted through the towering stack of unread magazines on the corner table next to her. She glanced toward the front desk, spotting the deputy on the phone. She shifted nervously in her seat, wondering how much longer she would be waiting for the detective to arrive.

The sound of the door slamming caught her off guard, and she jumped, startled to see a woman in light curly red hair with glasses pushed down the edge of her nose. She pointed to the deputy and asked, "You had a walk-in?"

He pointed in Ingrid's direction, and she shook her head, feeling second thoughts flood through her mind as she caught a

glimpse of more police entering the building. The face of one of the officers came into focus, and she went numb. She scrambled to her feet and made her way toward the exit.

"Wait!"

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Michael Harris turned back and forth in his desk chair, pondering his next move. He glanced toward the broken glass, still covering his floor where Tobias had thrown it earlier. He knew beyond any doubt that Tobias and the underlings he worked with were capable of doing much more harm than the mere threat and bruises he had received tonight.

He gritted his teeth, reaching over to dial a familiar number. After two rings, he heard the familiar voice of his sister. "Michael, I'm working. What is it?"

"Can't a brother call up his sister when he has a spare moment?" Michael Harris asked, trying to hide the wavering tone in his voice. "How's school?"

"Busy," she replied with a heavy sigh. "Juggling the different personalities that come into my classroom and trying to make science interesting to a freshman class." She let out a chuckle. "How are you? Mr. Big Shot Senator?"

"Busy," he acknowledged with a wry expression, keeping the phone nestled between the crook of his ear and shoulder. His attention shifted across his desk from the notes and busy calendars to the photo of himself and Susan. An optimistic kid standing in his red and white cap and gown with his kid sister sitting next to him in her wheelchair with so much pride written on her face, he could feel it even now. *What would she think of me now?* It seemed like so long ago he was just a kid with a dream. How had he fallen so low?

"Michael? Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Everything's going to be fine, Suzie," he replied, hearing the determination in his voice, and he let out a chuckle. "I just miss you is all."

"Well, you're welcome to come visit anytime you like."

"I know," he said gently, shaking his head. "I might just do that."

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Lois stared at the image in front of her, shaking her head as she waited for the elevator to arrive on the newsroom floor. Clark followed her gaze from behind, reading the scribblings in the file depicting the value Omer thought he could get out of Esma based on a sick pricing scale he applied to her looks and age. Her stomach churned as she scanned the scribblings feeling her eyes water as her hand instinctively covered her abdomen.

"Your friend Jack going to be a problem?" Scardino asked, hanging his head as he leaned a hand up on the edge of the corner of the elevator wall.

"He wants to stop these guys as much as we do," Clark responded with a frown.

"He was friends with this, Omer," Scardino pointed out.

"He thought of him as a mentor. Nothing more," Lois cut in, shaking her head. "Sometimes we don't always know everything about everyone."

"Speaking from personal experience there?" Scardino asked, furrowing his brow.

Clark leaned over to glare at Scardino with a clenched jaw. "How about you just focus on the case?"

"Fine by me." Scardino flashed them a quick grin as the elevator pinged, announcing their arrival on the newsroom floor. He gestured to the open door and added, "After you."

Lois rolled her eyes and stepped out on the newsroom floor with Clark a few paces behind her. She let out a frustrated growl as she turned the corner, noting the two of them were still right behind her. She reached for the coffee pot, pouring herself a cup.

A hand reached out to hand her the low-fat creamer, and she glanced up to see Clark's sympathetic gaze. He placed a hand on

her shoulder, and she flashed him a quick smile. “We’ll find her, Lois, I promise.”

“Don’t be promising things you can’t keep, Kent.” Scardino’s voice came from the corner where he had helped himself to the selection of snacks on the table, taking a bite from a candy bar, and Lois glared at him. “What?”

“Are you always this... hopeful?” Lois glared at him.

“It’s a part of my charm.” Scardino grinned at her, and she let out a huff.

“There is a sixteen-year-old girl being sold on the black market to the highest bidder.” She waved the file in her hand in the air. “Here is your proof.”

“It’s not enough,” Scardino said, shaking his head, following her toward the conference room.

“It’s the breakdown of how these guys are pricing these girls to sell,” Clark cut in, aghast that it was still not enough to draw attention from anyone.

Scardino pointed at the file. “Did you see Omer write this?”

“We all know it was him,” Lois shot back irritably.

“Really? Maybe it was just the poor helpful art instructor trying to find the right amount to offer the kidnappers,” Scardino quipped innocently.

“You don’t *really* believe that,” Lois scoffed in dismay.

“Of course, I don’t believe that, but that is the story he’ll tell, and that is exactly what these bureaucrats in Washington will believe when they let him walk. You want to nail him to the wall, then you need a smoking gun, and that ain’t it.”

“Hey, Lois, CK?” Jimmy walked up to them with a red-haired girl that couldn’t be older than seventeen behind him. Though hidden in her eyes was a wisdom that aged her. Lois immediately recognized her. Hidden beneath the makeup and dyed hair was the same girl Clark had been searching for since discovering her disappearance from the Fifth Street Mission.

“I hate to interrupt, but...” Jimmy gestured to the girl behind him, and Clark interjected before he could finish.

“Ingrid,” Clark let the name roll off his tongue with ease, and Lois’ eyes widened, realizing he might have given a little too much information away with the name slip.

“How did you...?” Ingrid looked at him in surprise, her eyes widened in fear.

“Wait,” Lois called out to her. “We’ve been looking for you. Superman was worried about you when you disappeared from the Fifth Street Mission. We just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

She stopped mid-step, seeming to be trying to determine if she believed Lois or not. “Superman saved me,” Ingrid spoke up in broken English. The faint German accent could be heard as she spoke. Her tone was harsh, as she added. “Then he took me back to where I lost everything.”

“I’m sure he didn’t know,” Lois took a step toward her as Jimmy and Clark both remained quiet, watching as Lois tried to stop this poor girl from disappearing into the darkness she had been swallowed up in for the last several months.

Ingrid gave her a hesitant gaze then turned away. “No one ever does.”

“So, let’s change that,” Lois prodded gently. “Let us help you.”

Ingrid turned to face Lois, folding her arms over her chest, shaking her head. “I sat in the police station for thirty minutes, ready to do whatever it takes to help save the girl you were searching for. Then the door opened, and I was staring at a man that had raped me for an hour and then spat on me like garbage. Don’t you see? No one can help me.”

“I can,” Dan Scardino called out to her from the corner where he had been seated quietly, watching the exchange unfold between the two of them.

Lois watched as recognition crossed Ingrid’s face, pausing with a curious expression and looking at Dan Scardino as if she

was trying to place him from somewhere. “I’ve seen you before... How...?”

Scardino stood up from his seat and walked over to her, pointing at a long scar across his jawline. “Nearly eighty-three stitches and a limp I’ll live with.” He frowned, meeting her fearful gaze. “You were the girl. The one that was hiding?”

She bit her lower lip, recoiling as she recalled the moment he was reminding her of. “I try not to think about...” her voice wavered, and she finally responded, “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you.”

Lois watched helplessly as Ingrid sunk down into one of the conference room chairs, letting out a labored sob that shook her to the core. She knelt down next to her, placing a hand on her shoulder, wondering how to reassure her after her trust and safety had been violated for so long. “Ingrid, why did you come here? What are you searching for?”

“I saw the papers. That girl... they have her. I know they do,” she let out a choked sob.

“Who has her?” Lois asked gently.

“I can’t say,” Ingrid shook her head, turning away.

“Why?” Scardino asked.

“You don’t understand. I will be killed. I survive because they don’t know where to find me.” Ingrid’s hand trembled as she let out a soft whimper. “You cannot stop these animals.”

“We can get Superman to help you,” Clark remarked softly, squeezing Lois’ shoulder.

“He doesn’t know what to look for,” Ingrid said with a sob.

“Then maybe you can tell us,” Lois pleaded with her. “Look, we know you’ve had a hard life. You were never given a fair shot at anything and forced to struggle and endure things no child should have to be put through. You’re a strong and capable individual, and if you help us, I know we can stop these people from ever hurting you or girls like Esma ever again.”

“I won’t go into these shelters or foster families. I won’t put myself in that situation again,” Ingrid warned with a dark gaze.

“Do you have somewhere to go?” Clark asked curiously.

“I am not on the street or living in my car if that’s what you’re worried about.” Ingrid sniffed, shaking her head.

Lois exchanged a glance with Clark, and he signaled his acknowledgment with a head nod. She turned to Ingrid and shook her head in agreement. “We just want to make sure you’re safe.”

“I can take care of myself,” Ingrid said, turning away.

“I’m sure you can,” Clark responded, pausing briefly as Ingrid looked away. Lois met her husband’s conflicted expression, seeing the tension and worry lines across his face briefly before he reached his hand up to cover his face. A gesture he often did when he was trying to keep his emotions at bay. Clark hung his head and spoke up. “Six months ago, you tried to jump in front of a train to get away from these guys. I may be wrong, but it sounds to me like maybe you could use some help in keeping away from these guys.”

“I don’t trust the police,” Ingrid shook her head.

“Then trust me,” Scardino interjected. He pointed to his chest. “You want to help us find this missing girl, we’ll gladly welcome the help, but we do it my way.”

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*Two Years Ago...*

Lois glanced across the room, catching the forlorn expression on Clark’s face as he sunk down on the edge of the bed, not bothering to change out of his suit and tie from earlier. She set her things down on the dresser and ran her hands across her upper arms, rubbing them gently as she walked further into the room. She hadn’t had the strength to put on the pretense of being okay after the news from the specialist earlier.

Clark had called his parents and arranged for Jon to have a sleepover with them for the night. She wanted so desperately to be able to hold Jon and never let go, but given the gravity of her

emotions right now, she knew it was probably for the best. Seeing her and Clark like this would only scare him.

“Your dad called,” Lois found her voice as she claimed the spot on the bed next to him, reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder. “Jon’s having a blast with your mom making paintball art.”

Clark chuckled, letting out a snort. “That’ll be fun getting out of his hair.”

She nodded her agreement, resting her head against his shoulder, waiting for him to work his way up to the news they’d received this afternoon. She didn’t have to wait for long. His haunting gaze shifted from his lap and back to her as he choked out a painful, heart-wrenching apology.

“I’m... so sorry, Lois. This is all my fault.”

“Your fault?” Lois squinted back at him, not following his logic as her hand slipped inside his, clasping her palm around his as she looked back at him expectantly.

“You were right. I was being a hypocrite and arrogant thinking I can handle these guys,” he explained gently, hanging his head in shame, continuing in a hoarse murmur. “First Bad Brain then LiveWire. I should never have confronted her there.”

“Clark,” Lois felt her heart hammer in her chest, feeling the weight of the guilt he was carrying from the words that escaped his lips. She reached her hands out, cupping his face as she forced him to look at her. Her voice trembled as tears escaped the corners of her eyes. “Listen to me. You did not do this. There’s no way anyone could have known what LiveWire was capable of.”

“No, Lois... It’s my fault. I should have...”

Lois felt the lump in her throat., watching the turmoil of emotions cross his face in dismay. “Clark, don’t you dare blame yourself for this. It was LiveWire that did this. Not you.” She pressed her lips to his forehead, feeling his steel muscles relax against her. Her arms wrapped around him as she felt his body shudder against her.

Tears burned against the corners of her eyes as his lips met hers. A soft whisper reached her ears as the tears flowed freely down her cheeks, unable to hold them back as her body shook uncontrollably.

Clark brushed his palm against her face, wiping away her tears. She let out a shuddered gasp as he nibbled his way down her jaw and to her throat. “I love you, you know that?” he murmured in between heated kisses.

She let out a shuddered breath, and he tilted her chin up with his thumb, brushing his lips against hers. One kiss became two, then four until she lost count. Raw, uninhibited instinct quickly took over as her hands roamed up and down his body, refusing to lose contact with him for a minute, she wrapped her arms around him, deepening the kiss. He groaned his approval against her lips as she ran her palms up and down his back.

Three months. It had been three months since they had made love. Three months since the incident with LiveWire. Three months since she had felt his heart beat in-sync with hers. She desperately needed to feel him pressed against her the way he always was when they made love. She needed him almost as much as he needed her in that moment.

She ran her hands up and down the front of his shirt, feeling the powerful muscles beneath the cotton of his dress shirt. Her body molded against his, feeling him begin to respond to her touch. “Make love to me, Clark,” she murmured against him, gripping the collar of his shirt as they sunk back on the bed.

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The distinct scent of incense swiveled through the air as Dan Scardino looked around the dimly lit room, toward the dinged red and gold trim that swayed back and forth where a man dressed in dark robes stood at the center of it all. The crowd circled around the man as a handshake here, and there was exchanged.

Scardino stood along the sidelines of the crowd, fidgeting

beneath the dirty cloths he wore, trying to fit in with the degenerates that seemed more interested in getting their fix from the local medicine man than anything. He stared down at his bare feet, grimacing at the bloody cracks on them. As painful as it was for him, the advice Yvonne had given him had helped him get through three levels of tests in order to bring him here.

“My friend, I don’t believe I’ve seen you here before.”

Scardino jumped, startled by the hand on his shoulder. He looked behind him and noted the burly man with a long goatee. He looked to his left, where the man that had been in the center of the room had moved to his side and was staring back at him expectantly.

“I, uh, haven’t had the pleasure,” Scardino grunted out, flashing his best smile at the man. “Anwir,” he introduced himself, feigning his best Arabic accent, hoping against all odds he wouldn’t draw any more attention.

The identity he’d assumed was one given to him by Yvonne. It was dangerous. Not knowing who might have come in contact with the man prior, but it had helped him cut through many of the barriers and given him a somewhat believable backstory when asked.

“Anwir?” the man stared at him for a long time and then asked, “How did you hear about us, Anwir?”

“Anwir,” Scardino responded with a smile.

There was an uncomfortable pause for what he felt would last forever, and then the man’s face relaxed and broke out into a smile. “Well, then, any friend of Anwir’s is a friend of mine. Come, get yourself a drink.” He pointed toward the table that many of the crowd were huddled around.

Scardino nodded, forcing a smile across his face as he skirted his way toward the crowd, feeling the eyes on him. Something felt off. He glanced toward the corner of the room where he saw a woman in gold and pink dancing. Her eyes caught his with an almost urgent calling that drew him to her. He found himself following her with his gaze, and with it, his feet followed until he stopped a few feet away from her.

As he stopped, he noted the woman was no woman at all. She was merely a young girl dressed to the nine in clothing made for a woman nearly ten years older than her. His gaze settled on her face as he saw the panic in her eyes.

“You can’t be this close to me.” She warned.

“How old are you?” Scardino asked.

“What do you care?” She scoffed, giving him a dirty look before sneering at him. “You stand out like a sore thumb.”

With that, a hard blow came from behind, and everything went dark.

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Clark stared at the ceiling, feeling his heart pounding against his chest in the aftermath of the recent lovemaking with Lois. Three months. It might as well have been three years. The pain of losing their unborn child had left them both in a grief-stricken fatigue that weighed heavily on them. A gaping hole that gnawed deep inside his gut, the guilt that he had carried with him. Holding her like this felt so right. The world seemed to make so much more sense with Lois by his side.

“Clark?”

He turned his head, looking down at where Lois was laid across him, resting her head on his chest as she let out a heavy sigh. “Hmm?”

“Do you think that doctor’s right?” She lifted her head up, meeting his gaze as she looked at him expectantly. “Do you think we really won’t be able to have another baby without seeing a specialist?” Tears trickled down her cheeks. “I don’t even think that’s an option. What if...?”

He quickly cut her off before she could ramp herself up into full babble-mode. “Lois, it was one opinion.” His voice trembled as he spoke, not sure how convinced he was of the statement but

continued, leaning over to stroke her cheek. “The very fact that we were able to conceive children is a miracle in itself. Trying to over-analyze if it’s still possible seems premature.” His gaze softened, and he added gently, “We live the impossible every day. The mere fact that we’ve conceived not one, but two children has combated the odds of supposed experts. Will there be challenges? Probably, but nothing worthwhile is worth having without its own challenges. This is no different.”

Lois nodded, placing a hand across his chest, hesitantly gazing at him as she found the strength to say the words weighing on her mind. “I want to try again.” She brushed her lips to his and murmured. “I want another baby.”

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*Present Day...*

Clark stared across the dinner table at Jon, trying to focus on the jibber-jabbering about his favorite Bob the Builder episode and how his friend Davey colored on his picture. He wanted so badly to be able to sit across from him and not think about the gruesome realities his mind had been opened up to this afternoon. Children as young as Jon plucked up off the street and sold into the black-market world.

How could the world be so cruel? How could this be happening here in Metropolis without him even knowing? Children taken from the safety of their homes and never to be seen again. Children.

“Dad! Dad! Dad!”

“Yeah, bud?” Clark shook his head, turning to Jon as Lois gave him a questioning gaze.

“Look an airplane.” Jon held his fork up in the air, making a whirring sound as he imitated an airplane flying in the air. “I am a fighter pilot! Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!”

Clark cracked a smile, chuckling at his son’s antics. Lois reached over to point to the broccoli still sitting on Jon’s plate. “All right, little bird, how about we focus on finishing this broccoli before trying to take off on any missions, hmm?”

Jon grumbled about how real fighter pilots don’t have to fly on a full stomach and poked his fork into the broccoli. Clark let out a heavy sigh and glanced in Lois’ direction just as she rolled her eyes.

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Dan Scardino leaned back on the hotel bed, staring up at the flickering light that buzzed above him. He frowned, shaking his head and turning to look over at the photo he had propped up on the nightstand. The young kid with his arm around a beautiful brunette—That kid had it all. A life and someone to love and a fighting spirit that caught him some hell from the higher-ups. Somethings never change.

What he wouldn’t give to be that kid again.

Things seemed so much simpler back then.

He felt sick to his stomach with guilt over not finding a way to get more information from Omer or Yvonne when he’d had the chance. So many names. So many faces and the more layers that he pulled back, the more complicated things became. Drugs. This had all started with a cocaine and methamphetamine bust and had ballooned into a full-blown child trafficking investigation.

He had more than he’d started with, and this girl, Ingrid, could be the key to finding Omer and this Tobias. He just prayed they didn’t get to her first.

The phone on his nightstand rang, and he reached over to answer it, “Scardino.”

“Mr. Scardino, this hotel water is too hot.”

“So turn it down,” Scardino instructed Ingrid over the phone.

“I tried,” she hissed back with a sharp tone.

“So, you want me to call maintenance?” Scardino asked.

“You were the one that said I couldn’t talk with the front desk,” Ingrid reminded him.

“Fine,” Scardino sighed, swinging his legs over the side of

the bed and reaching for the extra key card. “I’ll be there in a few.”

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Lois placed her head against the tile wall of the shower, letting out a heavy sigh as she wrapped her towel around her body, reaching her hand out to open the shower door. After dinner, she had been hit with a wave of nausea that had nearly taken her out. Clark had thankfully taken over with Jon’s bedtime routine while she reclaimed her bearings. Nausea had been the first sign for her with her last pregnancy but had been noticeably absent with her pregnancy with Jon. She needed to sit Clark down and tell him, but with everything, they were juggling, she wasn’t sure she had the mental strength to open that door just yet.

Nearly a year of desperately trying to conceive had tested both their emotional and mental strength. The painful moment they had both resigned themselves to putting an end to the emotional burden that came with continuing to try for something that would never come was forever etched in her mind. She had let that dream go, convinced she would never know the joy of carrying another life inside her again. Like every challenge they had faced before, they had sought one another out, supporting one another through the unwelcome reality of being unable to expand their family. As painful as it was, they had both accepted this as their reality.

A family of three.

Now, here she was nearly two years later wondering how to process the news – the bombshell – she had dropped on her this morning. Hope was such a cruel thing. Each month it had taunted them both and then been dashed away with the blink of an eye. With it came fear and agony with which she was forced to carry on in silence. It wasn’t fair. Nothing about what had happened nearly three years ago was fair.

Opening up those wounds and daring to hope felt surreal as if it were someone else she was watching. It couldn’t be that simple. It couldn’t be that easy. They had tried for so long, and now all of a sudden, it just happened?

Her gaze shifted to the pharmacy bag she had picked up earlier, pondering if she truly had the strength to endure this test again.

*‘One way to find out.’*

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Clark leaned back in his chair at the table, tapping the pen in between his fingers back and forth against the notepad in front of him as he listened to his friend, Roger Templeton, explain all the reasons why the FBI could not pursue this case.

“I get there are politics involved here, Clark, but we can’t just go barging into another country without some kind of due process.”

“We know these guys were last seen in Qatar. Why can’t we send someone over there to search for them?”

“We know they were there two years ago, Clark. There’s no telling if these guys are even on the same continent now.”

“The people behind this are plucking children up off the street and shipping them off somewhere, and doing God knows what to them...” Clark trailed off, unable to let his mind go there. “I’d think Qatar is at least a good place to start. Are you seriously telling me there’s nothing the FBI can do to rescue these kids?”

“We have no guarantee these missing girls are even in Qatar,” Roger explained plainly. “There are politics and some heavy-handed border laws that prevent us from storming over there without more evidence than a sighting from two years ago. Hell, they want to make it even stricter...”

“I understand,” Clark replied irritably, recalling the uproar that the open border laws had caused. There seemed to always be an argument over the Border control laws. An argument for open borders looked good on paper and sounded good coming out of the different politicians’ mouths during elections, but the details of

just what those laws meant left a lot to be desired. Many of the senators that were running on this platform insisted it was a humanitarian issue, while the opposing side argued the risk it brought in welcoming criminals without the checks and balances and no way to identify their comings and goings. While the laws that had been put in place weren't completely open borders, it did tie the hands of many governing agencies when pursuing suspects outside the country.

"Look, the only way we can do anything is to prove these girls are over there. We do that, and it then becomes something we can get the Secretary of State involved in with the UN to negotiate their release."

"Negotiate?" Clark echoed, aghast at the word. "Roger, these guys are criminals. How about the simple act of law and order to take them into custody and freeing these kids from whatever hell they're enduring right now as we speak?"

"I understand your frustration, Clark, but there isn't enough intel to even confirm your kidnappers are even in any of these countries. A sighting two years ago isn't enough to warrant breaking a country's sovereignty. Hell, even the Secretary of State can't..." Templeton trailed off with dismay. "I wish I had better news for you. I'm sorry."

"So am I," Clark barked, setting the phone down on the receiver with a click.

"How many is that?" Lois asked, poking her head around the corner with a towel wrapped around her hair and her terry cloth robe wrapped snugly around her.

"Eighteen," Clark grumbled, pointing to the list in front of him as she approached, looking a little more refreshed than she had after dinner. "You feeling any better?"

"A little," she admitted, leaning over to give him a peck on the cheek as she slid on his lap with a heavy sigh. "I guess I was more affected by everything Ingrid and Agent Scardino told us today than I thought."

"There is nothing anyone outside of people that sit in the White House can do to help these kids," Clark remarked with a heavy sigh. "I just... I don't know what to do."

"We don't know for sure they're still in Qatar," Lois pointed out, resting her head against his shoulder. "They could be anywhere."

"We don't know that they're not," Clark argued, shaking his head. "I don't get it. How is the FBI supposed to stop human trafficking if they can't go to the country they're taking these kids to?"

"Have you tried calling Jack Davenport?" Lois asked curiously. "Or Director Talley? Maybe they can get through the red tape?"

"Talley's not taking any calls, and Davenport has his phone going straight to voicemail," Clark grumbled.

"Well, maybe we can try them later?" Lois pondered aloud.

"I'm not sure there's much they can do. Roger seemed pretty insistent that the FBI's hands were tied unless some agreement can be made to allow the FBI or troops into Qatar. There is no way that's happening." Clark said, disheartened over the current situation.

"Something tells me you've already convinced yourself of an alternate way of handling this," Lois observed, placing a hand across his cheek.

"Superman could confirm these guys are still in Qatar," Clark began quietly.

"And what happens if Superman comes across these missing girls?" Lois asked, letting out a heavy sigh. "I want to bring them home as much as you do, Clark, but if Superman flies over there and tries to rescue any of these kids without the right authorities, it could start a war in an already hostile climate."

"I know," Clark acknowledged with a torn expression. "I have to do something, Lois. I can't just sit back and do nothing."

"You can't go break another nation's sovereignty in the name of justice either." Lois shook her head. "If you find her there. You won't be able to bring her home. You will have to leave her there. Are you sure you can do that?"

"If I do find her there, then I'll know where to send the FBI or whoever they decide to send in and rescue her," Clark said with a somber expression. "I *have* to know."

Lois nodded, mulling over something before she finally relented and then added, "You'll need to wear something a little more discreet than the red 'S' and cape."

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## Chapter 16: Hear That Sound

### *One Year Ago...*

Jon squealed happily as he lifted his arms in the air, making a buzzing noise to imitate an airplane. Lois laughed as she held him in her arms, settling him on her side as they exited the daycare's playroom. They walked through the glass doors and into the Daily Planet lobby.

She had tried to stick around as long as she could before heading out, but it was getting late, and well past the normal hour she left the Planet. Clark was still out searching for the new superhero that had shown up in Metropolis two days ago. She identified herself as Vixen, and not much else had been discovered about her much to Perry's dismay.

"Someone's in a good mood," Lois chuckled, running her hand across Jon's back.

"Lois..."

She turned to see Leslie Luckabee approaching them from the corner of the lobby where the elevator doors let out. Lois sighed, spotting the Planet's new owner as he waved his hand toward them, quickening his pace to catch up with them. He'd introduced himself yesterday morning and appeared to have implanted himself in the middle of the newsroom's day to day activities. Assess what the day to day life of the journalists he now employed were like — a much different approach than Franklin Stern had taken.

"Mr. Luckabee." Lois nodded in his direction.

"Ah, heading out?" Leslie asked, pointing to the door.

Jon slowed his airplane imitations, growing shy with the stranger he was unfamiliar with and resting his head against Lois' as they walked toward the door. Lois kept a hand on Jon's back as they exited, responding to Leslie's question with a frank, "Well, I think we've done all we can for the night. Superman's still looking for Vixen, and this little guy is ready to go home."

"Of course." Leslie gave a good-natured smile as they walked through the rotating glass doors, coming out onto the busy street in front of the Planet. He pointed to the sign that read 'Roberto's' two buildings down from the crosswalk. "I was planning on catching a bite to eat before calling it a night. Care to join me?"

Lois patted Jon's back, pondering if she shouldn't try to stick around close to the Planet with Clark still out looking for Vixen. She turned to Jon and asked him, "What do you think, bud? Enchiladas sound good?"

Jon nodded mutely before lifting his head from her shoulder and looking at Leslie with a furrowed brow that resembled his father when he was trying to size up someone new. Lois shrugged her shoulders, cradling Jon in her arms as she nodded her agreement. "I'll need to leave a message for Clark, so he knows where to meet us, but not cooking sounds divine right now..."

The words traipsed out of her mouth, just as a familiar sonic boom echoed from the alleyway behind the Planet. She bit her lower lip, turning her head toward the crosswalk Clark was on, walking toward them with a wave. "Daddy!"

"Your ears must be burning, mate," Leslie commented as Clark reached them. "We were just talking about you."

Lois pointed to the sign for Roberto's. "We were just going to grab some dinner before heading home. I wasn't sure when you'd

get back from your, uh, search for Superman, so I thought I'd buy some time... and Jon loves their cheese dip."

"You'll join us, of course," Leslie interjected.

"Cheese dip!" Jon demanded with a grin.

"Of course," Clark smirked, leaning over to press the call button for them to cross the street to Roberto's. "As long as Jon's not having chips for dinner." He raised his eyebrows at Jon, who stuck out his lower lip in defiance.

"So, any luck with the search?" Leslie asked, gesturing to the dimly lit sky above them.

"Search?" Clark looked at Leslie with a distracted expression as a loud shrieking of tires filled the air.

"Vixen," Leslie prompted.

Clark's face didn't even register Leslie's response as Lois found herself pushed toward the alley, and Clark's voice boomed through her eardrums with a sharp, "Get down!"

"Mommy!" Jon's fearful cries rang in her ears as she crouched down against the pavement, hovering over him, shielding him from any stray bullets as they rained around them. She kept one hand over his eyes, protecting him from seeing the gunfire.

"Don't move!" she heard Clark whisper in her ear with a shaky breath.

She let out a shallow breath, keeping a tight grip on Jon as she craned her neck to look up, feeling relief wash over her when she saw Clark standing in front of her. She looked to her left, seeing Leslie crouched down behind one of the pillars outside the Planet.

"Hey, Luckabee!" could be heard from a man's voice through the gunfire. The squealing of tires could be heard as the rain of bullets came to an end.

"Clark?" Lois called out, trying to assess what had happened. She glanced at Clark as he tugged on his tie, preparing to retreat. Before either of them could excuse him from the scene in front of Jon or Leslie, a rain of gold filled the air and, in its place, was a fierce and determined Vixen, staring the retreating car down. A split-second later, a blast of fire formed in front of her and ricocheted through the air and right on its target – the retreating gunmen – disintegrating the car and shooters into ashes.

Lois tightened her arms around Jon as she stared at the burning street, keeping her hand over Jon's face to keep him from seeing the disturbing scene. Clark reached his hand out to help her up, looking her over and asking, "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Just a little rattled," Lois responded, shaking her head. She glanced toward Leslie, who was still crouching down on the pavement. "Mr. Luckabee, are you all right?"

He glanced toward her shaking his head. "Yeah, I think so. Friendly town you've got here..."

Clark gestured to the street that was still in flames. "I'm gonna call the police..." He reached his hand over to cup Jon's face. "You okay, bud?"

Jon shook his head, burying his face against her shoulder. "He just needs a minute."

"I'll be right back," Clark promised, moving off.

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Clark barely registered the street around him as he moved toward the alleyway, making a quick change of wardrobe and reappearing barely a second later to confront Vixen who was still standing in the middle of the enflamed street where the retreating gunmen's car had been moments ago. One bullet. That's all it would have taken for Lois or Jon to have been killed or possibly injured. He could feel the rage within him rising as he clenched and unclenched his fists, blowing the flames on the street out with a long cool breath that covered the street in ice.

Vixen registered his presence with a blink of her eyes and held her hand up. "That's alright, Superman. I've got this situation under control."

"Vixen, what are you doing? You just killed them!" he growled, gesturing to the ashes in front of them.

"I don't understand." She stared back at him, confused.

"They tried to kill him." She gestured toward Leslie Luckabee.

"But, with your speed and strength, you could've easily arrested them, instead!" Clark fumed through gritted teeth.

"Why would I have done that?" Vixen looked at him with a vacant expression, barely registering the deaths of the gunmen as more than anything but a formality rather than a cold-hearted over-reaction on her part.

Clark feigned a calm he didn't feel, burying inside him the rage that threatened to consume him as he growled out, "Because that's the way the system works here."

"Why would I have done that? They just would've gotten out to kill again." Vixen jutted her chest out proudly, unfazed by the information he'd relayed.

"You can't go around hurting people... not even the bad guys! You have to use your powers responsibly!"

Vixen's eyes glowed as she narrowed her gaze at him. "I did. I eradicated evil." She pushed past him with a hard shove. "You do it your way; I'll do it mine!"

"No." Clark grabbed her arm to stop her. "You'll do it the right way, or you won't do it at all." She locked her gaze with his, and he saw the emotionless determination behind her eyes, sending a surge of fear through him as the thousand what-if scenarios ran through his mind.

She jerked her arm away. With a blink of an eye and a whirlwind of gold and blue, she disappeared before him. He scanned the streets, noting a few pedestrians that had been crossing the street that were knocked to the ground by Vixen's retreat. A man reached his hand out to help them up and he caught the shaken expression on both their faces.

Vixen was a serious threat.

He was going to have to stop her.

"Mommy!"

His eyes clamped closed, and his attention zeroed in toward the doorway of the Planet where Lois was crouched down next to Jon, cradling her in his arms. His heart lurched in his chest, feeling the raw emotions that were threatening to consume him rise. He needed to stop Vixen. Every fiber of his being wanted to fly off and chase her down, enforcing the justice system she so ceremoniously spat at with her degrading tantrum. He wanted to seek her out and bring her to justice. He wanted justice, but more than that – he wanted his family safe.

Jon had already witnessed more than he ever should have. He let out a heavy sigh and then turned back to the frozen street. The best thing to do now was to take Lois and Jon home. Vixen would be brought down, but not tonight.

He flew at super-speed toward the Planet, changing back into his suit and tie, readjusting his glasses as he approached Lois and Jon, who were talking with Leslie Luckabee.

"Where do you think she went?" Leslie asked, glancing toward the space Vixen had vacated earlier.

"The police are on their way." Clark heard a siren in the distance and smiled as he knelt down to pick up Jon, taking a moment to hug him a little tighter than usual. "You ready to go home, bud?" Jon nodded, wrapping his arm around Clark's neck as he turned toward Leslie. "We'll have to take a raincheck on that dinner, Mr. Luckabee."

"Understandable." Leslie nodded. "Uh, thank you for everything..." He motioned to the chaos around them. "You saved my life, Clark, I won't forget that."

Clark flashed him a weak smile. "You're welcome. Have a good night."

\*\*\*

"I hate you."

"I know you do." Dan felt his physical therapist pat his knee

as he gritted his teeth, holding the bright green spandex in place, biting his lower lip in an effort to hold back the pain that was rushing through him. She glanced at the timer in her hand and nodded to him. “And time.” He let out a heavy sigh of relief, feeling the tension dissipate. He reached a hand up to wipe his brow as he leaned back on the table.

“I still hate you,” Dan remarked grimly, staring up at the ceiling with a heavy breath.

He winced as he raised himself up for her to place a cold pack on his shoulder, letting out a heavy sigh as he felt the relief wash over him.

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Lois laid next to her husband, watching the rise and fall of his chest as she gazed lazily over at him. A slow grin covered her face as his hand brushed against her chin. “I can’t move my legs,” she giggled, craning her neck as she looked back at him.

“Uh-huh,” Clark lazily reached over, pulling her to him as he breathed a whisper in her ear. “I love you.”

