

Three Rules

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Summary: In this elseworld fanfiction, Lois is not as out of touch with her investigative skills when Superman comes on the scene. With the world in peril, how will Superman navigate this new normal as his enemy circles the gates?

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Teaser

Clark Kent was in trouble.

He knew it. Every time Lois Lane smiled at him he felt his heart lurch out of his chest, aching to be close to her. His throat clenched and he found himself — a writer — unable to articulate himself as confidently as he should. He'd traveled the world and met people from all walks of life. He'd dated off and on but no one had had this effect on him. Even during his off and on courtship with Lana Lang he hadn't been affected like this.

This was different.

There it was again, that smile.

He was a goner.

He'd only known Lois Lane for a few days now. He'd watched her work tirelessly in their investigation of the possible Messenger bombing. She wasn't like anyone he'd ever met before. Her attitude was confident and strong but there was something more that made her stand out to him. She cared — genuinely cared — about the story she was investigating. It wasn't exclusively about the headline for her but about the people.

That was something he could relate to. He had harbored the need to help others with his gifts for so long. All he could hear when he had the urge to use his gifts to help someone was his father's voice, warning him of what could happen. "They'll put you in a laboratory and dissect you like a frog."

He'd heard that phrase so many times over the years. It was why he'd kept moving from place to place. It was why he'd never had a relationship last more than a few months. It was hard to be in a relationship with anyone when you were constantly hiding who you are — even though he still didn't have an answer on his true origins.

Still, he couldn't deny the pull he felt toward Lois Lane. It had been there, calling to him since their first meeting and continued to grow the more he interacted with her.

"You can't risk anyone finding out about you." His father's warning continued to play in the back of his mind but all he could focus on was the spark that shone from Lois Lane's eyes as Jimmy Olsen gave them the news of S.T.A.R. Labs' report.

"They re-created the launch in a hologram, it was really smooth..." Jimmy's face took on an awestruck expression for a moment before clearing his throat and continuing on with his update. "Anyway, they concluded that Platt's theory was right on. There was deliberate sabotage. The transport explosion was no accident. Congrats."

Clark felt a wave of relief wash over him as the news hit him. There were still a lot of holes to fill but this was the first big step to proving Samuel Platt's theory right. They were closer to stopping whomever was behind the Messenger bombing and ensuring safe travel to all those in desperate need of medical advancements that only could be achieved with Space Station Prometheus.

They were so close.

She was so close.

He could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand on end as her smile brightened, "He was right! Platt was right!"

"Now we can write the story," Clark added confidently, feeling a rush run through his veins at the thought of exposing the truth behind the Messenger's explosion.

"I write the story," Lois corrected. The tone in her voice was just slightly domineering as she made it clear who was in charge once again. There was still something softer hiding behind her eyes as her smile brightened across her face, reaching up to meet her eyes where that spark lit up her eyes.

He was a goner.

"With my help," he reminded her, hoping to see at least a little crack in her abrasive attitude.

"With your help," she conceded. Her eyes lit up happily as she added, "And if we can convince people there was sabotage and find out who was behind it..."

"...we can stop them." Clark finished for her. He felt a surge of emotion pulse through her veins as her arms wrapped around him in a fierce victory hug. He knew it wouldn't last. It couldn't, but he couldn't help but yearn for time to slow down just a little so he could savor that moment.

She loosened her arms around him, taking a step back and then he saw it. There in her eyes, the slight blush on her cheek and the hike in her heartrate as she stared back at him. Before he could stop himself the words came out of his mouth.

"Why don't we have dinner...?"

'Too fast. Stop.' His mind screamed at him, warning him to put on the brakes.

She immediately began to backtrack, "I don't know, I..."

"We should celebrate." He finished lamely, hoping to save face and also holding out faith that she might actually say yes.

She seemed to mull it over for a moment before nodding, "Okay, dinner."

He felt a surge of satisfaction run through his veins. He couldn't believe his luck. Had he just put himself out there and not been turned down?

Just before he could revel in the idea of spending the evening with Lois outside of the office a look crossed her face. "Oh, what am I saying? I have plans tonight."

Plans.

<< "Why don't we make it dinner?" >>

The memory of Lex Luthor's invitation to her for dinner came back to him and he did his best to save face. He didn't like the man. He couldn't put his finger on it but something about his Luthor Space Station felt a little convenient given the current situation with the Messenger.

Instinct told him to stop her and not let her get near the man. The memory of Lex Luthor's face as he held the sword of Alexander the Great to Clark's throat flooded through his mind. He could tell from Luthor's face and the way he spoke that he enjoyed having the upper hand. It most likely would be no different when Lois attempted to interview him.

He could warn her but doing so without sounding like it was coming from a place of jealousy was now impossible. He had no claim on Lois Lane. He barely knew her and she him. He did his best to squash down the urge to say something about her dinner with Luthor and offered a gentle smile instead.

"Well, maybe some other time then?" he hoped his voice didn't sound too desperate as he spoke.

"Yeah," she nodded, stepping away and grabbing her notepad from the table where they'd been working. "Maybe tomorrow?" She suggested, throwing him a playful grin. "Celebrate the break in the case and me getting the first exclusive on Lex Luthor."

Her face was filled with confidence as she walked toward the door. He knew this interview wasn't going to go the way she planned, but voicing his concern seemed a moot point. He flashed her a quick smile, "Sure."

<< "Alexander's strategy was simple: always control the high ground." >>

There was an awkward silence that fell between them and she offered a friendly wave, "See you tomorrow."

"Good luck," he said, hoping his voice didn't betray his inner thoughts at the moment.

"Please, I don't need *luck*," she shot back confidently. "Remember who you're talking to. If anyone needs luck, it's Lex Luthor."

A smile cracked across his face as he watched her gather her things. "I look forward to reading your story." She looked at him again, this time a little longer and he felt like he would melt right there under her piercing stare.

He was in trouble.

Lois stared at the dark leather seats of the limo she rode in, quietly mulling over how she was going to get the elusive Lex Luthor to open up so she could write the first one on one interview with him. This was every journalist's dream. A smile crossed her face as she imagined having her by-line with the first in-depth take on the elusive billionaire grace the front page of the Daily Planet. It was sure to get her a nod from the Kerth committee and possibly even a Pulitzer.

'Easy there, Lane. You haven't got the story yet,' she reminded herself, reeling her imagination back in. Still it was fun to imagine the look on Clark's face when he... A frown crossed her face and she caught herself. Clark? Where did that come from?

She bristled, shaking her head, trying to calm her nerves, attempting to focus back on the task at hand. There was so much mystery around who Lex Luthor was. There was speculation of course and rumors that fueled the weekly tabloids but as far as the real story, that remained a mystery to her and the rest of Metropolis.

'That changes now,' she thought to herself gleefully, smoothing the imaginary wrinkles from her dress.

The car came to a stop and the driver stepped out of the car, *'This is it.'* She thought to herself, preparing for the interview of a lifetime.

Clark let out a heavy sigh as he sifted through the chaos of mismatched notes in a shoebox and the clean file folder with a stamp depicting the S.T.A.R. Labs logo on the cover. One by one he ran through the notes of the report – to put it loosely – Platt had submitted. They still had to convince E.P.R.A.D. and the officers investigating the explosion that had killed Captain Ladderman and his crew.

They had enough to draw attention to what was happening here and make the Metropolis P.D. take a second look at Platt's supposed suicide but it wasn't irrefutable. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about the timing of E.P.R.A.D.'s sabotage and Lex Luthor's Luthor Space Station didn't sit right with him. The timing felt too convenient.

Or perhaps he just wanted to find something on Luthor. A wave of uncertainty ran through him as he pondered

momentarily what his motivation was for looking at Lex Luthor harder than others. On the outside he seemed to be the answer to a city's prayers. A billionaire philanthropist willing to give back to his community and employing nearly an entire city on his own.

<<“I must admit I love the fact that everyone has to look up to see me.”>>

Conceited.

Self-absorbed.

His mind offered up the descriptors as he stared across the desk where an equally large stack of files were from the research he'd pulled on Luthor Space Station. He didn't like the guy. He could admit that much, but it felt much more than a twinge of jealousy or distrust. A sinister sense of suspicion fell over him each time he looked at the timeline of the sabotage and Platt's death.

The question was, would Lex Luthor commit murder in order to be the one to stake his claim on E.P.R.A.D.'s medical advancements that would have gone to the United Nations of Congress?

A resounding 'yes' echoed inside him as he leaned back in his chair, pondering his next move.

Lois Lane was not happy.

Her fork rested across the plate full of food, suppressing the urge to get up and leave. Her promise of an interview appeared to be nothing more than a trick to lure her here and distract her with a big show. The lavish dinner and wining and dining Lex Luthor seemed to be focused on were the actions she'd expect on a date rather than an interview – which she suspected he seemed more focused on.

Each question she offered up continued to be deflected one by one as if he was flicking an annoying fly that got in the way. A smile spread across his face and he offered, “Why don't I have my office send you a biography?”

She couldn't just give in and leave. She couldn't and wouldn't be seen as a failure. She'd been promised an interview and she was going to get one. Annoyance crossed her face as she stared back at him daringly, “Because I don't want the standard line. I want to know the real Lex Luthor. What makes you tick? What you want, what you strive for...”

“Pleasure.” There was an uncomfortable gaze between them as Lex reached out to push a strand of hair out of her face. She frowned, staring back at him with narrowed eyes, “The pursuit of pleasure...” He finished with a smile, catching her gaze once again. A look crossed his face and he smiled, “Does that surprise you?”

‘Finally a real conversation,’ she thought to herself, letting out a sigh of relief as he moved his hand back to his lap. She had expected to have him deflect her questions but

turning the evening into a date hadn't been where she'd imagined this evening going. Still, she didn't want to give up just yet. She had to keep trying and hopefully have something to show for her efforts.

“I would have guessed you'd say ‘power’.” She responded, in hopes of drawing more conversation out of him.

“Power is a means, not an end.” He explained.

“But achieving power must give you pleasure.” Lois deducted, following his reasoning aloud.

“Very good.” He nodded, impressed.

Lois bit her lower-lip, noting the space between them appeared to disappear as he leaned in with a smile pasted across his face. She was not one to be deterred though. She had read the tabloids and heard the stories of his skirt chasing tendencies but she wasn't one to back down from a challenge. An exclusive was what she'd pursued in this dinner and even though it was clear Mr. Luthor had other intentions she refused to be swayed by a few quotes or fancy wine.

Her lips pursed into a round ‘o’ and she tapped the side of her plate with a shrug, “You took over your first company at the age of twenty-one, but there were rumors that the buy-out was coerced.”

Try as he might he couldn't completely hide his reaction to her comment. She felt a silent victory and cheer as his body language stiffened. Across his face she could see a flicker of something ...lurking just behind the shadows before disappearing behind a forced smile that sent a chill down her spine.

She stared at him a moment before continuing with her question, “Is it true the Board of Directors was paid substantial, unreported fees?”

“Do you ever let your hair down?” he reached across the table and took her hand in his. Lois watched him hesitantly. His focus was everywhere but on providing her with an interview. “All work and no play...your credo, Lois Lane?”

Lois took a breath, steadying herself before she firmly turned him down. “Lex, I think you have the wrong idea about this dinner.” She reclaimed her hand, jerking it out of his grasp.

“I hope you don't think we're here merely because you're a beautiful woman. That wouldn't speak well for either of us.”

Lois cut him off. “As I said before, I think you've got the wrong idea about this dinner.”

A cold look crossed his face and was quickly replaced with the warm, flirtatious expression he'd been donning all evening. “Well, then, shall I have Asabi bring in dessert?”

“I never have dessert.” She replied, standing to her feet and crossing her arms over her chest defiantly. “I think I need to leave.”

“So soon?” He countered, looking at her expectantly. She arched an eyebrow at him, and he conceded, nodding to the man that had driven her to his Penthouse from the Planet, “Asabi, bring the car around, won’t you?”

Chapter 1

Clark fumbled through the never-ending lists he had printed out, keeping a careful watch for the remaining journalists burning the midnight oil a few desks over and the light still lit from his editor’s office. His gaze drifted to the elevator doors, wondering momentarily if Lois would return to the Planet tonight or not.

‘Probably not.’

His mouth twisted as he looked across his desk to where the elevator was, noting the dim light emitting on the balcony. He let out a heavy sigh, wondering if he should just call it a night. His gaze shifted back to the never ending list in front of him and took a heavy breath and flipped the page. What he wouldn’t give to be able to breeze through everything at super-speed, but he knew he couldn’t.

‘Too many witnesses.’

Each move weighed heavily on him. Each move brought with it the shame of not being able to fit in, searching for a place he would finally be able to call home. He had yearned for the excitement and adventure that came with traveling around the world, but more so he was drawn to the excitement of the unknown. Growing up in Smallville he had become well-versed in fitting in under the radar with those he had known his entire life, but never felt as if he had a connection with anyone outside of his parents. He had friends of course, but no one he could truly be himself with and no one he could confide in.

The loneliness was the worst of it.

Isolation.

On the whole, Metropolis felt different.

The pace of the city kept everyone and everything moving.

Something he could use to his advantage.

‘If only...’

Lois tapped her hand aimlessly on the smooth leather of the seat beneath her, watching the city lights flash by her while mulling over her failed attempt at nabbing the exclusive she thought this evening had been about. The car slid into a slow stop, gently rocking her back and forth and Lex turned to her with a nod.

“Safe and sound back to the grind.” He gestured to the Daily Planet building they were parked outside of as the

driver stepped out of the car, coming around to open the door for her.

She nodded her thanks and looked back at the billionaire with a hesitant gaze, “I think you learned a lot more about me than I learned about you.”

A seemingly knowing smile smoothed its way across Lex’s face, “I think we’ve both only scratched the surface,”

“Not exactly the point of an interview,” Lois pointed out as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Well, I’m a firm believer that the chase makes everything more worthwhile,” Lex said reaching for Lois’ hand and she pulled it back.

“Well, unfortunately, I only *chase* leads.” She shook her head, pointing back to his car. “And I believe you’ve made it clear there is no lead to follow here.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I can manage from here.”

Lex watched Lois Lane disappear behind the rotating glass doors of the Daily Planet, taken aback by her boldness and what seemed to be a brush-off. Something he hadn’t experienced in years. Not since taking over his father’s company at the ripe age of seventeen.

Something about Lois Lane was different from others he’d come across before.

She was...challenging.

He certainly loved a challenge.

He reached in his pocket to dial a number on his mobile phone he knew by heart, “Yes, Antoinette? Is everything ready? Of course, you’ll be well compensated....”

‘Idiot.’

Lois fumed internally as she stepped inside the awaiting elevator car, tapping the toe of her shoe against the short grains of the carpet below her feet. A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she reached over to press the button for the newsroom.

She wasn’t even sure why she had asked to be dropped off here. It wasn’t like she had a deadline to meet or anything to publish, but still she couldn’t allow her mind to stop racing. Going home meant accepting defeat. She would have to admit she’d failed. She wasn’t ready to do that. She may not have landed the exclusive she wanted to tonight, but she could get a jump start on prepping for the update with Perry.

A deep sigh escaped her lips as the doors opened on the newsroom floor and she rushed down the ramp, trying to brush off the failure of the evening. She made a pit stop to fill up on caffeine while simultaneously removing her earrings. She tucked them inside her coat pocket and set a Styrofoam cup on the counter in front of her before

reaching over to pour her coffee before gathering everything up and heading for her desk.

She barely had a chance to claim her seat when Clark approached her with a broad grin across his face. “Hey, I guess the interview went well...”

Lois made a face, feeling uncertainty cross her features as she looked back at Clark’s earnest gaze. “I had to get back. Work to do.”

“Oh,” Clark nodded his understanding.

She pointed to the single folded paper in his hand and asked, “What’s that?”

Clark looked down at the list in his hand and handed it over, “I was comparing the proposed medical treatments the United Nations of Congress had proclaimed to be able to heal with the medical research programs in process to see if anyone might be motivated to not want the mission to go forward.”

“Please tell me Dr. Baines has a relative or some boyfriend with a patent on a board somewhere,” Lois grumbled aloud as she scanned the list. “Metropolis General. Central Emory. Luthor Medical. Wayne Enterprises....” Her face blanched, “Most of the major hospitals with very deep pockets.”

“Maybe, but it’s motive, right?”

“Yeah, sure...” Lois agreed off handedly.

“Well, maybe we can ask Lex Luthor himself about the research Luthor Medical is working on. I’m sure you have some follow-ups to do with your interview anyway...”

“Yeah, not so much.” Lois frowned, leaning back in her chair. At his questioning gaze she begrudgingly admitted, “My interview was a bust.”

“Oh,” Clark’s face fell, seeming to understand the underlying message she thankfully didn’t have to come out and explain for him.

“It’s fine.” Lois cut him off before he could throw her a sympathetic apology. She had spent more than enough time kicking herself over letting her hopes get up about the interview with Lex Luthor. Now all she wanted to do was focus on something she could do. Right now, it looked like that might be digging into the research programs might be the place to start. “I need to prepare for our update with Perry tomorrow anyway. Was there anything new from S.T.A.R. Labs?”

“Not yet. I’m cross referencing what I can, but no direct link between Baines and Platt. There is enough to arouse suspicion though which I’m hoping...”

Lois shook her head, “Suspicion isn’t enough to get anyone to listen though, Smallville.”

“Well, is it enough to get Henderson to reclassify Platt’s death as a murder?” Clark asked, biting his lower lip.

“Maybe,” Lois shrugged her shoulders. “But convincing Perry is a good start. Just follow the evidence.”

Firelight flickered from the fireplace of the dimly lit room. Asabi was careful not to draw attention to himself as he prepared the drink station with a new bottle of each liquor Mr. Luthor liked to keep stocked in his study. A sound came from the corner of the room and he turned to see his employer, Alexander Luthor sitting in the leather executive chair behind the fine wooden desk, tapping his hand against an empty glass.

“A refill, Mr. Luthor?”

Lex looked up from his lap, clearing his throat as he shook his head, “No, that’s quite alright Asabi. I think it’s time I turn in.” He pushed against the edge of the desk and stood up, placing a hand on the desk for support. “Are the arrangements for Dr. Baines in order?”

“Radio frequency trigger for Dr. Baines’ helicopter will arrive promptly tomorrow evening.” Asabi assured him.

“Excellent,” Lex nodded his approval. “Once Dr. Baines has been taken care of there will be no one left to expose the sabotage at E.P.R.A.D.”

“I take it you’ve already swayed Ms. Lane to look elsewhere for her story?” Asabi asked with a wink.

Lex frowned, shaking his head. “She won’t be a problem.”

Lois took a gulp from her coffee mug as she gathered her things, mentally going through her checklist of everything she had to do this morning. Though she wasn’t convinced the medical research angle would pan out right now, it was all she had to go on. They had proof sabotage had taken place at E.P.R.A.D. but nothing concrete tying it to anyone.

She knew Perry well enough to anticipate his apprehension on printing a story without more solid evidence than they currently had. Proof of sabotage was circumstantial at best currently and there was nothing solid tying the sabotage to Baines or proving that Platt’s death was a murder.

“Lois?”

She pulled her attention away from the thoughts running through her mind over the current story she was trying to chase down to see Lucy standing by the front door with a delivery man standing behind her.

At Lois’ perplexed expression Lucy pointed behind her, “You have a delivery.”

Lucy stepped aside and the delivery man gestured around the small living room of her apartment, “Where would you like them?”

“Them?” Lois asked, not following his question until he stepped aside, gesturing to the cart of long stemmed red and white roses.

“What in the world?” Lois asked with a bewildered stare as he wheeled the cart in and began unloading the buckets of roses when she didn’t answer with a location. The courier handed her a card and she flipped the card open, reading it with a grimace.

‘Hoping to make up for last night.

~Lex’

“Wow, what exactly happened at dinner last night?” Lucy teased, reading the card over her shoulder.

Lois rolled her eyes, “Very funny.”

Dr. Baines stood in the doorway of Lex’s Penthouse with her arms crossed over her chest in defiance, “Lex, we have a problem.”

“Oh?” He looked over at her in confusion. “What problem do we have, Antoinette?”

“Reporters are crawling all over E.P.R.A.D. after that stunt with Commander Ladderman. You said no one would get hurt! You promised this wouldn’t come back on me.” She accused angrily.

“No, I promised *you* wouldn’t get hurt or implicated.” He corrected. At Baines’ scowl he sighed, reaching out to cup her cheek. “I’ll look into it.” he promised, taking her hand in his, “Just think, this time next year we will be celebrating the anniversary of Space Station Luthor as it becomes a source of scientific breakthroughs...”

“...and untold millions in patents,” Baines added.

“This isn’t about profit. It’s about power, real, unwavering power.” Lex remarked, smoothly, glancing across the room to where the sword of Alexander the Great was mounted on the wall.

Perry White’s hand tapped against the wood grain of his desk, quietly calming the aggravation that gnawed at his gut as he stared back at Lois Lane’s hopeful stare, looking over at the earnest expression on Clark Kent’s face.

They had their suspicions.

He knew that.

He had his own suspicions about what was going on at E.P.R.A.D.

But it wasn’t enough.

“Lois, you know better than to come in here with this weak of a story and expect me to print it.”

“Perry!”