After two hours of qualming their son’s cries with a few reruns of cartoons and ice cream, Jon had finally fallen asleep. The gunfire and explosion from earlier had left them all shaken, trying to grapple with the trauma by clinging to the comfort of one another. Her hand drifted across her abdomen, pondering momentarily if by some miracle they might have finally made a baby.

It had been six months since they’d received the news from the specialist surrounding her injuries after LiveWire’s attack. It had been six months of negative test results and painful reminders of what they had lost. Tonight had been a jarring reminder of just how fragile everything was.

Tonight could have easily become a deadly situation like that of the attack LiveWire had struck on the city and her. Thankfully Jon was safe, but her mind kept drifting to the horrible scenarios that could have happened.

“Clark?” she lifted her head up to look at him.

“Hmm?” His chin nuzzled against her head, running his hand across her face, tracing the worry lines away with his thumb.

“Vixen going after these criminals like this...” Lois began, biting her lower lip as she thought through the fears that were roaming through her mind. “What if she starts going after people that aren’t criminals?”

“I don’t know,” he responded with a heavy sigh. “Vixen is out of control. Anything’s possible, I suppose. I just hope we don’t find out the hard way how dangerous she is.” He pressed his lips to hers, tangling his breath with hers as he whispered, “She won’t get away with this.”

A whistle of relief washed over her as she stared into his eyes, letting go of the anguish she was toying with over the events that had transpired this evening. The power this Vixen character had was alarming and to think she carried these powers without the same morals Clark held himself to. Even when Superman was just a stranger that had shown up and rescued her and the other passengers on the Messenger, not once had she feared what he might do with the power he held. Here was this powerful man that had the strength of gods but was more human than those that were born here on Earth. Vixen was different, though. She was cold and unfeeling, unfazed by the brutality she subjected her victims to and even those she claimed to be saving.

“I love you, you know that?” she whispered, looping her arm around his neck.

“I recall you mentioning it a time or two.” His breath tickled her ear, and she tightened her grasp on him. His lips teased hers with slow languishing caresses, dipping his tongue into the crevices of her mouth as he rolled her on her side.

A soft moan escaped her throat as his hands roamed up her sides, tracing the outline of her curves as her hands roamed through his hair, fingering the dark silky strands as the urgency

behind each caress grew more insistent.

“I love you,” she whispered breathlessly as he rolled them over, so she was hovering over him. She ran her hand down his chest, tracing an imaginary ‘S’ across his chest. His hands ran over her bare back as she leaned forward to capture his mouth with his, readjusting herself across him, so she was straddling him.

The blaring of the phone on the nightstand quickly pulled their attention away from one another. Clark let out a groan, craning his neck to look toward the intruding ring coming from the wireless phone.

“It’s almost ten o’clock... Ignore them.”

She giggled as he drew his hands up her back, tugging her back down to capture her lips with his. The incessant blaring of the phone continued to ring in the background until finally, the voicemail picked up.

“Hello, Lois, Clark, I know it’s late. This is Leslie Luckabee...”

“I’m going to strangle him,” Clark groaned from beneath her as she attempted to stifle her laughter. “That man needs to get a life.”

“...I have a plan to stop Vixen. I know it might be a bit presumptuous of me, but I need your help to pull it off and...”

Clark groaned, rolling his eyes as Lois reached her hand over to answer the phone. “Hello?”

“Ah, Lois, sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you...”

“No, we weren’t sleeping.” Lois bit her lower lip, holding her index finger to her husband’s lips as he choked back a hard chuckle. “What was it you needed help with...?” She held back a comment about the late hour, leaning forward and holding the phone out for them both to respond to Leslie.

“I was hoping to persuade you and Clark to come down to the Planet straight away. You see, the problem is, I couldn’t wait to put the plan into motion because it’s a timely one, and we’ll need Superman’s help to pull it off.”

Lois glanced at Clark, who was shaking his head. “Now? It’s pretty late...”

“If it’s not too much trouble, I could come there,” Leslie offered.

Lois shook her head. “How about we meet in the morning?”

“It may be too late to wait till morning,” Leslie argued.

“Um.” She looked at Clark helplessly, and he reached over to take the phone, letting out an aggravated sigh.

“What do you need from Superman?”

“Ah, Clark, good, you’re there as well. It’s a bit too complicated to detail over the phone...”

Clark reached his hand up, pinching both sides of his temple as he let out a very irritable response. “Mr. Luckabee, it’s after ten, and our son is asleep in his bed. Neither of us are comfortable waking him up or leaving him here with a sitter, so if it’s that time-sensitive, just try to tell us what it is you need.”

“Of course, I didn’t even look at the time. I apologize,” Leslie quickly rambled on, and Lois stifled a giggle as her husband held the phone out for her to listen, rolling his eyes as he did so. “Given Vixen’s knack for nabbing criminals, I thought I might bait the hook if you will. Make me look like a crooked CEO like the bank chairman that was kidnapped so that when she comes looking for me, Superman is there to stop her.”

“Vixen goes after bank robbers and armed hitmen...” Clark argued, not following how this would draw Vixen out. “Unless you know something we don’t.”

“Well, I just assumed it was worth a shot. Still, with what happened tonight, if there’s even a chance this might work, isn’t it worth a try?”

“Say we go along with this... *questionable* scheme and Vixen does show up.” Clark’s eyebrows rose, and he rolled his lower lip inside his mouth. “How do you know Vixen won’t kill you once she’s grabbed you?”

“That’s where Superman would have to come in, I’m afraid,” Leslie responded. “He’d have to follow her and then stop her once and for all,” Leslie explained plainly as Clark let out a long breath. “I’ll need you and Lois to help keep a lookout to alert him when she does grab me, and we’ll of course, need a way to ensure Superman can keep up with her...”

“We could talk to Dr. Klein and see if he can get us a tracking device,” Lois suggested, looking over at Clark with a raised brow.

Clark nodded and turned his attention back to Leslie. “We’ll see what we can do.” He let out a low breath and then added, “Mr. Luckabee, you do realize if Vixen picks you up at super-speed then you might not survive...”

“I’m willing to take that chance.”

“Why?” Clark’s brow furrowed, moving his hand absentmindedly across her hip bone as he spoke. She arched her eyebrow, silently agreeing with her husband’s train of thought and wondering what Leslie would have to gain from all of this.

“I like challenges,” Leslie responded. “Now, all I have to do is hope Superman’ll be able to defeat Vixen. Of course, if he can’t, I suppose we’re all in a lot of trouble.”

“When are you printing the story on the corruption scandal?” Clark asked, unfazed by Leslie’s comment as his hand ran over her bareback once more, drawing her closer with the subtle motion.

“Just within the hour,” Leslie answered. “We’ll need to meet early tomorrow to go over logistics.”

“We’ll try and contact Superman and update him on the plan,” Clark answered with a long sigh. His breath tickled her ear as he leaned forward, running his hands across her bare legs suggestively.

“Thank you, Clark. I really do appreciate your help.”

Lois reached over to take the phone from his hand, pressing her thumb over the end button.

Clark grinned and looked back at her with an impish grin. “I suppose we should update Superman.”

Her eyebrows rose, and she grinned back at him. “If we only knew how to find him...”

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Dan Scardino pinched the bridge of his nose as he looked across the waterway, shielding his eyes from the sunlight over the horizon. He looked over his shoulders to where the line of deadbeat addicts had been corralled out of a rundown warehouse in Berlin. He winced as he made his way toward the building, nodding to one of the officers, feeling the shooting pain in his knee. Nearly six months of physical therapy and a few surgeries and he still hadn’t completely recovered from the injuries he’d received.

“Anyone talking?” Dan asked, pointing to the crowd of deadbeats behind the police line.

“Nothing,” the first officer shook his head. “If Omer Demir was here, he’s long gone now.”

Dan shook his head with dismay, letting out an aggravated sigh. “But the information you had...”

“That was nearly three weeks ago,” the officer reminded him. “I’m sorry, Agent Scardino.”

“Me too.”

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Clark reached his hand over to pick up the paper coffee cup from the Jeep’s cup holder. He looked over at Lois, who was craning her neck out the window to see the front of the Daily Planet entrance. The plan itself seemed risky, and he still couldn’t comprehend why Leslie would put his life on the line like this. His explanation had been evasive at best, and the quick change of subject only made him more suspicious.

“This is ludicrous,” Lois grumbled, gesturing to the globe above the Daily Planet building. “We’ve been out here for three hours. Meanwhile, no one is getting anywhere on the missing CEOs and Vixen’s probably off killing gangs in Southside...”

Clark tapped his ear, leaning over to brush a kiss across her lips. “She hasn’t come through Metropolis since last night.”

“Small miracles,” Lois grumbled. She pointed to the street they were parked across. “I still don’t get how this is supposed to connect with the missing CEOs.”

“Maybe Leslie thinks Vixen treats corrupt white-collar crimes the same way she treats street criminals?” Clark shrugged his shoulders, not that convinced. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It’s pretty brave what he’s doing. I’ll give him that.”

“But?” Lois raised her eyebrows, looking at him with a knowing look.

“I don’t know, there’s just something about the guy... I don’t trust, I guess.” Clark tightened his jaw as he tried to voice the concerns tumbling through his mind. Leslie had been more than helpful throughout the transition of ownership and remained very much involved in the investigations the newsroom was working on. Still, his overly friendly nature and constant presence set off red alerts for him that he couldn’t shake. Even last night, when he had called hours after being nearly killed to hatch another plan that could get him killed felt out of place.

“You’re just mad he keeps interrupting us every time we get a moment alone,” Lois teased him, placing a hand suggestively on his kneecap.

“Well, he certainly didn’t earn any points last night.”

A heavy sigh escaped his lips as he recalled the awkward moment when Leslie had called moments after he and Lois were basking in the afterglow of making love to one another. He had to acknowledge, at least internally, the timing of the new owner’s intrusions had something to do with his hesitancy to trust Leslie Luckabee fully, but much of his distrust came from something deep in the pit of his stomach, sending alarms off every time he encountered him. They were eerily similar to that of Lex Luthor and even Bill Church Sr. Knowing his gut instinct had yet to steer him wrong, he wasn’t about to question it now.

“We could have just let it go to voicemail,” Lois teased, reaching her hand over to trace the outline of his jaw.

“Yeah, sure, then have him show up on our doorstep at ten o’clock at night.” Clark groaned, resting his head against his folded palm. “We already have a hard enough time getting a spare moment alone as it is.” He reached over to take her hand in his, running his thumb across her knuckles, lifting his gaze up to hers.

“He’s needy,” Lois agreed with a chuckle, “but he’s been nothing but complimentary since he got here. To both of us. Plus, he’s putting his life on the line...”

Clark snapped his fingers, letting out a frustrated sigh. “See? That’s exactly my point. He’s putting his life on the line for what? A headline?”

“Maybe he’s doing it for attention?” Lois wondered aloud. “Notoriety?”

“Maybe.” Clark scrunched his nose up, not sure what to make of the new owner. “Something just feels off with him is all.”

“Well, whatever it is that’s motivating him to help, I just hope it’s enough to stop Vixen.” Lois leaned her head back against the headrest. “The sooner she’s off the streets, the better.”

“Yeah, you think it was a good idea to leave Jon with your mom this morning?” Clark asked, brushing his thumb across her knuckles. “I mean, breaking him from his routine every time something happens isn’t something he can do when he starts elementary school...”

“He was scared,” Lois said with a heavy sigh. “I just want to baby him a little longer.”

He nodded, catching the silent pain hidden behind her eyes as she looked down at her hand in his. The older Jon got, the harder it was for both of them. He desperately wanted to give Jon as normal a life as he could without disrupting his friendships and school life with what was becoming a usual occurrence for them. No matter how hard they tried to keep away from the more dangerous stories

that would draw his alter-ego out and put Jon at risk, they always found their way back to him and Lois in some way. Much like the run-in with LiveWire, the gunfight last night had been pure happenstance of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lois didn't even have to try to seek out a dangerous criminal anymore; they found her as easily as she found the last Double Crunch Bar in her desk drawer.

"I just worry is all. I don't want him missing out on something because of the choices I've made," Clark explained gently.

Lois reached her hand out to caress his cheek and kissed him. "Those gunmen weren't looking for Superman."

"I know," Clark frowned, meeting her gaze and giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "Sometimes, I wish it would be easier if it were that simple."

"Maybe we need a vacation." She grinned, tracing the outline of his tie with her index finger. "Somewhere without deadlines or crazed gunmen trying to kill our boss?"

He chuckled, looking at her in surprise, taken aback by the sudden change of subject. "Am I talking to the real Lois Lane? Kerth award winner? Mad Dog Lane?"

"I haven't been Mad Dog Lane in years," Lois reminded him, leaning in to kiss him.

"I beg to differ," he whispered, cupping her cheek. "The stories we chase now are more crooked politicians and taking down criminal enterprise compared to crazed Bureau 39 agent convinced that little green men are going to come after him... but you're still just as tenacious as ever."

"You're biased." Lois laughed, loosening his tie. "I've lost my edge. I'm not nearly as fearless as I used to be." Her hand planted itself on her abdomen, searching for the life that was lost close to a year ago. He reached his hand over to cover hers, and she lifted her eyes up to meet his. "It's been six months. I just thought maybe a change of scenery might do us some good. According to all the experts, reducing the stress can help increase our chances..."

He let out a heavy sigh, squeezing her hand as he whispered, "Stressed isn't exactly how I'd describe the last few months..."

She flashed him a flirtatious smile, giving him a heated gaze before responding with a quick, "We're working."

"You said it yourself. This isn't going to work." Clark grinned back at her.

"Hmm, I take it that's a 'yes' on the weekend away?" She traced the path across his shoulder to the space where his neck and shoulder met with her palm, pursing her lips with a gaze that was anything but innocent.

"Make it a week away, and you've got yourself a deal." Clark reached his hand over to cup her cheek.

Lois giggled. "Well, we may need to put in that request for time off pretty soon then." She turned her head back toward the Planet, pointing to where Leslie had exited the building. "I guess we should get back to watching Leslie."

He nodded, watching Leslie exit the Daily Planet and approaching the crosswalk. "Here he comes... Now let's see if Vixen shows."

Within a few footsteps, a blur of gold and blue filled the air, and Clark looked at Lois for confirmation. She had the handheld tracking device Dr. Klein had given them in her palm, checking the location as the device's incessant beeping grew more intense.

"Okay, it's stopped," Lois looked up at him, pointing to the tracking device, "...at an alley by Fifth and Troy."

Clark tugged at the knot on his tie, opening the passenger side door to leave. "On my way."

"Be careful." She leaned in to kiss him before he pulled away.

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Clark landed outside the corner of Fifth and Troy, glancing up

at the tall skyscraper, and then turned the corner, walking toward the alley where he saw Vixen standing over a disoriented Leslie. He stopped behind her, folding his arms over his chest and greeting her with a stern tone.

"Hello, Vixen."

She turned to meet his gaze, her bright blue eyes, though hollow of emotion, glowed with recognition, and surprise washed over her features as she turned toward him. "Superman..."

"You and I need to talk, Vixen," Clark said, approaching her with a slow progress, taking in the vacant lot behind them with his senses to be sure there was no one here that could be hurt inadvertently. He just had to find a way to get Leslie out of here...

"Talk about what, Superman?" Vixen challenged, "You can't stop me."

"Your only way out is past me." Clark took another step toward her, blocking her from where Leslie laid woosily on a pile of trash bags.

"I've been looking forward to his." Vixen grinned happily, squaring her shoulders as she reached her arms out. Clark shot a beam of heat vision at her before she could form the firestorm she was trying to draw out, and she let out a shriek in surprise, looking down at the mechanical wires and microchips that had suddenly been exposed.

"You're a machine?" Clark gasped, focusing his x-ray vision inside her. From head to toe, she was entirely made of metal and microchips. A super-powered robot programmed to wreak havoc on the city. But how and by who?

She glared back at him ruthlessly and reached out to press a button on her chest. The trigger initiated a count down, and a digital voice spoke up. "Self-Destruct on project Vixen authorized in two seconds. Time's up, Superman."

At super-speed, Clark flew her into the air just in time to have Vixen explode in his hands, sending parts flying in flames across the alleyway around them. He stared down at his hands, trembling from the encounter. He flew back down to the alley, where he found Leslie starting to come to.

"S-superman, what happened? Did it work?" He looked around the alleyway and frowned. "Vixen exploded everywhere, didn't she?"

Clark frowned, trying to control his reaction as he stared back at Leslie. "It looks like your plan worked, Mr. Luckabee."

*'How did he know Vixen exploded if he was unconscious?'*

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*Present Day...*

Senator Michael Harris watched as the headlights flooded the street below, careful to remain out of sight from the street lamp a few feet away as he looked over at Leo Nunk, who was tugging on his tie nervously. "Any particular reason for the urgent call, Senator?"

"Here," Harris handed him the file in his hand, drawing out a long puff from his cigarette. He exhaled with a shallow breath and added, "We're taking things up a notch."

"But the defamation suit..." Nunk began to argue.

Harris quickly cut him off, "Is not your concern. There's a witness that has been brought forward for the Special Prosecutor. Everything in there is a hundred percent accurate as far as you know."

"As far as I know?" Nunk scoffed, shaking his head.

"Just have it on the front page before morning." Harris let out a sharp grunt as he jabbed a finger in Nunk's chest.

"No," Nunk jutted his chin out and puffed his chest, straightening his shoulders as he stared Harris down.

"I beg your pardon?" Harris scoffed, glaring at the paparazzi reporter in surprise.

"I said, 'N'-O.'" Nunk jabbed a finger in Harris' shoulder. "I am not going to lose my career for this circus show you and your boys are trying to pass off as just another smear campaign. I want

out.”

Harris chuckled to himself, noting the clear defiant tone in Nunk’s voice and wrapped his hand around the Glock 48 tucked inside his jacket. “Out?” He pulled the Glock out and fired it at Nunk’s right foot, hitting the middle toe as Nunk yelped out in pain, falling to the ground. Harris lowered himself to the ground and hissed out in a harsh whisper, “You get out when we say. Got it?”

Nunk stammered out an unrecognizable response as he held his foot in pain.

Harris then narrowed his gaze at him and added, “Next time I won’t miss.”

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Lois was right.

Everything about this trip had been a mistake. Clark ran a ragged hand through his hair and let out a labored breath as he looked across the dirt-covered road just outside the local authorities of Qatar. He had foolishly thought he could come here and find Omer or the people he worked with and put the authorities on his trail, and that would be all he would have to do. But he was a fool.

They were just as crooked as the men that continued to reign with terror in this region. He had to do something. He had to do something to stop them, but he couldn’t find a single soul willing to go up against them.

Esma was nowhere to be found.

Omer was in the wind.

All he had was the number Jack had been given with a ransom demand. Whether that demand was truly from the kidnappers or a ploy for something else by Omer was anyone’s guess at this point.

He scowled inwardly and took off into the pitch-black sky, preparing for his flight back home.

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Lois felt the sudden movement against the edge of the bed and shot up, startled, and half-asleep before she realized the movement was coming from her husband. A second glance in his direction and she caught the turbulent emotions across his face as he reached over to place a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s just me, go back to sleep.”

“You’re back already?” Lois heard her voice crack as both his arms wrapped around her. His chin nestled its way into the space between her neck and shoulder as he laid on the bed behind her, cradling her in his arms while his heavy, uneven breaths told her just how tormented he was. “Clark?”

She turned in his arms, forcing him to look at her as she reached out to cup his cheek. A pained expression was seared across his face with the mental scars he’d endured leaving him near tears as he croaked out. “I... tried. I couldn’t find her, Lois.”

Lois bit her lower lip, letting out a heavy sigh as she leaned into him, pressing her lips to his, trying to wash away the heavy mental burden he had been subjected to. “If it was that easy, we would have found her a few months ago.”

“The authorities over there are just as crooked.” Clark let out a shuddered breath, holding her against his chest. “I don’t know what to do. No one wants to stand up to these guys.”

“We don’t know that, Clark,” Lois tried to soothe, not feeling completely convinced of her own words.

“Right? I guess we can hold out hope that Davenport or Talley might have some pull with Washington to take these guys down, but Lois, they’re the same people that passed the law to prevent any action from being taken in the first place. I just don’t know how much good it’s going to do.”

“Well, I know at least a few people that aren’t going to give up.” Lois sighed, resting her head against his shoulder. “As long as it remains prominent and on everyone’s mind, they can’t hide.”

“Well, they’re certainly going out of their way to make sure

that doesn’t happen,” Clark pointed out with disgust.

“So, maybe we go after them,” Lois replied with a sigh. “Maybe we’re going at this the wrong way.”

“You saying you want to take on the paparazzi now?” Clark asked with an amused expression.

“No, but maybe I want to go after whoever’s lining their pockets and possibly whoever pushed this bill through to give child traffickers a free pass to come pluck kids off the street and disappear into the night without a way for us to rescue them.”

“I love you,” he whispered, stroking her cheek with his thumb. “You are the most tenacious, incredible woman I’ve ever met. I don’t know how I would be able to get through any of this without you, Lois.”

“Oh, Clark,” She leaned over to capture his mouth with hers. “I love you so much. I don’t know what I’d do if I ever lost you.”

“Lois, I’d be nothing without you,” He whispered, resting his forehead against hers. “You and Jon are what keeps me going. Especially when I hit dead ends like this that make me want to scream.” He let out a heavy sigh and added, “There wouldn’t even still be a Superman without you.”

“You would have found your way eventually,” she replied confidently. “You always do.”

“Well, thankfully, for the rest of the world, I have this tenacious and stubborn partner that refuses to let me get stuck in my own head too long.” He smirked back at her, and she chuckled. They laid in one another’s arms for what felt like forever before Clark broke the silence, smoothing his hand across her face and asking, “Are you feeling any better? I know it was a lot that got laid on us at once yesterday...”

“I’m fine,” Lois insisted, looking back at his concerned expression. The worry lines on his face tugged on her heartstrings, and she let out a heavy sigh, unable to continue keeping him in the dark even if she hadn’t confirmed the news just yet. “I, uh, it wasn’t the interview with Ingrid that made me sick earlier.”

Clark’s brow furrowed in concern. “Are you coming down with something? It’s not the flu again, is it...”

“No, no, no.” Lois shook her head, scrambling to find the words as she blinked back tears. “I still have to actually confirm it, but the call earlier this afternoon was the pharmacy. Apparently, the blood tests last month got backed up and...” She let out a heavy breath, hearing her voice crack as she finally ripped off the Band-Aid. “Clark, they think I might be pregnant.”

“What?” Clark’s voice wavered as he stared back at her with a bewildered expression. “Are they sure?”

She quickly began rambling the speech she’d been rehearsing all afternoon, trying to prepare him for the news. “I know it’s crazy, and I’ve been over here wracking my brain trying to figure this out. There’s a very real possibility that it could have been a lab mix-up, right? So, I went to Vaughan’s and picked up a test. The chances of it being a lab mix-up are a little less realistic now because that came back positive.” She felt her voice catch, and she let out a whimper. “We tried for almost three years and...”

The last of her ramblings were quickly silenced as her husband’s lips covered hers, devouring her to the depths of her soul as he rolled her onto her back, tugging on her lower lip with his teeth. A moan of approval escaped her throat as his tongue slipped inside the inner confines of her mouth. She drew her hands through his hair, fingering the silky strands encouragingly.

His lips parted, and he ran his hands through her hair, hovering over her as he whispered, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” she murmured against him, running a hand across his face. She bit her lower lip and smiled back at him. “I made a tentative appointment for eight a.m. to have the ultrasound and try to determine how far along I am. With everything going on I... I don’t have a clear timeline.”

He nodded, wrapping his arms around her protectively, resting his head against hers. “I love you.” He repeated the words,

unable to hide the smile that was pasted across his face.

She smiled at him, leaning in to capture his lips with hers. "It's going to be okay."

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*One Year Ago...*

Dan Scardino looked across the table to the top brass officials that sat at the other end of the table, surveying the report of his time in Berlin. He swallowed the hard lump in his throat, letting out a shallow breath. Berlin was his first assignment since the scuffle in Qatar. Twenty-eight stitches, three surgeries, and never-ending physical therapy, yet it still wasn't enough to discourage him from continuing to pursue Omer Demir.

A week after the confrontation in Qatar he had woken up in a hospital in Bahrain with broken bones and the after-effects from the beating of his life. He'd been left for dead after he'd come so close to catching the people responsible for Jenna's death. When he'd finally found his footing and gotten his bearings, he'd returned to the Sudan and found Yvonne – What was left of her anyway.

"Agent Scardino, this is impressive work. The suppliers you've rounded up have been connected to many of the gun runners that were working the border," the Chief Deputy commented, flipping through the file in front of him.

"Thank you, sir." Scardino nodded. "I'm committed to stopping these guys."

"So, Scardino, answer me this, what exactly is the DEA doing investigating a human trafficking ring?" the Chief Deputy asked.

"It was a part of the case..."

"Not anymore." The Chief Deputy jabbed his finger on the folder in front of him. "Hand what you have over to the FBI."

"What about my assignment in Saudi?" Dan asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Yeah, about that... We'd like for you to stick around Washington, Scardino."

"These child traffickers are running drugs in and out of the country..."

"Then you can work with the FBI on capturing them. Missing persons is their territory," The Chief Deputy instructed.

"Understood."

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Clark finished typing up his notes from this morning's rescue, glancing over toward Perry's office, where Leslie Luckabee was cutting up with his editor-in-chief. He needed to find some time to pull Perry aside and talk to him about Leslie, but now was not the right time. He was convinced Leslie was up to something, but after this morning's rescue, he knew for a fact that the new owner was somehow involved with the creation of Vixen.

What he couldn't quite understand was why or what Leslie could possibly have to gain from the destruction Vixen had reigned on the city. He watched as the door closed behind Perry and then turned to where Jimmy was seated at his desk, head down on some data he'd pulled. Deciding he'd stewed over the recent epiphany long enough, he set the pen in his hand down and walked toward Jimmy's desk to get his friend's attention. If anyone could dig up dirt someone was trying to hide it was Jimmy.

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The loud hum of the printing press machines echoed down the narrow hallway as Lois Lane turned the corner, searching for the dark green door leading to the file room that had been dubbed the 'Archives.' She reached the end of the hallway and tapped her badge against the electronic lock on the door, gaining entry. She found her husband in the center of the disarray around the room. She closed the door behind her, watching as the digital letters across the keypad entry read 'locked' in digital print. She looked over in the corner where Jimmy was seated behind a desktop computer that had to be at least two years old, lost in thought, then over at her husband who was sifting through one of the file boxes

in his hand that read '*Acquisitions '94.*'

"Hey, Lois," Jimmy said absent-mindedly, waving in her direction.

"Hey," Lois looked around the room, trying to process the chaos of scattered blueprints and what appeared to be leasing contracts on the long table in the center of the room. "What in the world is going on in here?"

Clark glanced up from his position crouched over the file box, flipping through file after file with frustration covering his face. She heard the loud hiss come from the printing press next door and sighed, running a weary hand across her face,

"Let me guess, you think Vixen is a part of..." She picked up the file in front of Clark and frowned, "the Toasters? No, no, the Metros."

"No," Clark shook his head, setting the file down and placing it back inside the half-empty desk.

"What is all this?" Lois asked with a heavy sigh.

"Research," Jimmy responded firmly, waving a pen in the air. Lois turned her attention to her husband, trying to understand what he was trying to do here. "Clark, we just nabbed the bad guy. Err, bad robot in this case." She looked at him expectantly. "This is typically the part where the reporters get to gloat... and not obsess over whatever it is you're obsessing over here an hour past quitting time."

"Someone created Vixen, and we're going to find out who," Clark responded firmly, tightening his squared jaw as he spoke. She bit her lower lip looking at him with a questioning gaze, and he let out a heavy sigh, shaking his head. "Don't you think it was a little too easy?"

"What was too easy?" she asked, propping herself on the edge of the table, swinging her legs aimlessly. "The part where we printed a fake story to draw Vixen out or using Leslie Luckabee as bait."

"All of it." Clark shook his head. "Vixen just shows up out of the blue trying to act as a superhero vigilante, and then all of a sudden is after white-collar criminals..." He shook his head in dismay. "It just seems too convenient."

"You're right," Lois said sarcastically. "We should hunt down the evil microchips responsible and melt them down into aluminum cans. That'll teach 'em."

Jimmy let out a muffled chuckle. "Well, that's not exactly how you handle killer robots, Lois."

Clark smirked at her, shaking his head. "Come on, look at the evidence, Lois." He held up the paper from this afternoon's edition, flashing the headline of '*Faster than a Speeding Vixen.*'

She reached her arm over to hang across his shoulders, letting out a long breath. "You sure this is about *Vixen*?"

"It's about Vixen... and Leslie Luckabee." Clark grunted with a frown. "I don't trust him. I know we've been over this before but there's something there, Lois. I can feel it. He's bad news."

Lois looked toward Jimmy who was nodding his silent agreement with Clark from his seat. She let out a heavy sigh. "So, you think we should start looking into the new owner of the Daily Planet without any proof other than your gut?"

"We've run with stories on a lot less," Clark pointed out.

"Okay." She glanced toward the archive files he was currently pouring over.

He nodded, resting his hand on her shoulder as he led her to her chair to have a seat. "I'm comparing what we know on this Vixen and seeing if anything matches up with some of the crazies we've come against." He frowned. "It's all I have to go on so far."

"We're also looking into Leslie Luckabee's assets," Jimmy explained nonchalantly from his vantage point in the corner. "CK's looking for deeds and acquisitions, and I'm looking for other identities..."

"He knew about Vixen being a robot but was unconscious the

entire time Vixen was fighting Superman,” Clark shook his head grimly.

“We think he might have helped either build her or pay for her design and development,” Jimmy explained, looking over at her from behind the large screen.

Lois looked around the room with a heavy groan. “Any chance we can table this until tomorrow?” she asked, reaching over to toy with the end of her husband’s tie. “Something tells me Vixen’s microchips aren’t going to spring to life anytime soon and whatever it is that you think is going on with Leslie Luckabee can wait.” She folded the end of his tie, tugging him closer and closer until he was a mere few inches away. A sultry whisper escaped her lips as she leaned into him. “The bad guy’s been caught. Can we just go home and focus on taking Leslie down another night?”

His eyes crossed over her, seeing the look of determination as she gazed at him. “I suppose this can wait till tomorrow.”

Jimmy nodded his agreement. “You guys go ahead. I’ll finish up here, and we can compare notes tomorrow.”

She nodded, wrapping her arms around Clark and tugging on his tie. “Night, Jimmy...”

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Lex Luthor stared at the darkened cell door as he listened to the maniacal laughter from down the halls. For years he had sat in this solitude, planning the moment when he would finally be rid of this hell hole. Appeals had of course, been filed to escape the torturous hands of Dr. Hugo Strange.

A hand went to the singe marks across his face, recalling the painful treatment he’d just received at the hands of Dr. Strange. To be subjected to the same torture he had put his enemy through was a humbling experience to say the least. The irony was certainly not lost on him. Though his body was beginning to fail him his mind was as sharp as ever.

“Luthor!” The cranking of metal against metal grated on his nerves as he saw the cell door open. In the doorway, one of the guards stood, waving his baton in his hands as he spoke. “You got a visitor.”

Lex did his best not to react, wheeling himself out of his cell, tightening his hands on the metal arch of his wheelchair and following the guard to the visitor’s room. He kept his head down, careful not to react in any way that might result in extra time on what Hugo Strange referred to as ‘Old Bertha’ – the electrodes on the electroshock machine were old but the power that went through them could make his entire jaw hum.

Arkham Asylum was like no other prison he’d had the pleasure of visiting from the other side. A creative maze of insanity and intelligence all kept in a precarious balance as Hugo Strange controlled each player like an intricate game of chess. What he wouldn’t give to take control of Hugo Strange’s torturous chess game and claim possession of it.

He had lost the function of the muscles in his legs, and over time he was sure other parts of him would soon follow. If only Bender would follow through with his work on the appeal. Freedom – even if it were to swap one set of bars for another – would be so sweet. This was a new low for him. He had fallen from grace. Gone were the days of yearning for uninhibited freedom. He knew the moment Lois Lane had darkened the courtroom doors he was done for. There was no going back from the treacherous line he had crossed. Arrogance and egotism had gotten to him in his rage, allowing the fatal slip of the tongue to hang him for all eternity.

The large metal door opened, and he raised an eyebrow when he saw two men sitting behind the old shabby table in the center of the room. “Am I supposed to know you?”

“Well, I would hope that you’d be able to recognize your own son, but I suppose an introduction is warranted after all this time,” the man with dark curly hair remarked, tapping his fingertips on the table.

A hard guffaw escaped Lex’s throat, and his eyebrows rose up his forehead. “Keeping up the pretense with an injured façade. Very smart, but a bit overzealous, don’t you think?”

“I’m overzealous?” The dark-haired man laughed. “You took advantage of a diplomat’s daughter and then walked away like nothing ever happened. You stalk your prey like a vulture for months before striking, but yes... I must be the obsessive one, right? How dare I insinuate you have any part in the years of being outcast by my mother’s family, right, Daddy?”

“I have no children,” Lex growled back at him.

“That’s what they all say,” the dark-haired man replied, folding his hands behind his head and leaning his head back. “Go ahead, deny it. I’m sure after all this time it’s like second nature.” The man’s jaw tightened. “Trying not to admit the awful ugly truth of what you did. You’re used to getting exactly what you want, aren’t you? An acquisition doesn’t go your way, you turn to blackmail. A pretty face says ‘no’ and you pretend she’s just playing hard to get.”

“Is there a particular reason you insist on drabbling on about this imaginary history lesson, or do you always latch onto disgraced philanthropists to satisfy your daddy issues?”

A slow laughter came from the corner of the room. “Daddy issues?”

Lex craned his neck, looking over in the shadows to the man that remained hidden in the darkness. “Who are you?”

“Who I am is no matter,” the man said with a hiss. “You know it took me three years to track down every last traitorous board member that dismantled LexCorp? Three years of hunting each and every last one down.”

“LexCorp?” Lex’s brow furrowed, trying to follow what this mysterious man was doing sniffing around his corporation.

“Don’t worry, it’s in good hands now.” The man stepped out from the shadows, revealing his disfigured features as the fluorescent light shone down on his troll-like deformities.

Lex stared at the face, noting the scar along his right cheek. “LexCorp is nothing but a collection of businesses without ...”

“A Luthor to run things?” The disfigured man held up a familiar ring on his leather-covered hand, revealing a gold-plated ring with the initials ‘LL’ on them. He frowned, recalling the parting gift he’d given years ago. The man smiled and then shook his head, “I think I’ve got that taken care of.”

“Where did you get that?”

“I think you know.” The disfigured man slammed his hands on the table, causing Lex to jump from his seat in the wheelchair he was bound in. “My, how the mighty have fallen. On top of the world and taken down by a reporter, tsk tsk tsk... I would have expected better from you.”

“Daniella,” Lex breathed the name out, recalling the diplomat’s daughter he had found himself in hot water with years ago.

“Yes, unfortunately, your plan to rid the world of me and mom didn’t quite go according to plan.” The disfigured man glared at him. “Tell me, do you try to off all your offspring or am I just lucky?”

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*Present Day...*

Lois fingered Clark’s hand as she leaned back against the thin sheet that covered the exam table. This was it. In just a few minutes, they were going to know once and for all if the blood tests and urine tests were teasing her or if hope against hope had given them a miracle. A miracle she and Clark had so desperately prayed for.

She felt the tears in the corner of her eyes as the technician squeezed the warm gel across her abdomen, and a moment later, the wand roamed across her abdomen, filling the room with the rapid thumping of a heartbeat.

“You hear that?” the technician asked.

"This is really happening," Lois grinned, feeling the tears trickle down her face. She looked at Clark, who was fighting back his own tears as the screen popped up the image of a much more developed baby than she'd originally anticipated. "Oh, wow..."

"I'm going to take some measurements, and we'll see if we can't pinpoint a close guess on a date of conception." The technician advised.

The sound of their child's heartbeat continued to fill the room, and Lois sighed happily, looking over at Clark who was focused on the measurements the technician was taking of their unborn child. Most of the morning had been spent in apprehension and excitement, coupled with the anxiety of knowing the ultrasound they had with their previous child had been the first and last time they had seen signs of life from their child. The painful memories to follow had haunted them both for years, but this would be different.

The mere fact she had succeeded in conceiving again was a miracle. Even though there was no danger of running into LiveWire or any other crazed psycho villain, the chance that there might be someone out there was enough for her to take the extra precautions needed to ensure the safety of both this child and Jon. Anything and everything she could do to ensure their child's safety – she would do it.

She couldn't imagine having to endure the pain of losing another child again.

Across the screen, she saw the little hand of their child moving in a waving motion, and she laughed, pointing at the motion. "Honey, look..."

"Looks like someone is waving 'hi' to mom and dad," the technician grinned back at them. She turned to look back at the screen, taking some pictures as Lois and Clark watched in anticipation. "You look to be somewhere between twelve and fourteen weeks..."

"Wow... okay." Lois nodded, wiping the tears she had shed earlier from her cheeks. "So, what does that mean?"

"Well, it means your high-risk window of a miscarriage has decreased tremendously." The technician handed her a paper cloth to wipe her stomach with. "I'll give you a few minutes to clean up, and then just wait for your name to be called in the waiting room. The doctor will call you back and go over everything."

"Thank you." Clark nodded in her direction as she handed him the ultrasound photos.

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Jeremy Novak leaned back in his chair, looking across the desk at Jack Davenport as he pushed his index finger against the large manila file on the tabletop. He let out a gruff snort as he jabbed his finger against the file. "Do you know what this is, Agent?"

Davenport's brow raised and a smirk flashed across his face as he read across the tab on the file folder. "A closed case."

"An incomplete case," Novak corrected, setting a colorful tabloid on top of the file. "It seems the press knows more than the FBI. Why is that?"

"I think calling Tattletale Weekly the press is way too generous of a description there, Novak," Davenport replied unimpressed. He pointed to the cover story and scoffed, "So what's the story here, you think Lois Lane tried to kill herself and blamed it all on Luthor?"

"Maybe." Novak snorted with his hands folded across his lap. "That's for you to find out."

"You have got to be joking." Davenport snorted. He let out a chuckle and shook his head. "Oh, I get it. You're pulling one over on me. Who put you up to this? Myers? Travis?"

"I'm not pulling anything over on you, Davenport," Novak shot back with a gruff sigh, straightening up in his chair. "I have a witness that has agreed to come forward connecting Lois Lane to the criminal acts performed by the supposed Boss of Metropolis."

"And did your witness charge by the hour?" Davenport shot back, growling with disdain as he glared back at the special prosecutor.

"Now, that's inappropriate, Agent Davenport," Novak growled.

"Oh, well, I just figured since we're slandering witnesses on closed cases anything's game, right?" Davenport shot to his feet and leaned over Novak with a sharp hiss. "Your witness is a pathological liar trying to grab their five seconds of fame. Nothing more."

"How about you actually do your job and investigate before making that determination, hmm?" Novak snorted, glaring back at him. "You seem to be taking this accusation quite personally, Agent Davenport."

"You're damn right I am, Novak. We lost agents trying to bring this sociopath down and you think you're going to destroy all of that with whoever conned you into thinking my key witness took a knife and stabbed herself to death? Please tell me where exactly I'm overreacting."

Novak wagged his finger at Davenport. "You'll be first on the witness list."

"You have to get Talley to open the case again in order to add anyone to a witness list, Novak." Davenport pointed to the office behind him with a grin. "Good luck."

\*\*\*

Lois hooked her arm inside Clark's, snugly wrapping her hand around his forearm. She let out a heavy sigh as they reached the elevator doors inside the Daily Planet lobby. Her head rested against his shoulder as Clark reached his hand out to press the call button.

"Perry's done a good job of keeping the paparazzi away," Lois commented, looking around the entrance behind them, which for the last month had been hounded by tabloid reporters looking for the right angle to harass them coming in and out of work. Whatever Perry had done seemed to have scared them off, however.

"Yeah, I'll be glad when all of this dies down, though." Clark patted her hand with his, brushing his thumb against her wedding band.

"Twelve to fourteen weeks," Lois murmured, placing a hand across her abdomen.

"I guess there was a little more to that flu bug than we first thought." Clark smirked, leaning over to stroke her cheek before they stepped onto the elevator car.

A soft hum escaped Lois' lips as she turned in his arms, looking back at him with a twinkle in her eyes, "I suppose so. We may have accidentally gotten past the first trimester without realizing it..."

"...again." Clark leaned in to brush his lips against hers.

"Again," she repeated, smiling back at him. "But there's still so much to do and to be cautious over." She let out a long breath. "I haven't been taking any prenatals."

"The doctor said everything looks perfectly healthy," Clark reminded her.

"I can't lose another baby," Lois whispered softly, looking back at him with a pained expression.

His hands moved to her face to cup her cheek, leaning in to capture her lips with his. A contented sigh escaped her lips as she looped her arms around his neck, tugging him closer. The elevator doors pinged open, and a group of collective catcalls caught her attention as they pulled away.

They exited the elevator hand in hand and made their way down the ramp leading into the newsroom when Jimmy approached with a somber expression on his face, carrying two rolled-up papers in his back pocket. "I, uh, guess you guys haven't caught the morning news circuit?"

Lois shook her head, growing increasingly suspicious of

Jimmy's hesitancy. "Why do I get the feeling this isn't about a new lead to chase?"

"Well, it's certainly a lead..." Jimmy grumbled with a weary expression.

"Jimmy, come on, what's going on?" Clark asked.

Jimmy shook his head, pointing at the prying eyes around them and escorted them to the smaller of the two conference rooms where they found Perry seated at the end of the conference room table.

"Chief?" Lois called out, crossing her arms across her chest.

"You two better, uh, sit down for this one," Perry said grimly.

"I'd rather stand," Lois argued.

Perry didn't put up much of a fight, leaning back in his chair and extending his arms out on the table with a frown. "Suit yourself. Lois, I don't know exactly how to say this."

"Chief, there's more than one now," Jimmy said, holding a rolled-up paper in his hand and handing it to Perry.

"More than one of what?" Clark asked, growing more and more impatient with the lack of information coming out of the both of them.

"What is it, Perry?" Lois asked, narrowing her gaze at him.

"Tattletale Weekly." Perry flipped over the tabloid. "National Whisper... Metropolis STAR." Perry read aloud the headlines with a grim expression. "Luthor Lane Corruption? Investigative Criminal?" He shook his head in dismay, looking at Lois apologetically. "The list goes on and on..."

Before either Lois or Clark could react to the reveal of headlines, Jimmy elaborated, "The story broke this morning that a cooperating witness was looking into Lois in connection with the Rico charges Luthor was taken down with."

"What?!" Lois snapped angrily. "You have got to be kidding me!"

"This goes way too far," Clark growled pacing in front of where Perry was seated.

"Even so, it's become a part of the news circuit platform now," Perry explained, pointing to the STAR's headline. "The Daily Planet hasn't taken an official position on any of this, but the board upstairs has demanded a response by the end of the day today." He wagged his finger at Lois. "I don't care what you're working on. This takes precedent."

"Got it, Chief," Lois nodded in agreement.

Perry gestured to Jimmy. "What was it you had, Jimmy?"

Jimmy revealed a cover to the National Enquirer with a photo of Lois with Jon. "Corruption and Criminal Neglect! Details Inside!"

Clark reached his hand out to take the paper from Jimmy and tossed it into the wastebasket with a quick wadding up of the tabloid. "These guys should be run out of town with pitchforks."

"It's garbage, CK," Jimmy agreed with a shrug.

"It's calculated." Clark shook his head angrily. "Too careful. Too detailed." A cold expression crossed his face, and he moved toward the door to leave.

"Where are you going?" Lois asked.

"To take out the trash," Clark called out over his shoulder. The door slammed behind him and Lois shook her head, looking toward Perry.

"So, what do you want me to say?"

Jimmy pulled out a pen and paper. "Let's start with your side of things."

Lois blanched slightly, catching sight of Perry's stern gaze. "I already put my side of things into the public record."

"Well, it's time to remind the public of that," Perry advised, pointing to Jimmy. "Let me know once you two are done."

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### Chapter 17: From Zero to My Own Hero

Perry peered above the rim of his glasses looking over at Lois who was sitting with Jon on the red checkered sofa in his office,

sifting through the large file box that the Planet attorney had brought by for them to review. Adding the recent accusations to the defamation suit had been a more satisfying point in the day.

He felt a smile curl across his face when he noticed the small stack of papers Jon had colored this afternoon. After the story of neglect allegations came out Lois had whisked Jon out of daycare and settled in his office for the rest of the day, continuing to work through the investigation she and Clark were running with on the missing girls while simultaneously keeping Jon busy.

"How's he holding up?" Perry asked, clearing his throat.

"He started nodding off about fifteen minutes ago," Lois responded quietly.

"Jimmy did good with his write-up this morning," Perry leaned back in his chair. "The board seems satisfied at least."

"Well, that's all that matters, isn't it?" Lois rolled her eyes.

"Lois, something needed to be done," Perry replied gently.

"Yes, but somehow Clark's and my right to privacy got superseded by the public's right to know." Lois let out a heavy sigh. "I know the Planet had to take a stance, but it could have been done without my statement. That is the part I have a problem with, Perry."

"It wasn't optional," Perry acknowledged as more of an observation than a statement. "I'm sorry."

"I know you are," Lois said, setting the paper in front of her down. "Agent Scardino is working with Ingrid to try and piece together what she knows with the DEA's case on Agent Blake's murder. I'd like to try and get some headway on this case without another disaster pulling my attention toward unnecessary statements or responses to the public. You have my permission to print all the denials you want and slap my name on it but don't pull me off an active investigation to satisfy the board's status quo complex."

Perry bit the inside of his lower lip, feeling remorse wash over him as he glanced over at the very irritable Lois Lane accompanied by Jon's dozing figure. "He, uh, looks tuckered out."

"He is," Lois frowned. "We both are."

Perry nodded. "Why don't you two cut out of here early? If Clark comes by, I'll send him home too." He added the last comment knowing Lois had been lingering around the Planet in hopes of catching Clark. He had stormed out of the newsroom before anyone could talk any sense into the boy. Lord only knew where he had disappeared to and Superman sightings remained non-existent for the better part of the day. All either of them could do was sit and wonder what the next move was and pray he was all right.

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Maniacal laughter echoed through the halls and the dark room Clark stood in felt more like a dungeon than a visitor's room. The aged bricks and cell bar windows brought an eerie calm to him as he waited for his nemesis to be escorted into the darkened room. He looked above him to where the single bulb flickered, emitting a yellowish hue across a small corner of the room.

A creak of hinges and the grinding metal of the locks announced Luthor's arrival, and Clark turned to see the frail looking man who was but a remnant of the man the world had once known as Alexander Luthor wheeling himself in the room with a faint-red trimmed wheelchair. Despite his frail body, Clark knew from experience never to let his guard around the sinister psychopath.

Clark felt his fists clench and unclench as he met the soulless dark gaze from the man that had nearly taken everything from him. A smirk crossed Luthor's mouth and then twisted into a scowl before he broke the silence with his snakelike reflexes.

"Well, to what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from you, Superman? Miss me already?"

"Yeah, like a tapeworm," Clark growled, feeling the anger

within him boiling as he glared at Luthor, trying to keep his emotions in check. He tightened his jaw and hissed out, “We need to have a chat about Lois.”

“Lois? Why? Last we spoke I wasn’t to even utter her name for fear of the mighty Superman’s wrath.” A sneer crossed Lex’s face as he slyly asked with a raised brow, “Something change?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Luthor,” Clark growled out, pacing back and forth in the darkened corner of the room across from him. “I know you’re behind this.”

“Behind what... exactly?”

“Enough with the games, Luthor,” he snapped, crossing his arms. “This ends *now*.”

“Well, as much as I enjoy a good puzzle, I’m afraid I’m at the disadvantage here, Superman. What with me not knowing to what you’re referring to, *Superman*?”

Clark rolled his eyes, hearing his alter-ego’s name roll off Luthor’s tongue was like nails on chalkboard – a bitter reminder of how Luthor had gotten the upper hand on him and discovered a truth that could destroy everyone and everything he held dear.

“The tabloids. The paparazzi... I warned you once, Luthor,” Clark barked, meeting his enemy’s gaze with venom.

Luthor chuckled, clucking his tongue as he gazed up toward the ceiling, lost in thought for a brief moment before turning back to Clark. “Yes, the warning that I believe we can both agree I’ve been most gracious in following. Not a peep in... how long has it been?”

“Five and a half years,” Clark growled out, fighting the urge to throttle Luthor. “And not long enough.”

“Yes, five and a half years and yet I’m the one to be blamed when a turn of the tide among public opinion occurs, hmm?” Luthor raised his brow, drawing out his amusement as he snickered. “You locked me away in a dungeon with the world’s most vile creatures and threw away the key. You really think I have any reach from within here?”

“I wouldn’t put *anything* past you,” Clark sneered back at him with a growl.

“Are you really so narrow minded to believe that all evil in this city rests on my shoulders?” Luthor frowned as he added, “How unimaginative is that microscopic brain of yours that the idea of someone other than myself being capable of any wrong doing is completely foreign to you.” Luthor shook his hand dismissively. “I’ll never understand how a freak in a cape got the better of me.”

“You never answered the question,” Clark pointed out with a raised brow.

Luthor scowled, shaking his head before changing the subject. “I see Lois is still stirring up trouble with the seedy bottom-feeders of the city. Tsk tsk tsk... Really with all that power, you can’t control one woman? Pathetic.”

“I don’t *control* anyone,” Clark spat back. “Especially the people I love.”

“How is that working for you? You have all the power in the world yet where it would be most useful, your spine is nothing but a limp noodle. But I digress. This is where we differ in our approach. You would much rather play hero than prevent the danger all together. A mistake I never would have tolerated.” Luthor’s eyes darkened as he sneered offhandedly. “A woman with that much independence is bound to make trouble.”

“Well then, we can all be grateful Lois finally saw the light and realized what a low-life piece of vermin you truly are.” Clark growled, feeling his anger seething within him.

“Yes, the caped hero wins again. I’m left with my spoils and a kingdom of horrors.” He gestured to the darkened walls around him. “Probably for the best anyway.”

“You want to sulk about rotting in this hellhole, then look no further than yourself, Luthor. You destroyed everyone and everything you touched.”

“And yet you have no problem picking up my scraps like a rabid dog feasting on the head of the pack’s sloppy seconds.”

“Rejection really does something crazy to your mind doesn’t it, Luthor?”

“Oh, rejection?” Luthor laughed, shaking his head then hissed out the venom words. “You don’t know. You have no idea, do you? The trade she made...”

“What are you blabbering about?” Clark glared at him with disdain, unable to follow where Luthor was headed with his ramblings.

“Oh, Superman... How do you think she found you? Luck?”

“Go to hell,” Clark spat back, putting the pieces together of what Luthor was insinuating.

Luthor gestured to the room around them. “I’m already there.” A slow smile spread across his face before he added in classic twisted knife fashion, “You never even questioned it, did you? The convenient timing of a surprise pregnancy and nary a question in sight. She certainly made sure to dig her claws in deep, didn’t she? Tell me something, does little Jon have my eyes or Lois?”

Without a second thought, Clark hoisted him up and slammed him up against a wall. “You scum-sucking parasite. I swear to God you come near Lois or Jon, I will break every last bone in your body again and again...”

“Did I hit a nerve, Superman?” Luthor chuckled as he hissed out. “Five years is a long time. Sitting here waiting while you build your little happy home with my son...”

“My son is off-limits, Luthor,” Clark raged in an eerie low hiss as he jerked him closer by his collar.

“Your son? How sure are you, really?” Luthor chuckled within his grasp.

“You’d be surprised just how much pain a human can endure without dying... Don’t test me, Luthor.”

He could see a flash of fear in Lex’s eyes. “You don’t have it in you.”

“You stay away from *my* son. You stay away from *my* wife,” Clark snapped as he leaned in close enough to see the fear flashed across his adversary’s face. “Whoever it is you’ve convinced to spew your vicious lies to better stop or the next time I make a visit you’ll be spending the next six months in a body cast.”

“My son,” Luthor snapped back.

He tightened his grip on Luthor’s neck and glared him down, feeling the anger flood through him at the insinuation of what vicious lies he was trying to paint. Luthor’s eyes flinched and Clark smirked, feeling he’d gotten the better of his nemesis as he tossed him back into his wheelchair in a slump.

“Your fear’s showing, Luthor.”

With that he shoved the visitor’s door open and stormed out, leaving behind the maniacal laughter and cackling as he exited Arkham Asylum. Luthor’s words haunted his thoughts all the way back home to Metropolis.

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Victor Talley bit his teeth down on the end of his pen, raising a brow at Jeremy Novak, the Special Prosecutor that had been ranting in his office for the last half hour about the Luthor case. His jaw tightened and he set the pen down on the pad in front of him, trying to rationalize what could possibly be motivating Novak to push for this case to be reopened. The prosecution of Lex Luthor and his underlings had taken its toll on his entire department and cost him two agents. Reopening the case was not an option as far as he was concerned.

“Are you listening to me, Director Talley?” Novak called out to him, stopping mid-stride and slamming his hands against the desk in front of him.

“Blah, blah, blah, reopen the case your team worked on for nearly half a year and cost you the lives of a few of your agents.” Talley rolled his eyes, sneering back at Novak with disdain. “That

about it, or did I miss something?"

"Talley, I don't think you understand the predicament you're in." Novak growled, glaring down at Victor with a dark stare.

"There are a lot of powerful people looking at this case. Asking questions about the star witness you propped up on the stand."

"There were several witnesses," Talley snorted.

"The one that connected the boss to Luthor?" Novak snorted, shaking his head. "The way I hear it there was a lot more to the story than Lois Lane let on. Maybe sloppy work, Talley?"

"Or maybe you need to stop listening to the fairy tales your friends on the Hill are trying to pander." Talley leaned back in his chair, folding his hands across his chest. "The case was solid and I'm not reopening the case."

"You open it or I'll get your replacement to," Novak snorted with a glare.

"The only way you're getting anywhere near that case is to pry it out of my cold dead hands." Talley growled with a sinister glare.

"I'll get the Attorney General on this, Talley," Novak warned.

"Why?" Talley chuckled. "To point out that you have zero probable cause to reopen a closed case where we have the suspect serving time? Oh, please do." Talley pointed to the door behind him. "You'll forgive me if I don't shake with fear."

"You think I'm joking?"

"No, but it's interesting that you think I'm going to let you just undo all the hard work my team put in on this case, Novak." Talley wagged his finger in the air and tightened his jaw. "Luthor is in jail where he will remain for the next nine hundred years and I'm not going to let you or anyone else jeopardize that."

"And Lois Lane?" Novak growled.

"I think you're barking up the wrong tree, but just to show there are no hard feelings and to solidify once and for all that I'm right and you're wrong, I'll have Agent Davenport take a second look and send over the report when he's done."

"He was the agent on the case."

"Yes, he was."

"Don't you think that might be a conflict of interest?"

"He's more motivated than anyone to wrap this investigation up and drop these insane conspiracy theories you and your friends have conjured up by sniffing too much petroleum distillate," Talley sneered, pointing to the door. "Now, if there isn't anything else, some of us have real cases to investigate."

"I'll look for your report," Novak shot back.

"I'll look for your formal apology," Talley added with a sneer. "And if you don't get out of my office right now, I'll be sure your next appointment is licking stamps in the middle of Podunk town, Novak."

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'*He's lying*,' Clark told himself, feeling the muddled thoughts hanging over him as he approached the townhome he and Lois shared. '*Just trying to get in my head*.' Still, the perverse details Luthor tried to spew at him still haunted him.

<<"*How do you think she found you? Luck?*"

"*Go to hell.*"

"*I'm already there.*">>

<<"*You have no idea, do you? The trade she made...*">>

<<"*My son.*">>

'*Lying bastard!*' his mind screamed out as he reached the balcony of their townhome. The tightness in his chest continued to build and the volatile confrontation with Luthor played in his mind over and over again. He stepped inside, closing the back door behind him and spinning into the green shirt and black leather jacket he'd been wearing earlier.

He let out a shallow breath, leaning his head back against the door. He looked up toward the stairs, hearing the soft drumming of the shower running. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and let out a soft sigh, listening to Jon's soft snores as he walked up the steps

to check on him. He reached the top of the stairs and stopped just outside Jon's room, placing his hand on the door. He wanted more than anything to wrap him up in his arms and never let go but he knew if he dared open the door Jon would be up most of the night.

He leaned his forehead against the door, mulling over his confrontation with Luthor once more before sinking down to the floor and burying his face in his hands. Even after six years the memories of his torture and the manipulation still haunted him. A hand folded over his shoulder and he looked up, seeing Lois wrapped in her terry cloth robe with her hair wrapped in a towel.

"Clark?" She knelt down beside him, moving her hand to his knee. "Are you all right?" He looked back at her, feeling the tension in his shoulders disappear as he stared back into her eyes. Her hand moved to his cheek, stroking his jaw as her eyes creased with concern. "Hey, what's wrong?"

What was he supposed to say? He knew everything Luthor spewed out of his lying throat was just sour grapes and an attempt to hurt him and Lois even further. He wouldn't give Luthor the satisfaction of hurting Lois any more than he already had. He wanted more than anything to take away every second of pain Luthor had put her through. Not only had he terrorized her and threatened to assault her, but now Luthor was trying to claim parentage to his son. His beautiful—smart-as-a-whip, spitting-image of himself—son.

'*Over my dead body*,' Clark thought to himself, uncertain how to respond to her question.

"Clark?" Lois called his name and he leaned into her, capturing her lips with his. His hands buried themselves in her hair, devouring her lips with his. She let out a soft moan against his lips, running her hands through his hair. "It's okay," she mumbled incoherently as he leaned into her, wrapping his arms around her and pushing the chaos that had been tormenting him for the last hour out of his mind.

His hands roamed up and down her body as he stood to his feet, allowing her long legs to wrap around him and he lost himself in the art of kissing her. Every ugly image and perverse scenario Luthor had painted for him disappeared as he staggered through the master bedroom door with her in his arms. Seconds later he fell into the bedsheets with her, letting out a low groan as her hands roamed up and down his face, whispering soft reassurances as she helped him shed every last article of clothing that prevented him from the skin to skin touch he so desperately needed.

He could feel his body tremble against her as he settled his weight on top of her. A reassuring smile crossed her face and she ran her hand against his cheek as she whispered, "It's okay." Her lips peppered against his face, whispering soft reassurances to him. "I've got you."

How so much could be conveyed between them with a silent touch and aching gaze still astounded him. He didn't have to tell her the ugly awfulness that had been haunting him for her to know how desperately he needed her to hold him and never let go. After nearly six years of marriage and one child—soon to be two—she could read him like a book. She was the glue that held him together when he thought he would break. She continued to save him again and again sometimes without even realizing it.

"I love you," he murmured into her ear, his voice cracking, surprising them both with the emotion in it.

"I'm right here," she whispered reassurances to him as her limbs wrapped around him, holding him in a warm cocoon and shutting out the rest of the world. "I've got you."

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*One Year Ago...*

The sound of Jon's giggles echoed through the downstairs followed by that pitter patter of his footsteps against the hardwood floor. Clark knocked on the doorframe of his and Lois' bedroom door, smirking when he saw three large suitcases laid out on the

bed. “I thought we were only leaving for a week.”

The weekend away was supposed to take some of the pressure off both of them and hopefully help increase their chances of conceiving. It had been six months now since they’d been delivered the painful news that they may not be able to conceive a child of their own without the help of a fertility specialist. Something had clicked after that, consuming them both with the desire to have another baby.

Lois had described it as a gaping hole that desperately needed to be filled. He wanted so desperately to give her what she sought after, but each month the rejection came again and again, reminding them both of what they’d lost at the hands of LiveWire.

“This from the man who brings a change of clothes everywhere he goes?” Lois arched her eyebrow at him as she reached over to zip the smaller of the suitcases.

“Jon is trying out the fishing pole with Dad.” Clark chuckled, placing his hands over her shoulders, leaning in to press his lips against her cheek. “I’m not sure who’s having more fun, Jon or Dad.”

“Well, they’ll have plenty of time to test out the new pole.” Lois grinned, patting his cheek with the back of her palm. “He’s really excited.”

“Well, it’s his first fishing trip,” Clark whispered in her ear.

Lois nodded, leaning her head back against him. “I’m glad your folks were able to come with us. I know Jon will enjoy having them with us.” She turned in his arms, looping her arms around his neck and pulling him to her. “And maybe taking a break from your crusade to go after the people that built Vixen will give you some perspective when we get back...”

“Perspective?” He chuckled, tracing the outline of her hips with his hands as he allowed a crooked smile to wander across his face. His eyes lingered on the soft curves of her legs, noting the perfect way the fabric from her jeans hugged her body. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“Well, I hope six days and seven nights away from the rest of the world will be good for the both of us.”

“And not chasing down leads for a week, you going to be able to handle that?” he challenged.

“I’m planning on doing my own investigation,” she teased, reaching her hand up to caress his chest with her palm.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, it’s very thorough research.” Her hand brushed over his shoulder as she grinned back at him. “Seeing how long a certain superhero can stand being unplugged from the rest of the world without coming up with excuses to return a video...”

“Very funny.” He scrunched his nose up, leaning in to whisper a kiss against her lips. His hands drifted to her lower back and he brushed his lips against her cheek. “I already spoke with Perry and he’s going to let us know if anything major comes up.”

“Just Superman-wise or with your investigation into the guys that helped build Vixen?” Lois asked, tracing the outline of his collar.

“Both,” he responded, framing her face with his palm.

“Just don’t forget we’re leaving Metropolis to get away from it all,” she reminded him, reaching her hand back to pull out a sheer black teddy from the corner of her suitcase. “Focus on...” she trailed off as she let the lacey lingerie fall down from where she held it up to herself on her index finger, “...other things.”

His eyes danced across the lacey material, feeling the heat rush through him as his mind quickly began picturing her creamy skin beneath the material. “Metropolis? Never heard of it...” he joked, capturing her mouth with his as he lowered her on the bed with him.

She let out soft giggle, tightening her arms around his neck and pulling him to her. “We still have to pack...”

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Dan Scardino craned his neck, looking around the white

walls of the office he was in. He glanced across the table to the agent that was anything but focused on gathering the information he had to give them regarding the human traffickers.

“So, this Yvonne that helped you is...where?”

“Dead.”

“And this Omer?”

“I don’t know.”

“And this Albert Schiller?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you know, Agent Scardino?”

“Look, I know what I saw.” Scardino fumed angrily. “And Agent I really don’t like your tone.”

“You want the FBI to take on a case that has no fresh leads where you’re still carrying it around to chase a ghost.” Agent Johnson folded her hands over her chest and glared back at him.

“I’d like to talk to another agent.” Scardino shook his head. “Jack Davenport still working in this office?”

“He’s on another case.” Agent Johnson tapped her hand on the notepad in front of her.

“Well, then, I guess I’ll just resurrect this dead case myself until he gets back,” Dan Scardino said, standing up and heading for the exit.

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Clark let out a low whistle, holding his hand up to look across the waterpark the cabins were looking out on. Just to the left was a nature trail leading up into the mountains the resort was surrounded by. A wooden sign pointed toward the trail with a picture of a fish and pole directing everyone to the lake in the center of the circle of cabins.

“A waterslide!” Jon squealed happily, jumping up and down in his red and blue swim trunks, pointing to the green and white alligator slide that had water spraying through it.

“And look.” His mom pointed to the blue and yellow swing that was spinning with water spraying through it.

“I wanna go. I wanna go...” Jon frantically jumped up and down pointing at the waterpark.

Clark let out a sigh, shaking his head. “Okay, okay, we’ll come down as soon as we drop our stuff off in the cabin.”

“But...” Jon’s lower lip began to quiver, putting on his most endearing act of sympathy, eying his grandma with bright eyes and a puffed out lip that threatened to double by the second as he pleaded his case. “I don’t wanna go to the cabin yet.” He pointed to his feet. “I got my water shoes on...”

Clark’s mom took sympathy on Jon and waved him off. “Why don’t you two finish unpacking and you can meet up with us later?” She leaned down to whisper in Jon’s ear, “I think your grandpa’s already started setting up the tacklebox anyway.” They turned toward the entry gate to the waterpark and Clark sighed, shaking his head as they walked off.

He finished the trek up to the cabin with a red door and a ‘32’ hanging from the center of it. He walked up the three steps leading inside, carrying the suitcase over his shoulder and the large tote bag filled with towels and toys Jon had brought with him. He opened the door with his keycard, noting the immediate presence of the cold air from the air conditioner directed at him.

He set the suitcase and tote bag down on the table in the corner, propping the suitcase on its back and unzipping it and flipping it open. The water running in the bathroom stopped and he turned to look over his shoulder to see Lois exiting the restroom with a set of white hand towels in her hand, setting them on the table next to him. His gaze lingered across the sheer white oversized tank top that hung over the bright peach toned bikini he could make out without the help of his x-ray vision.

“Hey, where’s Jon?” she asked, leaning over his shoulder to give him a quick peck on the cheek.

“He just *had* to go see the waterpark with mom.” Clark chuckled, handing her a few of the items on hangers as he pulled

them out of the suitcase. “Where do you want his shirts?”

Lois pointed to the door next to him. “There’s a closet right here.”

He reached over to open the door and hung the clothes on the wire shelf inside with the other clothes Lois had already hung up, smoothing his hand against the front of one of Jon’s shirts as he did so. He then turned his attention back to Lois, running his hand over her hip. “You know that boy’s going to run his grandparents ragged on that waterpark.”

“Well, I suppose we’ll have to take shifts.” Lois sighed, looping her arms around his neck, leaning in to whisper to him, “I think you can take him.”

He chuckled, wrapping his arms around her as he let out a heavy sigh. “Don’t be so sure about that. Even I have my limits especially when he puts on that look.”

Lois giggled, leaning in to kiss him. “Who knew Superman could be such a softie?”

“Who knew my real weakness was a couple of puppy dog eyes from a three-year old and his gorgeous mother?” Clark grinned, tightening his arms around her as he pulled her to him.

A tender smile crossed her lips as she leaned up to stroke his cheek. “Are you saying you’re outnumbered?”

“It’s not exactly a fair fight.” His eyes drifted across the sheer cover that came down to the middle of her thighs.

“Hmm, well, I suppose we’ll have to go easy on you then.” She grinned, leaning in to kiss him. A low moan escaped her throat as his hands planted themselves on her hips, walking them back to the bed. “You know, that line for the waterslide is pretty long...”

His hands ran up and down her sides, gathering up the sheer fabric before pushing the cotton material of the cover she wore, finding his way beneath the thin material and coming in contact with the bare ivory skin of her upper thigh. “We should probably wait an hour before we go swimming anyway with that whole no eating right before swimming rule.” His eyes danced across her curves as his hands slid up her lower-back.

“It was just a few pretzels.” Lois giggled, running her hand across the front of his shirt. “But a rule’s a rule, right?” Her legs came in contact with the edge of the bed and she leaned in closer to him, fingering the outline of his pectorals through the cotton shirt he was wearing.

“Well, we know how much of a stickler you are for rules.” He grinned, leaning forward to brush his lips against hers. His hands slid up the curves of her hips, tracing an imaginary outline from her hips up her waist as he pressed his weight against her, leaning her back on the bed.

“Hello?”

A faint sound reached his ears as he hovered over Lois. His lips smoothed their way across hers, tracing the outline of her mouth with his tongue as she slinked her arm around him, tugging him on top of her.

“Hello?”

“Clark,” she murmured, sinking back into the mattress as his hands wandered up the back of her thighs, feeling their way up the smoothness of her legs as he hovered over her.

“I love you,” he whispered in her ear, tearing the cotton cover from her and tossing it to the ground. His hands wandered up her sides as she tugged at the cotton hem of his shirt helping him shed himself from the light-weight material before letting her pull him back into her arms.

“Hello?”

“What is that?” Lois asked, pushing back against his shoulder, arching her back as she sat halfway up, her cheeks flushed and chest rising and falling heavily as she turned to look at him with a quizzical look.

“What’s what?” he asked, letting out a heavy breath, panting as he rolled over on his back next to her.

“Helloooo?”