“No.” Perry White shook his head adamantly, leaning back in his chair as he folded his hands across his lap.

“Look, I want to help. I just don’t see enough here. Hard facts. That’s the name of the game. Am I clear?”

“Crystal.” Lois grumbled, storming out of his office with Clark trailing behind.

The door to Perry’s office slammed behind Lois as she crossed her arms over her chest, leaning up against the column behind her. She shook her head as Jimmy stopped by to join her and Clark.

“What we need is physical evidence.”

“Well, Platt said the sabotage was on the ion particles. Maybe someone could take a look and prove...”

“How are we going to prove anything?” Lois challenged, shaking her head. “The last time Jimmy and I came within ten feet of E.P.R.A.D. we had security called on us.”

“Well, maybe we can ask Dr. Baines for permission to set up an independent examination...” Clark’s suggestion fell on deaf ears as Lois began to see red, frustrated he still was unable to see what was so plain to her.

“Clark! Are you out of your mind? Baines isn’t going to let us do that. She could be involved.” A long sigh escaped her throat and she muttered. “We don’t have time to play by the rules. The Colonist Transport goes up in two days.”

“What are we supposed to do then?” Clark asked as she reached for her purse.

“Our jobs. We investigate.”

Clark leaned against the steel door with a yellow ‘*Caution*’ tape across it. He spied the guards who were aimlessly walking up and down the aisles inside.

“Are you sure about this?” Clark asked, looking at Lois apprehensively as she readjusted the E.P.R.A.D. engineering suit she’d borrowed.

“Having second thoughts, Smallville?” Lois asked with a smirk.

“No, I just ...”

“Okay, we’re in.” Jimmy cheered as the lock to the door gave away and the E.P.R.A.D. Space Station’s Research Center entry way was revealed.

Lois pointed to the fenced in area marked ‘*REPAIR*’ and waved Clark and Jimmy with her to follow, “Come on, let’s see what we can find.”

Clark nodded, turning to follow Lois behind a secluded fenced in the area with a large print sign that read ‘*REPAIR.*’ With his enhanced vision he could see the shell being repaired but something seemed off about it.

“What do you think they’re doing there?” Jimmy asked, “Repairing the shell.”

Lois pointed to the wreckage, shaking her head, “No, I watched them load the Messenger onto the truck. The whole left side of the shell was bashed in.”

“They’re working on a phony shell.” Clark summarized, catching onto what she was saying.

Jimmy snapped a few photos of the wreckage being repaired and Lois pointed them down the hall toward the offices. “Come on, this way...”

Clark reached his hand out, hearing footsteps approaching. “Actually, I think the guards went this way. Don’t we want to stay behind them?”

“Right,” Lois hesitated a moment before following him down the corridor where a trio of offices were located. One of the research labs on the hall looked directly out onto the wreckage. “Follow me.”

Dr. Antoinette Baines slammed the phone down, fuming as she scanned the security footage with Lois Lane on the black and white screen. She pressed the speaker phone button and began to dial, waiting for the call to connect.

“Antoinette?”

Lex’s voice smoothly called her name, but she quickly snapped back, “Your friend Lois Lane is here. I think it’s time we eliminated her.”

“Kill off the Daily Planet’s star reporter? I’m surprised at the suggestion, Antoinette.”

“But she suspects *me*, Lex.” Baines argued, feeling her temper rise.

“She lacks *evidence*.” Lex insisted confidently. “Evidence is sometimes all that separates the criminal from the successful businessman... or woman.” Lex let out a heavy breath, “I told you I’d take care of her.”

Dr. Baines bit her lower-lip, feeling the hard lump fill her throat as she added, “Lex, I did this for you...”

“And you’ve been paid very well. In fact, your final installment is waiting for you in the helicopter. Proceed as planned. I promise... there will be no loose ends.”

Lois pointed to the screen in front of Jimmy, watching as the last of the files were backed up on a portable disk. She looked over her shoulder at Clark who was keeping guard by the door to be sure no one was coming. “Coast still clear?”

Clark nodded.

Lois looked to Jimmy who was tapping his hand on the desk. “Almost there?”

“I have no idea what we just saved or what we have photos of but it’s all here.” Jimmy answered.

“Good, let’s get out of here.”

Lex Luthor watched the footage of the helicopter outside of E.P.R.A.D. going up in flames. A slow smile spread across his face and he extended his hand out to

press the rewind button, pressing play again to watch his handiwork in action.

“Goodnight Antoinette.”

“Mr. Luthor?”

Lex turned to see Asabi in the doorway with the fresh bottle of liquor for him. “Yes, Asabi, I think a celebration is in order.” He watched as Asabi poured the cool liquid into his glass and topped it off with a few ice cubes.

Lex claimed his glass in the palm of his hand and took a sip, letting out a long hiss before turning to Asabi, “Were there any issues wiping Dr. Baines’ records from the E.P.R.A.D. computers?”

“No, the tech we worked with has assured me the virus will make it look like everything on Dr. Baines’ server was never there.”

Lex nodded his appeasement with the news and then took a sip of his drink before setting it down. “I’ll need to have the car ready at nine. I have a visit to make.”

“Oh, where to, Mr. Luthor?”

“The Daily Planet. I have some unfinished business.”

Chapter 2

Lightning crackled across the pitch dark sky, and the wind howled across the street as Lois Lane gripped the belt of her trench coat around her. She stole a glance over her shoulder to where Clark and Jimmy were a few paces behind her. The quick scan of her surroundings and a shove against the rotating glass doors, and she was inside the Daily Planet lobby.

“What a mess,” Jimmy grumbled, shaking the rain droplets off his jacket with a swipe of his hand.

Lois pointed them toward the elevator in the corner of the lobby, motioning for them to follow as she ran a hand through her damp hair. “Fingers crossed those files lead us somewhere.”

Clark nodded his agreement, reaching over to press the call button to the elevator, pausing a brief moment as his hand brushed against hers as he pulled it back. Her lips tightened, feeling an electrical current rush through her at the sudden contact. Every alarm blared in the back of her mind, warning her of the impending danger that lurked around the corner. She had recited the mantra again and again to herself, warning every hormone and wavering thought to beware. She had been through that before.

‘*Nope. Not going down that death trap again.*’

She cleared her throat, catching the stare of Clark’s eyes on her. It was strange how different he looked with his face covered in the remnants of the rainstorm they had just run through. If it weren’t for the solid frame of his glasses, they would almost disappear behind the scattered droplets that covered his face.

She wanted to say something...anything to break the silence that had fallen between the three of them but found her mind blank as she mulled over what the next move was. She had asked for a team, and this was what she had to work with. A rookie that seemed to have more wits than she'd initially given him credit for. They were getting close to something. She could feel it.

But would it be enough?

Would whatever data Jimmy had been able to confiscate from the E.P.R.A.D. server be enough to clear Samuel Platt's name and bring peace to his daughter and widow? Would there be a smoking gun to prove Baines' connection to the Messenger sabotage? Each question came with its own subset of inquiries that left her wondering where all of this would lead.

The doors to the elevator opened as they arrived on the newsroom floor, and Jimmy made a beeline for the conference room, mumbling something about decrypting files. The lights were dimly lit and in the corner was a television set playing footage of an explosion just outside of Metropolis with a small group of journalists watching the coverage.

Lois pointed the screen as she rushed up, "Hey, turn that up."

"At this time we can confirm at least one of the passengers has been identified as Dr. Antoinette Baines..." The newscaster's voice was solemn as he continued to talk through the somber subject matter, turning to experts who questioned how E.P.R.A.D. would move forward with the launch.

"No..." Lois fumed angrily, stomping her foot. "No."

A hand reached over to squeeze her shoulder and she jumped back, startled by the contact, turning to see Clark's surprised expression. "If Baines was behind the sabotage then why" Clark stopped mid-sentence, answering his own question. "She could identify whoever was responsible."

"As much as I hate to admit I'm wrong, I think you're right. She wasn't alone in this, but unfortunately, our only lead on who else could be working with her just went up in flames." Lois gestured to the screen in dismay.

"We still have the files on the server." Clark reminded her.

"Well, I hope you believe in miracles, Smallville, because we're going to need one."

Miracle.

That was how Lois had described their chances of clearing Samuel Platt's name. Clark patted his face dry, fresh out of the shower, aiming a beam of heat vision expertly across the hair that was beginning to peak across his chin and cheeks. One of the downsides he had noticed

since puberty was how quickly his hair grew. He ran his fingertips through the dark locks on his head, wondering momentarily if it might be time for another trim.

He grimaced, looking around the hotel room. Maybe he should wait until he was living somewhere bigger than a shoebox before attempting a haircut. Knowing his luck he might end up catching the whole place on fire. He turned his attention back to his reflection, watching as the dark shadow of hair disappeared under the beam reflected on it.

After patting his face dry, he finished drying himself off with a quick beam of heat across his skin, watching as the droplets of water rose up in steam around him. Once he was sure he had completely dried off, he moved at super-speed to change into the suit and tie he had laid out. He took a quick glance to the clock on the nightstand, noting the time.

"Better get moving."

Boring.

More boring.

Lois fought the urge to yawn as she listened to Barnes provide his update on the Metropolis Car Show. She glanced across the table, trying to find anything but the mundane tone that filled the air. She had so many things she could be doing right now. It was just shy of midnight when she had finally pulled herself away from analyzing the data they had found at E.P.R.A.D. What they had been able to access without the heavily coded passcode and encryptions had been printed out for later analysis. Jimmy was supposed to be working with the photo lab to get the photos he'd taken printed so they could be analyzed.

She just hoped it would be enough.

She shifted in her chair, feeling the edge of the chair's back hit her spine. Her neck craned to the side, and her gaze moved to the left corner where Clark was seated notepad in hand, seemingly unfazed by the dull stories being pushed by Barnes. If it weren't for Barnes' connection with one of the board members, she was sure Perry would have sent him packing years ago.

Most of the time she could stand the weekly update but today was not one of those days. She had a lot of ground to cover and hearing each reporter's update wasn't something she had the patience to endure. She glanced over at Clark who appeared equally as impatient to get through the weekly staff meeting as she was. A smile smoothed its way across her face as she looked across the table to where Jimmy was seated, taking furious notes and Cat who seemed more interested in analyzing Clark than paying attention to Perry.

She could admit even to herself that Clark was able to bring his a-game in the investigation. Many would have already turned in for the night, but he had still been at it

long after she had finished up her dinner with Lex Luthor. The sour reminder of how that dinner had ended left a bitter taste in her mouth, but thanks to a few hours of digging through the research and a less than legal second visit to E.P.R.A.D. they had a clear direction in the investigation that would help them find the person or persons responsible and expose them.

A giddy grin crossed her face at the anticipation of another headline with her by-line gracing the cover of the Daily Planet. She had worked hard to get where she was in her career, but one thing that still remained just out of grasp was the long-sought out Pulitzer. This story could be the story that finally got her that recognition. Her attention moved to Clark just as he glanced down at his notebook again. A curious furrow rose in her brow, pondering if he might be giving the pad in his hand just a little too much attention.

“Lois?”

Lois pulled herself out of her inner musings, hearing her name from her editor. “Still working through the E.P.R.A.D. research to figure out who’s behind the sabotage.”

Perry’s brow furrowed and he smirked at her, “Well, that’s good to hear, but that still doesn’t answer my question on the Lex Luthor piece.”

“Lex Luthor?” Lois asked, feeling the heat twinge across her cheeks.

“Yes, were you able to get anywhere with your interview?” Perry asked with a bemused expression on his face.

“No, I hit a wall,” Lois grumbled in response.

Perry’s smirk broke out into a grin as he pointed to the window behind her, looking out onto the newsroom. “Well, maybe a follow-up is in order?”

Lois looked over her shoulder, startled to see Lex Luthor standing a few feet away in the middle of the bullpen, staring back at her with a nod. She let out a low mutter, grabbing her things and heading into the newsroom to see just what had spurred a visit from the philanthropist.

Clark’s brow furrowed as he moved his attention to the newsroom behind him, watching as Lois exited the large conference room and cornering Lex Luthor, who stood just a few feet away from her desk. His super-hearing almost instinctively tuned into the conversation happening a few feet away. He knew he should be focused on his editor’s updates, especially given the fact that this was his first week, but he just couldn’t help himself.

“Bad time?” Lex Luthor’s voice rang in his ears as he gave the best impression he could of paying attention to Perry as he continued the update with the staff.

“Working,” Lois responded to Luthor, “I don’t exactly have a story to file because someone got the wrong idea about dinner the other night.”

“Did you get the flowers? I did try and apologize...”

“I don’t need an apology. I need answers to my questions.”

Lois closed the door of the small conference room behind her, stepping out into the newsroom and stopping in front of Lex Luthor, watching him with a careful eye. “What can I help you with, Lex?”

“Bad time?” Lex asked, raising his eyebrow with a smile.

She crossed her arms over her chest, shaking her head, “Working. I don’t exactly have a story to file because someone got the wrong idea about dinner the other night.”

“Did you get the flowers? I did try and apologize...”

Lex tapped his index finger on his jaw.

“I don’t need an apology.” Lois counted sharply. “I need answers to my questions.”

“I was hoping I might be able to make it up to you by taking you to lunch.” Lex offered, gesturing toward the elevators. “I have a meeting in Paris this morning and would welcome the company.”

Lois twisted her mouth tightly, pondering momentarily if she should trust the invitation or not. As appealing as it was to possibly follow-up on the elusive interview she had been chasing after for what felt like forever, she couldn’t just drop everything and fly off to Paris without any notice.

“As tempting as a trip to Paris is, Mr. Luthor, I’m going to have to decline,” Lois frowned, shaking her head.

“There’s a little girl that’s depending on me to help clear her dad’s name right now, and I can’t let her down.”

“Yes, of course, I understand,” Lex Luthor seemed surprised by the rejection but quickly recovered with a quick, “Another time then?”

As he spoke, the conference room emptied out, and she heard Clark and Jimmy approaching, “I’ve got to get these photos printed, and then we can meet up later?” Jimmy asked as he grabbed his camera bag.

“Yeah, maybe take what you have to Henderson and see what he says?” Clark suggested as they stopped in front of Lex Luthor. Clark nodded recognition to Lex Luthor, “Mr. Luthor.”

“Mr. Kent,” Lex Luthor quickly excused himself, “Well, I’ve got a flight to catch, hmm?” She gave a nonverbal shrug, and he gestured toward Perry’s office. “I’ll be seeing you, Ms. Lane.”

Lois frowned, watching as Lex met Perry just outside his office, shaking his hand with a grin as if he was working one of his elaborate parties. She wondered momentarily just what he might have to discuss with Perry

but quickly dismissed it as she dove into the next steps on the investigation.

Detective Bill Henderson sifted through the photos laid out on his desk, grumbling heavy breaths and offering up a minor ‘hmm’ every now and then while examining each photo as if it were a jigsaw puzzle piece to a much larger picture. He loved puzzles.

“Well?”

His eyes lifted, seeing a very tired James Olsen standing over him, pacing back and forth. “Do you want my opinion or not?”

“Sorry,” the mumble came out of the young man’s mouth as he looked down at his feet. “I’m just nervous.”

“It’s hard to make some of this out,” Henderson explained, pointing to the blurry image on the photo in front of him.

“Yeah, sorry, I was just trying to get as many photos as I could,” Jimmy explained sheepishly.

Henderson pointed to the blurry image of the shell being rebuilt and tapped on it, “There’s something here in the corner that can’t be quite made out. There are a few guys down at S.T.A.R. Labs that specialize in this kind of stuff.” He pulled out a card and jotted down the name and handed it to the young journalist. “See if you can get them to help clean this up and then we can see what we’re looking at.”

Perry tapped his fingertips on the surface of his desk, mulling over his conversation with philanthropist Lex Luthor from earlier in the morning. Though he’d been careful not to come right out and say it, the underlying message had been clear. Whatever had happened during the interview Lois had conducted with Luthor apparently had left the billionaire rattled enough to threaten legal action against the Planet if any reporter were to pursue an investigation into LexCorp or any of its subsidiaries.

Unfortunately for Lex Luthor, a threat like that would only encourage him to look further into what he was trying to hide.

“Mr. White?”

He looked up, seeing the copy boy at his door, “Yes?”

“Fax came over directed to you, Mr. White.” The copy boy handed it to him.

“Thank you.”

Clark cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder, listening as Jimmy stammered his update from Detective Henderson. He nodded his agreement and responded, “Okay, Jimmy, just let us know what you find out...”

He hung the phone up and turned his attention to the disparate files they had printed off from the data retrieved

from the server, hoping to find anything that would help clear Dr. Platt’s name. The endless reports directed to Dr. Baines had covered everything from lab conditions to inner office squabbles, but nothing so far even hinted at anything regarding sabotage or mechanical errors like Platt claimed.

“Jimmy’s taking the photos to S.T.A.R. Labs to see if they can clean up the photos he took at E.P.R.A.D.” Clark said with a defeated sigh. “I guess we wait.”

“This is hopeless,” Lois grumbled from across the table, taking a sip from her mug of coffee. “We’ve got blurry photos and a smorgasbord of files that may or may not give us what we need to prove sabotage.”

“New E.P.R.A.D. director still not returning calls, huh?” Clark asked.

“I’ve left four messages,” Lois grumbled.

“We still have two days until the launch,” Clark shook his head in dismay, running a hand across his face. He pushed the stack of reports he had been sifting through to the side and reached for another file filled with more unknown documents to go through.

“Two days and no one is even willing to consider talking to the press or listening to unsubstantiated rumors from a mad man that supposedly killed himself.” Lois reminded him, “We have to prove Platt was murdered in order to restore his credibility and...” She stopped mid-sentence, looking down at something in front of her.

“What?” Clark asked.

“It’s a list of patents from the USPTO office for the medical treatments Prometheus is supposed to help find cures for, but...” Her face scrunched as she looked over the paper in front of her. “It doesn’t make any sense?”

“What doesn’t make sense?” Clark asked, walking over to where she was sitting to read over her shoulder.

“Look,” Lois pointed to the list in front of her. “Luthor Space Station has a patent on almost everything listed here.”

“I thought Luthor Space Station didn’t break ground until this year,” Clark’s jaw tightened as he read through the list.

“That’s what he said. Kinda throws out the whole humanitarian argument, doesn’t it?” Lois jabbed with a shake of her head. She pointed her finger at the date of the patents, “This says the patent was awarded last year.”

“Maybe it’s a coincidence?” Clark shrugged his shoulders but didn’t seem all that convincing.

“Yeah, right...” Lois grumbled. “Maybe there was something to that medical research angle, but we’ll need more than just suspicion to prove anything.”

“So, what do we do?” Clark asked.

“Follow the evidence.” Lois tapped her pen against the list in front of her. “Where’s that list of medical research centers you had?”

“Just a sec,” Clark stepped out into the newsroom to retrieve the list of research centers he had pulled the previous day. He barely reached his desk when he was stopped by Perry White.

“Hey, Kent, you and Lois still working on that E.P.R.A.D. sabotage story, right?” Perry asked, walking up with a printout from the fax machine.

“Yes, sir, Mr. White, we might have caught a new angle,” Clark said, turning to his editor with a smile.

“Well, I think you may have more than a new angle,” Perry handed him the fax in his hand. “This just came in. Sent over from E.P.R.A.D.’s new director.”

“The same director that has been avoiding our calls?” Clark asked with a raised eyebrow.

Perry chuckled, patting Clark on the shoulder, “Well, he’s talking now. He apparently found this on Dr. Baines’ hard drive and wanted to do the right thing.” Perry pointed toward the conference room. “Look it over with Lois, and I want the story on my desk within the hour.”

“Yes, sir,” Clark called after him, scanning the fax he’d been given. A frown crossed his face, feeling the pit of his gut churn as he headed back into the conference room. The blinds on the conference room door clanged, and he let out a low breath.

“You find it?” Lois asked, not looking up from the scattered papers in front of her.

“Yeah,” Clark nodded, claiming a seat next to her. “Mr. White just dropped this off. A fax from E.P.R.A.D.’s new director.”

Lois’ jaw tightened as she looked it over, “A confession to the sabotage from Dr. Baines.” Lois frowned, shaking her head. “Seems a bit convenient considering Baines is now dead.”

“You don’t think she’s behind it?” Clark asked.

“No, I think she’s behind it, but I don’t think she was alone in it,” Lois explained.

“Well, Perry wants the story within the hour. What do we write?”

Messenger Sabotaged, Alleged Saboteur Dies in Fiery Explosion!

By Lois Lane and Special Contribution by Clark Kent

Lex Luthor took a sip of his chardonnay, scanning the front page of the Daily Planet with a frown as he scanned the article. “Asabi?” Lex called in his office, knowing the man was waiting just outside the hall.

“Yes, sir?” Asabi called as he stepped into the office.

“It seems the director at E.P.R.A.D. wasn’t as convincing as we anticipated.”

Asabi frowned, pointing at the front-page story with Antoinette Baines’ photo declaring her as the saboteur, “Mr. Luthor the Planet, like every other news organization has run with the confession you had the director send out.”

“All other news organizations left no doubt in the public’s mind that Dr. Baines acted alone. It seems Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent are less than convinced of Antoinette’s sole culpability in the Messenger’s sabotage.”

“Your visit with Mr. White this morning didn’t help?” Asabi asked curiously.