The faint sound from a speaker reached his ears and he frowned, reaching down to pat the pocket of his swim trunks, groaning when he pulled out the cell phone from his front pocket with the screen lit up. “Hey, Jimmy,” he felt his cheeks flush as he heard the uncomfortable pause on the other end.

“Hey, CK, I was just about to give up on you. What happened you pocket dial me or something?”

“Something...” Clark acknowledged, stealing a glance over at Lois who was wearing a very amused expression as she rolled on her side, watching him with a hint of a smile teasing the corners of her mouth. “Uh, what’s up?”

“I know you guys are on vacation, and I don’t want to bother you...” Jimmy began to ramble as Clark’s attention shifted to the flirtatious smile on his wife’s face. He watched with agonizing interest as she yanked the sheer cover up over her head and tossed it to the floor, revealing the bright peach bikini that held his attention as she repositioned herself on the bed, propping her head up with her chin in her hand. “...I was going to just email everything I found.”

“Yeah, sure, Jimmy...” Clark managed to squeak out as his focus moved to the two strings dangling across her shoulders, holding her gaze for what felt like eternity as she tugged the knot holding them together loose. He let out a low moan, watching in complete agony as the fabric fell to the side, exposing her to him.

He barely got a chance to give voice to the hurried good-bye on his tongue before her legs looped over him, supporting her with her knees as she straddled him and tossed the remnants of her bikini top to the side. He vaguely recalled pressing the end button on the mobile phone before disappearing into his wife’s embrace.

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#### *Present Day...*

Clark let out a low moan, jerking himself awake when he spotted the faint light from the sun outside his and Lois’ bedroom window. Fragments from the night before lingered across his mind and he let out a low groan, looking across the room to the sheets and remnants of clothing lying strewn across the bed from the frantic lovemaking of the previous evening.

His hand reached across the curve of his wife’s thigh pressed against his hipbone. He let out a long, contented sigh, glancing across the smooth ivory skin pressed up against him. He just wanted to hold onto this moment a little longer. Before the onslaught of foul darkness crept into the forefront of his mind. The ugliness Luthor had tried to stain him with still lingered in the back of his mind.

<< “You have no problem picking up my scraps like a rabid dog feasting on the head of the pack’s sloppy seconds.”

“Rejection really does something crazy to your mind doesn’t it, Luthor?”

“Oh, rejection? You don’t know. You have no idea, do you? The trade she made...”>>

He had been so sure Luthor had been behind the latest fabrications coming out of the paparazzi. He hadn’t stopped to think before storming into Arkham to confront Luthor. Nearly six years later and he was still making the same mistakes he had then. Jumping head-first into the situation and not assessing the consequences before finding himself face to face with the vermin that had been locked away in his hell hole never to be seen or heard from again.

Until now.

<< “You never even questioned it, did you? The convenient timing of a surprise pregnancy and nary a question in sight. She certainly made sure to dig her claws in deep, didn’t she? Tell me something, does little Jon have my eyes or Lois’?”

“You scum-sucking parasite I swear to God you come near Lois or Jon, I will break every last bone in your body again and again...”

“Did I hit a nerve, Superman?”>>

His jaw tightened as the reminder of Luthor's insinuations and claims on Jon raced through his mind. The sour grapes were nothing but Luthor's attempt to drag him down to his level, but it still stung. It wasn't the first time Luthor had tried to make innuendos and attempt to twist his assault onto Lois all those years ago as some prize of victory to be congratulated. Only in Lex Luthor's mind could the battery and assault and attempted rape of someone be twisted into a perverse reality where Luthor was the wounded victim.

<< "Your son? How sure are you, really?"

"You'd be surprised just how much pain a human can endure without dying... Don't test me, Luthor."

"You don't have it in you."

"You stay away from my son. You stay away from my wife.">>

Clark reached a protective hand across Lois' abdomen, pushing the confrontation away from the forefront of his mind, focusing his attention on the miracle that continued to thrive beneath his fingertips. A smile curled across his face as the faint simultaneous heartbeats of Lois and their unborn child echoed in his ears.

He wanted so desperately to have a face behind the mask of darkness the paparazzi were hiding behind in each of these headlines that seemed to grow more and more dangerous with each moment.

It wasn't that simple though.

There was no face in the darkness to seek out.

The shadows continued to swirl around them, staying just far away from the light.

Something had to be done.

"You're awake," Lois whispered lazily, reaching over to cup his cheek as she lifted her head from his shoulder.

"Yeah." A smile cracked across his face and he leaned over to kiss her forehead.

"You okay?" Lois asked, propping herself up on her elbow.

"Yes... No." He shook his head, letting out a heavy breath. "I don't know." He finally settled on his answer with a frown.

"What happened?" Lois placed a hand on his chest, looking at him with her questioning gaze.

"The latest headlines... I figured Luthor probably had his hand in it somehow, so I went to confront him." Clark let out a shaky breath. "Not my finest moment."

"Clark, you shouldn't have done that." Lois let out a sigh, wrapping her arms around him in a protective cocoon.

"I know that now," Clark choked out, taking in a deep breath as he savored the feeling of her arms wrapping around him snugly. "It was a waste of time and... I'm sorry if I worried you last night. I... Even after six years he still finds a way to get under my skin."

"You want to talk about it?" Lois ventured cautiously.

"Not really," Clark murmured, turning toward her to cup her cheek.

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Ingrid skirted the remnants of her pancakes across her plate, glancing up across the table to where Dan Scardino was sitting, sipping his coffee as he jotted down notes on a notepad in front of him. She reached over to take a sip from her orange juice. She had tossed and turned most of the evening, trying to get comfortable in the sorry excuse for a hotel she had been put up in. The second thoughts and apprehension had gotten the better of her around three a.m. leaving her staring at the ceiling for hours planning her escape, but she could never quite make the move to leave. Each time she did she remembered Esma. Another girl much like herself who was living in hell under the thumb of these monsters, having her innocence stripped from her.

As much as she hated being under the thumb of the DEA Agent sitting across from her and having what felt like no freedom to come and go as she pleased, it was a price she was willing to

pay for the moment. Tobias and Yusif had to pay.

"I set up a meeting with the detectives that are investigating Esma's disappearance," Agent Scardino said, setting his coffee mug down.

"Detective Reed," Ingrid recalled the name being mentioned earlier when she had gone to the police earlier.

"That's right." Scardino smiled gently. "Since the police station can't be trusted we thought we'd arrange for them to meet us where you feel comfortable. Mr. White at the Daily Planet has been generous enough to arrange for the Daily Planet's boardroom to be used."

"And what if someone sees these detectives coming in and out. You don't know the reach these people have." Ingrid shook her head with dismay. "You can't trust anyone."

"Do you trust me?" Scardino asked, raising a brow at her.

"I have no reason to, but... you seem genuine with your desire to stop these atrocities," Ingrid replied with a slow smile. "Almost as if you had something to gain from your pursuit."

"I do." Scardino chewed on his lower-lip and then instead of elaborating he asked her, "You came to the Daily Planet and found those reporters whose job has nothing to do with putting a stop to the parasites that prey on children. Why?"

"Every other paper and publication remained silent about this poor girl's kidnapping. Every other publication then turned around and attacked them, yet they continued to publish story after story with one message. 'Bring Esma home.' They weren't looking for a story that would win them accolades. They weren't splashing any spin that you normally see. I figured if they could be that dedicated to helping bring Esma back home, then perhaps they could help stop the men responsible without worrying if they could be bought or intimidated." Ingrid reached over to take a sip from her glass, letting the last of the liquid swirl around the bottom of her glass before she set it back down. "I prayed someone somewhere would do the same thing for me."

"They were," Scardino answered with a shrug. "It may have started from Omer's influence but from what I've been told Kent and Lane were searching for you with Jack along with all the other missing kids they were connecting to this trafficking scheme. He was just as surprised to discover Omer's involvement in all this."

"No one expects the man with the heart of gold to be the wolf in sheep's clothing taking his piece when no one is looking," Ingrid commented bitterly.

"Well, that's why they hire jerks like me to sniff 'em out."

Scardino signed the receipt dropped off by the waiter and flashed her a quick smile. "You ready?"

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Cold stares and even colder shoulders greeted Lois and Clark as they entered the newsroom later that morning. Lois rolled her eyes as she caught the sneers scattered through the desks of her fellow journalists. "Tough crowd," Lois observed under her breath as she made her way toward her desk.

"Ignore them," Clark whispered in her ear.

Lois tightened her jaw, taking a sip from her coffee mug as she set her things down on her desk. Ignoring the obvious blatant stares and dirty looks being directed at her felt like sitting down in the middle of a fight. Yet she knew no good would come from causing a scene. The cold shoulders and stares would disappear eventually.

Her gaze shifted to Perry's office where a crowd of suits were standing with their backs to the door and window of Perry's office. "Odd," Lois uttered with a raised brow as Jimmy walked past them.

"Yeah," Clark agreed, following her gaze with a frown. "Hey, Jimmy." He pointed to Perry's office. "You know what's going on over there?"

Jimmy stopped mid-stride, pointing to Perry's office. "FBI's been in there for at least an hour with the Chief."

“FBI?” Lois’ brow furrowed.

“Yeah, Jack Davenport came by with a few suits early this morning,” Jimmy explained with a shrug. “I think it might be connected to that case you guys were working on with Jack.”

“Jack hasn’t mentioned anything,” Lois commented, pursing her lips.

“He’s been keeping a low-profile after everything came to a head with Omer Demir,” Clark interjected with a frown.

“Might be worth giving him a call, you think?” Lois wondered aloud.

“Maybe,” Clark agreed.

“Or you could just ask Agent Davenport yourself,” Jimmy pointed to the door that was opening with the agent leading the exit out of Perry’s office.

“Jack.” Lois raised an eyebrow as she saw Agent Jack Davenport approach them with a tense expression on his face. “Long time. You throw a party without us?”

Not even a hint of a smile crossed Davenport’s face when he stopped in front of them. “There somewhere we can talk?”

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Leo Nunk gritted his teeth as he watched the nurse extract the bullet from his foot. A metal clank could be heard where the bullet was dropped onto a metal tray. The pain meds were finally starting to kick in. He looked away as the nurse continued with her questions.

“You really expect us to believe you shot yourself, Mr. Nunk?”

“That’s what I said...” Nunk growled.

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Davenport was uncharacteristically quiet as he stood in the corner of the conference room, avoiding eye-contact with either Clark or Lois. Clark picked up on the slightly rapid heart rate from the agent and increase in body temperature which hinted at Davenport’s current state of mind as he appeared to be seething in his anger as he paced the small corner of the room he was standing in.

“You two seemed to have really stepped into it this time,” Davenport finally said, shoving his hands in his pockets as he looked over at them. “Everything from adultery to criminal master-mind. I mean, that’s a new one for me.”

“It’s a load of crap,” Lois snapped folding her arms over her chest and jutting her chin out with a stern gaze focused on Davenport.

“No doubt.” Davenport smirked for a brief second before replacing it with a frown. “Unfortunately, it’s gotten the attention of my superiors and a special prosecutor.” He let out a heavy sigh. “I’ve been instructed to investigate the validity of the claims in order to keep this special prosecutor from re-opening the Luthor case.”

Clark shook his head adamantly. “You cannot be serious!”

“If I had my way, I’d find the biggest rusty nail to sit this boil of humanity on, but we don’t have a choice. If that case gets reopened Luthor gets a new trial and his conviction gets vacated.” Davenport growled angrily. “I can’t take that chance.”

“No,” Clark took a protective step in front of Lois. “How is this even possible? That monster terrorized this city and Lois and because someone cooked up an imaginary tale and printed it in a publication that isn’t even worth the ink its printed with everything we worked on, everything we lost and sacrificed to bring that sociopath down... It just doesn’t matter?”

“I’m as furious as you are, Kent,” Davenport snapped irritably. “I lost my partner because of this demented sociopath and I sure as hell don’t want to be giving him any opening to argue against the evidence presented at trial. If I refuse to do it, then they’ll just pull another agent that doesn’t know you to come in and do the investigation.”

Lois broke her silence. “Why are they so deadset on this?

Who would actually want to reopen this case?”

“I don’t know,” Davenport said with a shrug. “Talley said he threatened the Special Prosecutor with a call to the Attorney General and the guy didn’t even blink. They threatened to replace Talley if he didn’t get in line, so his hands are tied too.” He ran a hand through his hair and let out a shallow breath. “I’ll try to make this as painless as possible.”

“Too late,” Lois fumed, storming out of the conference room.

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Jack sat in the corner of the conference room, glancing up occasionally to where Agent Dan Scardino sat a few seats down from Ingrid. He felt his stomach churn in anger as he listened to the details of her time in captivity and eventual escape.

Names that he had yet to hear of sprang from her lips and yet they all came back to the one name he knew. Omer Demir. How had a man that claimed to be trying to help the children subjected to the world’s atrocities by these traffickers be one of them? It seemed so foreign to him.

Detective Reed placed a hand across Ingrid’s hand, giving it a squeeze and then stood up, thanking Ingrid for her time.

Dan Scardino looked at him and asked, “You sticking around?”

“Yeah, I’ll hang around.” Jack nodded.

Scardino looked at Ingrid. “Keep him nearby. I’ll be back in a few.”

Ingrid nodded, staring down at her lap as the detectives left the room with Scardino. Jack let out a heavy sigh, uncertain what to think of the agent or even the recent discovery of having a man he had thought he admired be exposed as a child trafficker and possibly worse.

“How much longer you think?” Ingrid asked, looking in his direction.

“They’re not going to make you go through everything all at once,” Jack reassured her, walking over to the mini fridge to pull out a soda. He pointed to the open shelf of drinks and asked, “You want anything?”

“No.” She flashed him an uneasy smile. “I’m fine.”

He pointed to the scar across her forehead. “That’s a nasty scar.”

“One of the few that weren’t delivered to me by these animals.” She touched her head and replied with a heavy sigh. “I got caught in an explosion trying to escape this city. Hasn’t quite healed yet.”

“Sometimes stuff like that happens around here, but Superman always shows up to save the day.” Jack offered her a half-smile as he claimed the seat across the table from her. “I’m sorry we couldn’t have helped stop this from happening to you.”

“They said you worked with Omer?” Ingrid arched her eyebrow at him.

“In the capacity of thinking I was rescuing children from child trafficking rings not...” He clamped his mouth shut, unable to finish his sentence.

“...not orchestrating a conspiracy to make money off the children he helped kidnap by double crossing his investors?” Ingrid thrust her tongue into the side of her mouth as she clenched her jaw, seeming to be holding back something.

“I get the feeling you know a lot more than you’re saying,” Jack remarked carefully.

“I learned a long time ago not to show all your cards,” Ingrid clarified with a guarded expression.

“We’re going to need to know everything in order to find Esma,” Jack explained gently.

“There are so many different places she could be.” Ingrid wiped a tear from her eyes. “And I just met you all. I didn’t sign up for this lock down and to become a prisoner all over again.”

“You’re not a prisoner,” Jack argued.

“You tell me where I can go and what I can do. The life I

attempted to build is in shambles now. I'm sure I've lost my job..." Ingrid shook her head dismissively. "You have no idea what it's like to lose everything and have your freedom squashed again and again."

"You know these people. They'll come after you. We can't let them get away with this and right now you're the only solid lead we have to stopping them," Jack remarked cautiously.

"See? No choice." Ingrid sniffed.

"Last I checked you didn't have a gun to your head." Jack cocked his eyebrow up across his forehead and looked at her with a sympathetic smile. "Look, I know you've been through a lot and you have no reason to trust any of us, but these guys are the good guys. Lois and Clark are the best people you could ever know. Detective Reed is amazing at what she does and is dedicated to helping wherever she can. She volunteered at the soup kitchen all the time when my brother and I were getting our meals from there."

"And this Agent Scardino? What about him?" Ingrid asked.

"I don't know him well enough to have an opinion, but he seems like one of the good guys."

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Dan Scardino turned the corner in the newsroom, finding Clark Kent and Jimmy Olsen inside one of the conference rooms with a stack of boxes the entire stretch of the conference room table. He let out a low whistle as he opened the door. "Wow, you guys have been busy."

"We're trying to establish a timeline on these missing girls." Clark pointed to Jimmy who was tapping away at his keyboard. "Jimmy's trying to analyze everything to see if anything matches with the data we were given by the FBI."

"FBI?" Dan let out a low whistle. "Careful there. I hit a lot of roadblocks dealing with them on this."

"Agent Davenport helped us bring down Lex Luthor. We know him well enough to know we can trust him," Jimmy explained, not looking up from his screen.

"Yeah, sure," Clark grumbled, reaching a hand over to skim through another file.

"Oh, I'm so convinced now," Scardino flashed him an uneasy smile.

"It's just a formality." Jimmy looked over at Clark. "Jack Davenport knows there's nothing there."

"Famous last words." Clark scowled, handing him the file in his hand. "Another one in Hobb's Bay." He gestured to Dan. "How's Ingrid doing?"

"She's warming up to Detective Reed and Henderson," Scardino remarked carefully, closing the door behind him. "I know she's holding back a lot but even the stuff she has given us... It's the makings of a horror show."

"Yeah." Clark frowned. "And there's still kids out there living that horror show."

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### Chapter 18: I See It All

Jack Davenport looked up over the rim of his reading glasses at Lois Lane sitting across from him. "At what point did you first realize Lex Luthor was involved in criminal activity within the city of Metropolis?"

"When he had a knife to my throat and was threatening to assault me... just like I told you six years ago," Lois fumed angrily.

"Have you ever known Nigel St. John prior to your relationship with Lex Luthor?" Davenport asked.

"No."

"Have you now or have you ever received gifts from any known criminals?"

"No."

"For the record, why do you believe you are being investigated?" Davenport raised his eyebrow as he stared back at

Lois with a smirk across his face.

Lois smiled as she leaned back in her chair. "I'm being investigated because I dared to speak out about a young girl's kidnapping. I'm being investigated solely on the basis of a planted story within publications like the Tattletale Weekly and National Whisperer."

"Thank you." Davenport leaned over to press the stop button on the camcorder.

"That's it?" Lois asked, looking over at him in surprise.

"That's it," Davenport replied, typing up the last of his report and hitting send on the email. "I was instructed to investigate allegations of wrongdoing. I found no evidence of wrongdoing." He flashed her a quick smile. "I'm copying you and Kent on the report to the Special Prosecutor and the Attorney General."

An email popped up in his inbox, and he chuckled when he read it.

To: Jack Davenport

From: Jeremy Novak

Subject: Re: Lex Luthor Investigation Report – Lois Lane

Findings

Jack,

You cannot be done already.

- Jeremy Novak

Jack replied back with a quick two-word response.

To: Jeremy Novak

From: Jack Davenport

Subject: Re: Lex Luthor Investigation Report – Lois Lane

Findings

Jeremy,

I am.

- Jack Davenport

Lois smiled up at him. "Thanks, Jack."

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Clark glanced at the clock again as he sat across from Jon, helping him color the dragon in his coloring book. It was getting late. He wasn't sure how much longer Lois would be. He hated that she was being forced to go through this alone, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He wanted so badly to put a stop to all of this, but right now, all he could do was follow the advice of their attorney and lay low while they let the legal system work to their benefit.

He had spent most of the day digging through the files they had on the missing children along the eastern coast thanks to the advice Ingrid had given him in looking into the major cities along the coast.

Despite the technology and advancements in travel and shipping, the movement of illegal goods still depended on freight trains, shipyards, and the occasional illegal passport on a personal airline. All of which relied on being close to the coast in order to move the illegal goods and people to the other parts of the world. That was how they got the girls out. That was how they got them in. His stomach churned in disgust just thinking of how many lives had been destroyed with this operation running right under his nose all this time.

What he still couldn't understand was how there had been nothing to signal distress when these kidnappings were taking place. What made this different from the muggings and assaults he picked up on? Why did he hear their screams but not these children?

A knock on the door caught his attention, and he turned to Jon, who was happily coloring in his book, then turned to the front door to answer it. His heart stopped in surprise when he found a woman in her mid-forties standing outside his door with a white badge around her neck with her photo that read, 'Metropolis Child Protective Services,' and a uniformed officer.

"Mr. Kent?" the woman asked, pointing to her badge. "Linda Bailey. I'm with Metropolis Child Protective Services. We need to

speak with your son, Jon.”

Clark’s jaw tightened, taking one more glance back at Jon, who was oblivious to what was about to happen. Before he knew what had happened, the words came flying out of his mouth. “No.”

“Excuse me?” the CPS worker echoed in surprise.

“I said, no,” he repeated, crossing his arms over his chest. “You are not going to come barging into my home and harass my four-year-old son. You and I both know the only reason you’re here is to keep up an image with the public.”

“Our job is to protect children...”

“And my job is to protect *my* child... *from you*,” Clark snapped, pulling a card out of his pocket from the attorney’s office he’d picked up earlier. “You can talk to my attorney.” With that, he slammed the door in her face and turned back to Jon. Hopefully, they would be gone by the time Lois returned home.

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*One Year Ago...*

Clark let out a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose as he cradled the phone in his hand, fighting the tempting desire to gather his family up and take them someplace where they couldn’t be hurt. He found his voice after a long pause. “Luckabee did *what*?”

“Almost overnight. O’Neil Industries was taken on a hostile takeover according to sources. CK, the companies Luckabee Enterprises owns now...” Jimmy’s voice wavered as he listed them all off. “The Daily Planet, Utilities, transportation... phone companies, broadcasting, tech companies, military weaponry, and marketing firms... It’s all...”

“Put them all together, and it’s just like LexCorp,” Clark remarked grimly.

“Not just *like* LexCorp, CK. Every company that’s been acquired was at one point owned by Lex Luthor before you guys took him down,” Jimmy explained over the phone. “LexCorp has been resurrected under Luckabee Enterprises.”

“Why?” Clark wondered aloud, more to himself than to Jimmy. “What’s his endgame?”

“I don’t know,” Jimmy answered. “I know you guys aren’t due back for another day, but I figured it was important.”

“No, no, thanks for calling Jimmy.” Clark sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Listen, do me a favor, will you? Run a check on Luthor’s estate and check for any unusual activity and get back to me, will you?”

“You thinking Luthor’s behind this?” Jimmy asked.

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Clark answered.

“You got it.”

\*\*\*

Lois bit her lower lip, holding back laughter as she watched Jon dance around the waterpark, catching a whistle of the water coming out of the green and yellow turtles. The high-pitched laughter was music to her ears as she watched him run around the small stretch of padded area where the kids were playing.

“He’s certainly having a blast,” Martha commented with a light laugh, leaning over to hand Lois a drink from the tray in front of her.

“He’s a never-ending ball of energy.” Lois grinned, watching Jon climb on top of one of the turtles with another one of the boys.

Jonathan approached with fishing poles in hand, waving at them from behind the iron gate. “I see someone’s already hard at work...” He gestured to Jon, who was happily playing in the kids’ area. “We still heading up to the trail?”

“Just give him a minute to get dried off and changed and then we’ll be right behind you, Jonathan,” Lois answered, motioning to Jon who was running around with shrieks of laughter.

Jon saw Jonathan by the gate and ran over to him, giggling as he did so. “Hey, Grandpa.”

“I thought we were going on a hike.” Jonathan grinned at

him.

“We are,” Jon giggled. “I got busy playin’.”

“Come on, bud, let’s get you dressed,” Lois said, motioning for Jon to follow her. She flashed a quick smile in Jonathan’s direction. “We won’t be long.”

Jonathan nodded. “Any idea where Clark is?”

Lois frowned, shaking her head. “He was gathering up Jon’s gear last I saw...” She reached her hand out to take Jon’s with her as they headed toward the gate leading up to the lot where the cabins were. “I’m sure he just got distracted. He keeps checking in with Jimmy on the Luckabee case.”

“Ah,” Jonathan’s eyes lit up into a smile of recognition, recalling the name of the Daily Planet’s new owner Clark had been investigating.

“What’s a luck bee?” Jon asked with a curious gaze.

“It’s a... never mind.” Lois shook her head. “Come on, let’s get you dried off and changed.” After a quick promise to be right back, she walked with Jon through the gate watching as he bounced up the pebbled trail until he finally stopped in front of their cabin door. She pulled a key out of her pocket and unlocked the door.

The small table in the corner had Jon’s hat and vest. On the bed was the orange tackle box with block lettering on it that spelled out Kent. Lois frowned, looking around the empty room. “Clark?”

“Daddy?” Jon called out.

A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she gathered up Jon’s shirt and pants on the bed. She pointed him to the bathroom with a pair of underwear and pants. “Go ahead and get changed. No playing in the sink and no dripping on the floor.”

Jon nodded with a giggle and she knew from the minute he ran toward the bathroom he was going to make a huge mess, but her mind was elsewhere as she scanned the room, looking for a note or something from Clark. A faint sonic boom came from outside, and she sighed in relief, counting silently to three. The door opened, and she glanced up to see Clark in the doorway with his hair disheveled from its normal neatly combed style and the blank, shell-shocked expression across his face as he quietly closed the door behind him.

“Clark?” Her brow furrowed in concern as she gazed at him, standing up from her place on the edge of the bed. “What’s wrong?”

He leaned his head back against the doorframe with a frown. “Where’s Jon?”

Lois pointed toward the bathroom as the sound of his soft giggles from the bathroom hung in the air. “Probably making a huge mess.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “What is it?”

“I, uh, had to go see Jimmy about something...” Clark said, still unable to look at her as he stared across the room with a forlorn expression.

“It couldn’t wait another day till we get back home?” Lois asked, placing a hand across his chest.

“No,” Clark shook his head, and his voice cracked into a high-pitched growl. “As of this afternoon, Luckabee Enterprises is an exact replica of LexCorp. Not just the types of businesses, Lois, the exact same businesses Luthor had under his thumb...”

“What?” Lois heard her voice waver as she took a few steps back, shocked at the news he had just laid out for her.

“That’s not all,” Clark explained grimly. “A week ago, Luthor’s estate was accessed by an heir.” Clark pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll give you a wild guess where that money got transferred to.”

“Luckabee Enterprises,” Lois breathed out the name, hoping against hope she was wrong as she sunk down into one of the chairs by the side table.

“I wish I’d been wrong,” Clark grunted, hanging his head.

“What are we going to do?” Lois asked, rambling out the

thousand thoughts that were racing through her mind. “Someone needs to tell Perry and oh, God, what if he’s working with Lex? What if he knows...?” She drew and invisible ‘S’ across his chest.

Clark ran his hands up and down her shoulders, whispering in her ear, “Jimmy’s already talking to Perry, and we don’t know that he’s even talked to Luthor or if Luthor even knows he exists...”

“But, you just said...”

“It was accessed by a blood test and the firm handling the estate,” Clark explained, wrapping his arm around her. “Let’s just... not freak out until there is something to freak out about.”

“Okay, so let’s start with what we do know...”

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Lex looked over his shoulder as he wheeled himself down to the visitor’s room, feeling a rush of exhilaration run through him as he approached the tall steel door. He hadn’t felt this alive in years. Plotting and working out each intricate detail brought him back to life. His mind had been tired and ready to give in to Dr. Hugo Strange’s torture but knowing he not only had a son but one who could carry on the legacy of the Luthor name brought new meaning to him. Revenge would be his.

Superman would pay.

He reached the visitor’s room, hearing the door echo behind him as the guard slammed it shut and turned to his son seated across from him next to the dark-haired man he’d introduced as ‘Leslie.’ The plan sounded like something out of a bad soap opera but given how close he had come to his enemies, he wasn’t about to poke holes just yet.

“We have a problem,” Leslie folded his hands across from him, resting them on the table. “It appears the ruse of the out of town conference has hit a snag.”

“Make a big enough fuss, and they’ll come running. Lois always loves the attention of the spotlight on her,” Lex waved his concerns off.

“That might work if they were around, but it appears both Lois Lane and Clark Kent couldn’t be bothered to participate in this prestigious event.”

“Why the hell not?” Lex growled, jerking his head over to Leslie with a glare.

“It seems they’re both too distracted. Are you sure you know this Kent, as well as you, claim? It seems to me he’s too busy playing daddy to notice much of anything,” Leslie spouted off with a heavy shrug. “Not exactly the biggest threat if you ask me.”

“He’s far more dangerous than he seems,” Lex mumbled out, taking a long pause to mull over what Leslie had just revealed. “Playing Daddy, you say?” His gaze sharpened as he pressed for more information. “How old is the child?”

“Three,” Leslie responded nonchalantly.

He quickly did the math in his head, adding up when the child could have possibly been conceived. A hard chuckle as the reality of the threats he’d received from Kent and Lois’ behavior in the courtroom suddenly made much more sense.

“Something wrong?” his son asked, slamming a hand on the table in front of him. His face scrunched into a tense scowl as he jabbed a finger at him. “Oh, I get it. You certainly do get around, don’t you?” A dark expression crossed his face, and he scowled at Lex with a long hard glare before leaning back and cocking a spit wad in his face.

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*Present Day...*

Jon wiggled back and forth on his seat at the table, happily chewing away on his toast and reading the back of the box of cereal on the table. Clark held the phone to his ear, listening to the directions he was being provided by their recently acquired attorney for the upcoming hearing this morning in family court.

The doorbell rang, and he let out a sigh as he crossed the room to answer the door. He smiled when he saw his parents on the other side of the door. The smile quickly washed away as he

motioned for them to enter. Clark let out a long sigh as he listened to the attorney explain the purpose of this morning’s hearing and what they should or shouldn’t do in court. He made his way back to the kitchen, still listening to the attorney as he poured Jon another bowl of cereal. His mom pulled up a chair next to Jon, and his dad placed a hand on Clark’s shoulder, offering him a sympathetic squeeze.

He hated this.

Every last second of the last week had been a nightmare. The paparazzi had gotten wind of the calls for an investigation by Child Protective Services and had turned the harassment up a notch leaving both him and Lois struggling to keep Jon in the dark about what was happening. It was unnerving to watch everything unfold.

Everything seemed to be simultaneously coming apart at the seams – originating by a planted story that at any other time, would have been laughed off. He couldn’t prove it, but the pressure Davenport had been put under to investigate Lois along with the recent investigation with CPS had to be coming from somewhere. Could it be Luthor or possibly someone connected to Intergang? Lois had originally thought the kidnapping was connected to the global criminal enterprise, but he wasn’t entirely sure where to point the finger.

Though he had his initial doubts about Dan Scardino in the beginning, he had been eternally grateful to have someone around to assist Ingrid while they dealt with the current threat from CPS.

“Thanks, we’ll see you there,” Clark said, hanging up the phone and turning to his parents. “Thanks for taking Jon this morning. Lois didn’t want to risk...” He saw Jon look up at him curiously, and he clamped his mouth shut, meeting his dad’s gaze. “Thank you.”

“We’re happy to help,” his mom interjected gently, placing a hand on Jon’s shoulder. “Who is ready for a visit to the science museum? I heard they have a room that makes you dizzy.”

Jon giggled at his grandma, and Clark flashed them a quick smile, feeling the apprehension build inside him as he watched Jon gather up his things. He knew it was ridiculous to feel so torn up over such a simple hearing, knowing there was nothing that could be done other than the Child Protective Services being granted the authority to talk to Jon and continue their investigation or have it completely shut down. Still, knowing how uncharacteristic everything had been surrounding the continued vulture-like focus that plagued them, he couldn’t help but wonder what the outcome would be if the CPS was granted their motion.

After a quick good-bye and a few hugs that lasted longer than necessary, Clark headed upstairs to check on Lois. They still had an hour before they were due to be in court for the hearing. He reached the top of the stairs and was immediately greeted with the creaking of the pipes as the water to the shower was turned off. He smiled as he made his way to the bedroom, where Lois had two outfits laid out on the end of the bed. A deep violet pantsuit and a charcoal suit with a similar style.

“Hey.” Lois’ voice caught his attention, and he turned to see her standing behind him wrapped snugly in her lavender terry cloth robe with her hair wrapped in a towel.

“Hey.” He smiled, reaching out to pull her to him. “How are you holding up?”

Lois frowned, grumbling out, “I’m not sure which is the pregnancy or which is just nerves. My stomach’s been in knots all morning.”

“I spoke with Patricia, and she said she’s heading over right now. All that can happen is for CPS to be granted permission to talk to Jon or have the investigation shut down completely.” Clark heard the slight hick in his voice as he spoke.

Lois nodded, resting her cheek against his chest. “That’s what I’m afraid of. I don’t want Jon to have to talk to those people. I don’t want him to even know anything about this.”

"I know," Clark sighed, letting out a low breath. "I hate this. I feel so helpless."

Lois let out a low breath, changing the subject. "I take it Jon's already been picked up?"

"My folks just left with him. They're headed over to the science museum, and he is none the wiser," Clark reassured her, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her to him as he added with a whisper, "Everything's going to be okay."

"I'm not as convinced," Lois murmured, tightening her arms around him as she added in a hoarse whisper, "I can barely hold it together long enough to make it through a shower or to say good-bye to Jon for a day trip out with his grandparents. How am I supposed to make it through an entire morning of court hearings?"

"Lois." Clark rested his chin against her shoulder blade. "Honey, I'm worried too, but we've done everything we can. I've called Patricia, and double and triple checked on where to meet her. All that's left is to show up and defend our stance against these people."

"I hate this," Lois whimpered against him, resting her forehead against his chest.

"I do too," he whispered in agreement, cradling her in his arms.

She let out a heavy breath, reaching her hand up to wipe away the tears that had trickled down her cheeks. She stepped out of his embrace and grabbed each outfit off the bed to hold up for him to inspect. "Violet or Charcoal?"

He gave her a once-over, and she blushed as his eyes lingered over her. The last few weeks had been a challenge for both of them, adjusting to the impending arrival of their unborn child. Nearly a week after confirming the pregnancy, her body seemed to register the fact that she was pregnant. A change that had not been lost on him in the slightest as he found himself entranced by his wife's newly pregnant body. The rounding of her abdomen and filling out of her breasts to almost another cup size were just a few of the changes that had taken place. To him, she'd never looked more gorgeous.

He pulled her to him and allowed his hands to roam up and down her newly established curves, resting them across the sides of her hips, feeling the smoothness of her growing abdomen beneath his hands.