“Not as well as I would have liked,” Lex mused, shaking his head, “Unfortunately, distracting Ms. Lane was a fruitless endeavor as well.”

“How would you like to proceed Mr. Luthor?”

“I want you to find out everything you can on the reporters Lois Lane, Clark Kent and James Olsen. No matter how small the indiscretion. I want to know about it.” Lex said as he pulled out a file in his desk marked, ‘Bureau 39.’ He straightened his tie. “I have a meeting in Washington this evening. I expect a full report when I return.”

“Of course, Mr. Luthor,” Asabi nodded.

Messenger Sabotaged, Alleged Saboteur Dies in Fiery Explosion!

By Lois Lane and Special Contribution by Clark Kent

Glasses clinked against one another, and the crowd of journalists circled around the television set, and a banner was pinned up with ‘*Congratulations!*’ painted across it. Lois grinned ear to ear as she walked up to Jimmy, who was basking in the attention from the secretarial pool.

“Of course, it was a risk, but as they say no reward without risk, right? I took the photos myself...”

Lois took a sip of her champagne, and she turned to Clark with a smirk, “He took the photos...”

Clark chuckled as Perry approached them with a broad smile, “Lane, Kent! Great work you two. This piece is sure to have quite the number of follow-ups.”

“That’s great news, Sir,” Clark responded with a smile. “Has the new director re-examined the Messenger yet?”

“Yes, I just spoke with ground control, and they just finished going through the colonist launch station with a fine-tooth comb. They discovered the same coolant problem in the protective bands and have fixed it. They’re all set for tomorrow morning.” Perry cheered, clapping Clark on the shoulder. “And you’ll be pleased to hear Amy Platt is back on the passenger list with her mother.”

Clark let out a sigh of relief, relieved to hear their spot on the Messenger had been restored after the investigation. “Thank you, sir.”

Perry ran a hand through his hair, grinning ear to ear, “We’ve been getting calls all morning about the

E.P.R.A.D. sabotage, and it seems the new director is willing to have a sit down after the launch.”

“After the launch?” Lois asked.

“Now, look, Lois, you have to admit with all the sabotage and questionable practices going on, expecting a seat on the Messenger was far-fetched.” Perry chastised.

“But Chief, imagine the Daily Planet getting an exclusive personal account of being on the colonist transport...” Lois argued, feeling the rejection hit her hard.

“No can do, Lois.”

Lois seemed to mull the rejection over and then nodded begrudgingly, “Oh, well, another time then.”

“You still have the sit down with the director afterward,” Perry reminded her.

“Right.” Lois nodded as Perry moved off with a shrug. She turned her attention to Clark who was admiring the headline on the front page of the Planet. “Admiring your handiwork, Smallville?”

“Something like that,” Clark nodded to her with a half-smile. “We did something really good here. Cleared Platt’s name and made sure a little girl got her place on the Messenger restored.”

“I know,” Lois frowned, “I just wish we could have caught who was behind the sabotage to begin with.”

“One headline doesn’t mean we have to stop the investigation,” Clark reminded her. “Maybe we can compare notes later? If I do recall, you owe me a raincheck on dinner?”

Lois flashed him a weak smile, “As much as I’d love to dig into the leads we have with the medical research, I think I’m going to pass tonight. Maybe after the launch?”

“Sure,” Clark nodded, trying not to look too disappointed.

Later that evening, Clark stared at his reflection in a full-length mirror at his parents’ farmhouse, feeling a wave of uncertainty wash over him as he looked into the mirror and saw the blue and red spandex dressed man staring back at him. He had tried on about a dozen different costumes. All colorful spandex. So far, none had caught his interest, but this one felt different. It was mostly blue spandex with red briefs over them. It had a red cape attached and a yellow belt around the waist. He wore matching red boots.

“What about that one?” his mom called out to him, exhausted with her glasses half skewed across her face and her hair loose from the pins she kept them in.

“I don’t know, Mom...I mean, it’s certainly...colorful,” he said, walking around the bedroom uncertainly.

She stood up to get a better look at him.

“What do you think?” he asked, feeling a self-conscious wave of uncertainty wash over him as she looked him over.

“Well, one thing’s for sure; no one’s gonna be looking at your face,” she teased.

“Mom!!”

She let out a good-hearted chuckle and teased. “Well, they don’t call them tights for nothing.”

She wrapped her arm around him and stared at his reflection a moment. “It feels like there’s something missing. Something...” She moved toward the bed and pulled out an old trunk from beneath the bed. She flipped the latches open to the trunk and pulled out a blue baby blanket, holding it close to her. “The baby blanket we found you in so long ago.” She put the blanket back down and reached into the trunk once more. “And this...” she pulled out an ‘S’ shield emblem.

After a few back and forth placements and one more bout with the sewing machine, he donned the suit with the crest across the chest sewn onto it, staring at his reflection with a new sense of fearlessness that he hadn’t felt before. Having this connection to his past as a part of his alter-ego felt right. Like destiny.

“Your parents would have been so proud of you. We sure are.” His mom hugged him.

“Thanks, Mom.” He hugged her back and turned around to look at himself in the mirror more critically. “I’m still not so sure about the cape.”

“Really? I love it. It’ll look grand when you’re flying.”

His dad stepped in the room to survey the suit making process and stopped short when he saw him with the emblem across his chest. “That’s my boy.” He smiled proudly.

E.P.R.A.D. was abuzz with activity and thanks to sources and a disguise, Lois was able to sneak on board, finding herself a seat in the habitation module. She began to settle herself in, strapping herself in for the launch. This was it. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the door to the room open. Panic began to set in as she feared her work to obtain the exclusive of the lifetime would be dashed in a moment, but the man was far too preoccupied to worry about her presence. He placed a device on the wall then left before he could notice her presence.

A digital beeping noise reached her ears and she quickly unstrapped herself, moving to examine the device. She walked over to it and felt panic set in. “Oh, my God!” she gasped. The digital timer on the wall read one minute and thirty seconds. It was counting backward along with the announcer. She hurried over to the door and began to bang on it insistently. “It’s a bomb! There’s a bomb on the transport! Somebody help!”

“One minute and counting...” the announcer read off.

Back at the Kent farmhouse, Clark was settled with his parents, taking in the historic launch that played on the television as they watched the boosters ignite. “There she blows,” Jonathan mused.

Clark looked up from the television with a faraway look on his face. Martha noticed the gesture. “What’s wrong, Clark?”

“Something’s wrong,” he said grimly, getting up to change into his suit.

“What do you mean? Did you hear something?” Jonathan asked in concern.

“I’ve got to go.”

Desperation began to set in as Lois fiddled through her purse, searching for something to help diffuse the bomb. At the bottom of her purse, she found her Swiss Army Knife. With the help of the knife, she found a cabinet on the wall and tore off the casing. Underneath the plastic casing were a million different colored wires. “I have to warn them...” she muttered to herself. “Which one?” She began slashing the wires with her knife, unsure of what each wire connected to but hoping it would be enough to draw attention to stall the launch and get rid of the bomb.

“Thirty seconds and counting...” the officer read off.

A technician waved at the officer. “Sir, we have a circuit failure in the main panel.”

The officer nodded. “Due to a mechanical failure, we have suspended countdown at twenty-nine seconds. We will advise.”

Outside of E.P.R.A.D., hundreds of spectators stood watching the launch. A red and blue blur passed over them.

“What the hell is that?” a man asked.

“Is it a bird?” another asked.

“Is it a plane?” someone else asked.

A man with a pair of binoculars shook his head. “Nope. Just some guy in a pair of tights and a cape.”

The crowd turned on him, throwing random items at him. “Oh, come on.”

The launch commander and other personnel gathered around the monitors, searching for an answer as to what had gone wrong. All team members were silent and in awe as they watched Clark make his way down the corridors and into the main panel room.

“Are we scrubbing the mission?” the public affairs officer asked the commander.

“Help! Somebody! There’s a bomb! Please!”

Clark made his way to the door and pried it open. Lois looked towards the door, not really getting a good look at him. “Oh, thank God! We’ve got to get the bomb squad down here and...” she stopped when he stepped into the light, unable to finish her sentence as she stared at him with an intensity that he was sure would melt him into a pool of nothingness if she could.

He cleared his throat, pointing at the device behind her, “If you’ll excuse me, Ms. Lane,” he reached for the bomb behind her, taking it and placing it in his mouth to swallow.

Before she could open her mouth to argue, it exploded inside him. She stared at him for a long moment, “How did you know my name?”

A twinkle crossed her eyes, and she cleared her throat, “You just swallowed a bomb, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.” He responded, trying not to meet the steely gaze that seemed to be sizing him up with a critical stare. “I don’t believe you’re supposed to be back here, Ms. Lane.”

“Well, I won’t tell if you won’t, Smallville.”

Chapter 3

Panic rose up inside Lois as she banged on the metal door, searching for anyone who would hear her pleas. “Help! Somebody! There’s a bomb! Please!”

A startled gasp escaped her throat as the doors opened with the help of a hand sliding across the edge and someone... Was he wearing a cape? She barely had a chance to look at him as relief washed over her, and she uttered a quick, “Oh, thank God! We’ve got to get the bomb squad down here and...”

She found herself unable to finish her statement as she stared at him, getting a look at him for the first time. The blue and red suit was flashy and looked like something off of a Saturday morning cartoon, but there was something so familiar about his eyes as he looked back at her. She tried to place it. Wondering why this stranger in tights and a cape looked at her as if he knew her.

She had a thousand questions racing through her mind as she stared at the ‘S’ emblem sewn across his chest, trying to find her voice. A soft clearing of his throat came, and he pointed at the beeping device behind her, “If you’ll excuse me, Ms. Lane.”

She stepped back, watching as he reached for the device, yanking open the wires and pulling out the small explosive trigger, and placing it in his mouth to swallow. She wanted to scream, yell...something. This was insane. Yet as she watched the bomb explode and disappear inside this stranger, she felt was so familiar.

Wait, he just said her name. He knew her. Her eyes looked up, sharply catching his gaze.

He knew her.

His eyes felt familiar.

His voice.

<< “Such a typical male response.”

“Lois, trust me on this. I am not your typical male.”>>

She stared at him for a long moment before breaking the silence, “How did you know my name?”

His eyes seemed to almost twinkle with a smile as he stared back at her. It hit her like a wave. His voice. His face. It was all him in this person that had just swallowed a bomb and ripped a metal door off its hinges before her eyes.

“You just swallowed a bomb, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.” He responded as she continued to stare at him with a critical gaze. A narrow look crossed his face as he frowned, “I don’t believe you’re supposed to be back here, Ms. Lane.”

“Well, I won’t tell if you won’t, Smallville.”

The admission caught him off guard as he stared at her for the longest moment. She was sure of her assessment as soon as she saw the look of panic on his face. Mustering up the pretense of calm, she folded her arms over her chest and broke the awkward silence that had fallen between them.

“I’m guessing you were planning on a haircut before heading back to the Planet? Kinda makes you stand out. And if I were you, I’d do something with the hair while in the suit because a pair of glasses isn’t enough to hide behind unless you plan on providing Perry with the mother of all excuses...”

“How did you...?”

“Please,” Lois shrugged her shoulders. “I’m not the top investigative reporter for nothing.” She pointed behind him, “And might want to save this for later...”

Before he could respond, several colonists appeared in the doorway. Among them were Mrs. Platt and her daughter, Amy. Lois shifted her shoulders back as they both turned to face the colonists.

The head colonist took a step inside and surveyed the damage. He looked from the torn circuitry of the panel to where Clark was standing. He appeared to have drawn the wrong conclusion, so Lois interjected, still reeling from the events that had occurred moments ago, “Th-there was ... a bomb.” She pointed at Clark. “He...he ate it.”

The colonists all appeared to be equally shocked by the news. Amy wheeled herself up to Clark, unafraid. Lois watched in amazement as Clark’s face lit up with a light smile, kneeling down, so he was eye-level with Amy. Prometheus had been Dr. Platt’s dream for her. Now, thanks to Clark, that dream would see reality.

“Hi.” Amy looked at Clark with a whimsical smile, admiring his suit as she pointed to the ‘S’ on his chest. “I like your costume.”

“Thank you. My mother made it for me.” He smiled back at her. “What’s your name?”

“Amy. Amy Platt. Who are you?”

Clark hesitated a moment and then responded with, “I’m...a friend.”

“Can you really fly?”

He nodded. “Yes, I can.”

“Can you teach me?”

“Not to fly.” He winked at her, looking around them. “But once this lab is operational...walk...that’s very possible.”

The public address speaker crackled as the whirling sound from the booster rockets whined down to silence, indicating they were turning off. “Attention, colonists. The mission has been scrubbed. Prepare to disembark.”

The colonists all voiced their disappointment. The head colonist sighed, “It’s over.”

“Why?” Lois asked, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Once the thrusters have been fired they have to be replaced,” Mrs. Platt explained.

“We’ll lose our launch window. We just have to forget about Space Station Prometheus,” the head colonist said in despair.

“No, you don’t. There’s nothing wrong with this transport or the station. You only need to get there,” Clark reasoned aloud.

“How are they supposed to do that?” Lois asked, watching as the metaphoric wheels began to turn in Clark’s head.

“Easy. I’ll give them a boost,” Clark replied with a smile.

Clark’s mind was reeling with questions as he flew the Messenger transport into orbit, helping place it on the Prometheus Space Station. So many breakthroughs would come from this mission, and so many lives changed. He wanted to bask in the moment and celebrate this advancement but he couldn’t.

Everything seemed to change the moment Lois had called him out on the giveaways that had told her who he really was. He still had to talk to her. Returning to E.P.R.A.D. wasn’t something he envisioned going well with the conflicted feelings that ranged from horror and panic to awe and admiration. He knew she was the best and yet he had flown in without a second thought. He should have known he wouldn’t be able to hide from her.

So now he was left with a dilemma. How could he continue to live in Metropolis? How could he use this... whatever persona to keep up two identities when someone he’d met less than a week ago had seen right through him?

If it weren’t for that bomb...

That bomb.

A bomb that had been placed on the Messenger to destroy Prometheus. He didn't have the proof, but he had his suspicions. He stopped mid-flight, landing on the balcony of the Penthouse to Lex Luthor's home. His arms were folded across his chest, keeping the stance as he waited for Luthor to notice his presence.

The billionaire caught his eye, standing from his desk and pressing a button to open the windows that led to the balcony. A slow clap accompanied the welcome as Luthor looked at him with a narrow gaze.

This was it.

He was positive Lex Luthor was behind the explosive device on the transport this evening and possibly even Dr. Baines' death. He just wished he had the hard evidence to prove it.

"An astonishing debut..." Luthor cheered, bringing the claps to a pause. "To what do I owe this honor?"

He took a step towards Lex. "Dr. Platt's name has been cleared no thanks to you."

"Yes, I heard Dr. Platt's suicide was ruled as foul play." Luthor allowed carefully. "I'm not sure what that has to do with me?"

"Someone was pulling the strings and lining the pockets of Dr. Baines and others to be sure Prometheus failed. I suppose on the face, it was a good plan. Destroy Prometheus and just about anyone can swoop in and build a space station of their own in its place. Not only would they make billions from the patents of vaccines developed, but also be the supposed savior of the space program."

Clark stared at Luthor for a long time, careful not to point the finger at him directly without his evidence.

"That's quite a theory," Luthor replied calmly, but his eyes gave away his nerves that were rattled by the insinuation.

"Isn't it?" Clark uttered with a long pause. "Imagine someone so cold and heartless that they'd be willing to kill innocent people that just want to find a cure in order to cut in line and get the credit."

"A terrible thing," Luthor mused, staring back at him coldly. "What did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't," Clark responded. "Perhaps you should commit your abundant resources to finding the person responsible for these murders, Mr. Luthor. I hear you like to throw your resources around." A smirk crossed his face, and he counted, "Unless you already know who is responsible for these crimes?"

"So, you become both my judge and executioner?" Luthor challenged.

"Like any other citizen of the planet, I must obey the law. I am not above it. I don't think you have that same belief, Mr. Luthor. You seem to believe you are above the laws that govern this city and keep order."

Lex smiled back at him. "I hold a certain ...position in this city."

"Yes, and there is nothing that would please me more than to see you dethroned and exposed for who you *truly* are. That day will come."

"I trust not. But then, as they say...let the games begin," Lex lifted his glass in a toast and took a sip.

He turned away, floating a few inches off the ground as he prepared to fly away. "One other thing. If you ever need to find me, all you have to do is look up."

Lois slammed the door to her apartment closed and let out a shaky breath. She leaned her head back against the door, sighing in relief. So many questions remained swarming in her mind. The long drive back from E.P.R.A.D. had given her a lot to mull over. After an hour of questioning, she'd been released by security and left to return home. She had snuck onto the Messenger transport in hopes of landing the story that would help take her career to the next level.

She looked around at the familiar surroundings, noting Lucy's noticeable absence, and headed for the bedroom to change out of her work clothes. She turned on the shower and stepped in, closing the door behind her. The water beat on her back as she leaned back against the hot water.

She'd certainly found that story, but right now, she was struggling to figure out just which way to take that story. A bonafide superhero had rushed onto the Messenger transport and saved the lives of the colonists, and flown it into space. That was news. That was an irrefutable fact she couldn't deny.

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

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

The question came as to whether she should reveal everything she knew.

She barely knew Clark.

He seemed to be a genuinely kind person.

A hero.

Something the world needed desperately right now.

Lois winced as she felt the tight muscles in her neck, begin to relax against the hot water.

<<"We should have known. We should have protected him.">>

<<"You are a strange one, Clark Kent.">>

She stepped out of the shower and wrapped her towel around her as she headed toward the bedroom to change. She opened the drawer and grabbed a tank top and pajama bottoms to change into.

Her mind kept spinning through the last few days, trying to make sense of the chaos so she could come to a

decision. She wanted a Pulitzer. She wanted it more than anything in this world, but was it worth possibly destroying an innocent man's life for?

No.

She didn't know him.

She wasn't sure what this persona he had raced onto the scene in was supposed to do other than help the colonists that were in danger of losing their chance at a cure that had been ripped out of their grasp by an unknown force working against them. There was a lot she didn't know, but right now, she knew he seemed to be an ally.

'Tomorrow,' she promised silently, pulling back the covers and preparing to settle in for the night.

Lex leaned back in the fine leather seat behind his desk, turning to face the view from his balcony as he puffed on his cigar. The moonlit sky felt different. A change in the air from the freedom he had always enjoyed amid the city. This unnamed adversary had thrown the metaphorical gauntlet and called him on his game.

Now, it was time for him to do the same

"What?"

Clark felt the panic rise up inside him as he hung his head, staring down at his boots, listening to the heavy pounding of his father's heart in his chest. Every warning and fear of discovery they had fought against had come to a head. Despite the costume and the best of intentions, he had discovered.

"Jonathan, calm down," his mother urged, placing a supportive hand on Clark's shoulder. "We don't even know that Lois will..."

"Calm down? Everything we've worked for is at risk. Not only does he pull a stunt for the whole world to see on national television, but his super persona is exposed by a reporter he's known for less than a week." Jonathan threw his arms up in the air. "I don't even know what to say or think."

"We don't know that she'll say anything, right?" his mom looked in Clark's direction, trying to assess his opinion on the matter.

"I don't know," Clark shook his head.

"Well, did she say anything?" his mom asked.

"Other than suggesting a haircut and something more than glasses in my disguise?" Clark asked with a furrowed brow.

His mom turned to his dad shaking her head, "That doesn't sound like someone who's eager to expose Clark to the world."

"Even so, it's dangerous," his dad shook his head. "This isn't like being caught by Sherriff Holmes in the cornfields with half-burnt crops. This is a big city with

people that don't know you and are out for themselves. Always looking to make a quick buck. If they find out about you, they'll put you in a laboratory, and ..."

Clark shook his head and finished the familiar phrase with him. "... 'dissect me like a frog.' I know, Dad. Believe me, I know, but I didn't know what else to do..." Clark stood up and paced around the room. "I couldn't just let the Messenger explode."

His parents exchanged a look, and his mom placed a hand on his shoulder. "So, what do we do now?"

"I don't know," Clark admitted, shaking his head.

MYSTERIOUS PHENOMENA IN SPACE!

The headline for the Metro Gazette read.

CIEST MANIFIQUE!

The headline for the Paris Bulletin read.

ALIEN INVASION ON EARTH!

The headline for the Daily S.T.A.R. read.

I'M HAVING THE SPACEMAN'S BABY!

The headline for the National Inquisitor read.

"We are in shock tonight as over the emotional events preceding the Messenger's takeoff from E.P.R.A.D. and the mysterious circumstances surrounding the landing on Space Station Prometheus. The world is waiting for answers as to who this....flying man is. No one knows who he is or where he came from." the President of the United States addressed the press.

"Mr. President? Do you feel this 'flying man' as you put it is friend or foe?" Michael Mabee from the Gazette asked.

"At this time, we don't know enough about him, but by all appearances....he seems to be a friend," The President said, "Next question?"

"Has anyone tried to contact this 'flying man' and find out if there are any others like him?" Nick Nelson from the National Inquisitor asked.