"You're not helping," Lois argued with him half-heartedly.

He leaned down, resting his forehead against hers, reaching over to cup her cheek as he murmured, "You look stunning in both of them." He flashed her a wicked grin as his hands slipped inside her now slightly open robe and added, "Though I prefer what you're wearing right now."

"Oh, that'll go over well. Show up in court barefoot with nothing but my robe and towel." Lois chuckled with a roll of her eyes, leaning over to set the outfits down and then looping her arms around his neck. "I love you. You know that?"

"You've mentioned it a time or two." He grinned back at her.

"How much time do we have till the hearing?" Lois asked with a shaky breath.

"Forty-three minutes," he murmured, glancing at the clock. "Why?"

"No reason," she whispered, reaching up to hook her hand around the end of his tie, tugging him with her down on the bed.

\*\*\*

Victor Talley bit down on his lower lip, staring at the man across from him with sharp black-trimmed glasses and a pointed nose. He had seen him on television from time to time on the Top Copy specials, and he'd seen his photo next to the extravagant stories he published on those weekly rags that printed stories about Elvis Presley's love child or resurrection. Still, he couldn't bring himself to look away as he listened to the story that seemed so far-fetched it just might be true.

Corruption all across the department with members of

Congress and even his own agents on the take to help further the agenda of the corrupt and cover for one another in the blanket rule of keeping one another's identity a secret as a means of survival. The concept of using the press to destroy those that oppose the corrupt and simultaneously orchestrating the downfall of those that dared speak out felt eerily familiar.

Nunk cleared his throat as he pointed to his injured foot. "These people are crazy. I did my fair share, and I'll own up to it, but I need help, and from where I'm sitting, you're the only one I can turn to. I need help."

\*\*\*

Tobias stood in the corner of the courthouse, watching as the woman he'd been waiting for entered through the security checkpoint with her file jacket and a large tote bag in hand. The red-haired woman was tall and shapely with a determined look on her face that would take on the careful pieces he had set in place to orchestrate the downfall of these troublesome reporters. Had she been a few years younger, he'd have repurposed her for another field of work that was more profitable, but for now, that was a market he was less proficient in.

"Ms. Patricia Banks?" Tobias called out, adjusting the knot on his tie as he walked up to the woman headed toward courtroom 3B.

"Who wants to know?" Patricia asked suspiciously, looking over at him with a frown.

"Call me an interested party." Tobias smiled at her holding up the briefcase he'd carried with him inside.

"I'm due in court." Patricia pointed to the courtroom doors that stood behind him.

"No, you're not," Tobias replied coldly, setting the briefcase down in front of her.

"What are you doing?" Patricia asked with the pigment of her skin slightly flushed, and her voice box rapidly moving inside her throat in a panic.

"You work long, hard hours, Patricia. Saving the lost souls, and yet you still can't save your mother, can you?" Tobias remarked boldly, hearing her voice catch in surprise. A smile crossed his face, and he slithered closer. "The drug trial starts next month, right?"

"How did you...?" Her eyes widened in a panic as she backed away from him. "Get out of my way."

"I can't let you go in there, Patricia." He pointed to the briefcase in front of him. "Take the money. Spend some time with your mother before the trial begins. Lord knows you won't get a second chance if things don't go well..."

Tears glistened in her eyes. "I..."

"Yes, you can."

\*\*\*

Lois used a coffee stirrer to mix in her cream and sugar in the Styrofoam coffee cup. Her hand was shaking nervously, and she could feel her heart racing as she tried to pour the coffee into the cup only to have it spill all over the counter. She let out a muttered curse, and a hand reached across her with napkins and paper towels to help her.

"Thanks," Lois gave the woman a grateful smile. She felt her eyes begin to water as she stared at the mess across the counter, trying to tidy up the small countertop next to the vending machines setup for everyone waiting to have their names called in the courtroom. They only had two more cases before theirs, and the attorney they'd hired had been a no-show. Clark had taken advantage of the short break to search the courthouse for her to see if there might have been a mix-up with the courtroom she needed to appear at, but so far nothing.

"How far along?" The woman pointed to the obvious bulge in Lois' abdomen.

Lois placed a hand across the bump and gave her a watery smile. "About three months." Her voice trembled, and she found

herself bursting into tears.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” The woman tried to calm her down, placing a hand on her shoulder as she followed her back to where the wooden benches were outside the courtroom. “Look, family court is just like anything else. It has its purpose, and for the most part, the judges are very fair.”

“Our attorney just didn’t show up this morning.” Lois blinked back tears, shaking her head. “Who does that?”

“Scum bags,” the woman replied, extending her hand to Lois to take. “Constance Hunter.”

“Lois Lane,” Lois introduced herself with less confidence than she normally would have. “Journalist and persona non grata among paparazzi and politicians apparently.”

“So, I’ve heard.” Constance leaned her elbow against the back of the bench. “You seem to have made quite a few enemies.” She gestured to the courtroom behind them. “So I take it that’s what brought you here?”

“They want us to let CPS talk to our son to investigate allegations of neglect that were completely fabricated by the paparazzi. We told them we’d see them in court.”

“Smart.” Constance nodded in agreement.

“Except for the fact that our attorney has disappeared on us,” Lois added with a scowl.

“There’s no actual allegation outside the tabloids?” Constance asked with a curious frown.

“None.” Lois shrugged her shoulders. “Who knew fabricated stories could incite mob rule on the court system, right?”

“Well, technically, it can’t,” Constance answered her gently.

Lois spotted Clark approaching with a takeout coffee in hand and smiled when she saw him. He handed her the coffee and claimed his seat next to her, shaking his head when she glanced at him with a questioning gaze. Lois pointed to Constance. “Constance, this is my husband...”

“Clark Kent.” She smiled back at him. “I’ve read your work. Good stuff.” Constance gestured to herself. “Don’t mind me. I was just nearby when the coffee maker decided to act up. Constance Hunter.”

“Nice to meet you.” Clark held his hand out for her to shake. He pointed toward the courtroom doors. “Looks like they’re back in session.”

\*\*\*

Jeremy Novak stood at the prosecution table, wearing a broad smile as he glanced across the aisle where Lois Lane and Clark Kent sat at the defendant table, unaccompanied. The Kents glanced in his direction and then at one another, seeming to be uncertain with one another. Novak straightened his shoulders and turned his attention to the judge that was preceding over today’s hearing, frowning when he saw Judge Colin Harper at the bench.

He glanced behind him to where Tobias was seated front-row with a man he didn’t recognize. He felt a hard lump in his throat as he leaned over to whisper to Tobias, “I thought this hearing was with Judge White.”

“Judge Harper didn’t take the bait,” Tobias responded in a harsh whisper. “Just do what I paid you to do, and everything will be fine.”

\*\*\*

Clark reached his hand over for Lois’, eyeing the man standing behind the prosecutor’s desk. He leaned over to whisper in Lois’ ear after the Special Prosecutor had introduced himself. “That’s the attorney Davenport was warning us about.”

Lois craned her neck to look over at the blonde-haired man sitting behind the prosecution table. “What are we going to do?”

“Pray for a miracle?” Clark asked, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Mr. Novak, what are you doing in my courtroom?” Judge Colin Harper asked, raising a furrowed brow at the special prosecutor.

“Jeremy Novak for Child Protective Services of New Troy, your honor,” Novak responded, standing up from his seat.

“I figured that much,” Harper grumbled. “The question was more referring to why one of the Attorney General’s state attorneys is handling a motion any of the attorneys at our local District Attorney’s office can handle.”

“I, uh, volunteered...” Novak replied with a smile.

“Uh-huh,” Judge Colin Harper looked over at the defense table, glancing toward the defendant’s table where both Clark and Lois were seated. “Mr. and Mrs...” He glanced down at the bench, flipping the paper up in front of him. “Kent? You do know you have the right to an attorney, correct?”

Clark stood up from his seat, followed by Lois. “We’re aware, your honor. The attorney we acquired has been a no-show this morning.”

“Had you spoken with this attorney prior to the hearing?” Judge Colin Harper asked, raising his eyebrows in concern.

“Just this morning, your honor,” Clark answered, feeling the flush cover the back of his neck as he stared back at the judge’s perplexed expression.

“Your honor, this is a clear delay tactic in order to buy more time. It’s already been a week since the initial visit to the Kent’s residence, and still, the minor child has not been produced to CPS for assessment,” Novak argued, glaring in Clark’s direction.

“Your honor!” a voice from the back raised up, and all eyes turned to Constance Hunter, who was making her way to the front. “Constance Hunter for the defense.”

“Ms. Hunter?” Judge Colin Harper looked at her with a perplexed expression.

“Just evening the odds, your honor.” Constance looked slightly rattled as she reached the defense table and set her briefcase down on the table.

Lois smiled, and Clark mouthed a quick ‘thank you’ in her direction. Judge Harper let out a heavy sigh and asked, “Are we ready to proceed?”

“Yes, your honor,” Constance responded.

“You don’t need time to debrief?” Novak looked over at Constance in surprise, and she arched her eyebrow at him with a smirk.

“Something wrong, Mr. Novak?”

“Of course not.”

“Good, I mean it’d be a shame if you were prepared for a fair fight, wouldn’t it?” Constance asked with a smirk.

“Let’s proceed, your honor.” Novak shrugged his shoulders.

“After you.” Constance motioned to Novak, who handed her a copy of a folded blue and white motion.

“Child Protective Services demands the immediate action of the courts to enforce Lois Lane and Clark Kent to produce the minor child Jon Kent in connection to allegations regarding neglect and possible criminal activity within the residence.” He motioned to the motion in front of the judge. “It’s all in there, your honor.”

“Uh-huh,” Constance looked back at Novak, crossing her arms over her chest. “Anything else?”

“That’s all,” Novak responded confidently. “The State rests its case, your honor. The minor child should be produced to CPS for investigation into these allegations.”

Constance Hunter turned to the Judge with a smug grin across her face. “Your honor, we ask that the motion against the Kents be immediately denied with prejudice as the state has failed to produce any evidence of these allegations against the Kents nor have they produced any evidence to support their claim and slanderous accusations of there being criminal activity in the home of the Kents.”

Harper turned to Novak with a raised brow. “What evidence does the state have of these criminal activities?”

“Ms. Lane was investigated by the FBI as early as last week.”

Lois leaned over to whisper in Constance's ear, "At his request. The FBI agent and director were threatened into completing an initial investigation, and they found nothing."

"Your honor, that investigation was incited by Mr. Novak himself, and if Mr. Novak wishes to enter these allegations into evidence, we can gladly call down the agent that conducted the questioning of Ms. Lane to verify there was no wrongdoing by the Kents." A smirk crossed her face as she added, "Besides, last I checked, being accused of something didn't immediately guarantee someone is guilty of the charge. Last I checked, we had a justice system that looked at all defendants as innocent until proven guilty."

"Is there any substantial evidence outside of an investigation you are neck-deep in, Mr. Novak, or are we supposed to just take your word for it?" Judge Harper asked, propping his chin into his palm as he looked across the courtroom at Jeremy Novak, waiting impatiently for an answer.

"We have a statement from Mr. Leo Nunk..." Novak replied confidently.

"What were the findings of the FBI's investigation, Mr. Novak?" Judge Harper asked, rolling his eyes.

"The investigation was closed and..." Novak looked away. "The findings were inconclusive."

"That's not what Agent Davenport said," Constance argued, holding up a copy of the report provided to her by Lois.

"Investigation was deemed unnecessary and a waste of FBI resources."

"Let me see that." Judge Harper motioned for Constance to bring the report to him. She approached the bench and let out a concerned grumbling as he skimmed through the report.

Constance looked over at Clark and Lois with a smile. "Just give him a minute."

Judge Harper cleared his throat, looking over at Novak with a scowl. "Mr. Novak, does this look like a circus to you, young man?"

"No."

"Do I look like Bozo the clown, son?"

"Of course not, your honor."

"Then why are you bringing this three-ring circus into my courtroom? Your entire basis for this investigation is a publication in the Tattletale Weekly. Where is your evidence?"

"There is none, your honor," Constance spoke up, glancing over at Novak with a smug expression. "The investigation initiated by Mr. Novak and his peers, the accusations by the Child Protective Services and the State... all of this is a blatant witch hunt with no factual basis to subject my clients to this fruitless investigation with zero merit outside of what the Tattletale Weekly has printed on their cover." Constance arched her eyebrow as she glared at Novak. "If the State is that bored, I have plenty of cases he can volunteer on..."

"Mr. Novak, do you have any evidence of actual abuse or neglect taking place in the Kent residence?" Judge Harper demanded with a sharp growl.

Novak stammered, looking back at the man seated behind him then back at the judge. He let out a heavy sigh and gave him a pleading look. "If we could just..."

"Witnesses?" Judge Harper asked.

"No."

"Complaining child?" Judge Harper inquired, growing more and more irritated by the second.

"No."

"What basis are you trying to open an investigation?" Judge Harper asked, tapping his hand against the bench desk he was seated in.

"Well..." Novak began but quickly clamped his mouth shut at the judge's sharp glare.

"The Tattletale Weekly, your honor," Constance Hunter

interjected.

The gavel pounded. "Case dismissed with prejudice. I'm not sure how they do things in the courtrooms you're used to arguing in Mr. Novak, but here we have actual evidence before we set foot into a judge's court. And we don't let the tabloids dictate which cases are investigated." He wagged his finger at Novak. "You, in my chambers."

Lois nudged Clark's side, pointing to the man looking in their direction. "You ever seen that man before?"

"No," Clark narrowed his gaze at the balding man that was staring them down with an intensity that sent a chill down his spine. He whispered back to Lois, "Get a photo while we're leaving."

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#### *One Year Ago...*

Lois poured over the file in front of her, tapping her hand across the solid wood table as she scanned the information they'd pulled on Leslie Luckabee. After Clark had updated her on everything, Jimmy had found, they had updated Jonathan and Martha and arranged for them to continue the last night at the cabin while they resumed the investigation into Leslie Luckabee. No sense in disappointing Jon if they didn't have to.

"He's a ghost," Lois commented, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Never existed before four years ago," Clark summarized, leaning over the table and jabbing his finger at the photo of Leslie Luckabee.

Perry leaned back in his seat, folding his hands across his lap and adding his own synopsis, "It's entirely possible Leslie Luckabee could be a cover, but if that were the case, then the acquisitions made by Luckabee Enterprises and Leslie Luckabee himself would be invalid. You can't go into a legal contract with a ghost."

"We need to find him," Clark shook his head, running a hand through his hair. "He's up to something..."

"Well, he hasn't been anywhere near the Planet in the last few days," Perry commented with a shrug. "Odd considered he'd practically built his office next to mine there for a while."

Lois leaned over to whisper to Clark, "We should probably check with your folks to make sure Jon is okay. You never know..."

\*\*\*

A sonic boom echoed in the background, and Jonathan Kent looked up from the front steps of the cabin, looking over at Jon, who was happily fiddling with his bag of cars, making motor sounds as he brought to life the play world he'd built in the confines of his dark navy blue bag. A smile tickled the corners of his mouth when he saw his son in his Superman suit, approaching with an amused look.

It seemed whatever had spooked him had been pushed aside as Clark pasted on a smile and put on his best Superman performance for his son.

Everything was fine.

He hoped.

\*\*\*

Clark reached his hand over to squeeze his wife's shoulder, giving her a supportive smile as she lifted her head up from her hands to meet his gaze. He felt numb after nearly a week since LexCorp had been resurrected under the guise of Luckabee Enterprises. No one had seen or heard a thing from the reclusive philanthropist, and the more they dug, the more he was convinced there was more to the story.

The doors to the conference room opened, and Perry appeared with a manilla folder in hand. "Jimmy got a copy of the medical records in Hong Kong."

"Hong Kong?" Lois craned her neck to look at Perry with a perplexed expression.

"According to the records, Lex Luthor was listed as the father on the birth certificate," Perry explained. He tapped his hand on his chin. "Now, here's where it gets confusing..."

"We're listening..." Clark edged cautiously.

"One birth certificate, but a death certificate was filed with the courts for the child yet never found in the medical records..."

"Luthor tried to hide his existence," Clark summarized. He flipped through the manilla envelope.

"Says the mother died in a car accident three years later." Lois peeked over his shoulder, scanning the page he was on. "That's one way to avoid a scandal."

"The mother's death certificate was legitimate. I found several mentions in the society pages of New Zealand's publishing outlets. The mother wasn't just anyone. She was the daughter of a diplomat. An inquiry was made into her death, and foul play was suspected but couldn't be proven." Perry sighed, tapping his thumb against the edge of the table. "According to the reports, there were several surgeries performed on the child afterward, and a trust was set up by Lex Luthor to care for him."

"Are we thinking Leslie is this missing child?" Lois asked.

"I don't know." Clark shook his head. "It still seems like a pretty big leap between Luckabee's non-existent life and this child Luthor had. There isn't anything tying Luckabee to Luthor."

"Why would he go to all this trouble?" Lois asked. "If he's not Lex's son, then why bother?"

"I don't know."

\*\*\*

Leslie Luckabee stormed through the stairwell leading into the underground subway station. He glanced over to the small room Lex Luthor Jr. was testing with a handheld device against the floor, reading something off of it with a scowl.

"Aren't you a little old for those handheld games?"

"I'm testing the calibration, you moronic imbecile!" Lex Luthor Jr. growled at him, turning sharply in his direction.

"Ah." Leslie soured his face into a tight scowl and let out a heavy sigh. "Well, if you're done playing... whatever it is you're doing there, I'd like to talk about what we're going to do about Superman."

"What about him?" Luthor asked, unfazed by the mention of the name.

"What about him?" Leslie echoed angrily. "He's digging into my past in Australia, New Zealand... It's only a matter of time before he figures it out. Which begs the question of when are we going to get rid of him?"

"Superman isn't our concern right now," Luthor hissed, shaking his head.

"Yes, well, while you're over here twiddling with toys, he's ripping years of work apart faster than a speeding bullet. You still haven't perfected the Kryptonite..."

"I will take care of it," Luthor snapped.

"Like you took care of Vixen?" Leslie hissed in his ear.

"That was a minor setback. The only thing you need to worry about is our plan for Clark Kent."

"All this trouble for one lousy reporter?"

"He's much more dangerous than you give him credit." Luthor darkened his gaze as he added, "He will be destroyed along with the child known to the world as Jon Kent... I will not be replaced."

"You said nothing about killing a child." Leslie's eyes widened in horror.

"Plans change."

"I'm done." Leslie backed away from him in disgust. "I didn't sign up for this."

"I tell you when you've had enough. You work for me. I make the rules."

"Last I checked, you still can't make it to the surface without hiding behind shadows," Leslie taunted him. "I'm done taking

orders from you."

"I made you!"

"You got your money's worth, didn't you?"

A leather-covered hand reached out to grab him by the collar, pulling him down to where he was eye-level with Luthor as a sharp toned hiss escaped his throat. "You are a lucky man. Lucky I found you bussing tables in that café, hoping for an acting break. Lucky I educated and trained you. Lucky I handed you the world's most powerful corporation..."

"I didn't sign up for..."

"You signed up for what I tell you you signed up for. I say jump, and you say how high? It seems the lines of fact and fiction have blurred in that feeble mind of yours, so let me remind you of a few truths you seem to have forgotten. We wouldn't want your luck to change, hmm? You pretend to be Lex Luthor Jr. I am Lex Luthor Jr. You pretend to be the brains of this criminal enterprise. I am the brains of this enterprise. I made you, and I can destroy you. Never forget that!"

He tossed him to the ground with a hard shove and asked, "Are we clear?"

"Crystal."

\*\*\*

"Here," Clark pointed to the photo in front of him of a boy with bandages wrapped around his hands and the side of his face. "Look at those injuries."

"Look at those surgeries," Lois argued, pointing to the long list of reports on medical procedures performed. "He very well could have had plastic surgery to erase the damage."

"But look at this." Clark pointed. "Green eyes. Five-foot four. One sixty-five." He frowned, shaking his head. "That was six years ago."

"Leslie's a good six feet tall," Perry interjected, shaking his head, "and I don't think he wears stilts."

"And he has brown eyes, not green," Clark pointed out.

Perry pointed to the date of birth. "This boy's at least ten years older than Leslie too."

A commotion came from the newsroom, and Perry looked over toward the glass door where Jimmy was motioning to him. He opened the door, and Jimmy yelled out, "They're evacuating the building. Someone just called in a bomb threat."

Lois met Clark's gaze briefly, nodding as he motioned to the stairwell. A hidden message silently passed between the two of them as he made his exit from the conference room, disappearing amidst the chaos toward the stairwell. He opened the door to take cover from prying eyes while he made a quick wardrobe change when he felt it.

A piercing pain ran through him, knocking him to his knees. His eyes fluttered, darting to the dark figure standing over him, taunting him with a maniacal laugh. "Superman, so glad you could make an entrance. I'm afraid you won't be swallowing any bombs today."

Before he could react, another burst of the painful shockwave ran through him, and darkness overtook him.

\*\*\*

Lois tightened her arms around Jon, cradling him against her chest as she looked around the crowded streets across from where the Planet was located. Perry walked up to her with a concerned expression on his face. His hand tapped on his chin as he continued toward her, motioning for her to come to him.

She moved to meet him, stopping in front of the men dressed in heavy-duty bomb diffusing gear. "Perry, what's up?"

"There's no bomb," Perry explained quietly, looking around the crowd. "Someone called it in to clear the building, we think."

"Are we sure?" Lois asked apprehensively.

"We searched every floor, miss. No explosives," the man in bomb squad gear replied. "You have a good day, Mr. White." He moved off toward the rest of the squad who was packing up to

leave.

Lois turned to Perry with concern. “You think this is Leslie?”  
“I don’t know what to think, Lois.” He let out a heavy sigh.

“Where’s Clark? Usually, he’s first on the scene when we have scares like this.”

“I... I don’t know. He disappeared after the call came in, and... I haven’t seen him.”

\*\*\*

Luckabee staggered through the crowded precinct, scanning the faces for someone familiar. He gripped the handheld recording device in his jacket, letting out a heavy sigh as he reached the office of the police commissioner.

“Can I help you?”

“I’d like to report a crime.” He set the tape recorder on the commissioner’s desk and smiled back at him. “It’s all there.”

\*\*\*

Clark lifted his head, feeling the familiar achiness wash over him. He looked around the room, noting the green hue across the walls. He shook his head, placing a hand across his chest, feeling the pain still lingering from his attack. Even in his weakened state, he could feel the faint hint of his powers still lingering. He blinked, looking toward the door with what looked like a digital camera just above the red digital lock pad that read, ‘secure.’

He reached his hand up, feeling his glasses on his face, and dipped them down the bridge of his nose, aiming his heat vision at the camera. A faint flicker of sparks burnt through the wires, and the red blinking light on the camera and the digital letters on the lock pad faded away. He pulled himself to his feet, shaking off the pain that continued to linger.

<<“*We seem to be having a repeat of your past behavior again. It would be a shame to lose all that progress...*”

“*Go to hell.*”

“*That was a mistake.*”>>

‘No.’ Clark quickly dismissed the memories of his time under Dr. Kelly’s care. He wouldn’t go there. He had to get out of here. He scanned the wall, looking for how to trigger the door to open and smiled when he found the locking mechanism inside the wall. A moment later, the door was sliding open, and a room full of computers and the remnants of a construction site welcomed him. He felt a wave of relief wash over him as he stepped outside the room, keeping a careful eye out for whoever had brought him here.

A light, slow clap came from the corner, and he jerked his head around to see a man sitting on a stool in the corner, his face partially covered by a large brimmed hat. Still on his guard, Clark took a step toward him, feeling the relief as he moved further away from the sealed room.

“Not even two minutes and you’ve already shown your cards. I’m impressed, but assessing your surroundings isn’t high on the list of priorities when you’re surrounded by Kryptonite, is it, Superman?”

The accusation caught him off guard, but Clark refused to react to the name, continuing to glare at the stranger as he folded his arms across his chest, unfazed. “Who are you?”

“Isn’t the better question, who are you?” the man asked with a cackle. “I mean, really a pair of glasses and hair gel? That’s your disguise?” He reached over to take a sip from his wine glass, reaching his hand over to press a button on a remote that started playing opera from the speakers around them.

“*Edipe.*” Clark’s eyes hinted at recognition, but he remained in his stoic position watching as the man swayed his hand back and forth, seeming to move to the French lyrics of the tragic tale being told through the art of opera.

“Very good.” The man smiled, wagging his finger at him. “I always did enjoy the Greek tragedies. Though unlike Oepidus, I plan to embrace my destiny.”

“Your destiny being?” Clark inquired with a bark in his tone.

“Why, isn’t it obvious?” he cocked his head at him, chuckling aloud and adding in a harsh whisper. “I’m going to rebuild my empire brick by brick and destroy everything you hold dear, Superman.”

“Isn’t that a bit cliched?” Clark scoffed, shaking his head. “Picking up where Lex Luthor left off despite him leaving you to fend for yourself...”

“You know nothing!” the man roared in fury. “My father is nothing but a coward. Don’t you dare mention his name in my presence.”

“Then why do you insist on recreating his work? You can’t even think up a plan on your own?”

“I’ve improved on it,” he insisted, setting his glass down on the table.

“Unimaginative,” Clark smirked, looking back at the room he’d just exited. “Kryptonite cage, really?”

“It’s not your average Kryptonite,” he hissed back at him.

“No, it’s much less effective,” Clark remarked, narrowing his gaze at him, feeling a smile curl across his face as he watched the fury cover the man’s face. ‘*Got you right where I want you.*’

\*\*\*

Lois rushed into the police station, meeting Bill Henderson in the middle of the precinct with a frantic plea. “Where is he?”

“Lois, calm down.”

“He threatened to kill my child. I’m way beyond calming down, Bill.” Lois fumed, clenching her white-knuckled fists.

“He wasn’t the one that threatened it.”

“Then who did?” Lois demanded.

“Lex Luthor Jr.,” Henderson explained, letting out a heavy breath. “Look, we’ve got enough to hold him and this Lex Luthor Jr. We just need to find him.”

\*\*\*

Clark felt a rush of adrenaline run through him as he slammed Lex Luthor Jr. against the concrete column that was helping hold up the city above. The sudden onslaught of voices he shouldn’t be able to hear and senses he knew to be the quickly returning powers Luthor had thought he had rid him of fueled his anger as he tightened his grasp on the withering neck of Lex Luthor Jr.

“I see the synthetic Kryptonite works nowhere near as well as I’d hoped. I’ll be sure to up the dosage next time.”

“What makes you think there’ll be a next time?” Clark growled, tightening his grasp around Luthor Jr.’s neck and snarling out in a mocking tone. “When I’m through with you, you’ll be locked up in the cell next to your father for the rest of your miserable life.”

“As far as the rest of the world knows the robotic superhero made to make Leslie Luckabee look like a hero, the CEOs that magically found themselves on train tracks and underground sewers were all the product of someone else. Lex Luthor Jr. had nothing to do with any of that.”

“You always talk about yourself in the third person?”

“Do you?” Lex Luthor Jr. chuckled, mockingly as the sound of voices approaching echoed around them. “I suppose this interview’s over, hmm? What should I do with all that time at the police station? Maybe get to know that Chief of Police and let them know about a little secret I know...”

“Alexander Luthor Jr, you have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney....”

Clark smiled, watching as Luthor was led into custody by Detective Henderson. Perry walked up to him, patting him on the shoulder as Lex Luthor Jr. continued ranting and raving about not living in a cage.

“Creepy,” Clark commented, looking over at Perry.

“Well, maybe he’ll be more comfortable being questioned at Shady Brooke. They know how to handle stuff like this...” Perry shrugged his shoulders.

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Tears trickled down Lois' cheeks as she stared back at the painful single line on the pregnancy test that told her she'd gone another month without conceiving. She felt her stomach clench as she thought through each painful negative test result she'd received. The first few, she and Clark had sat together, waiting to see if fate would smile on them. After some time, she had taken it upon herself not to burden him with the pain that came from each negative result.

She wanted so desperately to fill the void within her, clinging to hope that they would prove the doctors wrong and mend the brokenness that shattered her into a million pieces. Each month that passed without conceiving, the more painful it became. The realization that she might never have the opportunity to birth another child again made the gaping hole in her heart ache all the more. Jon continued to grow to be so much more like his dad each day, and the thought of not getting a chance to see him be a big brother made her ache for what had been lost.

She took a deep breath, tossing the test into the garbage can and turning to the large mirror in her and Clark's master bathroom, reaching her hand up to swipe the tears off her cheeks. This was just another in the long list of blows she'd received in the last twenty-four hours. Another month with a negative test result. It seemed like a fool's errand to continue trying like this.

Hours after the bomb threat and Clark's escape from Lex Luthor Jr.'s lair, she felt numb. The vicious, sadistic truths they had learned from Leslie on what Luthor's true intentions were for vengeance were enough to keep anyone up at night. Her baby. Her precious little boy had been a target for the sole reason of him existing. No other explanation.

"Lois, honey?"

She clamped her eyes closed as she felt the floodgates let loose, and the anguish she'd been holding back for most of the afternoon escaped. Clark's arms wrapped around her in a tight cocoon as she let out a labored sob, mumbling incoherent pleas over the cruelty of the world as he cradled her against him, lowering them both to the ground until they were sitting on the floor leaning back against the bedroom door.

"Do you have any idea how scared I was? I didn't know where to look..."

"I know, I know." Clark reassured her, whispering a kiss against her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"He made his own Kryptonite." Lois shook her head in disgust. "Thank God he wasn't able to succeed, but Clark he could have killed you if he'd gotten it right."

"He didn't," Clark reminded her. "It's fine. Everyone's fine," Clark whispered, running his hands through her hair. "He's locked away in Shady Brooke with a first class ticket to Arkham coming up next."

"He tried to go after Jon," Lois said numbly.

"He didn't get the chance," Clark reminded her. "He's safe."

"I can't. I can't go through that again. I refuse." Lois looked back at him, shaking her head. "I can't lose him or you..." She trailed off, shaking her head in dismay. "I may never get the chance to have another baby. The way things keep going, we're going to have to ship him off to Switzerland to keep him safe."

"Why do I get the feeling this isn't just about Luthor Jr.?" Clark asked, cupping her cheek.

She let out a heavy sigh, shaking her head. "I took a test this afternoon. Negative." She hung her head, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"Maybe we're putting too much pressure on one another," Clark began carefully.

"What do you mean?" Lois jerked her head around to look at him. "I thought..."

He cut her off, shaking his head. "I would raise a hundred kids with you if that's what you wanted, Lois. There is nothing I

would love more than to have an entire house filled with a little you and me running around with Jon, but after everything we've been through I can't help but wonder if part of the reason all of this is so hard right now might be because of how much pressure we're putting on one another. I love you. I love Jon. You two are my world, but maybe instead of focusing on what we don't have right now, we just focus on what we do have. A beautiful family of three with room to grow if the fates allow it."

Tears trickled down her cheeks as she felt his lips cover hers. A silent nod of agreement came followed with a heartfelt plea before he scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom, intent on making the painful realities from the last few hours disappear.

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## Chapter 19: I See It Now

*Present Day...*

Lois turned the corner with Clark a few steps behind her as they reached the end of the hallway leading to the larger boardroom they had been using for Agent Dan Scardino, occasionally the FBI agents he was working, and Ingrid. It had been nearly three weeks since she had entered the Daily Planet newsroom with the promise to help find Esma. Almost a week since the hearing with Judge Harper and going toe-to-toe with Jeremy Novak to protect Jon.

The sudden wave of planted stories that kept appearing in the tabloids had come to a halt – almost overnight. They still had a hearing scheduled to present their case for the defamation suit but the painful fatigue that had been weighing on both her and Clark over the stories that plagued the publications covering newsstands and supermarket check-out lines had all but disappeared. In their place were the usual celebrity sightings and obviously edited photos made to be a grab attention.

"Where's Ingrid?" Lois asked, setting her things down as she looked across the table that was scattered with several file boxes from the case they were currently building. Behind Dan Scardino was a rolling bulletin board with black and white images of children that had been reported missing over the course of the last seven years with a thumbtack signifying the year they were reported missing and the location.

"She went to get some air," Dan Scardino said, looking up from the open file in front of him. "Jack went with her down to the deli to pick up some lunch."

Lois let out an uneasy breath, taking the seat across from Agent Scardino. "How's she doing?"

"As well as can be expected." Scardino shook his head. "Unfortunately, it's not as easy as her being able to just answer questions. She was drugged a lot of the time and helping her connect the dots to what happened, and also getting her to trust us..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "They really did a number on her."

"It can't be easy for her," Clark commented, pulling the thin manilla file out and handing it to Scardino.

"What's this?" Scardino asked, reaching over to take a sip from his coffee mug.

"Remember that guy we mentioned that was hanging around the hearing last week?" Lois prompted. She reached over to jab her finger on the grainy photo that was printed out on the 8x10 photo in front of Agent Scardino. "It took Jimmy some time to clean up the image, but this is what we have."

"You still thinking this guy has something to do with Esma's kidnapping?" Scardino asked, chewing on his lower lip.

"The way he was talking with Jeremy Novak." Clark shook his head. "This guy's involved in this up to his neck. We know the planted stories are the work of the guys behind Esma's kidnapping. This guy showing up to the court hearing only proves that."

"Or maybe he's just another of Novak's ponzies?" Scardino suggested with a raised brow. "Look, it's suspicious, I'll admit

that.”

“But?” Lois pressed, crossing her arms over her chest.

“But we’ve got leads all over the place. What makes you think this guy is worth the already thin resources we have on this case?” Dan Scardino pushed a thick file toward Lois.

“What’s this?” Lois asked, flipping the file folder open.

“Surveillance on the Fifth Mission. Not a peep since we’ve put a detail on the place. We’ve either been made or there’s nothing to tell,” Scardino answered with a shrug.

“Well, we still don’t even know how these kids are being kidnapped without alerting Superman,” Clark added with a shrug. “What makes you think putting an undercover patrol unit is going to do any better?”

“Look, we’ve got a whole lot of theories but not a lot of direction.” Scardino pointed to the man’s photo again. “I don’t even have a name to enter into the database.”