The President sighed for a moment, "Mr. Nelson, as I already stated, we haven't spoken to him, but if it makes you feel any better when E.P.R.A.D. was checking the footage from the rescue, there were no signs of any unidentified flying objects in Earth's orbit,"

"But what if..."

The television blinked, and Lois set the remote down, tapping her hand against the table in front of her. Her hand brushed against her cheek, pushing her hair behind her ear as her mind drifted to the events over the last twenty-four hours. The world was watching and demanding answers to the events that had transpired yesterday, and for once, she had the answers but wasn't convinced the truth should be told.

'Flying man?'

Question after question tumbled through her mind as she gathered her things.

'Time to face the music.'

Chapter 4

Clark kept a careful eye out as he pushed through the swinging doors of the Daily Planet. The lobby was filled with the usual rumblings for the morning as everyone moved through to their different destinations. He tugged at his collar, wondering what fate waited for him in the bullpen but knew the only way to find the answers to the questions that had kept him up the better part of the evening was to break the silence and talk to Lois.

He wanted to believe he was right about her.

He wanted to believe she wouldn't reveal his secret to the world.

He desperately needed to believe that.

He reached the corridor where the elevator panel was, standing with the small crowd awaiting the elevator car. He glanced at the time, wondering how chaotic the newsroom would be after the events that had transpired at E.P.R.A.D. The elevator doors opened, pushing that concern to the side as he stepped inside among the others that had been waiting. He let out a heavy breath, watching the doors close, and then a hand slipped inside, nudging the doors open at the last minute.

His eyes darted to the opening, catching Lois' gaze as she stepped onto the elevator car and then quickly looked away, wondering if he should say anything. Two floors up, half the patrons left the elevator car, and another floor later, they arrived at the newsroom, where they were greeted by the booming voice of their editor.

Lois fidgeted in her seat, looking across the conference room as Perry paced in front of the staff, listing off what sounded like the agenda of any other staff meeting. Only this wasn't any other staff meeting.

She knew it.

Perry knew it.

Clark should have known it was coming.

Perry turned to the staff, stopping mid-pace, stopping in front of Lois and letting out a low whistle, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Daily Planet has prided itself on being the pillar of journalism among the worldwide news organizations. We are the first always. We are the best."

There was a soft murmur of agreement and Perry let out a low breath.

"We are the best, and yet the world watches with bated breath as the Daily Planet has nothing to say on the subject of E.P.R.A.D.'s rescue yesterday and the mysterious flying man that supposedly flew the Messenger into space? Now, why is that?"

"Chief, no one has seen this guy..." Jimmy stammered.

Perry looked down at Lois with a piercing stare as Lois fidgeted nervously in her seat, "Is that so?" There was a murmur of agreement, and Perry continued to stare suspiciously at Lois. He knew. She knew he did, but he wasn't saying anything. "Our publisher called this morning and demanded to know what the Daily Planet was doing about landing the exclusive on this mysterious flying man and what happened at E.P.R.A.D. last night. Are we clear?"

Lois cleared her throat, "I thought E.P.R.A.D. was mine."

"Well, apparently not," Perry shrugged his shoulders. "Unless there's a lead you would like to share with the rest of us?"

Lois glanced toward Clark across the room then back at Perry, shaking her head. "No."

"Then we're clear. E.P.R.A.D. is fair game. Every reporter for him or herself," Perry said.

"All right!" Jimmy cheered.

Perry smiled at Jimmy. "Enthusiasm. I love it." Perry grinned across the room. He motioned for everyone to leave, and Lois gathered up her things, preparing to leave when she heard her name, "Lois, I want to see you in my office."

Her gaze darted to Clark, who looked equally curious as she was to what Perry wanted to see her for.

Lex Luthor sat outside his penthouse, enjoying the view. Asabi, his manservant, stood by his side. Lex read the headlines in the various newspapers in Metropolis. "Well, I see our mystery visitor has made quite the entrance," Lex mused aloud, tapping his hand against the table in front of him.

The phone rang, and Asabi answered, "Mr. Luthor's office." He was quiet a moment, then turned to Lex. "Mr. Luthor, a George Thompson, is calling for you."

Lex nodded. "I'll take the call in my study." He walked into his office and waited for Asabi to depart before picking up the phone. "Mr. Thompson, this is a surprise. I thought I told you never to call me directly."

"My apologies, Mr. Luthor," Thompson eased into the conversation, "You wanted me to alert you if anything new came up with the Bureau?"

"Of course," Lex agreed, taking a pen in hand. "Was there any action on the movement to dissolve Bureau 39?"

"A closed hearing is taking place next Thursday. If Bureau 39 is dissolved then everything will be dissolved and available for auction to anyone."

"Then I suppose it works in my favor that the hearing on Thursday goes well, hmm?" Lex murmured more to himself than to Thompson.

Lois wrung her hands, biting her lower lip as she sat across from Perry, feeling as if she had been called to the principal's office for talking during class. She knew what was coming. It was inevitable. Perry could read her like a book. She could of course, turn yellow-bellied and let the truth of what she knew roll off her tongue, but what would that say about her? No, she had to keep silent.

So far, no one had connected that she had been on site at E.P.R.A.D. last night and as far as she was concerned, she'd like to keep it that way. She had yet to talk to Clark since the rescue and trying to talk about the events without really knowing the facts of what had happened felt as if she was feeling her way through the dark, searching for a light switch. A frustrating exercise that left her with more questions than answers.

"Lois?"

"Yes?"

"Did you hear me?" Perry asked, tapping his pen across the notepad in front of him.

She looked back at him, feeling as if she was holding back a dam that was threatening to burst. "I heard you."

"Did you go to E.P.R.A.D. last night?" Perry asked, pushing the photograph across the table to her.

Lois swallowed hard, shaking her head, unable to cover up her presence with Perry, "Yes."

"Mind telling me what you were doing there?" Perry asked with a raised brow.

"I ...thought I might be able to get an interview with the colonists before take-off," Lois supplied lamely. "But it was a good thing I was there!"

"And why is that?" Perry folded his hands across the table in front of him.

He knew.

"I don't know anything more than you do," Lois replied calmly, shaking her head. "There was a bomb. I called for help and next thing I know this crazy man shows up and swallows it. End of story."

"Sounds eerily like the story the director at E.P.R.A.D. told everyone." Perry mused.

"That's all I know," Lois supplied, crossing her arms over her chest.

"That's all you know? That's your story, huh?" Perry pressed.

"I don't have another one to give." Lois sighed, running a hand through her hair.

"Hmm," Perry mused, picking up a thin file off his desk, "Well, I guess that's that then. We'll see what comes up."

"Right," Lois smiled back at him, standing up from her seat to leave. "I'm sure something will turn up."

Perry nodded, seeming to mull over everything for a moment before waving the file in his hand, "Well, until

something does turn up, the police department reported a string of burglaries from their car lot. Seems we have a thief inside the impound lot stealing hubcaps, rearview mirrors..." He handed the file folder to her.

Lois felt her face fall as she begrudgingly took the file from him, "There has to be a more important story you can assign me to than petty thieves breaking into the impound lot."

"Or an inside job." Perry corrected her.

"Even if it is an inside job, it's still"

"Now, Lois, ordinarily you'd be right, but letting a big story like this get away can rattle anyone, fill a reporter with self-doubt. Seen it happen."

"Perry..."

"Lois, just take the story. It's a good little confidence builder." Perry instructed.

Lois gritted her teeth, realizing she wasn't going to get anywhere, nodding in defeat as she made her way out of Perry's office.

Clark spotted Lois storming out of Perry's office from the corner of his eye, he quickly jumped up from his seat, intercepting her on her way to the break station to most likely refill her morning dose of caffeine. He had so many questions rushing through his mind since yesterday. He had gone through the events that had transpired over and over in his mind wondering what – if anything, he could have done differently to not aim a giant spotlight on himself and reveal the side of himself he'd spent his entire life hiding from the world.

He had to cling to the hope that his gut instinct about Lois had been right.

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He wanted to believe she wouldn't reveal everything she knew to the world.

The conversation he'd overheard in Perry's office moments ago, told him his trust was properly placed for now, but given the subtle low-ball assignment Perry had given her he wasn't sure how long she would continue to remain silent.

'Just say something,' he chastised himself as he reached the top of the steps, watching as Lois poured the remaining brew into her coffee mug.

"Unless you've got a lead on the E.P.R.A.D. story I'd turn back around," Lois warned, not looking up from the mug she was staring into or attempting to make any eye contact with him.

"Well, I haven't had a chance to look at anything since yesterday's..." He began to trail off and then finished with a hurried, "You know as much as I do at the moment."

“Somehow, I doubt that,” she quipped with a smirk, taking a sip from her coffee mug as she walked past him, heading toward her desk.

A crimson blush crossed his cheeks. He reached his hand up to run a hand through his dark locks, “I suppose I owe you an explanation at least...”

Lois shook her head, shrugging her shoulders. “What you do on your own time is...whatever you do.”

His jaw tightened and his eyebrows rose up in surprise, uncertain if he had heard her correctly. He opened his mouth to question her, barely getting out his quizzical “But...”

She shook her head, gesturing to the bull pen behind them, “Unless you’ve coughed up some magical lead to drag me out of Perry’s doghouse, it looks like I’ve got another story to chase. Impound lot thieves won’t rest for anyone.”

“Impound lot thieves?” Clark asked, following her back to her desk. “Lois, come on, there’s no reason for Mr. White to reassign you.”

“Well, I have no lead on the E.P.R.A.D. story...” Lois shrugged her shoulders.

Clark felt his head hang down, letting out a heavy sigh, “You *had* a story.”

“No, I didn’t,” Lois bit her lower-lip. She looked away for a moment and then turned back to him, seeming to mull over her response.

“You killed your story,” Clark accused.

“I did what I had to do,” Lois corrected him, shaking her head as she pushed past him.

He reached his hand out to stop her, “Wait.”

“What?”

“I...” he paused, not sure what to say. He wanted to say so much but found him unable to finish his sentence.

She sighed, shaking her head and gathered her things, preparing to head out. “See you around, Smallville.”

Lex Luthor moved through the winding staircase, letting out a low whistle as he paused in front of a doorway that was hidden behind the corner of a hidden panel and brick. He placed his hand on the center of the panel, unlocking the hidden door and revealing the entryway. Waiting by the door was his butler and trusted confidante, Nigel St. John.

“Everything’s set up for you, Mr. Luthor,” Nigel gestured to the darkened room, lit only by the recessed lighting and casting a dark shadow over the room.

Lex nodded, looking across the executive level of the room which positioned him at a table with the trusted experts from LexCorp Nigel had summoned. Jules Avery was the lead man of his street operation, heading up security and keeping his organization running like a well-

oiled machine. Monique Kahn was his lead scientist at LexLabs, brilliant and cunning. With his trusted team, he would uncover the strengths and weaknesses of this caped hero that dared darken his door and threaten him.

He looked across the room with a nod and smiled, “I’m sure everyone’s seen and heard the news. No one knows much about this mysterious savior that flew the space shuttle to Space Station Prometheus. I’d like to change that.”

Lois watched on as the clerk from the impound lot was led away in handcuffs. She shook her head, wondering momentarily just how long he had been swindling the impound lot’s owner out of parts. She let out a heavy sigh, trying to hang onto the momentary relief that at least some good had come out of the fluff piece she had been assigned.

“I can’t thank you enough, Ms. Lane,” the owner said, pointing to the clerk that was being led to the patrol car. “We had been searching for the culprit for months, and he was right under our nose.”

“Well, just glad there’s a happy ending to this story,” Lois replied, making her way to the exit, preparing to write up the story she’d uncovered over the last few hours. She checked her watch, grimacing at the late hour. It had taken her longer than anticipated, but thanks to the nicely timed arrest of the clerk, she had enough to write up and give her story a place in the city section.

She reached the street where her car was parked and stopped when she saw the familiar figure of Clark Kent standing in front of her Jeep. She let out a heavy sigh as she approached, cocking her eyebrow at him as she muttered a quick, “Are you hard of hearing, Smallville?”

“No, I actually hear very well,” he responded with a smile. He pointed back to the patrol car that was pulling out of its parking spot. “I see you wrapped up the impound lot story.”

“I did alright,” Lois replied shyly. “And what brings you out here? Not another guilt trip?”

“It wasn’t a guilt trip,” Clark argued, lifting his left brow and letting out a low chuckle.

“Uh-huh,” Lois smirked at him as she fished her keys out of her purse. “Then you so happened to drop by because you enjoyed the scenery of the Metropolis Impound Lot?”

“No,” Clark allowed, shaking his head. “I’m less inclined to just ignore everything we uncovered in the Prometheus story...”

“I’m not ignoring anything.” Lois frowned at the same time Clark added, “I think Lex Luthor is behind the Messenger sabotage, and I want to prove it.”

Lois' head jerked, and she crossed her arms over her chest, "Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you're asking for? You want to go after the man that employs over half the city's population?"

"Well, follow the lead, right?" Clark shrugged his shoulders.

Lois nodded, "I suppose." Her lips pursed, and she looked at him with a frown, "I guess as long as you aren't hanging him from Luthor towers as an interview tactic..." She gave him a warning glare, "That was a joke, by the way. Don't do that."

Clark chuckled, pausing as his gaze met hers, feeling the corners of his lips curl into a smile. "So, does this mean you'll help me?"

"It is bad form to let a lead die," Lois smiled back at him.

He felt the corners of his lips tighten and his smile broadened. "Right."

She cast a quick glance at him before looking away. Her eyes softened, and she cleared her throat, "Listen, I just want you to know what I saw at E. P. R. A. D...I'm not going to tell anyone."

Clark shoved his hands inside the pockets of his jacket, taking a step toward her as he responded softly, "I didn't think you would tell anyone, Lois...or at least, I hoped you wouldn't." His eyes softened as he added, "Thank you."

She nodded, keeping her features relaxed as she continued. "Anyway, thank you forstopping the bomb."

"I'm glad I was able to get there in time," Clark responded, cocking his head to the side as he kept her gaze, seeming to almost be looking through her as he spoke.

"Me too." She cracked a smile and shrugged, "Well, you want to tell me why exactly you want to look into Lex Luthor?"

"Besides the fact that he was behind the Messenger bombing?" Clark asked as the crease on his forehead tensed.

Lois nodded, feeling the intensity of his stare as she spoke, "You don't know that for sure."

"Maybe not with physical evidence, but I know."

Lois sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Okay, convince me."

Surveillance video coverage showing the grainy image of the rescue at E.P.R.A.D. The mysterious stranger lifted the Messenger transport with ease and flew out of the camera's view. The screen blinked, and the white and black snow covered the screen before Lex Luthor reached over to turn the screen off.

"Greatness of man has just been challenged. Our world has lived by the rule of whoever controls the technology of

the world, controls the world." Lex paused, pacing in front of the experts Nigel had gathered, and he mused, "The Roman Empire ruled the world because they built roads. The British Empire ruled the world because they built ships. America; the atom bomb. And so on and so forth." He pointed to the image of the caped hero on display and asked, "A man that can break the laws of physics and challenge everything we think we know is a great advancement that could make all those opposed tremble in fear of destruction. Who do you think could harness and control such an advancement?"

Nigel nodded his agreement, "A god."

Lex scowled, shaking his head and dismissing the comment, "Gods are selfish beings who fly around in little capes looking down on mankind. Many like to think of God as all-powerful. The beacon of perfection. Dating back to the Roman Empire, man strived to compete with the gods. A god who is all-powerful cannot be all good. And if he is all good, then He cannot be all-powerful. That is why we will win."

Monique spoke up. "He's still a man. All men are weak," she said seductively.

Lex smiled grimly. "Obviously, we know very little about this god-like being that has graced our city. It is up to us to see just what he is capable of and expose his weaknesses. I have designed a series of tests and. I'll need your help."

Lois perched herself on the edge of her desk, flipping through the slender file in her hand, noting the circumstantial evidence pointing back to LexLabs and LexCorp as culpable in the sabotage of Messenger. She bit her lower-lip, pondering how to pitch this angle to Perry.

"What do you think?" Clark asked, tipping his chin up and looking at her with a hopeful expression. She could see the determination in his eyes. He wanted this so badly to be enough to start an investigation into LexCorp, but it wasn't. It wasn't nearly enough to convince Perry.

She let out a heavy sigh, fingering the loose strands of hair that covered her face, "There's something there for sure, but unfortunately, I don't think it's enough to take to Perry yet."

Clark's face fell, "But the patents show a motive..."

"And Lex Luthor isn't the only one with skin in the game." Lois reminded him. "Look, I get it. I'm no fan of Lex Luthor either, but we have to stick to the facts and right now is not the time to test Perry's patience. Unless you'd like to be on dog shows instead of chasing after the City beat?"

Clark shook his head, letting out a heavy sigh, "I'm sorry about that, really. I guess I owe you ..." His voice trailed off as his attention was pulled to the announcement

coming from the television across the room. “We interrupt your regular programming to bring you this breaking new story...”

Lois glanced toward Clark as the murmur in the newsroom turned silent, with every reporter’s attention focused on the screen as the newscaster narrated the danger of the current situation unfolding.

“We have just received word that there has been a bomb threat made to the Carlin Building.”

Clark’s jaw tightened as he looked over and saw the scene of people being rushed out of the Carlin Building and the newscaster being ushered back as sirens could be heard in the distance.

Lois crossed her arms, staring at Clark expectantly, “Isn’t this the part where red, blue, and yellow rushes in to save the day?”

“Red, blue, and yellow?” He echoed the phrase aloud with a bewildered expression.

She grabbed her things off her desk and shrugged, “Well, either way, I have a story to chase.”

“Do you always rush onto the scene where bombs are set to go off?” Clark asked, following her toward the staircase.

“If that’s the story.” Lois shrugged as she led the way down the steps, turning the corner for each floor with precision until she found herself in front of the door that read ‘Ground Level.’

She pulled the door open and felt her breath catch in her throat when she saw Clark on the other side wearing the blue and red suit he’d shown up at E.P.R.A.D. in.

“Took you long enough.”

“How did you...?” she breathed out, jerking her head back, trying to process how he’d suddenly appeared in front of her after being a few steps behind her moments ago.

“I’m fast,” he said simply.

“Uh-huh,” Lois nodded, tucking her lip into a thin line as she continued to process the newly discovered information he’d provided to her.

“I should get going...”

Lex Luthor took a long puff from his cigar, holding his breath as he waved the cigar in the air between his index and middle finger and then releasing the smoke he’d been holding into short round puffs. A slow smile crossed his face and he looked to his right where Asabi stood, holding the trigger in his hand.

Lex looked to the monitors in front of him, watching as the crowded chaos erupted on the screen as people ran out of the Carlin building. He turned to one of the monitors with the current coverage of the scene.

“If you’ve just joined us, the original report of a bomb planted in the lobby of the Carlin Building has now been confirmed. Currently, the Bomb Squad is awaiting the arrival of what they term a ‘containment blister’ as well as a team of deactivation specialist. Once the blister is in place, they’ll attempt to neutralize the threat. Meanwhile, the building has been evacuated and we’re being told to move back...”

“Are you sure he’ll show, Mr. Luthor?” Asabi asked.

“He’ll show,” Lex replied confidently.

The resounding sonic boom echoed through the sky, announcing the strange subject of their tests’ arrival.

“What in the world?...Can we get a shot of that?”

Asabi smiled and nodded to Lex as the mysterious stranger in blue and red appeared on the screen. “Now, Mr. Luthor?”

“Hold,” Lex instructed.

“Excuse me!” the reporter called out from the crowd, waving at the man in the red and blue suit. “Can we get a statement?”

“Uh, not right now.” He continued making his way toward the crowd, then stopped and turned to apologize. “Sorry,” He then bounded up the steps of the Carlin Building.

Lex watched Superman enter the building from the private surveillance monitors he had setup inside the building. He watched the red cape disappear inside the building, then nodded to Asabi, pointing to the trigger Asabi held. “Now.”

Lois raced from the taxi cab, pushing her way to the front of the crowd, watching as the SWAT leaders pushed the crowd back, trying to urge everyone to get away from the building. She stood near the barriers, watching as a familiar red cape billowed on the corner of the crowd. A smile tugged on the corners of her lips and she spotted Clark’s retreating figure pushing past the barriers and entering the building.

She barely had a chance to register him entering the building when she felt a huge wave push her back, knocking her to the ground. Her mind registered the chaos around her as sirens went off, and the chaotic screams around her seemed to resonate in her mind. She blinked and everything around her had been set on fire. Carefully she craned her neck, ensuring she was indeed safe from danger, and then pushed her weight up to stand, staring at the remnants of the Carlin building.

“Oh, my God...”

Lex held his breath, watching the fiery scene on his screen. Police cars had flown across the crowd and crashed upside down onto the street and the less than sturdy

barriers were lying in the street where many of the officers working to control the crowd were struggling to make sense of the chaos.

Still, his coverage from inside the building had been knocked offline from the blast. He had to be sure. Just when he thought the challenge he'd been sizing himself up for had ended before it had begun he saw the flicker of red and blue exit the building.

"Invulnerable," Lex commented with admiration.

"A man of steel," Asabi remarked.

Glass crunched below the heel of Lois' shoes as she walked through the debris from the explosion, examining the site carefully. A makeshift triage had been setup on the side where several ambulances were lined up, looking over the injured and treating them as best as they could before sending them either to the hospital or home. Off to the side where many of the SWAT team and police officers talking with other fellow journalists. She scanned the crowd, wondering where Clark had disappeared to. He had exited the building and a moment later disappeared amid the smoke that had yet to clear from the explosion.

Had he been hurt?

Could he be hurt?

The question was one she couldn't answer among many others she found herself hesitant to even ask. She barely knew him yet had inadvertently been given a glimpse into something that had to be his biggest secret. It was daunting and frightening all at once. She wasn't sure how she felt about any of it, but she was sure of her decision to keep his secret safe.

It seemed his presence had been noticed by someone – someone looking to make an example of him. Her mind flashed back to the explosion when the building had erupted into flames just as Clark had entered. It was no coincidence.

Where was he?

She felt the nagging question push to the forefront of her mind as she turned the corner and spotted Clark in his navy blue suit from earlier standing with Bill Henderson at one of the tables that had been setup to examine the evidence extracted from the site.

"Clark?" she called out to him, rolling her shoulders back and squaring her jaw to hide the fear and panic that had been running through her mind for the last half hour. He was okay. He had walked into a building and *survived*. She let that news sit with her for a moment, wondering what else he was capable of.

"...somewhere within a two-mile radius..."

Henderson was explaining as she approached them, noting the evidence set out on the table of melted bomb components.

Clark looked up, registering her presence, and his face immediately changed to concern when he moved to her side in concern, "Lois, you're hurt..."

"I'm fine." She tried to shrug him off.

"Let me see," Clark pleaded, stepping between her and the table Henderson was looking over to look at her forehead.

"Clark, I'm fine. It's nothing," Lois let out an exasperated sigh, feeling the frustration begin to boil over. "A bomb just blew up. A lot of people are more injured than I am."

"But..."

"You guys want to hear this or not?" Henderson asked, his face showed a cross between amusement and annoyance as she let out a heavy sigh.

"Yes!" Lois cheered, pushing Clark aside and pointing to the table.

"The explosion was radio-controlled, activated from an unknown point of origin within a two-mile radius of this site. Also, there were video cameras installed in the lobby that were not a part of the building's security system or any other system that the management company knew about. We think the two are connected." Henderson held up the melted plastic for her to see.

"So, what you're saying is someone watched..." Clark trailed off, trying to process what it was Henderson had explained to them.

"It was a trap." Lois summarized for him. "They waited until this guy showed up and then triggered the bomb inside."

Clark looked across the parking lot, noting the chaos around him and muttered a disgusted, "So many people were hurt."

"A lot more people could have been hurt had the bomb been pointed at the door," Henderson explained. "See here," he pointed to the melted plastic of the bomb. "It looks like someone pulled the bomb back mid-blast."

Lois cast a glance toward Clark then looked back at Henderson, "Well, I guess we'll never know."

"Unless someone finds that guy in the cape and asks him. He walked out," Henderson said firmly. "I've never seen anything like it in my life."

"Me neither," Lois nodded in agreement and turned toward the remnants of the bomb scattered across the table. "How soon before the report is finalized?"

"There's still a lot to go over," Henderson explained. "These are all preliminary estimations right now, but that's the working theory right now. Hopefully, we'll be able to recover enough from these pieces here to try and track down the source of this within the next forty-eight hours."

Lois nodded numbly, "You'll call us if there's an update?"

“If not, I’m sure you’ll be calling me,” Henderson smiled back at her. He pointed to her forehead, “Get that checked out before you leave.”

Lois crossed her arms over her chest, looking across the chaos and turning to where Clark was standing off to the side lost in thought. Her heart lurched out of her chest, feeling a protective urge to reach out and comfort him. Here he was trying to help and then someone turns around and tries to kill him...or test him? She wasn’t sure which it was but at this point the working theory was that someone had watched Clark enter the building and triggered the bomb. He could have been killed if he wasn’t...

What?

She bit her lower-lip, tucking it inside her mouth and approached Clark with a heavy sigh, “Hey, you okay?”

“Look around,” Clark shook his head in dismay. “No one is okay.”

“So, is Henderson right?” Lois asked, tucking her chin into her chest, looking down at her feet.

“About what?” he asked.

“About the bomb being triggered when you entered the building.” Lois looked back at him with an expectant gaze. “Look, I know we don’t know one another that well, but that was a huge blast, and you haven’t got a scrape on you.”

“I’m invulnerable,” he commented in a hushed whisper. “Swallowing bombs or stopping something like this is nothing...” He shook his head. “Had I just gotten to the bomb in time...”

“Well, if someone was watching, that would explain a lot.” Lois shrugged her shoulders.

“Except for why so many people had to be hurt and caught in the crossfire,” Clark growled with frustration. “It’s not me I’m worried about. It’s the people that could be hurt or worse...” He frowned, “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

“Maybe we need to find out who’s behind this before you hang up your boots for good.” Lois interjected.

Clark chuckled, shaking his head. “We?”

“If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a bully. And stopping a bully and exposing them to the world is what I do best.” She tucked her arm through his, pulling him with her, “Come on, I’ve got to get this checked out, and we’ve got to find whoever’s behind this.”

“There you go using that word again,” Clark teased.

“Shut up.”

“Still think putting your life at risk for a headline is worth it?” he asked.

“Rule number one,” Lois shrugged her shoulders as they approached the line for triage. “Always get there first.”

Chapter 5

The tea kettle whistled from the stove, announcing itself to the farmhouse. Martha moved the kettle from the stove, pouring the hot water into each awaiting mug filled with the awaiting tea bags. She smiled as she set each mug on the tray, turning to carry them into the living room where Jonathan and Clark were discussing the recent events that had transpired in Metropolis.

“You sure you’re okay, son?” Jonathan asked as Clark continued blotting at the stained suit in his hands. “That was no nickel popper.”

“I’m fine,” Clark said, continuing his attempts to clean the spandex suit in his hands.

“Remember to blot. Don’t rub,” Martha advised, setting the tray down and claiming a seat next to Jonathan.

“It’s not coming out,” Clark groaned, shaking his head.

“Maybe this wasn’t a good idea. With that reporter friend of yours knowing your identity and so many people asking questions still...” Jonathan tapped his hand on his hand nervously. “Are you sure you can trust her?”

“I’m positive,” Clark flashed a quick smile at Jonathan before turning back to his suit. “If I can just get this out...”

Martha reached for the suit examining it carefully and asked aloud, “Do you think it’s a dirt based stain or an oil based stain?”

“I don’t know, mom,” Clark groaned. “It’s a *bomb* stain.”

Jonathan interrupted, shaking his head in dismay, “Will you two forget about the laundry for a minute!? We’ve got a serious problem here.”

Martha gave her husband a sympathetic pat on the knee, “Jonathan, it isn’t certain the explosion was aimed at him.”

“Aw, bull,” Jonathan muttered under his breath.

“Someone’s gunning for our boy.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about. It’s everyone else in Metropolis.” Clark explained with a defeated sigh. “Most of the paramedics and front line officers were injured from the blast. Lois nearly lost an eye...”

“Oh, Lois again...” Martha grinned impishly, taking a sip of her tea.

“It’s not like that,” Clark shook his head as a small smile crossed his face. “I mean, she’s been surprisingly... supportive. She had every opportunity to rat me out to Perry and she didn’t. She hasn’t even pressed for information on why I’m doing what I’m doing.”

“Even if you don’t know yourself,” Martha observed quietly.

“Well, I sorta do. I’ve asked myself a thousand times ‘why me?’ and never could understand it, but this. It feels right. It feels like I’m finally finding purpose.” Clark

explained as his face lit up the room with a grin that melted her heart.

"I'm still nervous about this reporter friend of yours," Jonathan commented letting out a heavy sigh. "If your friendship with her were to go south she has everything she needs to ..."

"Lois isn't like that, dad," Clark tried to reassure him. "You can trust her. We can trust her."

"I hope you're right," Jonathan sighed, gesturing to the footage from the bombing earlier. "Try not to walk past any more exploding buildings."

"I'll try my best," Clark chuckled.

After dinner, Clark headed back to Metropolis, circling around the waterfront district. For the most part, everything seemed quiet. The moonlight over the water cast a reflection as he flew overhead, making his way toward Carter Avenue and the upper east side of Metropolis. He smiled when he caught a glimpse of a couple kissing goodnight on the steps of one of the apartment buildings before he found the apartment building he was looking for.

Apartment building 1058 was one of the newer buildings and had a unique charm to it as he floated outside the balcony behind the building on the fourth floor, pausing as he came face to face with Lois Lane.

A twisted smile crossed her face for a brief moment before she walked toward him, unlocking the window and pointed to his worn out suit, shaking her head. "Shouldn't you be wearing something else for evening flights?"

He looked down and smiled, "I guess old habits are hard to break."

She shook her head and gestured for him to enter "You might want to get in here before someone sees you." She turned back toward him and motioned to his attire, "So, you just save the cape and boots for things that go boom?"

Clark let out a soft chuckle, running a hand through his dark hair. "Not exactly." He pointed to her forehead that was bandaged from earlier. "How's your head?"

"I'll live," she acknowledged with a confident puff of her chest.

"Good," he flashed a weak smile at her. He felt his throat go dry as he looked into her eyes that stared at him with a question silently written across her face. His heard lurched in his throat, forming a hard lump that silenced all thoughts and reasoning.

"Was there something else?" she asked, craning her neck to the side as she looked at him expectantly.

He shook his head, uncertain what had drawn him here in the first place. "No, I just..."

"Wanted to drop by?" she asked with a curious gaze.

"Something like that," he acknowledged.

"You should probably consider a change of uniform if you're going to make a habit of patrolling the city." She drew an imaginary 'S' in the air and giggled.

He nodded, smirking at her for a moment before spinning into the red, blue and yellow suit. He looked down at himself nervously. "I guess I'm still getting used to this." He reached his hand out, cupping her cheek, "Goodnight, Lois."

"Try not to run into anymore exploding buildings tonight," Lois teased.

Clark nodded, smiling back at her as he floated outside the window, "I'll try." With a final wave he disappeared into the night sky, letting out a heavy sigh as he flew across town to where he was staying at the Apollo hotel. His heart hammered in his chest as flew over the city, recalling the visit with Lois. He was still trying to find his stride as he explored the freedoms with the dual identities he was trying to carry.

Lois did have a point.

Flying above the city as his alter-ego – which he still had yet to name – would provide him more of a cover. He landed outside the Apollo, changing into his suit and tie from earlier and heading up the steps. The flickering light outside the door blipped as he fished the key out of his pocket, muttering below his breath as he struggled with the door hinge. The doorknob broke in his hand and he let out a defeated sigh.

"I've got to get out of here."

The next morning, Lex Luthor sifted through the headlines across his desk, showing the heroics of the unnamed hero that had captured the city's attention. He took a sip from his tea, glancing over the article on page two with the news of his medical board under investigation for negligence in a triple by-pass. The hospital was insured but the doctors under investigation were acting without approval from the board in the risky procedure.

He let out a deep sigh, wondering if the next test would push articles like this to the back of the classified. He took another sip from his tea and reached for his phone.

"Yes, Asabi?" Lex stole a glance at the clock on the wall. "I believe we're ready for our next test. Be sure Ms. Kahn and Mr. Johnson are in position."

The newsroom was filled with chaos from the moment Lois stepped off the elevator. She barely made it to her desk before she'd been bombarded by Jimmy Olsen and other fellow reporters pointing at the announcement on display from Perry.

A large blow – up of Clark in his red cape and boots at E.P.R.A.D. was on display outside Perry's office next to a

large board with red block letters with Perry's questions underlined.

Who is he?

What is he doing here?

Is he friend or foe?

Lois set her things down, shaking her head as she looked across the chaotic newsroom. "I guess Perry read the article on the Carlin Building explosion."

Clark walked up to her, gesturing to Perry's sign, "Doesn't look like Mr. White is backing down on his demand for answers."

Lois shook her head, looking at him with a sigh, "You know, if it's not the Daily Planet it'll be someone else." She shrugged her shoulders, gesturing to Perry's office. "Any idea what you want to do about this?"

"I'm ... still trying to figure it out." Clark explained.

"Well, don't wait too long or else you may not have much of a choice on how the story gets told," Lois raised her left brow. "With an entire city scouring for every tidbit of information out there and nothing to help humanize this...stranger there's no way to control the narrative."

"Lois? CK?" Jimmy waved a facsimile in his hands as he approached. "This just came from Detective Henderson."

Lois nodded her thanks and skimmed over the facsimile. Clark looked at her expectantly, "What is it?"

"They finalized the report from the bombing yesterday. Surveillance was tracked back to the manufacturer." She handed him the report. "LexTech."

"You've got to be kidding me," Clark muttered under his breath.

"Lois! Clark!"

They both jumped, startled by Perry's booming voice coming from the editor's office as Perry poked his head out the door. "Possible jumper at the Lexor Hotel."

"We're on it!" Lois called out, grabbing her things as Clark headed toward the stairwell.

Lex Luthor sat back, watching the footage from the view he had on the monitors of each building. The top of Lexor Hotel had surveillance cameras positioned to give him ample coverage of Jules Johnson in position on the ledge with the Metropolis P.D.'s negotiator who was attempting to talk Mr. Johnson down from the ledge.

The police negotiator's voice crackled through the speaker on Lex Luthor's desk.

"It's always darkest before the dawn, son."

Lex watched as Jules' face twisted with a smirk as Jules asked the negotiator from the ledge, "Is that so?"

"Come down. We'll talk it through."

"I don't know. I kinda like it up here. Fresh air." Jules' arms spread out, taking the view in. "Great view."

"Well, can I get you something?"

Jules grew thoughtful for a moment. "Cappuccino?"

"Whatever you want."

"Make it decaf," Jules added with a wink. "Caffeine makes me jumpy."

Lex shook his head in dismay, pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head. He reached over to press the microphone hooked up to the earpiece Jules was wearing. "Enough fun and games. Any sign of him?"

Jules shrugged his shoulders, grinning ear to ear as he teetered on the edge. He leaned forward, waving his arms dramatically in the air for the crowd below.

Lex reached over to press the button for the microphone, "Theatrics are not going to get us the results we need."

"Come on, I have to make it realistic, boss." Jules responded as a sonic boom was heard in the distance. Across the screen Lex saw a red and blue streak. Jules looked behind him to where the mysterious hero Lex had been attempting to draw out stood in blue spandex and red boots. Jules gestured to the emblem across the stranger's chest. "The S-Man."

"You don't really want to do this," the stranger called out to him.

Jules pretended to contemplate the comment a moment and sighed. "You know, you're right." He moved away from the ledge. "I've seen the error of my ways."

Lex shook his head in dismay and turned to the monitor from LexComm Towers where Nigel was positioned with Monique. He pressed the button on his desk from the microphone and called out to Nigel, "Ready?"

The footage showed Monique trembling on the ledge of the LexComm Tower with Nigel holding her by the ankle. "Confirm." Nigel's voice crackled through the speakers.

"Please, be careful," Monique pleaded with Nigel.

"Don't worry, lovey, I've got you." Nigel grinned.

"Execute," Lex said, taking a puff from his cigar as he watched the monitor where Jules was to be sure the stranger was indeed still across town. He looked at Asabi who nodded, hovering his hand over a timer.

"Roger that," Nigel said. "Sorry, lovey." He let go of Monique's ankle and pushed her off the ledge with a cane.

"Wha-? No!" Monique screamed as she fell from LexComm Tower.

The blur of red and blue filled both monitors and Lex leaned back, watching to see at what speed this super-powered being had in hopes of exposing his weaknesses. Monique's screams filled the air and Lex reached over to turn the volume down as he focused on the image.

He saw the pigments came together and he saw the cape wielding hero with Monique in his arms from the footage across from Luthor Savings and Loan.

“Mark,” Luthor called out.

Asabi stopped the timer. The digital indicator blinked, 2.1191416 seconds.

Lex smiled, impressed. “Faster than a speeding bullet.”

The sonic boom from above caught Lois’ attention as she stood outside LexComm Towers with the taxi cab she had hailed, chasing after Clark in his rescue of the second jumper. She watched as Clark flew with the second jumper toward Metropolis General Hospital and climbed into the taxi cab to follow.

“Metropolis General Hospital,” Lois requested as she closed the cab door behind her.

“You got it.”

After making sure the second jumper had settled in with the ER doctors Clark circled back to LexComm Towers to survey the scene without the excitement from earlier. He hovered over the Luthor Savings and Loan, noting the absence of the cameras and patrol cars that had previously occupied the streets below. In their place were the normal comings and goings of Metropolis citizens trying to get from point a to point b within the lunch hour. The chaos from earlier long forgotten.

He looked over his shoulder, checking for anything out of the ordinary before landing on the roof of the LexComm Tower that hovered over where the second jumper had plunged from. He did a quick scan over the roof of the building. An occasional cigarette butt and trash and debris could be found near the edge of the roof, but something stood out from the rest of the debris. Off to the side, on the corner of the ledge he found a freshly disposed cigar next to a package for a calling card with LexComm printed across the top of the packaging. He frowned, shaking his head and examining the cigar. He didn’t smoke himself but he had been around enough people that did to know it was an expensive brand. A familiar brand.

<< “So, you become both my judge and executioner?”

“Like any other citizen of the planet, I must obey the law. I am not above it. I don’t think you have that same belief, Mr. Luthor. You seem to believe you are above the laws that govern this city and keep order.”

“I hold a certain . . . position in this city.”

“Yes, and there is nothing that would please me more than to see you dethroned and exposed for who you truly are. That day will come.”>>

A shudder ran through his spine.

‘Hard facts. Follow the evidence,’ he reminded himself.

Lois Lane’s eyes narrowed as she watched the doors leading to the hospital triage open and a familiar man in a dark suit step out, tucking a hat over his balding head and rushing toward the double doors that led out of the hospital. She quickly set the magazine she’d been using as a cover down on the table and bolted up, following the man with a disposable camera in hand.

She made her way outside, noticing another man in a turban waiting for the man in the dark suit. There was something so familiar about both of them. She just couldn’t place it. Before they could close the door to the town car they were standing outside of she took a few shots with the camera in hand and then aimed it toward the license plate, hoping to get a clean shot before the car took off with both of the mysterious men inside.

Clark picked up the phone on his desk back at the Planet, tapping the pencil between his index and middle finger as he responded, “Clark Kent, Daily Planet.”

“Mr. Kent, this is Gertrude about the application you put in on Clinton...” a squeaky voice rang in his ears. “You wanted me to call when Mr. Wallace returned?”

“He’s there?” Clark asked, reaching for a pen on his desk.

“Yes, he’s over at the three hundred unit if you’re still interested...”

“Of course,” Clark cheered, trying to contain his excitement as he jotted a quick note to Lois for when she returned. He would have to wait to update her on what he’d found on the jumper later.

Lois tapped her fingers against the counter as she waited for the photos she’d taken to be developed. Normally she’d just take this back to the Planet, but there still wasn’t enough on this to prove anything and explaining why she’d wasted half a roll of film to Perry wasn’t how she wanted to spend her afternoon.

“Lane?”

She jerked her head up as the clerk approached with a slim envelope of photos for her. “Right here.”

“You know you had eighteen more photos on there... Why the hurry?” the clerk asked.

“Just needed to match the plate is all,” Lois shrugged, grabbing the photos from the clerk hurriedly.

“Right,” he snorted moving off as Lois flipped through the photos, spotting a familiar emblem on the license plate. ‘LexCorp.’

“Gotcha.”

Clark buried his hands inside his pockets, looking across the discolored walls and carpet stained with debris

from the last tenant. He frowned, feeling defeated as the landlord, Floyd showed him around.

"This street is one of the quietest areas in Metropolis. I own a couple of different buildings. This is the only one I have that doesn't give me any trouble."

Clark nodded, looking around skeptically. His gaze moved to the windows and the angle which worked perfectly for easily making an exit and entrance without facing any other buildings as the brick mortar buildings from one of the corporate offices faced the window.

It was a perfect setup.

If it was livable.

"You married?"

"No."

"Girlfriend?"

"No." Clark ran a weary hand across the back of his neck.

"Boyfriend?" Floyd ventured and Clark looked at him with an insulted scowl. "Me? I mind my own business. Where you from?"

"Kansas." Clark opened one of the kitchen cabinets only to have it break off. He looked at Floyd with a raised brow.

"Few screws is all."

Clark turned on the kitchen faucet and brownish water flowed out. He looked at Floyd once more.

"Minerals. Good for the liver."

Clark walked over to the balcony with Floyd a few steps behind him.

"Nice view. You see out, no one sees in. Walk around in the buff. I do."

Clark looked at the man shaking his head to rid himself of the mental image that had just invaded his mind. He needed a place and this looked to be the best he could get. "How much?"

"Nine-fifty."

"Nine hundred and fifty dollars?" Clark choked out in shock.

"Hey, you want cheap. Go back to Iowa."

"Kansas," Clark corrected. "This place needs repairs..."

"Okay okay...Nine even?"

"Only if you deduct the cost of whatever materials it takes to get this place in a livable condition the first month."

"Done."

"So, when can I move in?" Clark asked.

"Soon as the check clears." Floyd grinned.

Lois set her things down on her desk, returning to the Planet after an impromptu visit to the photo lab down the street and then again at the copy shop downstairs. Armed

with the new information she waved Jimmy over as he juggled the Chief's latest project of repairing 'Mr. Foot.'