“You were the one that didn’t want to bring the sisters in for questioning,” Lois pointed out, tapping her hand against the tabletop. She let out a heavy sigh. “You may not be willing to look into this guy, but we are.”

“Suit yourself.” Scardino shrugged his shoulders. “But you’re not going to get very far without a name.”

Lois rolled her eyes, waving him off. “Well, if I backed down every time someone told me not to, I’d still be handing out mail downstairs.” She pointed to the file folder in front of her. “Has anyone even tried to talk to the people running this place?”

“With what?” Scardino asked, folding his arms across his chest. “Taking in runaways? Feeding the homeless?”

“If what Ingrid said is true then...”

“Then, if we don’t want to scare these people off, we wait for something more than a scared kid’s word to question them with,” Scardino argued. “I want to get these guys as much as you do, but right now, we don’t have enough to go storming in there and accusing the Fifth Street Mission of anything.”

“So you don’t have anything on the mission. We have no name to go along with this face. What do we have, Agent Scardino?” Clark interrupted with growing aggravation in his tone.

“I’m hoping we can draw out more information from Ingrid,” Scardino responded. “She might be able to point us to the safehouses Omer used.”

“Esma is still out there,” Lois reminded him.

“And we’ll find her.”

“Will you?” Lois pressed, standing to her feet. She shook her head. “I’m going to go get some air.”

“Right behind you,” Clark called after her, shaking his head.

“You show up over at Fifth Street Mission, they’ll panic, and we’ll never get them,” Scardino warned.

Clark shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe or maybe we get some direction from talking with them.” He let out a long breath. “I know these people.”

“No, you don’t,” Scardino warned. “No one does.”

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Leo Nunk glanced across the desk he was seated at to the dark blonde-haired man staring at him. He swallowed hard, looking at the glass walls around them and back at the man who kept a steady gaze on him.

“So, you’re Jack Davenport, eh? Heard a lot about you.”

“I doubt it,” Davenport retorted with a scowl. “Mr. Nunk, I despise everything you stand for and everything you do. Because of your actions, innocent people have been subjected to unnecessary inquiries, and this very department was wasting time and resources that could have been better used to help real victims.”

“I’m sensing a but there...” Nunk said nervously.

“But for whatever reason, my director is convinced you’re valuable to us.” Davenport leaned back in his chair. “This better be good.”

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Dan Scardino rolled his eyes as he watched the door close behind the two reporters that he was convinced were about to completely blow his investigation. He let out an aggravated sigh, raking a hand through his hair and reaching for his mug of coffee.

He was just as frustrated as they were. Ingrid was able to reveal some insights into how these guys operated, but right now, she didn’t trust them enough to open up completely. After so many years of her holding everything in and going into survival mode, it was like clawing at a cement block with a spoon to get her to open up. He could tell she wanted to. It was in her eyes—the pain of what she so desperately wanted to share. She wanted to help them find Esma.

He knew if he pushed her, she’d only close back up. He turned his attention to the transcript of the latest interview with Ingrid. Hopefully, he could find something to help give him some direction.

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Clark looked around the open space at the Fifth Street Mission, following Sister Tracy as she showed them around. It was everything he had seen before, but Tracy insisted on showing them around. Something felt different about this visit, though. The normal crowds that were at the mission were non-existent.

His super-hearing picked up on hushed whispers coming from down the corridor where a woman’s voice could be heard in sharp whispers. “Yes, they’re still here...”

Tracy pointed down the corridor where a sign read ‘Girls Only’ and explained, “I try to keep the boys and girls separate.”

“Have you had trouble with them staying separate in the past?” Lois asked, following the direction Tracy was pointing with her eyes.

“Well, you know what they say. Boys will be boys. No sense in tempting them, hmm?” Tracy offered a slow smile, but there was something off-putting about the way she looked back at Lois that made Clark wonder if there was something more to the story.

Clark pulled out the photo Jimmy had cleaned up for them from his jacket pocket. “Tracy, have you seen this man here before?”

He watched her eyes slightly widen with recognition and heard her heart rate pick up, then just as quickly, she pasted on a smile and shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Well, that’s too bad.” Clark pasted his own smile on his face and slipped his hand in Lois’ as they neared the kitchen area, careful to look for anything that stood out as they approached the exit to the building.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help to you,” Tracy explained, looking back at them with an apologetic expression. Her eyes shifted to Lois’ midsection and her face tensed as she asked. “How far along?”

Lois patted her abdomen. “Three months.”

Clark watched with apprehension as Tracy’s tone changed to almost a sales pitch. “Well, you know we do a lot more than bring in homeless and runaways. We work with the community to offer free prenatal courses and childbirth classes.”

“Thank you, but we have that covered,” Clark interjected, feeling more and more uncomfortable with the way Tracy kept staring at his wife’s midsection. “We should get going.”

“Of course.” Tracy beamed back at him and gestured to the door. “Do stop by again. I enjoy our visits.”

Lois turned her head suspiciously at him but didn’t say anything as he quickly ushered her out the door. She waited till the doors were closed behind them and asked him, “What was that about?”

“Other than the fact that she’s clearly lying through her teeth or the fact that she was practically salivating over your very noticeable pregnancy?” He asked, placing a protective hand over the bump on her abdomen. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

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Dan Scardino's jaw tightened as his teeth glided against one another with enough pressure to crack the Colosseum. He propped the phone between his ear and shoulder, feeling the heat rush across the back of his neck, spreading into his face as he responded to Bill Henderson with a sharp, "Well, I'll be sure to pass along the message."

With that, he slammed the phone back down on the receiver and let out a muttered curse, folding his arms across his chest in aggravation. A raised brow and subtle cough escaped his fellow co-habitants of the room, earning him a questioning gaze from Jack and an equally confused expression from Ingrid.

"You just can't tell them anything," Scardino grumbled, shaking his head. "Two minutes after Lane and Kent hightail it out of Fifth Street Mission, and they got a tow truck showing up to help move them along."

"I'm sure Lois and Clark didn't tell them about the patrol car," Jack insisted, shaking his head.

"No, they just aggravated the people running the place to the point that they felt the need to send a message that they know we're onto them." Scardino shook his head. "I guess I'll have to get more creative with the stakeout location."

"They're sending you a message," Ingrid spoke up. "They can spot a police car a mile away. They want you to know they only allow you to see what they want you to."

Scardino shrugged his shoulders. "Then what do I do? What's the point of any of this?" He gestured to the room around them.

"It's about control," Ingrid responded. "These men. They don't give it up easily. They control the girls, the children, the drugs... the crime. All of it."

"Like Intergang," Jack commented with a scowl.

"What's Intergang?" Ingrid asked.

"It was a global criminal enterprise that tried to take over Metropolis sometime back," Dan Scardino explained. "They were shut down by Superman and the feds."

"Unfortunately, all that did is open the market for these guys," Jack pointed to the board behind Scardino. He pulled out another photo and handed it and a tag to Scardino. "This one goes back to six years ago."

Dan stopped, feeling his breath catch in his throat when he saw the photo in front of him. "Yvonne?"

"Familiar face?" Jack asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Informant when I was investigating a lead out in Qatar."

Scardino shook his head, waving his hand to the photo in front of him. "She escaped the hands of this Omer and some guy named Elias only to end up in another pimp's grasp."

He frowned, recalling the painful memories of waking up in Dubai with what felt like a hangover that had lasted a little over a week. He had been scarred from top to bottom with injuries that left him in physical therapy for the better part of a year—fractured bones, and muscle tears and burns that made him scream in agony.

It had been by pure luck that he had found his way to the care of a doctor who had later taken him to the better facilities in Dubai. He spent weeks trying to reach out to Yvonne and then he found it. The footage that was leaked to the U.S. Embassy of a woman beheaded. His captain never could confirm the identity beyond a shadow of a doubt but the tattoo on her left shoulder confirmed it for him. It was her.

"Anwir?" the name escaped Ingrid's lips and they both looked over at her in surprise.

"Where did you hear that name?" Scardino asked, narrowing his gaze at her.

"His head was used as a warning." Ingrid shuddered, shaking her head and cradling her face in her hand. "He used to work with Elias and then left with a few of the girls."

Scardino nodded in recognition. "Yvonne was one of them.

The other girl, Anna, was killed in a shootout with some guy... Temple? No, that's not right..." He held up his hand, "Just give me a sec, and I'll remember it."

Jack frowned, leaning back in his chair. "Church?" he asked. "Maybe," Scardino shrugged. "I'd have to see the guy's face to tell you for sure. There was a photo I had..." He walked over to one of the boxes and began sifting through the paperwork, searching for the black and white still he was searching for.

Jack flipped through a few keys on his laptop and turned the screen around, revealing the very familiar man's face. "Bill Church Jr. disappeared from sight for three months after an impromptu visit to Qatar nearly three years ago. Just before he took over his father's criminal enterprise, Intergang."

Scardino pulled out the photo still from the file in his hand to reveal a matching image, "Looks like we've got a match."

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Lois looked around the corner bus stop, standing next to the crosswalk sign and pointing to the street across from her. "Okay, so we're what? Two blocks away from the Fifth Street Mission? Esma was last seen here." She stomped her foot on the pavement for emphasis.

She pointed to the lack of cameras around. "Broken." She pointed to the camera above them next to the streetlight. "Stolen." She pointed to the open cords where a convenience store's camera had once been. "Out of order." She pointed to the ATM machine on the other side of the corner.

"For six months," Clark reminded her, walking up behind her with a scowl on his face. "How many crimes are committed here without anyone seeing a thing?"

"Bus makes its rounds every thirty minutes," Lois recalled aloud. "Esma gets off the bus." She pointed to the crosswalk sign where the button to change the signal was.

"And then disappears." Clark pointed to the three directions she could have gone. "But where?"

"It was the middle of the day," Lois murmured, looking around the busy street. "It was the middle of the day, where busy streets would have gotten someone's attention." She frowned, looking behind her to an alleyway, then turned to her left to a drive-thru leading to a laundromat and over to her right where the storefront behind her continued. "There's nowhere to go. There's nowhere to hide."

"Someone around here had to have seen something," Clark said, looking around.

"Clark, we're dealing with people that have Bobby Bigmouth running scared and Henderson closing ranks on us," Lois reminded him, feeling disheartened as she looked around. "They wouldn't have left witnesses."

"Well, let's just start this over again." Clark pointed to the alleyway behind them. "We have that photo. Let's see if anyone recognizes him and go from there."

"So they can lie to us like Tracy did?" Lois argued with a defeated sigh. "She's in this up to her neck. I can feel it."

"Maybe, but she's not talking, and right now we need a name," Clark said, placing an arm across her shoulders.

"He doesn't have a name. He's a ghost, according to Jimmy," Lois reminded him.

"Everyone has a name," Clark whispered, leaning over to place a kiss on her cheek.

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Jack Davenport pushed a paper in front of Leo Nunk, pointing to the pad in front of him. "You want to help stop these guys? You do the right thing first."

"I need guarantees..." Nunk tried to argue.

"I need a massage and a half million a year, but this is not a Christmas special, Charlie Brown." Davenport leaned back in his chair, staring Nunk down with a scowl. "You will print a retraction on every story you planted at these people's request."

“You don’t understand... I can’t do that,” Nunk argued, pushing the pad away from him.

“What don’t I understand?” Davenport asked with a growl. “You want my help getting out from under these guys; you do the right thing.”

“It’s not just the Senators!” Nunk fumed, pointing to the office around him. “These guys are everywhere. They have people on the take everywhere. I do this, and I might as well sign my family’s death warrant.”

“We can stop these guys,” Davenport pointed to the pad in front of him.

“This isn’t a single criminal mastermind running the show.” Nunk pointed to the line of cubicles behind the glass-paned office they were in. “They’re everywhere. You want names. You want dates. You want a retraction. You want a lot of things, Agent Davenport, but I need guarantees before I put my neck on the line.”

Davenport pointed to Nunk’s injured foot. “Seems to me, your bargaining chip is long gone, Mr. Nunk.”

“Aren’t you the least bit curious to find out who is double-dipping on the FBI’s dime?” Nunk asked with a raised eyebrow.

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“Excuse me?” Clark waved his hand at a man dressed shabbily standing near the dumpster outside the laundromat. The man squinted back at him with a gruff moan, and Clark took that as a sign he had the man’s attention. “You hang around here a lot?”

“Sometimes,” the man admitted, scrounging up his face suspiciously. “Who wants to know?”

“We’re looking into a kidnapping. A young girl disappeared from this corner six months ago,” Lois explained calmly, looking at him expectantly. “She’s just a kid.”

“What’s it got to do with you?” the man asked suspiciously.

“I’m Clark Kent. This is Lois Lane with the Daily Planet,” Clark explained, introducing them to the stranger. “We just want to help find her and bring her home.”

Lois pulled out a twenty and handed it to him. “You ever see this girl before?” she held out the photo of Esmá for him.

He shook his head. “No.”

“What about her?” Lois pulled out another photo, revealing the image of Ingrid.

“Yeah.” He nodded in an almost trance-like smile. “I know her. *Real* well.”

“How well?” Clark pressed, watching the man’s face relax as he chuckled in response.

“How is Ingrid? I haven’t seen her around much.”

“She’s safe,” Lois answered then pulled out one last photo. “What about this, man?”

The man’s brow furrowed, and Clark pressed, “You know him, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I seen him around.”

“What’s his name?” Lois asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Clark pointed to the photo. “This man is dangerous, isn’t he?”

“Have you asked Ingrid?” the man asked.

“Not yet,” Lois answered suspiciously.

Clark met Lois’ gaze, and they turned to leave. The man seemed to have second thoughts and then called out to them. “Wait! You take me to Ingrid and I’ll tell you everything I know about him.”

Clark shook his head. “We can’t do that.”

The man nodded, backing away with a smile, holding up the twenty they gave him. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

Lois watched the man disappear further into the alleyway and turned to Clark. “I’ll take creepy things I wish I never knew for five hundred.”

Clark scowled, watching the man disappear. “I’ll call Henderson and see if he can have someone come down here and talk to that guy.”

“On what?” Lois asked with a scowl. “A leering gesture. He isn’t going to talk to Henderson, and you know it.” She looked toward the bus stop sadly, shaking her head. “He’s probably one of many that have assaulted her, Clark.” She tapped the photo in his hand. “And I have a feeling this is the man responsible.”

Clark let out a heavy sigh, wrapping his arm around Lois as they walked toward the meter where they had parked the Jeep. “Funny, I thought I’d feel better about getting closer on this investigation.”

“Me too.” Lois frowned, shaking her head. She pointed to the man who was peaking around the fence. “Let’s be sure that guy doesn’t try to follow us out of here. It’s bad enough he knows Ingrid is out of his clutches.”

“Yeah,” Clark nodded in agreement, opening the door to the Jeep for her.

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Dan Scardino wore a smug grin as he watched Bill Church Jr. from across the table. He glanced over at the jumpsuit Church had been fitted with and let out a long whistle. “I guess they just don’t make those in Armani, huh, Billy?”

“What do you want?” Church asked, leaning back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest in defiance. “I’m here out of curiosity, not your amusement, Agent Scardino.”

“Yes, yes, I know.” Dan Scardino leaned across the table and placed a single black and white photo in front of him. “I’m here about her.” He pointed to the woman with the long scar across her face on Bill Church Jr’s arm.

Church chuckled. “This is about a few prostitutes?”

“This one. Right here.” Scardino tapped the photo again, pointing at Yvonne’s face in the photo. He bit down on his lower lip, feeling the edge of the uncomfortable metal chair digging into his backside as he stared at Church. “You know her, don’t you?”

“I met her once,” Church admitted with a shrug. “What does that have to do with me?”

“And this man?” Scardino tapped at the face of the man standing next to Church. “How do you know him?”

Church’s face fell, and a panic began to set in across his features. His eyes strayed away toward the door, and Scardino knew he had him. Church cleared his throat, pushing himself away from the table. “I can’t help you.”

“How does it feel to help a pedophile get away with murder?” Scardino asked, moving in for the kill.

“What the hell are you blabbering about?” Church barked at him, standing up from his chair.

“I mean, I just assumed you must like little girls what with the company you keep. You get a friends and benefits discount?” Scardino tapped at the photo in front of him and smirked as he announced. “Fourteen. Fifteen.”

“No way,” Church shook his head adamantly. “That’s sick.”

“You’re the one rocking the cradle in the photo, my friend.” Scardino shrugged his shoulders, propping his hands in the air. “Not sure how your cellblock is going to feel knowing they’ve got a pedophile in their ranks.”

“You’re out of your damn mind!” Church snarled back at him.

“Right.” Scardino leaned back in his chair. “I’m sure they’ll be really understanding. I mean prison is full of guys that get their rocks off with little kids, right? What’s the worst that can happen?”

“It wasn’t like that!” Church growled. “I never even touched them!”

“That’s not what this photo looks like,” Scardino tapped on the black and white photo. “You look pretty chummy there.”

“You’re out of your mind, you perv!”

“Maybe but I’m not the one that’s gonna have to sleep with one eye open,” Scardino responded smugly.

Church looked between him and the door and then seemed to debate internally before finally asking, “What do you want to know?”

“Where did you meet Elias?”

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Lois leaned over to tuck Jon into bed, pressing her lips to his cheek and giving him a hug a little longer than necessary before pulling away. She flashed him a quick smile and whispered, “Goodnight,” one last time and then turned to close the door behind her.

She made her way to the living room where she found the file boxes she and Clark had brought home earlier. She ran a hand through her still damp hair feeling a chill run down her spine as she recalled the creepy way the homeless man – if he really was homeless – had practically salivated over the photo of Ingrid. She let out a heavy sigh, placing a protective hand across her abdomen.

“We’re going to stop these guys,” she promised softly.

The phone on the side table rang, and she jumped, slightly startled. She reached over to place a hand on her chest, trying to calm her already heightened nerves and then picked up the phone to answer it. “Hello?”

A heavy breathing came on the other end of the line, and she heard a voice crackle through the phone line. “I hear you’ve been looking for me, Ms. Lane.”

“Who is this?” Lois felt her heart pang in her chest as she heard the man chuckle.

“Now, why would I give that away and spoil our fun? You have something that belongs to me,” he hissed at her through the phone line. “I want it back.”

“You’re not coming anywhere near her again, you sick bastard,” Lois growled out.

“Really? Have you learned nothing from your recent court battle, Ms. Lane?”

“Go to hell!”

“Return Ingrid to me, and all of this goes away.” The man chuckled over the phone line. “A woman in your condition can’t exactly fight back if she were to walk down a dark alley... or step off a bus stop in the wrong part of town.”

“Is that a threat?” Lois asked, feeling her breathing grow faster with each second she had this monster on the line.

“Produce what is mine or face the consequences,” the man warned. “Superman has yet to stop me... Think about that.”

With a click, he hung up, and Lois slammed the phone down, feeling her heart hammering in her chest. She looked around the room as panic began to overtake her. She looked toward the window, bolting up the stairs to reassure herself that Jon was indeed safe and sound in his bed.

She reached the top of the stairs and raced toward the blue and white trimmed bedroom door. With her heart hammering in her chest and her knuckles white with the tension of clenching her fists as she stormed up the stairs, she let out a labored breath, trying to calm the panic rising inside her. She released the fist in her palm and reached out to open Jon’s bedroom door.

A wave of relief washed over her when she saw Jon’s sleepy face pressed against his pillow. Her lips quivered and she felt a hard lump in her throat tense as she choked back a sob, leaning her head against the frame of Jon’s door. He was safe. He was okay.

Why didn’t that make her feel any better?

Her hands slid up and down her arms, and she took a step back into the hallway, trying to remain as quiet as she could so as not to wake Jon. She reached her hand out to close the door behind her. A labored sigh escaped her throat, and she sank down to the floor, allowing a choked sob to escape past her lips.

“Lois?”

She looked up, squinting back the tears that trickled down her

cheeks. Standing over her, still in his cape and spandex from his recent patrol, was Clark just before he sunk down on the floor next to her, reaching his hand out to cup her cheek.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

“A, uh, call came in... they want Ingrid back.” Lois bit her lower lip, shaking her head.

“Who wants Ingrid back?” Clark tried to clarify.

“Whoever kidnapped her in the first place.” Lois whimpered, raising her fist in the air. “He practically admitted to orchestrating everything that happened with CPS. That monster is never going to stop...”

“He’s not going to get away with this,” Clark promised, wrapping a protective arm around her, cradling her against his chest.

“You don’t know that.” Lois whimpered, feeling the despair and fear that had been pushed to the back of her mind overtake her. “We’ve been looking for Esma for months. Look what happened with CPS, the tabloids... Almost getting Lex Luthor released. They’re too powerful.”

“Lois,” Clark whispered, placing his hand against her cheek, resting his forehead against hers. “We will stop them.”

“How?” Lois challenged, resting her hand against his shoulder, pulling away. “We have no name. We have no face. Just a mysterious kidnapper that seems to be ten steps ahead of us and has his sights set on a very scared little girl.” She let out a soft whimper. “What’s to stop them from coming after Jon?”

“I won’t let that happen,” Clark whispered, running his hand down her face, brushing his thumb against her jawline.

“You can’t be everywhere at once,” Lois raised a brow at him.

“Lois, there is not a force on this Earth that would stop me from protecting you and our children.” He placed a hand across her growing abdomen for emphasis. “We will stop them.” He leaned forward, brushing his lips to hers, cradling her in his arms as she relaxed against him.

A slow smile crossed her face as his featherlight kisses grew more intense. A short gasp escaped her throat as they sank onto the carpet and she wrapped her arms around him, moaning her approval as she felt his solid frame press into hers. His hands explored the back of his suit, feeling their way up his shoulder blades until she found the zipper holding the blue spandex in place.

A low moan escaped his lips as he hovered over her, smoothing his lips against hers. A muffled sigh escaped the back of her throat as he inched down her body, murmuring reassurances as his hands ran up and down the curve of her chest, outlining the sensitive flesh with his palms.

She let out a muffled sigh as the unbearable distance between them closed and his body sunk down, pressing her. She slinked her arms across his back, feeling her way over the heavy fabric of his cape as she helped peel the rest of his costume off.

His hands moved through her hair, framing the sides of her face as his body pressed into her. “Lois.”

“Clar...” She let out a muffled sigh as he drew her closer, tracing the frame of her face with a single hand as he pulled her closer, deepening their embrace with each caress. “Make love to me.”

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Attorney General Vincent Blake bit down on his lower lip, skimming through the information his FBI director had just brought to him. The evidence before him was damning and circumstantial, but if it was true, then the foundation of the country’s freedom was at risk.

He reached up to remove his reading glasses, folding them carefully and placing them on the table next to him. “Director Talley, you do understand what it is you’re saying here, correct? Accusations against the Senate Judiciary Committee are serious

and saying that even one member is not only compromised, but a co-conspirator in something as heinous as human-trafficking... This isn't something to tread into lightly."

"We have a witness willing to testify to at least two senators' involvement," Director Talley responded.

"A known convicted felon," Blake responded with a cocked eyebrow. "You can't base your entire case against this committee based on the word of a convicted felon."

"Then assign a task force," Director Talley pleaded with him. "I know we don't have a lot right now, but I'm confident we can build the case and prove their involvement."

"You need to convince me and the Vice President," Blake instructed with a solemn expression. "Regardless, I'll authorize the investigation, but don't let this be a repeat of what happened with Danny Malone."

"I won't," Director Talley promised.

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*Present Day...*

Dan Scardino glared at the senator in front of him, feeling his anger simmering beneath the surface. He glanced next to him, where the Deputy Chief was seated with the Attorney General Vincent Blake. The brass in this room alone should have been enough to make him second guess himself, but his heart refused to let him sit idly by while the senator tried to weasel his way out of the charges before him.

"You've been a naughty boy, Donald," Blake commented, clucking his tongue against his mouth. "How many trips to the Middle East does a senator need to make in a year?"

"Those were press tours," Schumer tried to shrug off the photos pushed in his direction.

"Let me guess, you didn't inhale?" Scardino asked, pushing a photo of Schumer packing a suitcase of drugs with Omer Demir behind him. The photo was dated nearly five years back.

"I did *nothing* wrong," Schumer argued.

"And what about him?" Scardino jabbed his finger on the face of Omer Demir. "Socializing with known human traffickers and drug smugglers? Tell me something, is that supposed to increase your chances of re-election or hurt them?"

"You think you're so smug," Schumer chuckled, looking around the room. "Every one of you are living a fantasy. You have no idea how little power you have."

"Why don't you educate us then, Donald," Blake growled back. "I mean, we're just a bunch of dumb government officials. Please teach us what we don't know."

"In your dreams," Schumer shot back with a cocky laugh. He tilted his head in Scardino's direction and added, "You'll never stop them. They were right under your nose, and you still couldn't find them."

"I'm really going to enjoy watching them rake you over the coals over this one," Scardino chuckled. "How many decades does one spend behind bars for treason?"

"Now, you know that's a stretch, Agent Scardino," Schumer glared back at him. "You have nothing."

"We have a cooperating witness and video footage of your illegal practices of influencing your fellow committee members to vote a certain way by blackmail and physical bodily harm." Attorney General Vincent Blake spoke up, clearing his throat. "What exactly are we missing here?"

"I have information," Schumer stammered, looking with a pleading expression at the Deputy Chief for help. "Agent Blake's murder."

"What about it?" Scardino growled out, slamming his fist on the table.

"No deal. No information," Schumer argued.

"You cocky piece of crap, I swear to God I'll rip you limb from limb if you don't start talking!" Scardino flew across the table only for his Deputy Chief and the Attorney General to both

pull him back.

"How long has it been, Agent Scardino? Five? Six years? Still unable to find anyone willing to talk." Schumer chuckled, leaning back in his chair.

"What do you want?" the Deputy Chief asked.

"Don't you dare!" Scardino fumed, glaring at Schumer. "We don't make deals with terrorists."

"Terrorists?" Schumer chuckled.

Vincent Blake stood up from his chair, reaching across the table and jerking Schumer to him as he hissed out in a slow threatening tone, "You sat on information about a known open case and did nothing. You took money from human traffickers to help make it easier for them to smuggle children, women, and babies in and out of this country. You became a terrorist the moment you turned your back on the thousands of American citizens out there that desperately deserve our protection but can't get it because of a very illegal law you and your cohorts made sure was put in place so that sweaty degenerates like yourself can get away with raping and murdering children. I can't wait to hear the sentence come down on you for that."

"You have nothing on me," Schumer shot back cockily.

"We'll be picking up the others shortly," the Deputy Chief advised, standing up from his chair. "Any information you have regarding the Jenna Blake murder should be handed over to the DEA by the end of business today. Failure to do so will result in charges of obstruction."

Schumer's face fell in dismay. "Not without a deal."

"You're not getting a deal, Donald. You'll be lucky if you don't get a needle in your arm for what you've done," Vincent Blake added with a snort.

"But my wife..." Schumer stammered.

"Oh, he has a wife." Blake chuckled. "Wouldn't know it to see the way he and his secretary keep sneaking off..." He tapped his hand on the table. "I wonder if she might know where you keep all your classified documents. Maybe we can have a nice long chat with Mrs. Schumer with lots and lots of video footage and surveillance photos... Cancer patient that survived death only to have her philandering husband betray her. That's got to motivate someone, right?"

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The sun peaked across the pier, and the faint honking from pelicans flying above could be heard. Lois bit her lower lip, glancing across the walkway leading to the small corner of markets in what was referred to as Fish Town by many patrons. The stench alone could drive anyone away. The rough demeanors of many passersby left her feeling more than a little uneasy about the latest location of their investigation.

It had been three days since the phone call from Ingrid's former captor. Three days of wallowing in fear and self-pity, keeping Jon at home and trying to navigate through everything while clinging onto the pretense that the world around her wasn't crumbling in. For the most part, she had been able to keep the pretense going. Then each time she had another lead to follow, she froze.

It wasn't the first time she'd had her life threatened.

It was the first time she'd been threatened since finding out she was pregnant.

After everything she'd been through – struggling to conceive and surviving the court battle with CPS – the threat of losing her family to this invisible perpetrator shook her hard.

But that was what he wanted. He wanted her to trip up. He wanted her to look over her shoulder and question her surroundings – her instincts. She refused to give him that power over her.

"Hey," Lois bumped his hip, looking toward the pier Clark was staring off into the distance at. "We gonna stand here all day, sulking or what?" she inquired, taking his hand in hers and giving

it a gentle squeeze.

He offered her a half-smile, wrapping his hand around hers and running his thumb over her wrist as he tugged her closer. “You sure this is a good idea?”

“Louie said this guy knows the locals pretty well.” Lois shrugged her shoulders, glancing over at the cardboard sign that was on display in the window that read ‘*Help Wanted*.’ Just above the sign was a wheel barrel of what looked to be some kind of liquor with a sign that read ‘Hell’s Kitchen.’ She leaned her head on his shoulder. “Come on, maybe we can finally get a lead on this guy.”

“The police are looking into this guy,” Clark reminded her. “Is it really the best idea to try and flush this guy out on his own turf?”

“The police have been looking into Esma’s kidnapping for how long?” Lois asked, placing a hand on his chest. “If we back off, then this guy wins. He wants us to just hand Ingrid over like she’s some plaything someone borrowed.”

“Look around.” Clark pointed to the rough crowd going into the bar. “This isn’t Louie’s.” He pointed to a crowd standing by the door with worn-down clothing and jeans that were coming apart at the seams. “This is like one of those places you go in, and you have to protect your kidneys.”

“And just the kind of place that the creeps that are kidnapping these girls would hang out.” Lois frowned, hanging her head.

“I don’t like this place,” Clark shook his head, placing a hand on her growing abdomen. “You were inconsolable three nights ago, and now we’re storming into the heart of Hell’s Kitchen?”

“I also hated chicken two days ago and now have a craving for chicken wings.” Lois flashed him a half-smile. “Pregnancy is weird.”

“So I’ve been told.” He flashed her an uneasy smile, looping his arm around her, tugging her toward him. “So, what’s the plan?”

She toyed with the knot on his tie with a grin. “Well, I was hoping you could do that hover over the building while you fly over and see if you can spot any... hidden traps, doors, places where they might try to hide something or someone they don’t want found?” She trailed off, leaning in to kiss him.

He let out a heavy breath, glancing toward the fishermen standing outside the door then back at Lois. “And what exactly will you be doing?”

“Talking to Bibbo.” Lois pointed to the man with a balding hairline and beer belly that was leaned over, trying to clean his boat.

“What makes you think that’s Bibbo?” Clark asked.

“Look at the name on the boat,” Lois whispered, pointing to the red etching on the side that spelled out ‘*Bibbo’s Place*.’

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Jack Davenport placed a thick file on the table, careful that each corner aligned perfectly with the one above it, and then claimed the seat at the end of the conference room table. He watched with interest as the room filled with the agents Director Talley had called a meeting with. He did his best to remain eye-level with each one as they walked into the room. Thanks to the information they had secured and verified with Leo Nunk and a few of the informants they had placed in the capitol, confirming the identities of the planted agents had been a breeze.

A smile crossed his face as he watched Elena Johnson close the door behind her. Victor Talley sat across from him, nodding to him as he pointed to the basket in the middle of the table. “I’ll need all phones, watches, and any communication devices that require any type of GPS place in the basket.”

There were a few murmurs and grumblings from the seated agents, but they complied, one by one, placing their phones and watches in the center basket. Davenport placed the basket in a small enclosed drawer and pressed a red button on it to kill all

radio frequencies that might be emitting from the devices. He then turned to the agents in the room with a smile. “Congratulations. You are the grand prize winners.”

“Winners?” Agent Johnson echoed, looking at him with a bewildered expression.

“An all-expenses-paid trip to federal prison for at least a decade or two.” His eyes narrowed as he looked around the room. “You all disgust me.”

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Clark felt his heart falter and his gut churn as he took in the images of the beaten and bruised children hiding in underground floorboards, cramped into hidden wings of the club. He wanted desperately to storm inside and help free every last individual, but he couldn’t. Not yet. Without going through the proper channels, it would only exacerbate the situation. The person responsible for this had to pay.

After a quick change of wardrobe and a moment to collect the range of emotions that were swimming through his mind, he walked down the dock to where Lois was interviewing the contact they’d been sent here to find. It had taken some finagling and a few rounds of pool to get the information out of one of Louie’s regulars, but Lois had found a way to get her appeal to his common decency heard.

Though the characters at Louie’s were rough around the edges, none of them were anything like what you saw over here in Hell’s Kitchen. A quick look at the missing girl’s face and a heartfelt plea later, they were given a name.

Bibbo Bibowski.

“I’m not sure how much I can help you, Miss...”

“Look, I’m not trying to jam anyone up. I just want to help find this little girl. I think this man might know something.” Lois pulled out a black and white photo to show him. “Do you know him?” Lois asked the fisherman as Clark approached.

Clark looked around the dock, noting the trio of what could only be described as thugs on the pier looking in her and Bibbo’s direction. He met the steely gaze of one of the thugs with his own threatening glare, jutting his chin out for emphasis, sending a silent message to the thug. A moment later, the trio moved off, turning away, and he let out a sigh of relief, turning back to the conversation with Bibbo.

Bibbo scratched the top of his head, seeming to think long and hard. “I could be wrong, but that looks a lot like that Tobias character. He comes around every Thursday.”

Lois bit her lower lip, glancing in Clark’s direction for a brief second and then turning back to Bibbo, who was wringing out the rag in his hand. There was a pause as Bibbo nodded in his direction to acknowledge his presence before Lois dove back into the questioning of Bibbo regarding the man named Tobias.

“Do you know his last name?” Lois asked with an uneven tone. Clark placed an arm around her, quietly taking in the hesitancy on the man’s worn features as he finally responded.

“Berg.” Bibbo nodded with a tap on his chin. “Tobias Berg.” He waved his hand in Lois’ direction. “You don’t be messing with that guy, miss. He’s trouble.”

Lois pulled out her card and handed it to him. “Thanks for your time Bibbo. If you think of anything else, just give me a call.”

He nodded, tucking the card in his overcoat pocket and then turning back to his boat to finish wiping it down. They waved a quick thanks in his direction and then walked back down the docks to the gravel lot they had parked at. Lois winced, waving her hand in front of her as they approached the fish market a few feet away from the lot.

“We need to call the police,” Clark finally said, unsure how else to express the urgency that was weighing on him.