"Jimmy, got a sec?"

"Anything is better than this," Jimmy sighed, giving her a pleading look. "What have you got?"

"Think you can run a plate and do a search for me?"

She pulled out the photocopies of the two men outside the hospital and the license plate.

"Hey, that's Lex Luthor's manservant, isn't it?" Jimmy asked, pointing at the man in the turban.

"I knew I recognized him from somewhere," Lois grumbled aloud. "What about the other guy? He seems familiar right?"

"Kinda," Jimmy shrugged. "I can't be sure but I can take a look."

"Please," Lois smiled back at him.

"You got it," Jimmy grinned, taking the photos with him as he headed back to his desk.

She turned to her desk, picking up the note folded over with Clark's handwriting on it.

'Had to run out. Be back in a few and then compare notes on jumpers.'

- CK'

Lex cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder, shaking his head as he jotted down the notes from Nigel. "What do you mean hysterical? It was barely even a hundred feet..." He let out a frustrated sigh and added, "Yes, fine, whatever. Transfer an extra hundred thousand to her and clean up this mess."

With a hard click he hung up the phone and spun around in his chair, looking at the bulletin board he had pinned up with question after question covering the photo of the mysterious hero that continued to elude him. Though he had come closer to learning about the new rival he had yet to truly understand him or know what his purpose was for being here in his city.

Endangered lives appeared to draw him out, but not enough to rattle the hero enough or even make the connection that it was he, Lex Luthor, that dared to challenge him. A fact he was sure only this rival would be close enough to connect.

He needed something...bigger. Lex looked over at the note he had on his monitor, reminding him of a certain meeting with a secret government agency that was fast approaching.

Nuclear Explosion Averted By Super Man!

By Lois Lane

The headline covered the newsstands as Lois turned toward the long alleyway to meet with her source on the recent uptick in disasters that had rippled through

Metropolis. Each disaster appeared more deadly than its predecessor and each time there was a glaring hint leading her back to the philanthropist, Lex Luthor. Never enough to make anyone second guess him or pull him in for questioning but enough to raise her suspicions. LexTech designed the remote control powering the explosion at the Carlin Building. The jumpers were escorted to the hospital by an individual that worked at LexCorp. More recently, Luthor Power and Energy's nuclear plant overheated and seemed to recover from the disaster almost instantaneously.

There was something here.

She knew it deep in her gut.

The more she dug, the more convinced she was of the fact that Lex Luthor was up to this string of disasters. She still had little physical evidence to sway an outside party. It was all circumstantial and no one would be willing to put their neck out for a hunch.

She reached the white and blue striped cart where the familiar face stood with an arm full of foil covered goods. He took a big bite of his hot dog, grinning as he saw her approach, "Hey, you made it." He pointed toward the attendant at the stand, "You hungry?"

"I'm fine," Lois managed, looking away as he took another bite. "You said you had a tip come in about LexCorp?" She prompted him as they walked toward the white and black covered van he had parked at the end of the alleyway.

"Luthor Space Station and LexCorp," he corrected, setting his collection of food and drinks down on the hood of his van to fumble for his keys. He turned the key to the driver's side door and leaned in to pull out a thick brown folder and handed it to her. "I got a guy down at the courthouse that was keeping an eye out for me and he sent this over."

Lois skimmed the file, reading the contents of the document he handed her and shook her head, "I guess he wasn't as crazy as I thought..."

"Who?"

"Uh, no one," Lois smiled back at him, shaking her head. "Thanks for this."

"No problem," he grinned back at her. "See you at Louie's on Thursday?"

"What, and miss you boys making fools of yourself? Wouldn't miss it."

The hallway echoed with the music playing from the rundown speakers of Clark's boombox as he moved at super-speed through the new apartment. The ink had barely dried on the paperwork last week and he'd still yet to settle completely into his new apartment. Most of his spare time had been consumed with making repairs when

time allowed. More and more disasters around Metropolis demanding his attention. Each one seeming to challenge him and his abilities like never before.

Bombings.

Suicide jumpers.

Runaway trains.

Nuclear explosions.

He set the paint roller down, looking around the apartment to examine his work. Once the paint dried he could finally begin settling in. He let out a heavy sigh, looking over at the futon he'd set up in the bedroom with several boxes that had yet to be unpacked. With any luck, the afternoon would remain disaster-free and allow him the time to finish setting up his new apartment. With the constant rescues he was being drawn out for he found himself struggling to keep up with his responsibilities at the Planet and as unofficial hero and protector to the Metropolis citizens.

The investigation into the disasters that had come out of nowhere continued to leave both him and Lois uncertain of where to look next. Each disaster sent Perry spinning for the next angle and left him wondering what would come next. He couldn't help but suspect each disaster was coordinated. The bombing was initiated by remote control. The jumpers were within minutes apart. The nuclear explosion all but ceased within minutes. Almost as if the disaster was completely within the control of someone else.

The phone in the kitchen rang and he reached over to answer it, "Hello?"

Jimmy's voice chirped from the other end of the phone, "Hey, CK, it's Jimmy. I finally got that background check you wanted on the jumpers from last week."

"Yeah, what'd you find out?" Clark asked, grabbing a notepad and pen from the counter to jot down what information Jimmy had.

"Jules Johnson works at LexCorp. Strong family and community connections. Mental evaluation came back clear. Almost like he didn't even intend to jump." Jimmy read off for him.

"He doesn't intend to jump but plummets off a twenty-story building?" Clark asked, jotting down the information with a heavy sigh.

"The other jumper was a different story though," Jimmy explained with an uneasy breath. "Monique Kahn. Also works at LexCorp..."

"Yeah, who doesn't?" Clark muttered under his breath.

"Strong family connections in the city but mental evaluation came back horrible. Turns out she's terrified of heights."

"She's terrified of heights and jumps off a thirty-story building?" Clark asked with a raised brow.

“Good luck,” Jimmy chuckled.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark hung up the phone, turning to his notes on the pad in front of him.

‘LexCorp’ was circled for each of the jumpers. He let out a heavy sigh. Lex Luthor seemed to have his hand in every disaster in one way or another. With a blur of red and blue he disappeared, changing into his spandex uniform and cape and flying out the back window and over the city of Metropolis.

Lois Lane gazed across the table, contemplating her next move as she watched the sun set outside her apartment window. This was it. A hard piece of evidence to pick up the Messenger story and possibly expose Lex Luthor for his part in the sabotage. She wanted more than anything to rush down to the courthouse and demand answers though she knew they would be hard to come by on a weekend.

A heavy breath escaped her lips. She felt a nagging urge to take what she’d found to Clark. After all, he was the one to push this angle to begin with on the Messenger story. Though that angle had all but dried up she knew he was equally frustrated with how little traction the sabotage had gotten once the excitement of the launch had faded. The undercutting and sabotage that had taken place had been deliberate and cost several people their lives. The fury that ignited in her over the new director’s inaction on it left her numb.

She wanted to see justice.

She wanted to see corrective action.

She shook her head, laughing to herself.

The farmboy seemed to be rubbing off on her.

Expecting the world to work in a fair and meaningful way when the cynical side of her knew better. Though she’d been hard pressed to admit it at the time there was certainly something about the way he seemed to approach each story and disaster as if everyone could get a fair shot. The innocence was endearing and had it not been for her own knowledge of how the world worked she might even believe it possible to find this goodness he saw in others. She’d been proven wrong countless times before and knew better, but couldn’t help but be intrigued by him. Even without the powers he seemed to draw the innocence and good-hearted joy out of everyone he met. It was a trait she envied and admired all at once.

She let out a heavy sigh, reaching for the phone. It rang a few times and the voicemail clicked on, “Hello you’ve reached Clark Kent. I can’t get to the phone right now”

She slammed the phone down in frustration, reaching for her keys. *‘Probably for the best anyway. This was an in-person conversation.’*

Lex Luthor looked over the Daily Planet’s front-page article detailing the nuclear explosion he had coordinated to test the super being’s strength over the last two days. The unfortunate consequences that came with the test was, of course, the damage his nuclear plant had been subjected to at the hero’s hands and, of course, the fines that surrounded that damage. The damages, of course, would be recouped with his price hike for Luthor Power and Energy. The information he’d obtained from the tests was, of course, invaluable. He had learned more about this stranger that had invaded his city with his presence. This presence continued to remain a threat to him and everything he had built in his city.

The windows behind him opened and he jumped up, slightly startled by the presence of the caped stranger in the doorway to his office. Lex’s brows rose up his forehead, “Well, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

The prompt for an explanation was met with a cold stare as the red cape flew behind the hero as he stopped in front of the prized sword of Alexander the Great. “You want to know how strong I am, Luthor?” He bent the sword in half.

Lex swallowed hard, watching in horror as he pulled out a pistol from the case in Lex’s desk. “You want to know how fast I am?” He loaded the single silver bullet in the chamber and aimed it at Lex.

Lex felt a twinge of fear and horror rush through him as the bullet left the chamber and then stopped at the last minute, stopping millimeters from his chest when the bullet was pressed between his index finger and thumb just before he handed the hot remnants of the bullet to Lex. The hot bullet singed his palm and Lex jumped back as he watched his nemesis stride over to the window and give him a warning glare. The line had been drawn. There was no denying what they both knew to be true.

“Just so we’re clear, any other abilities you’d care to demonstrate?” Lex called out to him.

“The tests stop...now.”

“And if they don’t?” Lex challenged, narrowing his eyes at him with a menacing glare.

“You better think long and hard just what you’re willing to lose for a hobby that puts innocent lives at risk.”

“Me?” Lex shook his head, clucking his tongue, “I admit nothing, but let’s say the tests, as you call them, continue. What then? Obviously, your presence has put a target on Metropolis. Are you willing to accept the responsibility of putting innocent lives at risk?”

“Are you?” the darkness in his eyes clouded and he firmly stood his ground, “My presence is only a danger if I’m considered a threat. As far as I can tell the only one

who might see me as a danger would be you.” His nemesis’ eyes darkened as he stared Lex down.

“If you truly believe that then you are the fool,” Lex smiled, amused by the dark glimmer he saw in his enemy’s eyes.

“I know who you are, and I will bring you down. That is a promise.” With that he disappeared from Lex’s office, leaving the white curtains billowing in the wind with his exit.

“We’ll see...” Lex murmured, taking a puff of his cigar.

Clark let out a frustrated growl as he spun out of his suit and into his shorts and t-shirt from earlier. He looked around his apartment, feeling the rage pulse through him. Had it not been for the late hour he would have flown straight to the Kent farmhouse. He glanced at the pitch dark starlit sky, hanging his head in frustration.

Luthor’s threat left him wondering what to do.

He still wasn’t even sure what to call his alter-ego let alone how to handle Luthor’s threat. The tests would continue. That much he was sure of. As long as he remained in Metropolis, tending to rescues, then lives would be at risk. He ran a weary hand across his face, fighting back the fury that threatened to bubble over.

The loud tapping at his door caught his attention and he reached for his glasses, off the side table. He shot up to answer the door, fumbling with his glasses to place them on his face before answering the door.

“Lois?”

He opened the door for her to enter, surprised to see her at his door.

“Hey,” she brushed past him, looking around. “Sorry to barge in, but this couldn’t wait and you weren’t answering your phone. Which I guess is pretty normal at this hour, but it can’t wait.”

An amused expression crossed his face and he chuckled, “You mentioned that. Twice.” He held up his hand with two fingers up as he followed her inside, curious as to what had drawn her to his door at this hour.

She gave the apartment a once over, shaking her head. “This doesn’t even look like the same place anymore.”

“Uh...thanks?” he smirked at her as she dug through her satchel and pulled out a heavy brown expanding file folder.

“I’ve been keeping an ear out with my sources for anything to do with LexCorp since the bombing last week. One of my sources came across this.” She reached over to hand him the file.

He opened the folder, raising his eyebrows as he skimmed through the front page of a lawsuit Lois had

uncovered. “Lex Luthor is suing the United Nations of Congress for their patents?”

“Maybe that angle on the patents wasn’t as crazy as we thought,” Lois said, pacing in front of him.

“The angle that went cold when we started digging into LexCorp,” Clark sighed, recalling the dead end they had run into as soon as Lex Luthor’s name came into the investigation.

Lois bit her lower-lip, shaking her head in dismay, “Well, unlike the disasters and the closing of ranks that happened at LexCorp this gives us something solid to hopefully resurrect the Messenger sabotage story.”

“Us?” Clark grinned back at her.

“Well, it was a team assignment,” She acknowledged with a shrug. “I wouldn’t want to be accused of being unfair.”

“No one could accuse you of being unfair, Lois,” Clark took a seat next to her on his newly acquired sofa that was positioned at the brick wall where he was hoping to set up a television and entertainment center, but for now his radio and bookshelf stood alone with a few framed photographs from his travels abroad.

Lois nodded, shaking her head. “So, now we have a hard fact to take to Perry, but I’m not entirely convinced we won’t hit the same brick wall if we try to work this with E.P.R.A.D. .”

“You’re probably right, but last I heard it’s called investigative journalism for a reason.” He let out a low grunt. “Especially when Luthor is concerned.”

“Well, lucky Metropolis had someone looking out for them these past few weeks,” Lois commented, running a hand across her face. “I swear it’s not always like that here.”

Clark let out a soft chuckle, “Well, somehow I don’t think the events over the last week would have occurred if I weren’t here.”

“Or if a certain billionaire wasn’t feeling threatened?” Lois prompted, nudging him in the side with her elbow.

“He’s not going to stop, Lois,” Clark ran a hand through his hair. “I never should have done this. I never should have come out of the shadows and...”

“And what...saved people from deadly situations and stopping disasters from happening?” Lois’ gaze turned sharply to him.

“I can’t be everywhere at once.”

“So what, you just give up and let him bully you?” Lois asked, turning to look at him in surprise. “You can’t let him get away with this.”

“I don’t have anything to fight back with. I’m just a nobody that happens to have these abilities...”

“And happens to use them to save the Space Station, stop a bomb, rescue two people from plummeting to their

death and prevent a nuclear explosion....” Lois listed off each item on her hand. “You’re right, such a waste. What was I thinking? Who are you to try and get a simple minded businessman to follow little things like laws....”

“Ha, ha,” Clark tapped his hand against the file in his hand. “You’ve made your point.”

“Have I?” Lois crossed her arms over her chest, looking at him with a raised brow. “You can’t seriously be thinking of giving up...”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, unsure where he stood with Lois’ gaze on him.

“Look at all the good you’ve done in your short time in Metropolis. Lex Luthor has built up businesses and provided jobs but it could never amount to everything you’ve done. If what we suspect is even half true he can’t be left to stand in power unchallenged. People need someone to stand up and say something is wrong.”

“And you think I’m that person?” Clark frowned, letting out a heavy breath. “I don’t even have a name for this cape and boots and...”

“Well, Perry had a name,” Lois grinned back at him.

“Super Man?” he shook his head.

“It’s got a good ring to it,” She shrugged her shoulders.

“You really think so?” he asked.

“Super powers. Superman.” She grinned.

“What if it’s not enough?” he asked, feeling his insecurities tumble off his lips without a second thought. He caught himself, wondering why he’d given voice to that fear.

“It is for one person.” Her eyelashes fluttered against her cheek momentarily before meeting his gaze with a long pause.

He felt a hard lump fill his throat as he attempted to voice a response. The more time he spent around Lois the deeper he fell into the intoxicating trance that overpowered him when he was around her. It was as addictive as any drug and equally dangerous. She had the power to destroy him with a swipe of a pen.

“Maybe,” Clark agreed. “So, Superman, huh?”

“Yeah,” she grinned back at him. “Though you have to make it official with an interview for the Planet. We don’t want another paper picking up the name and running with it...”

“Even though Perry already beat us to it?” Clark asked.

“Well, he dubbed a headline,” she reminded him.

“I guess I owe you that exclusive.”

“As long as you’re not planning on running with your tail between your legs back to Nebraska...”

“Kansas.”

“Midwest Nowheresville without a syndicated paper...”

“They have newspapers...”

Chapter 6

Superman: Metropolis’ Hero

By Lois Lane

The hero’s colorful photo in blue and red graced the front page of the Daily Planet with Lois Lane’s exclusive interview with the elusive hero dubbed Superman. Lex set the paper down, reaching over to take a sip of his coffee. A soft caw from the balcony ledge caught his attention, and he smiled, holding his arm out to offer a place for the hawk to land.

“I think we’ll suspend testing, for the time being, Asabi,” he instructed as the hawk landed on his gloved hand. “The results are substantially complete. I’m very pleased.”

“But I don’t understand, Mr. Luthor. This Superman has proved himself unbeatable. You failed to frighten him off...”

“Yes, he’s tough.” Lex agreed with Asabi, nodding his head with a shrug, “In fact, he’s the opponent I’ve been waiting for. Unbeatable? No. Superman has a defect, a chink in his armor.”

“What is that?” Asabi asked.

“Superman has morals. He has ethics. He is unrelentingly good.” Lex paused a moment, staring out across the city below him as he uttered a promise more to himself than to Asabi, “Because of that, I will win.”

“To your inevitable victory, Mr. Luthor,” Asabi held up a fine china teacup with freshly brewed tea for him to take.

Lex reached his hand out to take the teacup from him, inhaling the fragrant tea before taking a sip. He turned to Asabi and asked, “What’s on the schedule this morning?”

“The meeting with the Senate Leader over the disbursement of Bureau 39’s assets is at ten. There’s a board meeting this afternoon with LexTech, and Mr. Bender has requested a meeting this afternoon.”

Lex nodded, setting the teacup in his hand on the table next to him. “Yes, set up a meeting with Mr. Bender after my meeting with the board.” He waved to Asabi, signaling to him he was dismissed, and leaned over to pick up the article he’d read over earlier about the supposed Man of Steel. The tests he’d performed had certainly brought to light the capabilities of this Superman, but there was still so much more to uncover. The future was unbelievably bright, and he couldn’t help but salivate over the upcoming victory.

The article gave Superman an introduction as if Ms. Lane was introducing a friend, championing all the good he had done for the city and insisting he be given the citizens of Metropolis’ undying trust. His mouth twitched as he scanned the article, setting his gaze on the small thumb size photo of Lois Lane by her by-line. He would of

course, expect nothing short of the best from the top investigative journalist of the Daily Planet, but he couldn't help but wonder if there wasn't something more to the less than critical tone to her article on his nemesis.

A weary hand ran its way across Jason Trask's face as he stared at the empty compound, letting out a snort in disgust. After dedicating himself to the government in his pursuit for truth he had been tossed aside like an afterthought. Nothing.

He turned on his heel, walking toward the open lot where his old Ford was parked, preparing himself for his next move. The mission was not over. The enemy had stepped out of the shadows, and he would bring him to his knees before he had a chance to unleash his power on humanity. This was one war he wouldn't lose.

Unlike the traitors that had let their guard down around this supposed hero, he could see right through the charade. He would not let the Earth be destroyed because the bumbling idiots in Washington couldn't recognize the danger they had put the country in by dismantling Bureau 39.

It was a fatal mistake they would regret, but he would be prepared.

The soft hum of the air conditioner echoed through the thin walls of the newly appointed director's office. Lois bit down on her lower-lip, tapping her pen against the notepad in front of her as she watched the man's beady eyes dart around the room, looking anywhere but in her direction.

"I don't think you understand just how dangerous what your adventure on our Messenger spacecraft has done to the program...."

"Well, it can't have been any more damaging than it literally blowing up mid-flight," Lois countered, holding back her frustration with all her might.

Perry had set up the interview for the Planet as a way to smooth things over after her disastrous run-in with E.P.R.A.D.'s team after Clark's initial rescue. Explaining her presence and the bomb that was nowhere in sight by the time the authorities had arrived left her in the hot seat with E.P.R.A.D. . Explaining that Clark had swallowed the bomb and ripped the sealed door off its hinges had proven a challenge as neither the authorities or the passengers believed her until they saw Clark actually fly the Messenger into orbit.

"We still haven't completely exonerated the Daily Planet from the investigation into the sabotage," the director advised, folding his hands across his chest.

Lois shook her head in disgust, "Well, then perhaps you should invest in a better security system." With that she stood up from her seat, storming out the door of the

director's office. She turned the corner, letting out an aggravated sigh as she moved past the scattered suits throughout the long walkway leading to the exit.

Frustration filled her veins as she pushed past the security check leading to the elevator doors. An aggravated sigh escaped her lips as she fished out her security badge and press pass in order to board the elevator. As she pulled the security badge out of her purse, she looked over her shoulder, spotting the director standing outside his door and shaking hands with an unknown woman in a dark suit that hadn't been there before. She quickly grabbed the disposable camera in her bag and took a few quick photos discreetly before reaching her turn in line to pass through the security check.

Lex leaned over the report in his hand, biting his lower lip as he jotted down his notes from the dissolution summary he had been provided. The information he'd been given from the Senate Leader hinted that Bureau 39's activities went much further than what the public knew. Several bunkers full of unmarked evidence gathered solidified that fact.

"Mr. Luthor?"

He looked up, spotting Asabi in his doorway, and waved him in. "Yes, Asabi, please come in."

"An update from Mrs. Cox," Asabi advised, handing him a thin manila envelope. "Your investment with the new director appears to have paid off."

"Excellent," Lex chimed, leaning back in his seat as he flipped through the file in front of him. Inside was a detailed summary of a project drafted by E.P.R.A.D. to provide him the unredacted file on Washington's insistence on keeping Bureau 39's existence quiet for so long.

He stared at the photo of a man in his mid-thirties with a report of an unknown spacecraft landing in the late sixties that led to the Bureau's establishment and founding by Agent Jason Trask. He smiled to himself, wondering aloud, "I don't suppose our new friend has an inkling to just where Mr. Trask is hanging his boots?"

"Unfortunately, the last he was seen was just before Bureau 39 was shut down in Washington." Asabi advised.

"Well, I suppose that gives us somewhere to start."

"Of course, Mr. Luthor."

Clark peeled back the thick file folder in front of him, sifting through the reports he and Lois had received from the medical offices on the list of patents. He still suspected the list they'd received from LexCorp was lacking but it was a start.

"Hey, CK, another fax from Luthor Medical," Jimmy held up a large handful of the new fax in his hand.

Clark waved him over and nodded, “Just put it down anywhere. I’m still going through all of this...”

“Yeah,” Jimmy set the file down, shaking his head. “Still trying to chase down all those patents?”

“It’s the only lead we have to follow right now,” Clark advised, highlighting one of the names on the sheet in front of him.

“Yeah, it feels like there’s a half-completed jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces and no directions on how to put it together...” Jimmy agreed with a defeated sigh. “Kinda like my life.” He let out an uneasy breath, looking back toward the editor’s office. “Two years out of college and still doing everything but journalism...”

“Have you tried talking to Perry about it?” Clark asked, turning to his friend with a raised brow. He’d seen the grunt jobs Perry often sent Jimmy on. Heck, his interview was interrupted by Jimmy’s update on Perry’s golf cart repair. Though he hadn’t realized just how long ago Jimmy had become the go-to person for grunt work at the Planet.

“Perry White looks at me and sees Mr. Fix-It or Mr. Go-Get-It. He doesn’t seem me as a real journalist.” Jimmy brushed him off with a defeated wave of the hand. “How often do you see him ask anyone else to go on a coffee run — Or fix foot massagers — Or reorganize Elvis plates?”

“Jimmy, you have to stand up for yourself. Show him you want to be taken seriously,” Clark advised, trying to counsel the young man.

“Stand up to Perry White? No way. I’d be out of a job,” Jimmy said.

“You never know until you try,” Clark responded, placing his hand on Jimmy’s shoulder with a supportive squeeze.

Jimmy nodded in agreement as Clark’s attention was drawn to the elevator doors Lois had just stepped out of. Jimmy let out a chuckle, “I guess that’s my cue.” He stood up from his seat and looked back at Clark with the shake of his head, “I wouldn’t get my hopes up, CK. Two things are always certain. The Daily Planet will publish rain or shine and the only relationship Lois Lane is interested in is the pursuit of her next Kerth.”

Clark’s head jerked back with a sharp stare as he looked at Jimmy in surprise by the comment.

Jimmy shrugged back at him, “You’re my friend and I care about you, but the only thing that will ever come is friendship with Lois. I’ve seen it happen before. Don’t get your hopes up. Expecting anything more is just asking for trouble.”

With that, Jimmy moved off, heading toward Perry’s office as Lois approached with a fresh cup of coffee in hand and a paper bag from the local photo shop down the

street. Lois reached out to hand him the extra cup. “Double mocha extra fat, extra cream.”

“Thanks,” Clark reached out to take the cup from her.

She checked over her shoulder before adding, “Some of us have to actually watch what we eat because we don’t have a metabolism that allows us to eat like an eight year old and not reap the consequences.” She held up her own coffee cup before taking a sip.

“I’ll try to keep my eating like an elementary school aged kid to a minimum.” He chuckled, shaking his head as she gave him a teasing grin.

He was in trouble.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing at the bag in her hand.

“I don’t know,” she perched herself on the edge of his desk and laid the glossy photos out for him. “Apparently the director at E.P.R.A.D. still blames me and the Daily Planet for the blemish on his record so that was a dud, but when I was leaving I saw this woman who was not on the floor before I arrived or when I was leaving but magically appeared....I don’t know. I thought it might be worth looking into.”

Clark frowned, taking a sip from his coffee again and reaching for the report he had on Nanosoft’s patent. It had been sold through a private negotiation that Bob Fences had advised was headed by an unknown woman. The woman’s description fit the photo Lois had taken.

“Well, I don’t know. It’s suspiciously close to Fences’ description of the negotiator on Luthor Space Station’s claim.”

“You think we might be able to connect her back to Lex Luthor or at least to the two thugs that were waiting outside the hospital last week?” Lois wondered aloud.

“Nigel and Asabi are both ghosts in the system,” Clark reminded her. “Without getting the government to unseal their records we’re at clue and a half, but it’s a start. It has to lead somewhere.”

“One can only hope.”

Lex Luthor boarded his private jet, reaching for a glass of fine champagne as he prepared for takeoff. It appeared the breadcrumbs had been laid by Jason Trask but he was never a patient man. A trip to Washington to uncover his whereabouts was the only way to get the answers he so desperately needed. The change of scenery would be a welcome distraction with the apparent changing of the guard.

The next morning the Daily Planet was full of excitement and activity as reporters moved through the newsroom at a frantic pace, attempting to chase down their next lead. Lois set her things down at her desk, stealing a

glance across the aisle to where Clark had settled into his desk across from hers. A position he had claimed during their recent work on the E.P.R.A.D. story. She took a sip of her coffee, savoring the warm flavors as she turned back to her desk.

“Wow, that must be some coffee, Lois, you’re practically drooling,” Cat sneered, walking up behind her and brushing the fur coat against her as she stopped in front of Lois’ desk. Lois felt a crimson pink cross her cheeks as Cat leaned in to whisper, “Or are you drooling over ...other things?”

Lois rolled her eyes, pushing the innuendo Cat was hinting at off her shoulders with ease as she claimed her seat, looking at the gossip columnist with a heavy sigh, “Isn’t it a bit early for you to be in? I thought you only came out on a full moon.”

“Ha! So close and yet still unable to deliver those one liners,” Cat shot back with a smirk, following her gaze to where Clark was seated, “So, I guess the rumors are true then. The infamous Mad Dog Lane has chipped away some of the ice. Should I get a bucket?”

“Not unless you need something to sit on while you recover from the shock that, contrary to popular, belief of well, you, one’s social life doesn’t equate to front page news.”

“Who said anything about front page news?” Cat asked, pulling out her copy of the Planet with the photo of Clark rescuing the colonists at E.P.R.A.D. ‘s launch last week. She let out a low whistle, “Seems tall, dark and handsome isn’t the only one turning heads...” She smirked at Lois, “What exactly happened at the Space Station last week?”

Lois glared at her. “And you wonder why nobody ever takes you seriously?”

Before Cat could respond Lois heard her name being called from Perry’s office. She glanced over to Clark’s desk, noting his absence briefly before making her way to her editor’s office.

Lois reached Perry’s office, standing in the doorway as Perry waved her in. She nodded to Clark who was standing on the other side of the doorway.

“Lois, Clark, come on in,” he signaled for her to close the door behind her. “Go on and take a seat.” He claimed the chair at his desk and Lois took a seat across from Perry, wondering momentarily what the sudden beckoning to Perry’s office meant.

“I, uh, want to start with congratulations, Lois, that piece on Superman has everyone talking and asking for more. The publisher’s ecstatic that the Planet nabbed the first interview. Keep up the good work.”

Lois flashed a weak smile, feeling a blush cross her cheeks at the attention before Perry continued.

“The publisher’s also taken notice of the work you two did on Dr. Platt’s murder and the reported sabotage.” Perry explained calmly.

“The story we weren’t allowed to print?” Lois pressed curiously.

“It didn’t go to print but our publisher still has access to the unprinted content on the Planet’s database.” Perry furrowed his brow. “As of right now, the Planet isn’t willing to stick its neck out on the sabotage story against Lex Luthor, but if you were to conduct a thorough investigation into the matter with follow ups looking into parties equally possible as suspects, and Mr. Luthor was listed among those suspects, the publisher wouldn’t stop us from printing and we would be covered legally.”

“Does this mean we can continue the sabotage story?” Lois asked giddily.

“It means you can continue working on it among other current stories,” Perry clarified, looking between the two of them. “Together.” He cleared his throat sternly adding, “I’m temporarily assigning you both as partners. The E.P.R.A.D. story and any future assignments will be handled together.”

Lois bit her lower-lip, uncertain how to respond. On one hand, she hated the idea of being saddled to another reporter’s by-line, but Clark had already proven his worth and if she had to be partnered with anyone she’d rather it be someone she could hold a conversation with and not run screaming from the room.

Lois exchanged a look with Clark momentarily before nodding to Perry who had drifted into an Elvis yarn. She shrugged her shoulders. It certainly would be interesting. What was the worst that could happen?

Chapter 7

Cat Grant watched from the corner of the newsroom as Lois exited Perry’s office with Clark a few steps behind her. The duo moved almost immediately toward the elevator doors, rushing out without even a nod of recognition to anyone else in the bullpen. She tapped her fingers against her chin, straightening up and walking to the collection of desks where Jimmy Olsen was hovering by the secretary pool.

She pursed her lips, pinching her cheeks as Jimmy turned to head back to his desk, bumping into her in the process. “Cat, I didn’t see you there...” Jimmy blushed as he combed his fingers through his hair nervously.

Cat smiled, slowly, no stranger to the instant gratifying fumbling in her interactions with Jimmy. He was a nice enough kid but much too young for her. Still, it was flattering to watch his sense of speech become challenged when he was around her.

“So, Jimmy, you’re an insightful young man...keeping up with the comings and goings around here.”

“I try to keep up with everything,” Jimmy nodded in agreement as he walked back toward his desk with Cat in tow.

“What’s the deal with Lois and her newly acquired green shadow?” Cat inquired, brushing her auburn hair back over her shoulders.

“What, CK?” Jimmy looked back at her in surprise. “I don’t know. They’re working together.”

“No...sparks? Cat fights?” Cat teased with a knowing smile.

“No, nothing,” Jimmy responded with a shrug, not quite catching onto what she was hinting at.

Cat let out a heavy sigh, frustrated she wasn’t able to obtain any further information from Jimmy as he moved off to answer a call from Perry. She glanced toward the empty desks Lois and Clark had recently vacated, wondering momentarily if an answer would ever come to her suspicions, but for now she was willing to wait.

A bright light shone across the darkness, sifting through the cracks between the doors as the opening grew wider. The metal sign on the door read, ‘Unit 238’. A loud crash filled the air and a flood of footsteps creaking with a shuffle across the floor echoed through the darkness.

A loud crash could be heard as a large crate was lifted and cracked open with a crowbar. The intruders eagerly claimed the crate’s contents. Classified files and photos of unknown objects were shoved inside each intruders’ bag, emptying out the unit with precision. Off in the corner, a light blue and green globe fell out of the crate and was tossed inside the bag.

That evening, Clark finished up dinner at his parents’ in Smallville, helping them clean up. The conversation had been lulled to a quiet pause as they sat on the front porch, looking out on his childhood home, taking in the peace that came in the solace of the blanket of stars twinkling down over him.

“Looks like the name is catching on,” his dad commented, handing over a copy of the Smallville Press with a familiar photo of himself rescuing the passengers from the Messenger launch at E.P.R.A.D. A chuckle escaped his dad’s throat as he asked with a bemused expression, “Superman, eh?”

Clark blushed, shrugging his shoulders, “Well, it’s all a part of the disguise, right?”

“I like it,” His mom remarked taking a sip from her tea cup before setting it down on the side table next to her. “How are things in Metropolis? Any news on who was behind the bombs and suicide jumpers?”

Clark let out a heavy sigh, shaking his head, “Lois and I have our suspicions but it’s nothing either of us can prove at this point.”

“How is Lois?” His mom asked innocently, grinning with a twinkle in her eye.

Clark smirked, shaking his head. “She’s fine.” He grew quiet a moment, collecting his thoughts. “I can’t prove anything yet, but I suspect Lex Luthor is behind the disasters over the last week or so.”

“And you said Lois agrees with you on this?” his dad asked.

Clark nodded in agreement, “Yeah we both have come across enough suspicious activities with Lex Luthor and it’s no coincidence that every disaster leads back to Luthor. It’s him. I know it is. He’s smart enough not to admit to it when I confronted him with it, but the only thing I can put together from all of this is Luthor is trying to test me.”

“You can’t give into him, son,” his dad placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I know,” Clark tightened his jaw and remarked solemnly. “Luthor has put an entire city in danger, searching for everything he can about ... me. Or Superman, rather.” A long pause fell and he contemplated his words and then cleared his throat, looking at his parents, “I need to know everything you know about how you found me.”

His dad looked between Clark and his mom and then answered. “It was May 17th, 1966. We were driving past Schuster’s Field that night when we saw what looked like a meteor in the sky.”

His mom’s face lit up as she remarked, “At first we thought it was one of those ICBMs...”

“It came streaking across the sky in front of us.” His dad chuckled. “It was hard to ignore.”

His mom smiled, “We found you and took you home. Your eyes were so big and wide, and that diaper-thing they had you in made you look so cute...”

“Martha!” His dad interrupted as Clark felt his face flush red with embarrassment. His dad cleared his throat and continued, “There were some men who were snooping around a few days later, asking questions.”

Clark’s ears perked up. “What kind of men?”

“They said they were with the space program. Said they thought some debris from a Russian satellite came down around here. Wanted to know if we knew anything about it,” his mom answered.

“What’d you tell them?” Clark asked.

“Nothing,” his dad replied firmly.

“There was something scary about them,” his mom added.

“We didn’t want people who’d shoot you into space to get their hands on you. We figured even if you were a Russian, you were ours,” his dad answered firmly.

“Is that what you think I am, a Russian experiment?” Clark asked, uncertainly.

“Honey, we don’t care if you’re a Russian or a Martian. And we didn’t care then. You were ours. That’s all we knew and we weren’t giving you to anybody,” His mom reassured him. “That’s why your father did what he did.”

“Did what?” Clark asked, curiously.

“Your mother had me go back to where we found you. We figured that your spaceship had to be destroyed so nobody would ever have any evidence how you got here,” his dad explained. “I planned to burn it, and then haul it to the dump.”

“It’s okay, Dad.” Clark smiled weakly. “Destroying it was probably the right thing to do.”

“Probably was,” his dad admitted, “but I didn’t.”

“Jonathan, why didn’t you ever tell me?” his mom asked.

“I couldn’t, Martha,” his dad apologized. “It was a part of you, son. I just couldn’t.”

Lex Luthor poured a glass of bourbon into a crystal glass, letting a heavy sigh escaped his throat and turned to the Senator sitting in the corner of the office. “A military base protected by this nation’s finest and yet no one can explain how the entirety of Bureau 39’s property was plucked out of your control?”

“Mr. Luthor, this is a breach of our nation’s security. We will commit all our resources to finding the responsible party and...”

“Mr. Senator, I’m surprised at you. Do you really have to ask who is responsible?” Lex took a sip of his bourbon, shaking his head. “No, the responsible party is your very own Jason Trask. Finding him ... that will prove to be the challenge.”

Clark followed his dad and mother through the woods as his dad counted his steps. “68 paces due north. Thirteen paces west.”

His mom looked around the darkened woods. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“That’s the wagon wheel. Hasn’t moved in over twenty-five years,” His dad pointed to the wheelbarrow a few feet away.

His mom patted Clark’s arm, looking at him in concern, “Are you okay? I know this must be hard.”

Clark reached over and hugged his mom. “What’s hard is not knowing. My parents had to give me up. Why? I have no idea where I came from or why I can do the things I can.” He noticed a hurt look cross her face and quickly

went to reassure her. “You and Dad are my parents. You know that. Nobody will ever replace you.”

His mom smiled weakly. “Oh, we know that, Clark. You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t have questions.”

“Mom, what if I’m not human?” Clark asked, voicing his own fears as he wondered who would place a baby in a space craft.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have told you...you were adopted.” His mom reasoned.

“That would have been hard after I started bench pressing cars.” Clark smiled back at her.

His dad stopped and pointed at the ground. “Six feet down.”

Clark took off his jacket and handed it to his mom. He walked over to where his dad was pointing and steadied himself to dig out the last connection he had with his life before finding his home here in Smallville. His fear and apprehension rushed through his veins before he spun through the ground, digging for the space craft that had carried his infant self to Smallville.

He looked around the deep pit he had dug, calling out to his dad, “Dad, are you sure about this?”

“Hundred percent. Right there. You don’t forget something like this,” his dad remarked. Clark shook the dirt from his hair and floated up from the hole he had created.

His dad and mom looked into the empty hole with him and his dad’s face grew grim, pointing to the hole with a firm, “It was *here*.”

Clark shook his head in dismay. “Not anymore.”

One Month Later...

Superman Gets Key to the City

By Lois Lane

Mysterious Wave of Arson Takes Over Southside

By Clark Kent

Lex Luthor’s New Fling – An Inside Look at Fashionista Miranda Thatcher

By Cat Grant

Lois smoothed her hand across the notepad in front of her, reaching for the mug of coffee next to her. She took a quick sip, looking around the room as everyone slowly filed inside the conference room for the morning staff meeting. She turned to the copy of the morning edition sitting in front of her, smiling to herself at the headline. Another front page story. It seemed Clark and Superman were keeping her and the rest of the Daily Planet staff on their toes.

Superman had stopped everything from runaway trains to attempted bank robbers within the last month, earning him the public’s trust with each good deed. A change that she could tell was helping Clark become more and more

comfortable in his skin as Superman. It was a unique experience, attending these public events or rescues knowing the man the public fawned over was the same one she sat alongside working on the latest copy with. The surreal awe of it all had faded and in its place was a genuine admiration and respect she felt for him. Though working with anyone was a challenge and having a partner had always been met with disdain, she had to admit working together seemed to make both their work change for the better.

Jimmy took a seat across from her, giving a quick thumbs up, as he added, "Another page one. Going for a record, Lois?"

"Hmm, well, it's not every day a superhero is given the key to the city," Lois smiled back at him, tapping her pen against the notepad.

Cat claimed the seat next to Jimmy, eyeing the newspaper laid out in front of Lois, "Yes, another front page Superman story. That makes what...eight in the last few weeks?"

"It's been a busy few weeks," Jimmy admitted as Clark claimed the seat next to her.

Cat raised her eyebrow with a sharp angle, not quite ready to end the conversation just yet. "You have to admit, it's quite a bit of luck lately."

"What is?" Clark asked, looking between them.

"It was an assignment."

"Of course, still one has to wonder just what happened on that Space Station to make our new hero so inclined to give...eight interviews exclusively to the Daily Planet?" Cat tapped her long fingernails against the wooden table, staring back at Lois expectantly.

"I don't make the news. I just cover it," Lois harumphed, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Oh, no," Cat groaned.

Lois turned, following Cat's line of vision and let out her own groan of contempt when she saw Perry with a large sign reading 'Metropolis Charity Ball' and a handful of tickets being laid out across the table and suppressed a groan.

The Charity Ball was one of Perry's favorite events the Daily Planet put on and it was a requirement that everyone from the stockholders to the janitor showed up. Last year she had lucked out with her attendance and was able to send in a donation while she recovered from the flu. Each year a lucky organization benefited from the funds that were raised, however, the cheesy dances and fundraising activities left a lot to be desired and continued to remind her of her status of 'table for one' in a setting which was planned for couples.

Perry called the room to attention with a quick bellow, "Alright everyone let's get started." He pointed to the sign

behind him, gesturing to the bold red and black letters printed on the banner. "Now, as you can all see the Charity Ball is upon us. I expect everyone to be in attendance. Are we clear?"

The room filled with non-committal grunts, which Perry appeared to be unfazed by, as he dove right into the meeting's agenda. "Now, Cat, why don't you get us started?"

Cat nodded, tapping her pen against her pad of paper as she looked up and addressed the room, "I've got an interview setup with Miranda Thatcher regarding her new perfume line and I'm hoping to get some information regarding her new relationship with Lex Luthor."

"Boy, he jumps around like a hot potato, doesn't he?" Perry commented, with a shake of his head. He then pointed to Lois. "Lois, Clark, what's on tap for today?"

Lois looked up, glancing at Clark briefly before jumping in, "We're following the fires that began erupting at Nanosoft and Hinkley's medical facilities and are now following the trend in Southside. Theory is they're connected," Lois explained with a shrug.

"Sounds promising. Keep me posted," Perry instructed. "Myers, how about you...?"

Lex looked up from his desk as the doors to his study opened and the stunning blonde haired beauty stepped into his office. He set his pen down, standing up from his desk to greet her, "Miranda, always a pleasure. To what do I owe this surprise?"

Miranda held out her hand for him to take as she entered his embrace with a purr, "Why Lex, since when do I need a reason to drop by?"

"I'm assuming this visit isn't strictly a pleasurable one?" Lex whispered seductively in her ear, watching the lines across her face smooth as she turned back to him giddily.

"Of course not," she purred back. "I've spent hours upon hours examining the reports you confiscated and the only conclusion I've been able to determine is that this landing Agent Trask was obsessed with coincides with the same time a rift was detected in the Earth's orbit..."