“How bad?” Lois asked, fishing the keys out of her coat pocket.

“Bad,” Clark frowned, shaking his head.

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Jack Davenport looked across the front office of Senator Michael Harris, leaning his head back against the leather of the desk chair behind the senator’s desk. A plump woman in her mid-thirties stood over him, scolding him with her hands on her hips as he propped his feet up on the desk and continued flipping through the latest People magazine he’d picked up on his way in.

“Mr. Davenport, Senator Harris is a very busy man and this... you cannot put your feet on there.”

“Well, have him come in here and tell me that to my face, and maybe I’ll listen, but until then, I’m going to sit here and wait dirtying up the senator’s desk until he shows his face.” He raised his eyebrow at the woman and added, “Like I’ve been doing for the last two hours.”

“He had lunch with his sister. It takes him a while to get back in the city,” Harris’ secretary stammered.

“Or make pitstops to shoot people, right?” Davenport grinned, flipping through the magazine in front of him. “Oh, no, Brad Pitt and Gwyneth are calling it quits. Mmm, mmm, mmm, that’s a shame. Ever notice how the relationships of the stars never last?”

Harris’ secretary looked as if she was ready to blow a gasket. If this were in one of those Saturday morning cartoons, she’d probably have steam blowing out her ears, and her head would probably explode from the anger boiling inside her.

“You can’t just...”

“Oh, look!” He flipped the magazine over. “A quiz. People’s Sexiest Movie for 1996.” He smiled as he pulled out a pen to begin filling in the missing words of the movie title.

“Senator Harris isn’t here.”

“But you can get him here, can’t you, Stacy?” Davenport smirked, looking up at her with a Cheshire grin.

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Lois set her tape recorder in the middle of the table, looking over at Ingrid, who was nervously fidgeting in her chair. She offered her a weak smile, placing both hands on the table in front of her as she thought through how to approach the subject of Tobias with Ingrid. She and Agent Scardino had argued back and forth over how hard to push Ingrid for information. Even Clark had his doubts, but in the end, they all agreed Ingrid was holding information back. While understandable that she might not be able to trust them, it was imperative they knew everything so they could help her and the other girls that were currently under this Tobias character’s thumb.

Trying to get Ingrid’s trust wouldn’t be easy, but she had to try. The threats she’d received from a few nights ago and the information she received from Bibbo would hopefully help draw out what they needed from Ingrid. Gaining Ingrid’s trust would require her to revisit a time in her life she’d much rather forget, but if it helped them stop Tobias and whoever he might be working with then it would be worth it.

Lois met Ingrid’s gaze and swallowed the hard lump in her throat, trying to formulate her words. “I can’t imagine what this is like for you. Having all these people you don’t know prying into one of the most painful and traumatizing moments of your life can’t be easy.”

“I’m used to it,” Ingrid shrugged her shoulders, looking away.

“Still, it doesn’t make it any easier,” Lois added calmly. Her voice cracked as she squeaked out the words. “It’s hard for anyone to really understand what you’ve gone through unless they’ve experienced that kind of fear... trauma.”

Ingrid’s eyebrows arched, and one of them rose into a peak as she stared back at Lois with a curious expression. “I was raped and assaulted for four years. I was tortured and made to do things that would leave you screaming at night.” Ingrid shook her head.

“Don’t try to compare battle stories. You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“You say that so calmly, like you’ve been practicing it,” Lois observed, tapping her fingers nervously against the table.

“Detached, so you don’t have to associate what happened to you with the horrible acts and just bold enough to scare off anyone that dares to ask questions.”

Ingrid leaned forward with a dismissive bite in her tone as she responded, “You don’t know me.”

“Yet you think you know me,” Lois commented coolly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Tell me something, Ingrid, how exactly does it help us find Esma if you refuse to tell us the names of the men responsible – beyond what we already know?”

“You don’t understand,” Ingrid’s voice trembled as she blinked back tears. “This man ... he is dangerous.”

“So are all the criminals Clark and I have helped put away.” Lois narrowed her gaze at her. “You want to hold onto what happened to you and use it as a shield to keep everyone as far away from you as you can go ahead. But don’t try and diminish what others have experienced. Assault, attempted murder, attempted rape, and living on the run under an alias for months while trying to tear down the person responsible...” Her eyebrows arched into a point, and she looked at Ingrid expectantly. “Ring any bells?”

“I say his name, and it makes it more real,” Ingrid whispered softly.

Lois pulled out a black and white photo still from her purse and placed it on the table, watching as Ingrid flinched. “This man was in the courthouse waiting for Clark’s and my hearing. A fisherman in Hell’s Kitchen identified him as Tobias Berg.” She folded her hands in front of her. “I have a feeling this is also the man that is responsible for the brutality you were subjected to.” She reached her hand over to cover Ingrid’s. “Am I wrong?”

“No,” Ingrid shook her head, allowing tears to fall down her cheeks. She bit her lower lip, looking back at Lois. “You were on the run... from who?”

Lois sighed, running a hand across her face as she summed up the strength to revisit the second worst moment of her life. “A very dangerous and manipulative man. He used to practically employ this entire city, but he was also a dangerous criminal. I was too blind to see what he really was until it was too late.”

She felt her voice box echo in her throat with a hard swallow before continuing. “I broke off the relationship and the next thing I knew he had a knife to my throat and was threatening to rape me while he continued to attack me both verbally and physically. I was left to bleed out on my apartment floor and was luckily found later but then was forced to go on the run and completely forget who I was.”

“Did they catch him?” Ingrid asked curiously.

“Yes.” Lois frowned, glancing down at her hands. “He’s still in prison where he’ll be for the rest of his life.”

Ingrid was quiet, glancing over at her with tears in her eyes. “I don’t remember much. I was standing outside at the Fifth Street Mission, where I’d been staying. Another foster home where the dad was a little too handsy or the mom was too drunk... Little did I know I would have been better off there.”

She closed her eyes, clamping them tight as she uttered a name. “His name was Yusif. The man that kidnapped me. I remember taking a cigarette and taking a puff from it and the next thing I know I’m waking up tied to a chair with him standing over me, beating me. It was like that for months. I became numb to it. Then it got worse. The physical assault turned into rape. I was chained to anything and everything and left to survive... They never tried to slit my throat or stab me, but they killed me in other ways.”

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Shouts could be heard down the hall as Michael Harris

approached his office. He turned the corner and found three security guards standing outside the double doors with his secretary. He let out a frustrated huff as he walked up to them. “Is there a problem here?”

“Oh, well, look who decided to show up.” A man sitting comfortably behind his desk grinned back at him. “The man of the hour.”

Harris stormed toward the unknown man with a fury running through his veins. He slammed his fists on his desk and roared, “I don’t know who you think you are, but you better…”

“Ah, ah, ah, now Michael, is that any way to talk to someone who’s looking to do you a favor?” the man asked, reading from the People magazine in front of him. “Oh, look! A new John Travolta flick.” He smiled back at Harris, shaking his head. “I really enjoy those. What about you?”

“Who the hell are you?” Harris looked at the security team behind him. “Don’t just stand there. Do something!”

“We can’t, Mr. Congressman,” one of the guards explained sheepishly. “He’s cleared by the Attorney General to be here.”

“Vincent Blake is such a champ, isn’t he? Not afraid to pick up the phone and clear the way for a fellow agent.” The man grinned happily from his seat.

“Who are you?” Harris glared at the man feeling a sense of dread wash over him as he pulled out his badge and tossed it on the desk. “Take a seat, Mr. Harris, we have a lot to talk about.” The man gestured to the security team behind Harris. “Hey guys, why don’t you take five? I’ve got it from here.”

“Of course, Agent Davenport,” the security guard that had responded earlier said to the agent that was currently occupying his desk.

Harris looked at the badge and identification that had been tossed on his desk, reading the name on the FBI badge. “FBI?”

“Well, federal crimes require a federal agency to investigate, right, Congressman?” Jack Davenport’s steely gaze met his, and Harris swallowed the hard lump that had formed in his throat.

Harris tightened his lips into a thin line as he straightened his tie, squaring his shoulders with a shrug. “Well, what does that have to do with me?”

“Surprisingly, Congressman, it has everything to do with you,” Davenport responded, setting a blue envelope on the desk in front of him.

“What’s this?” Harris asked, reaching for it.

“It’s a warrant to search you, your office, your home, your vehicle, and anything you own for a Colt 45.” Davenport tapped his hands on the desk in front of him. “I’m going to need your keys, Congressman.”

“I, uh, lost them,” Harris lied, biting his lower lip.

“Then I suppose we’ll have to do this the hard way,”

Davenport said, pulling a swiss army knife out of his coat pocket. “Never leave home without it.” He commented, pulling out the switchblade and proceeding to pop it into the lock of his desk drawer. In a matter of seconds, the drawer popped open, and the agent pulled it open to reveal the Colt 45. He used a black pen to lift it up out of the drawer and then looked back at Harris. “Let me guess, you’ve never seen it before, right?”

“What’s this about?” Harris asked, narrowing his gaze.

“Oh, the usual,” Davenport opened a plastic evidence bag and slid the Colt inside with a shake of his head. “Felony assault with a deadly weapon, conspiracy to commit fraud, blackmail, treason, and my all-time favorite is of course, the felony breach of the peace.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harris stammered, looking around uncertainly.

“Well, thankfully for you, we live in a country that guarantees you’re innocent until proven guilty, but until then, Mr. Congressman, you’ll be coming with me.” He winked at him and added, “Don’t worry. You won’t be going alone.”

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Bill Henderson glanced around the room to where Detective Betty Reed was seated across from him, and DEA Agent Dan Scardino was propped up on the edge of the table. Next to Detective Reed was Lois Lane with her husband and partner, Clark Kent, next to her. All eyes were on him as he stared at the names covering the board behind Lois Lane. The sticky notes were desperately clinging to the surface of the bulletin board.

Child trafficking.

Forced prostitution.

Sex trafficking.

Metropolis was a lot of things. It brought some notorious criminals to the heart of it and had seen some of the darkest parts of humanity. But nothing could have prepared him for what he’d found beneath the floorboards of Hell’s Kitchen. The haunted faces of the children that were dressed with barely anything covering them and the chains that had been wrapped around many of them had been hard to stomach. Drugs and prostitution were a part of everyday life in the depths of Southside, but child trafficking was a new one for him.

Three boats filled with underaged sex-slaves that all had markings burned into their skin. Another twenty to thirty were found in the underground lair of Hell’s Kitchen, where children were forced into unspeakable acts. It seemed like a bad made for TV movie rather than a collar he wished he could forget.

He bit his lower lip, flashing back to the faces he wanted desperately to forget. A weary hand covered his face, and he looked to Dan Scardino for guidance. “Obviously, we’ve stumbled into something much bigger than the Metropolis P.D. can handle here.”

“It’s not completely DEA jurisdiction either,” Scardino admitted shaking his head. He pointed to the board of names and photos. “Whoever we can match up here, we will, but the FBI needs to take the lead on this one.”

“Who would do something like this?” Henderson fumed, slamming his fist on the table.

“In the arrests you guys made, did anyone by the name of Tobias show up?” Lois asked, tapping her fingertips on the photo in front of her.

“No, your kidnapper is still out there,” Henderson grumbled, shaking his head.

“Many of the guys we picked up seem to have just been there to sample the merchandise unfortunately,” Detective Reed interjected, looking to Dan Scardino with a frown. “I never thought I’d be wishing I was talking about drugs in something like this.”

“You and me both,” Scardino grumbled. He let out a heavy sigh. “Well, we have a name and a face to try and track this guy down. The DEA is interested in him and trying to track down the guy supplying all the drugs to this human trafficking ring he’s involved in.” Scardino pushed a notepad toward Henderson.

“What’s this?” Henderson’s brow furrowed.

“Someone willing to play ball,” Scardino announced proudly.

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Lois glanced toward the television set, watching as the twenty-four-hour news circuit continued to play the coverage on the human trafficking ring that had been uncovered in Hell’s Kitchen. She wanted so desperately for that to be the final chapter to this ugly story. To listen to the news anchor, you would think that there were loving homes or families waiting with open arms for these kids to go home too, but the truth of the matter was it wasn’t a made for TV movie special where everyone got a happy ending.

It was a dark and twisted world where these kids were forced to endure the unspeakable evilness that humankind could subject them to and somehow survive. Surviving changed a person. She knew that better than anyone. Though the physical scars had been

wiped away and the years had caused the mental and emotional scars to fade, she still carried the weight of what was done to her.

Losing herself – her life – in the blink of an eye and enduring the mental scars she'd been left with had changed her outlook on everything. The normal risks she wouldn't think twice about taking before made her second guess herself when pursuing a subject on an investigation. She had come close to death. Each time she found herself plummeted into life with a rush of adrenaline, seeking that closeness and affirmation from those she loved.

She so desperately wanted to take out her own revenge and see Lex pay for the torture he'd put her through. It was a petty and fruitless desire but it fueled her pursuit for justice, and it wasn't until the end when she'd found herself face to face with Lex Luthor, knowing he was finally going to be held responsible for his actions that she realized how little her revenge plot did to make any of it right.

She had Clark. Though they had gone through their ups and downs and nearly torn one another apart, when each other's revelations had come to light, they had found one another through everything and come out stronger for it. Each obstacle put in their way had been defeated with the strength they both drew from one another.

Tackling life after something like this... she couldn't imagine the pain these kids were going through. She so desperately wanted to help them but found herself unable to even begin to know how. Each child had come through their experience with this human trafficking ring and would have to walk the path themselves. How many of them had someone to turn to? How many of them would be forced back into the same place that had abandoned them?

Two familiar arms wrapped around her from behind, and she smiled, turning her head to see her husband leaned over, holding her to him. "Hey," he whispered in her ear. "You okay?"

"He's still out there, Clark," Lois whispered tearfully, placing a protective hand over her growing abdomen.

"I know," Clark sighed, leaning in to kiss her, "but not for long."

Lois flashed him a weak smile. "Who would have ever thought to look on a stinky run-down boat for fishing to find over a thousand missing kids?"

"Those are just the ones we know about," Clark reminded her, leaning over to cup her cheek. "Agent Scardino's scheduled a meeting with Jack and Victor to go through the case in the morning, and police are still pulling kids out of the hidden compartments in that club..."

"You thinking Superman might need to help make sure they find them all?" Lois guessed, reaching over to cup his cheek.

"It's already after five," Clark reasoned. "Why don't you take Jon home and I'll meet you there." He paused, lowering his gaze, then drawing it back up to meet her eyes. "I can't let them get away with this. Especially with that Tobias character still out there."

Lois nodded, stretching her arms over her head. "Okay," she leaned over to whisper a kiss across his cheek. "I think Jon and I will pick up a movie and some Chinese."

"Save me some Szechuan Chicken?" He grinned back at her. "Always."

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## Chapter 20: I Am A Fighter

The tall white boats were covered in police tape, marking them off from anyone entering them. Jack Davenport lifted the tape up and stepped onboard, motioning for the red-haired woman behind him, Detective Betty Reed, to follow him onboard. In the center of the boat was a large pole that held several chains with cuffs on them.

Davenport pointed to the bloodstains on the floor, shaking his head in dismay. "Blood spatter across the deck here."

"How many total have been processed?" Detective Reed asked, biting her lower lip.

"Too many," Davenport answered with a shallow breath.

"Who would do something like this?" Reed wondered aloud, more to herself than anyone.

Davenport shrugged his shoulders, catching sight of a familiar face at the entry of the boat. He nodded his recognition to Agent Scardino. "You keep following me like this, I'm going to have to take out a restraining order."

Scardino rolled his eyes and lifted the police tape to enter. "Talley said you'd be here."

"So, you are stalking me?"

"We got a name," Scardino answered him, tapping his hand across the bar behind him. "Ingrid confirmed the man that kidnapped her was a Yusif who we were able to match up to a Yusif Ligor in our system. Wanted for promoting prostitution, sexual assault, and endangering a minor among many other things."

"This Yusif working with anyone?" Davenport asked, raising his eyebrow with interest.

"Tobias. Tobias Berg."

"Berg?" Detective Reed crinkled her nose, shaking her head. "That can't be right."

"According to Ingrid, that's who was holding her captive and keeping the gentlemen callers coming..." Scardino explained with a growl.

"Tobias Berg is a deacon at the St. Nicholas Catholic Church. He's a businessman that donates his time and money to help rescue kids like this..." Detective Reed argued, aghast at the thought.

"That's what they thought about Lex Luthor," Jack Davenport pointed out.

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Lois reached her hand out for Jon's as they turned the corner to approach the crosswalk leading them into the parking garage where she had parked the Jeep. She took a glance behind her, feeling as if there was a pair of eyes on her as they walked toward the crosswalk.

"Mommy, can we get ice cream?" Jon pointed to the ice cream shop he would sometimes stop at with his grandparents.

Lois shook her head. "We've got some ice cream at home, bud. Maybe we can make some sundaes after dinner, hmm?"

Jon frowned but nodded his understanding. She reached over to press the button to change the crosswalk signal, frowning as the signal blinked back 'Don't Walk' at her. She glanced up to where a construction crew was working on the streetlights above them and sighed.

"Figures," Lois muttered.

A man who had already been standing there, flicking his lighter turned to her. "Got a light?"

Lois shook her head, holding up a hand. "I don't smoke. Sorry."

The man nodded, holding out the cigarette in his hand. "That's a shame."

"Mommy!" she heard Jon squeal out in tears at the same time she felt something prick the back of her neck. A dizzy, euphoric haze washed over her as she opened her mouth to scream, and nothing came out. She reached her hand out but found it wouldn't listen to her as her mind screamed for help where her body and voice failed her.

'Clark! Help!'

Jon's tears reached her ears as she watched the two men come toward him as she laid helpless on the pavement, trying to process what was happening. The first man came toward him and then stopped, seeming to move backward. That didn't sound right. The second man tried to grab Jon, and he lunged toward him, knocking him to the ground.

“Mommy?” Jon’s little voice reached her ears and she blinked back tears trying to find her voice as she stared at the two unconscious bodies a few feet away from her.

She couldn’t move.

She couldn’t speak.

‘Clark!’ her mind screamed, desperately seeking him out and then she felt it. The familiar arms that had cradled her countless times before.

“Superman?”

“Jon, what happened?” she could hear the panic in Clark’s voice as he held her.

“They tried to take my mommy.” Jon’s voice trembled as he admitted this softly. “I didn’t let them.”

“Okay.” Clark’s voice was shaking as he cradled her in his arms. “Lois?” His voice cracked as he spoke, and she blinked back tears trying to control her emotions as she stared back at him.

‘Baby...’ her mind screamed at him.

He nodded, placing a hand on her abdomen, seeming to read her thoughts. “The baby’s fine. You’re going to be fine.”

“Mommy?” she heard Jon’s voice echo around her, and darkness faded across her consciousness.

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### Chapter 21: Hear Me Roar

Clark ran a weary hand across his face, sitting next to Jon in the waiting room while he waited for his parents to arrive. So many emotions ran through him. He wasn’t sure what to focus on first. She had been less than a block away from the Planet.

Jon said the men who tried to grab her had been in different places around the corner. They had been waiting for them. A sick sinking feeling in his gut washed over him and he shook his head. She’d been on her way home with their son.

Was this how the families of all these kids that had been kidnapped felt?

He glanced over at Jon, who was kicking his feet back and forth, wiping the tears from his eyes. He let out a heavy sigh, unsure how to even approach the subject of what had happened this afternoon with Jon.

He had stopped four grown men in their tracks from kidnapping his mother and unborn brother or sister. He couldn’t understand how. Jon didn’t know how. The only explanation was the one that sent a panic through him. Jon had his powers. That was the only explanation for what had happened.

“Is mommy going to be okay?” Jon asked, looking over at him with a sniffle.

“I hope so,” Clark responded, unsure what to tell him at this point.

“Are those men going to be okay?” Jon asked, looking back at him with a scared expression on his face.

Clark reached his hand over to pull Jon to him. He let out a long breath and leaned over to kiss him on the forehead. “Hey, how about we take a walk?”

Jon nodded, taking his hand, and they walked outside where the parking lot was mostly empty of any listening ears minus a security guard who was on his phone arguing with what seemed to be his sister over a babysitter.

“I didn’t mean to hurt them that bad. I just wanted them to leave mommy alone,” Jon said with a shaky voice.

“I know,” Clark said, softly, careful to stay away from any prying eyes and guiding Jon over to a small bench on the side of the building for visitors. “Look, what you did today was incredibly brave, Jon. Those men were trying to hurt you and your mommy, and you stopped them.” He let out a shaky sigh, placing his arm around Jon, unsure of what else to say to articulate the conflicted emotions he was feeling at that moment.

Jon gave him an uneasy smile. “I didn’t mean to hurt them, Daddy.”

“I know you didn’t, bud.” Clark flashed him an uneasy smile.

“I didn’t mean to hurt the first guy I hurt either. Sometimes we just don’t know our own strength.”

“Really?” Jon asked, looking at him curiously.

“Jon, what happened today. You can’t tell anyone but your mommy and me what happened.” Clark explained gently.

“Why not?”

“Well, because there are some things that other people that are not your family won’t understand,” Clark tried to explain. “What you did was incredibly brave, but if people knew it was you that stopped those men, they might start to ask questions that we can’t answer.”

“Did I do something bad?” Jon asked.

“No,” Clark shook his head. “You didn’t do anything wrong, bud. You saved your mom, and you protected her from some really bad people. But you have to be extra careful. The strength you have could seriously hurt someone.” He looked back at Jon expectantly. “Does what I’m saying make sense?”

Jon nodded. “I can’t be too strong in front of other people; otherwise, people will find out you’re Superman.”

Clark’s eyebrows shot up to his forehead, and he stared back at his son in surprise. “Well...”

“It’s okay.” Jon shrugged his shoulders. “I won’t tell anyone,” he added with a whisper.

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Lois opened her mouth, feeling the dryness in it as she began to stir. Her eyes blinked open, and she turned her head, seeing Clark slumped over against the edge of the bed with his glasses askew on his face and Jon asleep on the foot of her bed. She reached her hand out to place it on her growing abdomen, feeling a wave of relief wash over her when she felt a hiccup inside her.

A smile washed across her face, and she leaned her arm out to readjust her husband’s glasses. His eyes fluttered open, and he smiled when he saw her looking back at him. “Hey, you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

She reached her hand out to touch her forehead and grimaced. “I can feel the bruise on my face. It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Not as bad as it could have been,” Clark reassured her, reaching over to take her hand in his. He pointed to Jon. “We have quite the protector over there.”

Lois nodded, recalling the panic she felt when she saw Jon literally stop the attempted kidnappers in their tracks. “Like father like son.”

“More like mother like son,” he chuckled, leaning over to whisper. “He’s apparently known for the better part of a year.”

“He’s more patient than I would have been.” Lois chuckled.

She reached her hand over to cover his, feeling the tears trickle down her cheeks. “I’ve never been so scared. I kept trying to call for help and nothing would come out. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. I was just lying there helpless watching while these grown men kept coming at my baby, and I couldn’t stop them...”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” Clark leaned over to press his lips to hers. “You’re fine. Jon’s fine. The baby’s fine. Everyone is fine.”

“They drugged me with something. Something that made everything just freeze up.” She shook her head in dismay. “That’s why no one hears the cries for help. Because they can’t...”

“We will worry about what all this means later.” Clark pressed his lips to hers. “Right now, you need to focus on healing.”

“I don’t want these monsters to get away with this,” Lois argued.

“They’re not,” Clark answered, wrapping an arm around her. “The guys that did this are sitting in a cell talking to Scardino and Reed right now as we speak. They’re not going to get away with this, Lois. We’re going to get them.”

“What makes you think they’ll talk?” Lois asked.

“Let’s just say our son put the fear of God in them like neither of us could,” Clark whispered, placing a hand over her

growing abdomen. “I told you he was going to make a great big brother.”

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Four men sat chained to the table in orange jumpsuits with the identification number printed across their chest. Detective Reed looked to the DEA Agent who was pacing around the room with an eerie calm that sent a chill down to her bones. She’d read the police report. The needle had been found a mere two inches away from the victim while her son cried for help.

How Lois Lane had lucked out and not been snatched up in the time it took for Superman to arrive on the scene would remain a mystery. The unfortunate part of this was the fact that these men’s attempt to kidnap her had involved disabling all cameras in the area, so any footage they might have obtained was gone. All they had to go on was the word of a very scared little four-year-old boy, and the statement from Superman.

The FBI was keeping tabs at the hospital in hopes that Lois Lane’s statement would help solidify their case against these men and secure information from them on who they were working for. One of the men wore beady eyes as he kept stealing glances in her direction. His thin lips seemed to be almost salivating over the idea of confessing. She knew it wouldn’t be hard to make one of them crack. The question was who.

“You boys are pretty bold. I’ll give you that. Trying to kidnap a woman in the middle of downtown with her kid inches away,” Detective Reed commented with a frown. “Bold. But stupid.”

“The kid wasn’t supposed to be there,” one of the men remarked.

“What was that?”

“Shut up!” another shouted.

Scardino set a photo in the middle of the table, pointing to it with his thumb. “So here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to count to ten and the first person to tell me where this little girl is is the one that gets to play ball with the DA. Everyone else better roll up their sleeves and be prepared for that needle.”

“The death penalty is only for capital offenses,” one of the men commented with a snort.

“Child endangerment, kidnapping...” Scardino stopped in front of one of the men with the thin face and beady eyes. “Felony assault and rape with a first degree murder charge makes it a capital crime.”

“We didn’t murder anyone,” the man replied back smugly. “Only shut up a meddlesome tramp that needed to be taught a lesson.”

Detective Reed smirked, biting the inside of her lower lip as she paced around the room. “Oh? And what lesson was that?”

“Pfft, you women are all the same. Only good for one thing but still trying to force your way.” The man let out a sharp chuckle. “The nosey slut got what she deserved. I’m only sorry I wasn’t able to finish the job. I was really looking forward to some close and personal training.”

“Yeah?” Detective Reed chuckled, tightening her fists as she glared back at the beady-eyed man. “So attempted rape and assault, kidnapping, child endangerment... Please tell me I’m wrong.”

“Get your tramp,” the man shouted to Scardino.

“I’m sorry I don’t think I heard you right,” Detective Reed glared back at him with a scowl.

Scardino crouched down, so he was eye level with him and whispered, “I’m going to watch them stick a needle in your arm and enjoy every last second as the life slips away from you, you murdering, sadistic psycho. I know what you did, and when I’m through with you, I will go after every last friend and partner you have, Yusif.”

“You know nothing,” Yusif glared back at him with a chuckle. “Murder who? Your interfering whore is still alive, no?”

“I’ve got you on tape,” Scardino responded with a snarl as he

held his hand out as if he was about to wrap his hands around his neck. “You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted to find you... imagining how I’d choke the life out of you for what you did to Jenna.”

“The American agent.” Yusif flashed a smile before adding smugly, “She was delicious. A delicate flower ripe for the plucking. You’d be surprised the things a woman will offer to do in order to save her life.”

“You’ll be surprised at just how many friends you’ll have that don’t appreciate limp noodles that can’t handle a *real* woman,” Detective Reed cut in before Scardino could react to the confession. She stopped in front of the man. “I suppose you think you’re going to be the winner?”

“You have a deal, then I want it. Immunity and I testify against these scoundrels,” he looked around the room, and another man spoke up.

“You traitorous scum bag, you can’t just take a deal away from us.”

“You got something to offer, sunshine?” Detective Reed asked, looking to the man with a raised eyebrow.

“The girl.” The man smiled, gesturing to the picture. “Esma. I know who took her.”

“The deal is for her location,” Scardino shot back.

“Give me immunity, and I take you to her handler.” The man’s eyebrows wiggled as he added. “It’ll cost you, though.”

“No deal,” Scardino shook his head. “I need a guarantee you’re not yanking my chain.”

“No one knows where she is but her handler.”

“How many handlers has she had?”

“Four,” the man responded. “Five if you don’t hurry,” he chuckled.

“I don’t make deals with rapists,” Scardino snarled back at him.

“Your Esma will never be found,” the man responded with a growl.

“How quickly you think they’ll convict Mr. Congeniality and the aristocrat over here?” Scardino wondered aloud. “We got one that tried to kidnap and assault a pregnant woman and a four-year-old boy in the middle of downtown, and then we have another who thinks he’s going to get away with gang-raping my fiancée.” He pulled back his fist and let out a grunt as he knocked the man back in his chair when his fist came in contact with his face.

Reed looked around the room. “Anyone want to offer up a real location on this girl, or would you rather take your chances with a needle?” She held up her hand before adding, “And before you ask, yes, we know you all work for Tobias Berg. Perhaps we should put them all in the same cell and let them sort this all out?”

“Good idea,” Scardino said, rubbing his knuckles back and forth.

“Wait!” a voice called out to them. “Tobias will kill us all.”

“Is that so? I thought you were business partners.” Scardino raised his eyebrow as he looked at the man with sandy blonde hair expectantly. “Weren’t you his little stooge, Stefan?”

“Not anymore,” Stefan growled.

“You certainly look a little worn around the edges,” Scardino chuckled. “He take away your favorite toy?”

“I want a deal.”

“I want a Maserati and a confession.” Scardino shook his head. “I don’t think I’m getting either.” He shook his head. “Have fun with Tobias.”

“I don’t know where the girl is, but I can give you locations,” Stefan stammered, shaking his head. “Just don’t let them kill me, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

Scardino looked to Reed, “I think we can work with that.”

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*Three Months Later...  
Istanbul, Turkey*

The markets were filled with different sights and scents, and the sun bore down on the hot pavement. Dan Scardino looked over his shoulder, motioning to the undercover agents to follow him. The double doors in his path held a history of wear and tear on them with crackling paint and wood chips peeling away to expose the hidden secrets behind its locks and bolts.

Two heavy-set men stood by the front of the tall structure with traditional salwar with a golden yelek and light green and gold mixed cebken that had the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Several piercings and tattoos covered the parts of their arms and face that were exposed. The outline of what appeared to be a weapon of sorts could be made out on the right side of the first man.

Scardino reached his hand up, readjusting the hijab that covered his head, stumbling forward with his best drunken sailor routine. The first man stopped him, holding his hand out and pointing in the other direction for him to disappear into the crowd he had come from.

“Hold up, I got the golden ticket...” Scardino slurred out as the undercovers approached from behind, holding a Glock to the first man’s temple. Scardino chuckled to himself as he leaned over, holding his index finger to his lips and whispering, “Shhhh...”

He turned to the left and saw the other agents had already overpowered the other man and had him on his knees with his hands behind his head, searching him. Scardino motioned to the agent to his left, who was tucking his weapon in his holster and reaching over to cover it with the thobe he wore.

The first agent reached out to open the door, hearing a hint of drums and wind instruments from inside. The incense inside was enough to knock you out from the stench but he knew it was only a cover for something far worse. They slipped inside one by one and found themselves in an empty lobby with three curtains covering the different corridors. A golden rope wrapped around each curtain with a large tassel.

“You sure about this?”

Scardino looked over his shoulder and saw the stern features from the man behind the red and blue hijab and the red boots from beneath the dark red thobe. He smirked at him and shook his head. “Not much of a disguise, Superman.” He pointed to the curtains. “Where to next?”

“Left,” Superman pointed to the dark red curtain, and Scardino waved the agents over, motioning for them to prepare for their entry.

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#### *Metropolis, New Troy*

Lois placed a hand on the top of her growing abdomen, letting out a heavy sigh as she pushed her plate away from her. She smiled at Jon as he kicked his feet back and forth under the table, finishing the last of his French fries on his plate.

“Slow down, Jon, or you’re going to choke yourself,” her mother remarked with a playful smile.

“Nuh-huh,” Jon shook his head, reaching over to take a sip from his cup as the waitress stopped by their table.

“Can I get you guys anything else?”

“No, we’re fine.” Lois flashed her a quick smile. “Thanks, Ingrid.”

Her mother looked around the small diner with a critical nose. “Of all the places in Metropolis, this is where you decide to meet me for dinner?”

“It’s quaint.” Lois grinned back at her mother.

Her mother thankfully didn’t stay on the subject too much longer. She turned her attention instead to Jon, who was happily finishing up his fries, and asked, “So, Jon, are you excited about your first year of elementary school?”

“Uh-huh,” Jon nodded, not really offering her mother the enthusiastic reaction she was hoping for.

“Are you nervous?” her mother prodded. “Kindergarten is a

lot different from pre-school.”

“I know,” he continued chewing away at his fries.

Her mother gestured to the bump beneath Lois’ hands. “She’s certainly small for how far along you are. Are you sure they got the conception date, right?”

“There’s a possibility it’s wrong, but based on measurements and development, they’re pretty confident I’m right at six months,” Lois responded, reaching her hand across the table to squeeze her mother’s hand that was tapping against the tabletop nervously. “I’m fine, really, mom.”

“You got lucky,” her mother corrected carefully. “That’s not the same thing.”

“I know,” Lois tapped her index and ring finger against the baby bump beneath her hand as she felt her daughter move around in what had to be a cramped space now.

“Are you sure I can’t talk you into coming with me to Seattle?” her mother asked.

“I can’t,” Lois emphasized with a heavy sigh. “Look, I’m sure the new place is great, and it’s awesome you and Daddy are working things out and trying to be closer to Lucy’s new residency, but I can’t just pack up and take off to another state this late in my pregnancy.”

“I know. I know. I just worry.” Her mother shrugged her shoulders, looking down at her lap. “With Clark on assignment on this sting operation and you stuck at home by yourself...”

“She’s got me, Grandma.” Jon grinned happily, interjecting himself into the conversation.

“And she’s very lucky to have you.” Her mother turned to Jon and leaned over to give him a hug before turning back to Lois. “I just want to make sure you’re going to be okay is all. I went out of town for three days last time, and you two end up nearly killed walking across the street.”

“The bad guys are in jail, Grandma.” Jon reached a hand over to squeeze his grandma’s hand.

Lois smiled back at Jon, then met her mother’s gaze. If he only knew...

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#### *Istanbul, Turkey*

Clark ran a weary hand across his face, relieved to finally be rid of the Turkish ensemble he had been wearing over his cape and spandex. Though he was used to wearing a disguise on his rescues as Superman, he wasn’t used to wearing a disguise as Superman. The raids on the thousands of locations they had uncovered weighed heavily on him. Each rescue brought them closer to finding Esma and the man responsible for making the dangerous drug that could have cost him his family.

A hard lump remained in his throat as he flashed back to that week in the hospital. It was by pure luck that he had gotten to that crosswalk when he did. Every instinct had gone on alert on his way to the dock where the first human trafficking victims had been found. Something had called out to him, ushering him to return to the Planet. Even though he’d just left, he had followed his instincts, feeling the dread and beckoning grow stronger until he heard his son’s screams for help and what felt like Lois calling out to him.

It seemed impossible, but crazier things had happened.

Finding his son and wife in the state, they were with the unconscious assailants an arm’s length away brought a new kind of fear and rage he never wanted to experience again. Four hours of monotone beeping and doctors continuing to monitor Lois’ IV and the baby’s heart rate were the most traumatizing of his life. Even in his days of being under Dr. Kelly’s thumb and the torture he’d experienced at her hands were nothing compared to the anguish that consumed him in those long hours where he was forced to sit back and do nothing while he waited to find out if the doctors had been able to flush out enough of whatever she’d been drugged with to save them both.

That coupled with the revelation that not only had his son known he was Superman for the better part of a year but that under the pressure of witnessing the assailants trying to hurt his mother, he had reacted in a super-powered way. A consequence he had quickly addressed with Jon, but even with the stern warning, he couldn't hold back his pride and gratitude that Jon had been there to protect his mother and little sister. Nearly a year of pursuing these invisible assailants whose victims disappeared without a witness or cry for help, he hated to think what might have happened if they'd succeeded.

The assailants had quickly turned on one another and given them locations which had taken them across the globe to Turkey, Romania, Germany, and many of the Middle Eastern countries across Europe and Asia. Their latest target had been a compound on the outskirts of Istanbul. He looked across the crowded space as the agents moved through the compound, and screams could be heard along with muffled shrieks as each hidden room was cleared by the local police and accompanying agents. He'd already secured all the weapons to ensure everyone would make it out of this with no carnage. Enough lives had already been lost to these monsters.

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### *Metropolis, New Troy*

Lois laid in bed, peeking out the window at the moonlit sky as she looked at the time, wondering if Clark would get a chance to come home before the next location was to be raided. Her hand drifted to his side of the bed, letting out a defeated breath as she rolled onto her side, looking toward the window. Just as the weight of her worries finally began to drift away and the fatigue from the day called out to her, she felt a hand against her cheek, followed by the familiar pair of lips brushing against hers faintly.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," Clark whispered, cupping her cheek.

"Our daughter had other ideas," she murmured back to him, placing a hand across the bump across her midsection that was propped up against a pillow.

She smiled as she watched Clark dip his head down, placing his hand on her baby bump and whispering to their unborn daughter, "You need to let your mommy sleep." He brushed his lips against the smooth skin before tugging her cotton top's hem down to cover the exposed skin.

She reached her hand down to stroke his hair. "Everyone make it out okay?"

"Zero casualties," he whispered, before he stood up, reaching his hands up over his head and yanking off the cotton t-shirt he'd been wearing and tossing it into the hamper at the end of the bed. Her eyes wandered across his bare chest, taking note of the slow way he moved across the room to the other side of the bed, kicking his jeans off and crawling into bed next to her. The weariness that covered his face and weighed on his mind seemed to slow him down to the point that even spinning out of his clothes was too much effort for him. She bit her lower lip, keeping a careful eye on him as he sunk onto the bed next to her and releasing a shallow breath from his chest.

"Thirteen," he mumbled out, staring up at the ceiling fan that was spinning overhead.

"Thirteen what?" she asked, confused as she turned to look at him.

"Thirteen thousand was the latest count of children that have been rescued from these... monsters." His face tensed, and the lines across his forehead folded into a sharp crease with worry lines peaking across his face. She reached her hand out and folded her hand in his, wedging her fingers around his to form a tight fist. She laid next to him, letting the silence surround them as her mind continued to press her with questions she so desperately wanted to ask, but she knew not to push him for answers just yet.

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A thousand thoughts raced through Clark Kent's mind as he continued to stare at the ceiling fan blades spinning overhead. The warmth from Lois' hand ran through him, keeping him grounded as he tried to push the haunted soulless faces out of his mind. How many would he have to see before they finally found her? How many would be rescued from the pits of darkness they'd been thrust into only to be put into their own version of hell trying to reacclimate themselves in a world where they weren't viewed as a commodity?

He felt the hard lump in the back of his throat tense, and he squinted back the overwhelming grief that continued to consume him before and after each visit to yet another location that was discovered. With each raid, hundreds more popped up, and yet, through it all, they still were no closer to finding Esma. If they ever would.

Was she still alive?

"Hey, it's okay," Lois whispered to him, reaching over to caress his cheek, seeming to read his mind as she drew him into her arms, wrapping as much of her arms as she could with the crowded space of their unborn child between them. "I've got you," she murmured, brushing her lips against his.

Her hands smoothed their way down his chest, and he felt the familiar weight of her pressed against him, brushing featherlight kisses against his temple, moving across his cheekbone, and then shifting down to his jawline. The tension in his bones slowly began to dissipate until he finally felt relief from the heavy weight that had been pressing down on him, burdening him with the reminder of the lost souls he'd seen day in and day out.

He reached his hand out, wrapping his arm around her and tugging her to him, feeling a wave of relief wash over him as her scent and touch slipped through him, sending a shockwave through him, reminding him once again she was here with him. The terror that could have been was nothing more than a nightmare.

His lips smoothed their way across hers, devouring her in a fierce pull that drew him to her, unable to get enough of her as he felt her fingertips roam up and down his shoulders. A possessive growl escaped the back of his throat, fueling his exploration of her, needing the reassurance that the darkness he'd seen was gone.

"I've got you," she murmured against his lips as he dipped his head down, running his open jaw against her throat, feeling desire flood through him when he heard the labored breath escape her lips.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear, smiling as he felt the ripple against him of their unborn child moving beneath her abdomen.

"I love you too." She giggled as he dipped his head down to her abdomen, pressing his lips to the top of her round bump. "You keep that up, and she'll never go back to sleep."

He chuckled, sending a vibrating sensation through his whole body as Lois looped her arms around him, tugging his face to her, so he was eye-level with her. "You okay?" she asked, stroking his cheek with her hand.

He bit his lower lip, gazing at her with an apologetic frown. "We still haven't found her, Lois. I..." His voice cracked beneath the pressure he felt. "We've found thousands of kids, and I'm grateful they're safe, but the list is getting shorter and shorter, and there's still no sign of Esma."

"You'll find her," Lois whispered, tracing the outline of his jaw with her index finger.

"How can you be so sure?" Clark asked her with an incredulous expression, in awe of the unwavering faith she always had in him. Even when he found himself in doubt, Lois never gave up hope. Her undying devotion kept him going when he wanted so desperately to give up.

"Because you're you," she whispered confidently, wrapping her arms protectively around him. Her head rested against his, and

she moved her hands up and down his arms, whispering reassurances.

His lips found hers, tugging her lower lip to him and tracing the frame of her face with his palms. A faint moan escaped the back of her throat as her legs looped across his backside, crossing her ankles as he moved his attention down to her throat, nibbling at her voice box as he ran his hands up and down her thighs, feeling his way up and down her nightshirt.

“You’re amazing.” He let out a deep-throated moan. “Perfect,” he choked out, feeling the euphoric ecstasy envelop him as her hands moved across him.

“No one’s perfect,” she whispered to him.

His eyes gazed over her and he bit down on his lower lip as his eyes rested on her bare torso. “I beg to differ.” He let out a deep-throated moan as he hovered over her, running his hands across the smoothness of her bare torso. She let out a sharp gasp as his chin ran down the curve of her throat, nibbling at the sensitive flesh.

“I love you,” she murmured in a shaky breath, wrapping him into the serene cocoon of her embrace as they fell into one another.

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Vincent Blake folded his hands across the steel table in front of him, grimacing as four guards escorted the formerly well-respected Tobias Berg into the visitation cell. Vincent Blake couldn’t hide the grin across his face while he watched the guards chain his hands and feet to the table he was positioned in front of and then order him to take his seat. The sudden change of power was eating at Tobias, and Vincent Blake couldn’t hide the pleasure he was deriving from watching Tobias Berg’s fall from grace.

Vincent touched his face, pointing to Tobias’ black and blue bruise that covered the side of his face. “You really should see someone about that injury. It could get infected.”

“You got your conviction, what are you doing here?” Tobias snapped. The deep-seated anger threatened to boil over as Tobias let out a snort. “You here to gloat?”

“It must be hell in here,” Vincent Blake replied confidently, grinning ear to ear at the former sex-trafficking mogul and kingpin. “Out there, you were free as a bird, taking innocent lives and bending them to your will, and in here... you’re nothing but a punching bag with a ginormous target on your back.” He cackled happily. “Have they figured out you enjoy raping children for sport, or was this just your traditional welcome party?”

Tobias’ features were stone-like as he glared into Vincent’s eyes, trying to pierce his soul with the dark, soulless stare that he was sure must have worked on his minions and the girls he had working for him. “You think you have won? You’ve done nothing but slow down a business.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a philanthropist,” Vincent remarked coldly. “You’ll forgive me for choking on my own vomit while you profit off of the assault and murder of children.”

“You think I’m the only one to take on something the world demands and profits from? Look at your models in skin-tight enticing attire, and your television movies with the daring heroine... Sex sells. It’s what this world breaths and seeks out. More powerful than the green dollar and more accessible than any trade in the world.”

“You objectify and sell children to molesters and rapists. Children that you have stolen.” Vincent glared at him with a raw hatred he could not contain.

“Do you honestly believe I’m the only one?” Tobias chuckled. “All you’ve done is cleared the way for the next one. We’re everywhere.”

“We know.” Vincent glared back at him. He tapped at the black and white photo in the middle of the table, pointing at the image of Omer Demir with Albert Schiller. “Last chance, Tobias. You tell us where these men are, and I take death penalty off of the table.”

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### *Karabük, Turkey*

Heat and sunburns were an everyday occurrence now. The operation that had been authorized by the Vice President a few months ago had sent many men and women out into the field, trekking across the globe in search of the missing children that had been forced into this life of prostitution and abuse. Every location sprang out more and more locations until the last one in Istanbul. That location had given them a clear finger pointed here.

Dan Scardino stood dumbfounded in the middle of the gravel-covered road, staring into what felt like a time capsule. The farmhouse looked the same. Same rickety old door and rotting wood barely holding on. Yet, here they were ready to storm inside the structure he’d been in nearly six years ago searching for answers to Jenna’s murder.

It couldn’t be this easy.

He couldn’t have scoured the globe in search of Albert Schiller only to find himself in the same building that Jenna had been murdered and assaulted in.

“You okay?”

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the familiar eyes of the superhero looking at him with a tenderness he wasn’t used to seeing on the hero. He looked away, quickly trying to regain his bearings as he pointed to the farmhouse in front of them. “I was here nearly six years ago.”

“So are about fifty people,” Superman responded with a grim expression. “Be careful.”

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### *Metropolis, New Troy*

Jack skimmed over the front page of the Daily Planet, grimacing when he saw the photo of his former mentor with a large red stamp across it reading ‘*Wanted*.’ With the investigation into Omer’s involvement with the Human Trafficking scandal that had taken down so many, the nonprofit he’d finally found his niche in had been turned upside down when it was discovered Omer had been using the group as a front to smuggle kidnapped children to and from different countries and funneling funds to the different kidnapping groups for profit the nonprofit had dissolved almost overnight.

Life seemed so surreal.

Omer, of course, wasn’t the only casualty in all of this. The Fifth Street Mission had been exposed for its involvement and shut down. That had been a hard pill to swallow for him. The mission had helped him and his brother when they’d been on the street, and now, with it gone those that needed the help would find another door slammed in their face. The news that the sisters were not only assisting with kidnapping runaways for the human-trafficking ring but also working with a black-market adoption agency that sold newborn babies to the highest bidder. So far at least thirty babies had been reunited with the distraught parents that had been victims of kidnapping.

Each layer that was pulled back exposed more and more of the human trafficking ring, which seemed to expose the corruption deeply rooted into different pockets of communities across the globe. It wasn’t one place. It wasn’t one person. It was one ugly truth that motivated everyone to turn a blind eye. Greed.

A hand reached over to squeeze his shoulder, and he jumped, startled to see Perry White standing over him. He chuckled, looking around the empty diner with a grunt. “I guess they sent the search party after me, huh?”

“Well, you’ve been keeping a bit to yourself lately, and Jimmy’s been worried about you, Jack. I’ve been worried about you.” Perry took a seat across from him, resting his arms on the table as he glanced across it to where the paper was folded up.

Jack followed Perry’s gaze and shrugged. “They’re investigating the HRO for International Treason.” He let out a defeated breath, lifting his head up from where it hung and met

Perry's gaze with an earnest plea. "You know, I really believed what I was doing was helping. I thought I was helping people. I had no idea Omer was using it to kidnap kids."

"I believe you." Perry patted his hand. "And I agree. It was a great idea, filled with a lot of great intentions. It just had the wrong person leading it."

"A greedy person." Jack grunted.

"So where to now?" Perry asked.

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "Lucy offered to put me up in Seattle while I figure things out, but I really don't think that's for me. I can't do another dead-end job just to skirt by. I want to do something that's meaningful and makes a difference." He looked sadly across the table and added, "Like I thought I was doing."

"So why don't you?" Perry asked.

"Why don't I what?" Jack asked.

"Make a difference?" Perry prodded, arching an eyebrow at him. "You found your calling, son, why give up on it now?"

"Because you need money to start a nonprofit like this and I'm broke," Jack answered with a chuckle.

Perry took out a card from his pocket and handed it to him. "Take some time and get your head on straight and then give this guy a call. He can get you started with how to start something like this."

Jack looked at the card with a surprised expression. "The Attorney General?"

"He'll be expecting your call," Perry said with a nod.

"I wouldn't know where to start. I don't even have the funds to start something like the HRO," Jack explained, arguing half-heartedly.

"And I had no idea how to run a printing press when I first started at the Planet, but with some hard work and determination, I got there. I think you will too."

Jack smiled back at Perry. "Thanks."

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#### *Karabük, Turkey*

Clark stopped in the middle of the farmhouse, caught off guard when he saw the blue-eyed and blonde-haired girl, staring back at him with hope in her eyes. Somehow he thought it would have been different. He couldn't place exactly how, but standing here staring at the face that he had spent close to a year searching for wasn't how he had imagined it.

Tears welled up in her eyes as he reached a handout. "It's okay. I'm a friend of your sister, Lilith. She's been searching for you."

Her eyes clamped shut, and the tears trickled down her cheeks slowly at first then more quickly until her face was covered in tears. She dropped to the floor, covering herself with a sheet that was covered in dirt as she rocked back and forth, looking around the room that was filled with agents, searching and assessing each person for injuries.

A shout came from the other side of the farmhouse. Clark turned his head and saw Omer Demir being ushered out of a corner with Dan Scardino holding his weapon on him along with an older man with beady green eyes. He recalled the image from one of the photos Scardino had shown him of Albert Schiller. His features hardened as he watched the two men he held responsible for the attack on Lois be taken into custody.

'Don't,' he warned himself, fighting off the impulse to confront Schiller for what he had done.

He turned back to Esma, crouching down so he was eye-level with her and pointed to the men being taken into custody and whispered to her, "Esma, they can't hurt you anymore. They won't get away with this. I promise."

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#### *Metropolis, New Troy*

Lois tapped at the keys on her keyboard, staring intently at the screen as she wrote up the next scathing article against the

Human Traffickers and her coverage of the new Senate Judiciary Committee's vote to move forward with the trial for Senators Michael Harris and Donald Schumer along with several other senators and women who were found to be accepting bribes from the HRO in exchange for votes on certain bills. Her interview with Jack Davenport and the newest appointed leader, Senator Wayne Travis, gave her more than enough material to cover the trial and subsequent nullification of laws that were passed under duress and by coercion.

Congress would be busy issuing a review of the laws that had been passed and investigating which bills held up to scrutiny and which ones were pushed through due to the outside influence provided to this powerful and corrupt group of individuals that had taken it upon themselves to try and bend the laws of the people to fit their agenda. She paused, hitting save on the keyboard and then spinning around to pick up her printed copy from the copy room. She barely made it inside before the door closed behind her with a louder than necessary slam.

She jumped, startled by the noise but quickly forgot her protest when she saw Clark in front of her. Her hands flew to her mouth in surprise, flinging her arms across him as she uttered a hushed, "What are you doing here? I thought you weren't supposed to be back till later tonight?"

"The DEA and FBI have everything they need," he whispered, wrapping a possessive hand around her and pulling her to him. "I thought it might be a good time to come back home."

"How exactly are you planning to explain the early flight to everyone?" Lois whispered, leaning in to kiss him. "You're supposed to still be on assignment for another week, remember?"

"Well, we can sneak out the window." Clark pointed to the window that was slightly ajar.

"Sneak out?" Lois arched her eyebrow at him.

"Oh, that's right." He grinned back at her. "You don't play hooky."

She rolled her eyes, recalling his teasing from several years back about playing hooky before the newsroom had been sprayed with pheromone spray. "So, how did everything go?"

"I thought it would be better to just show you," he beamed back at her, looping his arms around her.

"Show me?" Lois grinned back at him.

"Is that a yes?" he whispered in her ear.

She bit her lower lip, feeling her curiosity get the better of her. "I guess it's the only way to find out what you're up to."

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Jack Davenport waited by the elevator, pacing back and forth with his hands behind his back. She would be here any minute. As many times as he had done this before, he still felt the nervous jitters run through him when he was about to reunite a family. The agents on the field had called about four hours ago to confirm the apprehension of both Albert Schiller and Omer Demir. He had a feeling there would probably be a turf war with the directors over whose claim to victory it was, but that was neither here nor there.

This had been a unique situation for them all. The drug Schiller had concocted and sold on the black market had turned everyone walking down the street into a helpless victim ripe for the taking by the likes of these ingrates. So much work had been done in the past few months to correct the wrongs that had transpired and do better, but there was still so much more to do. So much more needed to be righted.

The elevators pinged, and he stopped mid-pace, turning to face the elevator. The elevator doors peaked open and then disappointment covered his face when he saw Lois Lane and Clark Kent with their visitor's badges.

"What's wrong, Jack? Not happy to see me?" Lois asked, stepping off the elevator.

"No, I thought you were someone else is all," Jack combed his hands through his hair and pointed toward the office behind

him. "I'm waiting for the car that went to pick up Lilith."

"How's Esma?" Lois asked him, concern and anguish covering her face.

He let out a deep sigh and shrugged his shoulders. "She's alive. She's safe. She's a fighter." The words felt hollow but trying to sugar coat what this girl had been through wasn't something he could stomach. Truth be told, it would be a long journey for Esma, but now that she was free from the grasp of her captors, she could begin healing.

The elevator doors opened, and they saw Lilith step into the hallway with a frantic expression on her face as she looked between the three of them. "Is it true? You found Esma?"

Jack extended his hand to take the young woman's. "Ms. Kirsch? I'm Jack Davenport. I'm the agent assigned to your sister's case." He pointed to Lois and Clark. "You already know Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent. I hope you don't mind, I figured with all the work they put into making sure your sister stayed in the forefront of everyone's mind for the last few months, I'd let them see the fruits of their labor." He opened the door to the right, motioning for them to follow him down a long corridor.

"How is she?" Lilith asked tearfully.

"She's alive." Jack let out a hoarse whisper and turned to Lilith. "She's been through hell, but with the right support system and counseling, she'll get through this. You both will."

He opened the door in front of them and felt his throat tighten when he saw the two sisters run to one another, embracing for the first time in months. He turned over to where Lois was standing, wiping a tear from her eyes. "You did good." He gave her shoulder a squeeze and then moved off, trying to give the two sisters their privacy during their long-awaited reunion.

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## Epilogue

### *One Year Later...*

Lois set the paper down, smiling at the headlines that had graced the front page of the Daily Planet. The front-page photo of Jack shaking hands with Superman and Maury standing in the background covered the top half of the paper with the headline of '*Superman Foundation and Hope House Take On Child Services.*'

Jack had put together an elaborate and effective foundation for helping pull kids off the street without the ulterior motive the Fifth Street Mission had. With the help of many of the schools in the area and some motivated politicians looking to clean up their image, he'd secured funding to put a stop to the epidemic of missing children that had taken over Metropolis.

Working with other cities and overseas with the other organizations dedicated to stopping human trafficking, they'd successfully worked to free nearly three hundred children in the last year. It wouldn't completely eliminate the threat, but it was a step in the right direction, and with Jack working with the people Clark had put in charge of the Superman Foundation to lead the charge in restructuring New Troy's Child Services division, there might be hope in protecting the children in their charge from predators looking for an easy target.

She spotted Clark walking toward her with an extra skip in his step, nodding as he perched himself on the edge of her desk with a beaming grin. She pointed toward the television screen that was still displaying the coverage from Superman's testimony to the Senate's Judiciary Committee. "I take it everything went well?"

"Yeah." He leaned closer to whisper, "Verdict came in about ten minutes ago."

"And?" Lois inquired, raising her eyebrows with interest while trying to keep her composure calm and disinterested even though she was dying to know how the committee had voted.

"They're going to hold a press conference in about an hour to announce it." Clark chuckled, teasing her with the knowledge he

had but continuing to hold back from sharing.

"And your point being?" Lois prompted, reaching her hand up to finger the end of his tie, toying with it playfully.

"Mmm, mmm." He shook his head. "Nope."

"Is it at least good news?" Lois sighed, recognizing the stubbornness that was covering his features. Though many times he tended to share tidbits of information before scheduled press conferences that he'd learned as Superman, there were times he couldn't. This, it appeared, was one of those times.

"You will be satisfied with the information they are going to announce in..." he glanced at the time on her computer screen, "...fifty-three minutes."

"Fine, I'll wait." Lois crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in her chair. "You don't have to look so pleased with yourself."

"Superman has to be trusted," Clark reminded her, reaching his hand out to take her hand in his. He pointed to her screen. "Still stuck, huh?"

Lois glared at him. "Jewelry store locks up at night, and jewelry store opens up with everything gone in the morning." She let out a heavy sigh. "I'm mulling over the angle."

"Ah, is that what they call it now?" He chuckled, ducking as she swatted him with the newspaper in front of her.

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Ingrid looked around the semi-crowded room, noting the differences in age and gender of her fellow test-takers. She found a seat at the table near the middle of the room, settling herself in place and mentally preparing for the test she was about to take.

In front of her was a white packet with large bold black letters '*General Equivalency Diploma Test.*' At the bottom of the page was a line for her to write her name.

'*You've got this,*' she reminded herself.

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Jack fiddled with the knot of his tie, glancing across the crowd of reporters on the steps of the Capitol Building. A podium was positioned on the top step where the Senate Judiciary Chairman was standing, waiting to address the crowd. He checked the time on his watch, smiling to himself when he spotted Agent Davenport and Director Talley approaching from the edge of the crowd. Many lives had been upended and torn apart, but he was confident justice would continue to be served.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press, I thank you for your time and your patience today..."

A white light flashed from a camera as the chairman scanned the crowd with a clear purpose and intent. The words floated off his tongue and into the homes and offices of the world as he addressed the question everyone had been waiting for in the last year was finally answered. "Today, we celebrate justice. I want to thank each and every one of you and your tireless efforts to continue to keep this in the forefront of this country's mind. We pride ourselves on having a democracy that is based on the cornerstone that we elected officials are the voice of the people, and we serve the people. When that trust is broken, nothing short of unyielding punishment is acceptable.

"Our office has had a rotating door bombarded with testimony from everyone in public offices, public servants such as myself, judges, and even our cabinet members to inquiry those that hold the power to bend this nation to the whim of those that would want to do it harm. I am proud to announce that after nearly fourteen months of interviews and inquiries along with the trial for those responsible, we have named the treasonous leaders and they have been found guilty of high treason."

The crowd erupted into chaos as the journalists continued to clamor for a quote or sound byte to deliver on. The chairman waved the crowd off and turned away from the podium adding a quick. "That is all. A written statement will be issued to all media organizations addressing the details."

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A heavy sigh escaped Lois' throat as she leaned her head back against her husband's solid frame, feeling a wave of relief wash over her as the news of the former Senators' verdict sunk in. Over a year of working to stop the child traffickers that had worked unopposed in the shadows of Metropolis, snatching up children and selling them to the highest bidder. What had started as a pursuit for a young girl's life had ballooned into the uncovering of one of the biggest political scandals of the decade.

"It's really over," Lois breathed, reaching her hand up to swipe a tear from her eyes. She leaned back to look at Clark, whose arms were still wrapped tightly around her waist.

"Yeah," Clark leaned down to press his lips to hers. "It's really over."

She kept his gaze, feeling the weight she had been carrying for the last year and a half disappear with the realization that those responsible for the anguish and pain girls like Esmá and Ingrid had been put through were finally going to be punished. Justice would be served. So much had changed in the last year and a half. They had been subjected to the wrath of those responsible in every way possible. Trial by the media of public opinion had been the first tool of choice in an effort to dissuade them from pursuing this story. Next came the physical threat of trying and failing to kidnap her and possibly Jon. Though there had yet to be any sign of Jon's super abilities since, she'd forever be grateful for her son's quick actions, which had saved both her and his little sister.

So much had changed.

She had her credibility questioned. Her parenting skills and good name were put on trial, and she'd come close to becoming another voice to be snuffed out by this group of thugs that felt they had the power to bend the world to their whim. The recent takedown of the congressmen that had been working with the child traffickers they had uncovered had been an explosive headline that forced an overhaul of the justice department for the sake of preserving the sanctity of the highest office of the land. With the investigations came inquiries into other countries' justice departments as well and the formation of a department dedicated to rescuing and protecting individuals that might have fallen prey to the nefarious hands of human traffickers that could appear anywhere in the world.

Knowing the terror Ingrid and Esmá had endured was enough to keep her up at night and go to the depths of the Earth to stop these predators from ever coming near the innocent lives they sought to exploit. After Laura's birth, Clark had begun committing more and more time to help Jack build up the Hope House project. A part of her wondered if it wasn't his own protective fatherly instinct kicking into overdrive, realizing how their daughter would be more likely to be a target for predators like this.

It wasn't the only reason, of course, but it did stir up motivation for both of them to do what was necessary to put a stop to the men responsible for all of this. With the headlines and the verdict from Judge Harper swiftly shutting down any attempts to continue the trial by media, the Planet was able to secure a swift judgment in their favor and settle the defamation suit they'd been forced to file.

"Hey, you two, what are you still doing here?" Perry called out to them, pointing toward the elevator doors. "Hell's bells, the invitation said five o'clock."

"We were just heading out," Clark answered, taking her hand in his. "We have to drop Laura and Jon off at my folks, and then we'll meet you there, Chief."

"Five o'clock," Perry reminded them, tapping the blue-trimmed envelope in his hand. "Don't be late."

"Give us a little credit." Lois winked at him before heading up the ramp with Clark.

Clark reached his arm over to press the call button when they reached the elevator doors. "He's just nervous. It's not every day

we get invited to the Pulitzer Awards ceremony."

Lois flashed him a nervous smile. "I know. I can hardly believe it."

The Pulitzer Awards were something she had strived for throughout her career. She had climbed through the trenches, building up her career and her name, and now here she was preparing to attend her first awards dinner for the prestigious award ceremony.

"It's well-deserved," Clark whispered, leaning in to cup her cheek just as the elevator doors opened.

"We don't even know if we've won yet," Lois reminded him as they stepped onto the elevator car. She grimaced, glancing at the time on her watch. "We're going to be cutting it close even with super-speed."

"We'll get there in time," Clark reassured her.

\*\*\*

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Dan Scardino shook his head, pointing to the target that was littered with uneven punctures from the bullets that had just rained across it. He placed a hand on the agent's shoulder, pointing to the target.

"Try it again, but this time focus on hitting one spot on the target, not the whole thing."

The agent nodded, replacing the earmuffs and protective gear as the new target moved back into position. Dan let out a heavy sigh, tugging his own protective gear down over his ears as the shots fired.

The second attempt was a little better, but the workmanship on this agent's aim left a lot to be desired. Dan ran a hand through his thick hair and let out a heavy sigh, lifting the agent's protective gear up from his ears, tapping him on the shoulder. "How about we take five?"

He turned toward the exit, preparing to make his way to the breakroom and hopefully regain some patience before he had to head back in. How exactly he'd gotten suckered into helping train the rookies in-between assignments, he couldn't recall. But for now, he was stuck with the burden and hating every second of it.

He stopped in the breakroom, grabbing a quick cup of coffee, and stepped out into the front lobby, scanning his badge to open the sliding glass doors. He waved to the receptionist, Janice, and smirked when he saw a familiar face in the lobby.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in." Dan chuckled, reaching his arm out to shake his former partner's hand. "They let just anyone in here now?"

"Well, they let you in here, didn't they?" McCord let out a snicker at his own joke. "I had to see it to believe it." He pointed to the doorway behind him as Scardino walked out front with him to continue their conversation away from the crowded lobby where people were continuing to come in and out. They reached the corner of the building, taking a seat on the wooden bench next to a trash can and an outdoor water fountain when McCord gave him a once over and snickered. "They domesticated you, Scardino, and got you to train the guppies coming in, eh?"

"It was a weak moment, and it won't happen again."

Scardino flashed him an uncertain gaze.

"I'm sure." McCord laughed, shaking his head.

"Well, how's retirement treating you?" Scardino asked.

"Bored of laying around doing nothing already, or you just coming down here to rub salt in the wounds?"

"Nah, nothing like that," McCord responded with a smile. "I heard you were finally settled after your year-long stint and wanted to see how you were doing. This bust has been a long time coming."

“For both of us,” Scardino acknowledged quietly.

“I screwed up,” McCord gestured to himself. “I’m man enough to admit that. The important thing is you got ‘em.”

“Not all of ‘em.” Scardino scowled. “They’re still out there.”

“Well, lucky for them, they got a cranky old fart to help train these kids up and tackle some child trafficking butt to the ground.” McCord grinned back at him.

“Actually, I’m going to be staying stateside for a bit. Try the whole domesticated thing out.” Scardino shrugged.

“Well, look at you, Scardino. Trying to put down roots?”

“Something,” Scardino shrugged, taking a seat on the bench and sipping from his coffee cup. “I’ve been chasing these guys for nearly seven years. I need a change of pace. I’ve brought Jenna’s murderers to justice, and that’s enough for now.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve asked them for an assignment close by so I can pretend like I’m still somewhat human.”

“You sure there isn’t any other reason for staying nearby?” McCord asked.

“Jenna’s gone, McCord. I know that.” Scardino let out a heavy sigh. “I’ve got to learn to move on and figure out what’s next.” He gazed back at him with a smirk. “What about you? You poking your nose around here have anything to do with the judgment against Director Collins?”

“Well, maybe I’m just reconnecting with some like minds.” McCord gave him a weak smile. “I never fit in with the agency, Scardino. You know that. I would like to refer people to you guys if the opportunity presents itself.”

“Isn’t that a bit backwards?” Scardino furrowed his brow. “We’re supposed to know about drug busts before the locals, remember?”

“Well, I’ve been doing a little bit of P.I. stuff...”

“Ah, so you haven’t completely given up and picked out your headstone.” Scardino’s eyebrows rose. “What’s the case?”

“How do you know it’s a case?”

“Uh-huh.” Scardino waved his hand toward his chest, gesturing for him to hand it over.

“Old lady thought her husband was cheating on her. Long story short is yes, she was right, but there was a whole lot more to the story... Ever hear of a guy named Diego Martinez?”

“The drug dealer in New Troy’s housing project district?” Scardino’s brow furrowed. “We cleaned him and his guys out two years ago.”

“Did you?”

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Clark readjusted the tie on his tux, looking around the crowded streets outside the Metro Plaza where the Pulitzer Awards dinner was being held. After a quick change of clothes at home and a quick visit to his parents’ to ensure Jon and Laura were safely in their grandparents’ care for the remainder of the evening, he’d had time to slip in a quick patrol around the city before arriving at the Metro Plaza for the awards dinner. Lois had still been finishing up her make-up when he’d left and would most likely be arriving any minute.

He glanced at the watch around his waist, catching the time with a smile. Ten minutes to spare. He scanned the hotel lobby as he climbed up the steps, keeping a careful eye out for his wife. A gold-framed sign stood in the entryway directing everyone attending the awards dinner to make their way to the Plaza Suite.

A small crowd of tuxedos and evening wear surrounding the tall double doors with a large ‘P’ engraved into the doors on each side. The small crowd was missing one person – Lois.

He finished his trek down the stairs and moved across the lobby toward the secluded area by the bar, checking to see if Lois might have taken a seat there while waiting for him, but found nothing but a few competing journalists toasting good luck to the ceremony and wishing each other well.

“A little early for a nightcap, isn’t it?” a teasing voice came

behind him.

He turned to see Lois standing behind him with a stunning smile that stopped him in his tracks. He hadn’t had a chance to see her in the dress she’d chosen for tonight’s ceremony before leaving. As always, she was breathtakingly gorgeous in the black silk and chiffon that flowed around her, forming a perfect A-line cut on her strapless gown. Her hair was pinned back, and a sheer shawl hung over her shoulders.

“Wow.” He ran a hand across her cheek, leaning in to kiss her. “You look incredible.”

“Hey, you two, they’re about to start,” Perry said, waving them over.

Lois giggled, reaching her hand over to take hold of his hand and tugging him with her. “So, I guess this is the moment of truth, huh?”

“Just another award dinner.” Clark grinned, wrapping his arms around her, tugging her to him.

“It’s the Pulitzers,” Lois countered. “Prestigious journalism awards that only recognize the best of the best.”

“And you are the best,” he whispered, reaching his hand over to cup her cheek. “It’s not every day a cover-up all the way to the Capitol Building gets exposed. We’ve got this one in the bag.”

“You think so?” Lois teased, looking back at him. “You never know...”

“If not, there’s always next year...”

“And the year after that...”

THE END