"And what does that mean exactly, my pet?" Lex crooned.

"It means, if you find the space craft that crashed into the Earth's orbit we can use it to reverse engineer a way to track and destroy Superman."

"And this can't be done without the space craft?" Lex asked with a defeated sigh.

"I'm afraid not, Lex."

"Very well, then I'll find the space craft."

"I thought you said everything disappeared," Miranda folded her arms over her chest.

“I might know someone who can help us find it.”

Clark Kent looked around the room he was in, sizing up the collectible movie posters and autographed comic books that were framed on the walls. The rumor mill was filled with Bob Fences’ eccentric habits, but from the looks of it the eccentric nature truly seemed to be more of Fences being a child at heart.

“Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane,” A tall brunette in a sharp business suit with a skirt that showed off way too much leg approached them and Clark felt the heat rush to his face as he stood up, looking anywhere but at the plunging neckline of Fences’ secretary.

“I’m Simone,” She held her hand out as Lois took it to shake, “Mr. Fences executive assistant,” She motioned for them to follow her. “He’ll see you now,”

She opened the door for the duo to enter and he saw a young man in his late twenties with brown hair and large rimmed glasses in a polo shirt and khakis sitting at his desk with what looked like action figures of the Star Wars franchise.

“Look out!” Fences imitated the sound of a laser, “Bzzzt!” He made one of the figurines fall down, “Ahh, the death ray! Skkkk... Don’t worry I’ll save you, Princess Cleavage. Gzzzz!”

Lois bit her lip, turning to Clark who was equally put off by the self-made billionaire’s behavior. Clark let Lois take the lead as he focused his attention on keeping a straight face and listening to Fences’ vitals as they began the interview.

“Mr. Fences, I’m Lois Lane, this is Clark Kent. We’re from the Daily Planet. We had spoken off and on about the E.P.R.A.D. story and your patents?”

“Yes,” Fences pushed the figurines to the side and gestured to the chairs across from him. “I recall a few conversations. So, are you here to help me get my patents back from LexCorp?” he grinned impishly at Lois.

“Actually, Mr. Fences, we wanted to ask you about the woman you met with that represented LexCorp,” Lois pulled her purse out on her lap to retrieve the photo she’d taken. “Would you be able to identify her from a photograph?”

“If she’s in the photo, but like I mentioned before I don’t remember much about her. Her name was some non-discreet code name that was obviously made up and had been sent to be the handler. I haven’t seen or heard from her or Lex Luthor since the check cleared.” Fences advised with a shrug. “It was my own fault for selling. I just never thought they would get the Messenger launched with all the sabotage going on.”

“Seems like you weren’t the only ones that felt that way,” Clark added, shaking his head. At least three major

medical suppliers had sold their rights to medical advancements made at E.P.R.A.D. ‘s Space Station. Those were just the ones they had discovered.

Lois revealed the photograph she’d taken from E.P.R.A.D. and Fences focused on it for a brief moment before nodding. “That’s her. Why?”

Lois stole a glance toward Clark before they quickly cut the interview short. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Fences.”

Clark paused before leaving, asking Fences, “Mr. Fences, the fire that broke out in your lab last month. What was your company working on?”

“A competing vaccine for dementia,” Fences responded. “We lost everything.”

“Who was the competitor?”

“Luthor.” Fences shrugged his shoulders. “It was the only one we didn’t sell the patent to because we were so close.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fences,” Clark called out to him before leaving, continuing to contemplate the motivation for the fires that had sprung up in Metropolis.

Back at the Daily Planet, Lois fumbled with her notes, spreading them out on her desk as she contemplated how to use the latest tidbit of information they had gleaned from their interview with Bob Fences. “Did you find it strange that Fences would sell all patents but one?” she asked.

“Not if they were close to completing the vaccine,” Clark commented. “It takes years to develop and test a vaccine and if he was close, he wouldn’t have wanted to sell.”

“Why would they go after all of them but the one Fences was working on?” Lois wondered aloud.

“Maybe they thought they’d get it by other means?” Clark asked.

“Lois, Clark,” Perry called out to them waving them over from the doorway to his office.

Lois stood up from her desk and walked with Clark to Perry’s office. “What’s up, Chief?”

Perry pulled out four tickets, handing them both two a piece, “Good work on the follow up on those fires. Really top-notch stuff.” He pointed at the tickets. “Now, all funds this year are going toward the Coates Orphanage, so I want to be sure we have a good turnout. Which is why we need a big name on the bidding for our auction this year...a, uh, super name if you will?”

“Bidding?” Clark asked as Lois cut him off, shaking her head adamantly.

“Perry, can’t you get someone else to do it?”

“Are you volunteering?” Perry asked with a raised brow.

“Not in this millennium,” Lois grumbled, shaking her head.

“Bidding what?” Clark continued to try and follow what Perry’s nefarious plans for Metropolis’ recent hero were.

“Yes, what exactly are you planning to bid, Perry?” Lois asked with her arms folded across her chest.

“It’s for charity,” Perry insisted, holding his hands out as he shook his head. He finally relented and sighed, “Look, you don’t have to ask him. I just want to plead my case and since the two of you have built up a rapport with him, I’d appreciate it if you’d pass the message along.”

“That’s it?” Lois asked.

“That’s it,” Perry advised, pointing to the tickets in her hand. “And don’t be late.”

Lois bit her lower-lip, glancing at the tickets in her hand with defeat. Lucy had just left for California to start her second semester at Cal Tech. It wasn’t like she could drag anyone along to help cut through the boring, stale atmosphere with Lucy’s witty humor. One of the downsides to her sister’s absence was she now had no one to accompany her to events like this.

She tapped the edge of the tickets to her other hand, silently shuffling out of Perry’s office with no comment. She stopped at the coffee station to get a fresh cup, shaking her head in frustration as she fiddled with the creamer lid to get it open.

“So, what exactly does Perry mean by bidding?”

Clark’s question sent a flush across her face as he reached over to open the cap to the creamer for her. She glanced over at his innocent eyes, wondering if she should tell him the embarrassing events she had seen take place at the Charity Ball or let him discover them for himself. Finally taking pity on her naive partner and part-time superhero she opted to rip the band-aid off.

“It can mean anything really. Bidding for time, the idea of spending time with a big name, or having a photo-op. I’m not really sure what the plan is this year because Perry keeps a pretty tight lid on it until the day of…”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too horrible,” Clark shrugged his shoulders. “I mean, Superman’s had a few appearances at charity runs.”

“But has he done it with the upper crust of Metropolis?” Lois asked, stirring the sugar into her coffee.

“Well, no…but it can’t be that bad if it’s for charity, right?” he looked at her for confirmation and she let out a heavy sigh. He had a point. It was for charity, but would the event be without the usual embarrassing antics – only time would tell.

“Right,” she flashed him a weak smile. “If it’s something you want to do you should do it. Perry would certainly get a kick out of it, but don’t let that sway your

decision. He has other celebrities he can rope into whatever he’s bidding on.”

“Superman’s not a celebrity,” Clark clarified.

She raised a brow with a smirk, “Sure. Keep telling yourself that.”

He opened his mouth to argue further and stopped as a faraway expression crossed his face. The same look he often got right before he disappeared for a Superman appearance usually coupled with a rescue. She had become more and more accustomed to his quick exits followed by something coming on the line of the next big story.

As much as she’d like to take the opportunity to beat everyone to the lead by following Clark she found herself standing back and waiting for the signal to compete with her fellow journalists. It felt wrong to use what she knew of Clark for a story or to one-up her competition. She wanted to be the best, but not by cutting corners. Her friendship with Clark had grown over the last month and the closer they became, the more protective she found herself of him. Keeping the distance between herself and his alter-ego to appear as just another reporter following a lead was a necessity for both of them.

Clark motioned toward the stairs, tugging on his tie as he made a quick exit and she nodded, silently counting to ten as she took a sip of her coffee and walked back to her desk, gathering her travel mug to pour the fresh brew into and securing the lid. Just as she had spun the lid on tight the television in the newsroom reflected the image of a fire in the warehouse district with Superman flying overhead.

‘*That’s my cue,*’ she thought to herself, heading for the elevator doors with her fellow reporters on her heel.

A loud crack sounded inside the fiery warehouse as Clark lifted a large beam up over his head, allowing those trapped under it to escape. He took in a deep breath, inhaling the smoke to clear the way for them to find the exit. He set the beam down, letting out a blast of cold breath, extinguishing the flames on the side of the building he was in. A large door with a restricted access sign over the door was covered in flames as he applied the same application of cold breath, snuffing out the blaze that consumed the frame of the metal door. He frowned when the smoke cleared and he saw the gasoline canister from a few feet away and the melted metal state the door was left in.

He took another look around the warehouse, examining the contents of the debris and noting the supplies appeared to be associated with hospital equipment. A cold chill ran down his spine as he looked around the ashy residue covered building, noting the markings around the doors and windows. The fire was intentional but what was to gain from setting fire to a building full of medical

supplies? It was too soon to tell much of anything, but the intention was clear.

He helped ensure all the firefighters made it out of the building in one piece and addressed the crowd of reporters with the fire inspector who confirmed his findings indicating an investigation would be conducted into who was responsible for the fire.

“This fire was intentional and this office will not rest until those responsible are found and prosecuted to the full extent of the law.”

With that, the inspector moved off, returning to the remnants of the warehouse and leaving the crowd of reporters to disburse. Clark let out a heavy sigh, taking his own leave to head back to the Planet and take care of some unfinished business with Perry White.

Dr. Gretchen Kelly set the box of vials with the Nanosoft logo printed on them on top of the blueprints spread across the large table inside her lab. With the help of the switchblade in her hand she cut the seal, revealing a cooling case, keeping the vials in a set temperature.

The double doors behind her opened and the fragrant scent of rich cigar smoke tickled her nostrils, “Careful Lex you don’t want to disrupt the chemical makeup of these vials before I’ve had a chance to examine them.”

“I was just making sure Mrs. Cox’s shipment had made its way to your more than capable hands,” Lex smiled, stopping in front of the large cooling case.

“I’ll get right on it, Lex,” Gretchen assured him with a smile. She ushered him out of the lab ready to focus on the container in front of her. After Lex had taken the hint and exited, she slipped on a pair of goggles and gloves. Time to get to work.

The newsroom felt different as Clark floated in from the high-rise window of the Daily Planet. He kept his focus on Perry’s office as he floated down, using the years of experience in training himself not to react to the world’s reaction of things they couldn’t explain. He still remained one of those things despite the fanfare that had surrounded his alter-ego over the last month since the first rescue.

“Wow, Superman...” the familiar voice of his friend Jimmy Olsen caught his attention and he flashed a quick smile his way.

“I’m here to see Mr. White,” Clark pointed to Perry’s office.

“Of course!” Jimmy’s voice squeaked as he struggled to maintain the calm he was trying to portray. He walked with Clark to Perry’s office and knocked on the door, “Chief?”

“What is it, Olsen, can’t you see I’m elbow deep in red ink?” Perry called out with his reading glasses on the tip of his nose and red pen tucked behind his ear.

“Sorry to interrupt, Chief, you have a visitor. A Mister, uh, Superman. Err, Man? Super?” Jimmy struggled to find the right introduction and Clark chuckled.

“Superman is fine.”

“Right,” Jimmy trailed off, clearing his throat. “Uh, Superman is here to see you, Chief.”

Perry set the pen in his hand down, straightening up in his chair when he saw Clark standing in the doorway, “Well, Jimmy don’t just stand there. Let the man in.”

Jimmy’s face flushed as he stepped to the side for Clark to enter. “Right, sorry. Sorry about that, Superman.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark responded, feeling the corners of his mouth twitch as he watched his young friend’s face fill with delight over his name being uttered by Clark’s alter-ego. The joy and boost in ego on his friend’s face made the charade he was forced to continue in worth it.

“Jimmy, why don’t you give us a minute?” Perry motioned to him to close the door.

“You got it, Chief,” Jimmy’s step had an extra bounce in it as he exited and Clark couldn’t help but smile as the door closed behind him.

Perry reached over to shake Clark’s hand, “Well, Superman, good to meet you.” He motioned to the chair in front of him. “Please take a seat.”

Clark looked warily at the chair, uncertain if he should remain standing or not. Instead, he asked, “I was told you wanted to meet with me about a charity event?”

“Yes!” Perry’s face lit up as he pulled a flyer out of the desk drawer. “An extremely worthy cause. The Coates Orphanage is being sponsored at our annual Charity Ball. Each year all the profits go to a worthy cause and this is a great one. It’ll go toward clothes, school supplies, and keeping the building in tip top shape for the kids that stay there. A part of it also goes toward keeping the spirit of Christmas and birthdays alive for them as well.”

“It sounds like a worthy cause I’d love to help, but I’m not sure exactly what you need me for, Mr. White...” Clark looked at Perry with a curious gaze.

“Yes,” Perry snapped his fingers and handed him the flyer. “This year we’ll be holding an auction for a photo-op with eligible bachelors of Metropolis. It’s always a big draw.”

Clark’s eyebrows raised slightly and he nodded, “Photo-op?”

“You meet with a lucky fan and take photos and make their year and in the process help feed and clothe the youngins at the Coates Orphanage.” Perry explained matter-of-factly. “What do you say?”

“Well, as long as nothing else comes up I can try to stop by...” Clark answered.

“Great, I’ll put you down for an early slot so we can let you get in and out. If anything comes up we’ll make do. I really appreciate your help, Superman.”

“Of course, Mr. White,” Clark answered, walking with Perry toward the exit. He wasn’t exactly sure what he’d just signed up for, but it couldn’t be that bad, right?

Jason Trask tapped his hand against the table in front of him, sipping at the coffee in hand as he flipped through the old photographs of the Bureau 39 files he’d been able to confiscate. There was still so much left that he hadn’t been able to claim. He glanced at the newspaper headline laid across the table, shaking his head.

The coverage of Superman had been everywhere. He couldn’t escape it. He was like a disease. Continuing to wreak havoc on humanity in his mission to subdue mankind into a calm while he planned his attack. Trask flipped the photos until he found what he was looking for. He held the photo up against the image on the newspaper’s front page.

It was almost a perfect match.

Trask turned the photo over, skimming over the notes on the back. ‘*Smallville – 1966*’

Lois ran a hand across the black silk of her dress, glancing across the rich décor that was setup inside the banquet hall that had been rented out. Her gaze moved up to the high vaulted ceilings, glancing around the familiar setting they were in. The light jazz from the live band filled the room as she cast her gaze over the attendees of the annual charity ball. Metropolis’ wealthy were among the guests. Everyone from the mayor to Lex Luthor himself stood front and center, working the crowd.

In the center of the room was a stage that had been setup for the auction and a large photo booth in the corner where Jimmy was standing with lead photographer, Whit Jones, ready to snap the winning bid photos.

“Lois, glad to see you made it,” Perry’s voice interrupted her thoughts as she spotted him approaching with his wife, Alice on his arm.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Lois fibbed, forcing a smile.

“Well, we both know that’s a bold face lie, but I appreciate the attempt to save face,” Perry chuckled, pointing to the large banner overhead with ‘Coates Orphanage’ printed in bold red letters. A small crowd of children were huddled by the long table where games and food had been laid out for them with a clown and magician. “Hard to say no with the kids right here. Kinda melts your heart, don’t it?”

“What makes you think the rich and famous have hearts?” Lois smirked with a teasing smile.

“It’s for a good cause.” Perry reminded her. “They’ll buy one.”

Alice White chuckled, interrupting with a smile, “And I’ll take any good excuse to get him out of the newsroom and into a suit.”

Lois chuckled as Perry blushed, wrapping an arm around her, “What can I say? She knows how to drive a hard bargain.”

The light on stage beamed down on the hostess as she approached the podium, “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome friends and all to the 45th Annual Charity Ball. Without further ado, we would like to start the night off with our first celebrity photo auction...” She glanced around nervously and waved to Lex who was standing a few feet away. “...the fourth richest man...”

Lex leaned over to whisper something in the hostess’ ear and she quickly amended, “...third richest man in the world.”

Lois felt her eyes roll hard as she watched the small crowd begin to gather around the stage. She spotted Cat in a skimpy gold ensemble which at one point probably resembled a whole dress. Not that one could tell in its current state.

The hostess continued, “Shall we start the bidding at ... five hundred dollars?”

A woman dressed in blue waved her number in the air, calling out, “Five hundred!”

“One thousand!” another called out.

The bidding continued as Cat approached Lois, sauntering with a sly smile as she gave her a once over. “You did remember this was a party, right, Lois?”

“Couldn’t you afford a *whole* dress?” Lois groaned, shaking her head as Cat reapplied her lipstick in her compact.

“Less is more, darling.” Cat sneered, giving her a pointed stare. “Sometimes.”

The woman in blue held up her number, waving it in the air as she called out, “Ten thousand!”

“Ten thousand for a photo op?” Lois grumbled under her breath with a hard roll of her eyes. “Thank God, it’s for charity.”

“Sold! For ten thousand dollars!” the hostess called out.

Lois watched Lex move off with the winner, “Annette, I’m charmed.”

The hostess pointed toward the large window as a spotlight fell over the open windows Superman had just landed on. Lois watched as Clark nervously walked toward the stage, trying not to be fazed by the attention she knew he was uncomfortable with.

“And now, something really special. A super celebrity photo – op with our one and only Man of Steel.”

Lois bit her lower-lip as she watched the feeding frenzy erupt from the crowd before Clark could even finish approaching the podium.

“One thousand!”

“Fifteen hundred!”

“Two thousand!”

Lois turned around, surprised to see Cat waving her hand in the air calling out the latest bid. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to win some up close and personal time, what does it look like?” Cat grunted with a gleeful grin. “Why, jealous?”

“Of course not, I...”

“Five thousand!” another bid called out.

“Six!” Cat grinned, waving her number in the air.

“Would you quit it?” Lois growled, shaking her head.

“Why? Too rich for your blood, Lois?” Cat teased.

“Of course not, but...”

Lois waved her hands in the air and the hostess called out to her, “And we have seven thousand, ladies and gentlemen!”

Lois flushed, realizing what she’d done, desperately looking around for anyone to outbid her. Thankfully another called out to her rescue.

“Eight thousand!”

“Nine!” Cat called out desperately.

Lois looked on in disbelief at the frenzy when the final earth shattering number was called out by a woman in black standing in the corner, “Fifty thousand dollars.”

Lois let out a low whistle and turned to Cat, “What’s wrong Cat, too rich for your blood?”

“Her necklace is too rich for my wardrobe,” Cat responded letting out a soft gasp, “That’s Princess Charlotte. She just went through that nasty divorce with Prince Arthur.” A thoughtful look crossed Cat’s face, “I wonder if I can nab an interview later...”

“Fifty thousand going once, going twice!” a pound of the gavel later the hostess called out. “Sold!”

Lois flashed the bewildered Clark a sympathetic smile as he moved off the stage into the Princess’ grasp. Thankfully for him this was just a photo-op. It was a large sum to drum up for charity even for a photo with a celebrity, but that’s what they were here for, right? She couldn’t seem to shake the bitter taste in her mouth as she watched Clark move toward the black curtains where the photo-op was being held with the Princess Charlotte on his arm.

“What’s wrong, Lois, jealous?” Cat teased.

“Not in the slightest,” Lois harumphed, moving off toward the open bar to get a glass of wine and sample the

spread of food that had been laid out and leaving Cat behind her.

She reached the bar and called out, “Red Chardonnay.”

“I would have taken you for a champagne type of girl,” Lex commented as he turned around from his seat at the bar, looking at Lois with a pleased smile, seemingly getting a thrill out of surprising her with his presence.

“Lex, you certainly know how to draw a crowd.” Lois glanced around the bar at the bidders that had lost out on the photo-op.

“A pleasure to see you again, Lois.” Lex reached out to take her hand before diving into his line of questioning, “I was surprised I didn’t hear back from you last month. The Paper is keeping you busy I see.”

“Well, those front page stories don’t write themselves,” Lois shrugged, not wanting to address his first question as she pointed to Clark who was exiting the photo booth with a flushed expression. “Superman’s been quite the draw lately.”

“Yes, apparently not only for you, my dear,” Lex followed her gaze and pointed to the crowd of women that had rushed up to Clark trying to get a photo or autograph. Front and center was of course Cat Grant.

“Well, everyone needs a hero to look up to,” Lois brushed it off, trying not to show the bitterness that was boiling inside her as she claimed the glass of chardonnay the bartender had just slid across the bar to her.

“Yes, of course, it’s just a shame that a lovely woman such as yourself would have your attention taken by someone so...unattainable.”

Lois jerked her head back, giving him a sharp gaze as she replied coolly, “Where I spend my time and who I give attention to is none of your business, Lex.”

“Is that why you were bidding earlier?” Lex asked.

“I wasn’t bidding, I was arguing and...you know what? I don’t owe you any explanation. Excuse me.” Lois grabbed her glass and headed toward the long table where the spread of catered food was laid out.

“Shouldn’t you be heading for the nearest exit by now?” a voice behind her caught her attention as she reached for the plate on the table.

She turned to glance over her shoulder, spotting Clark dressed in a black tuxedo and his glasses tipped on the edge of his nose. “Decided to make an appearance at this travesty, did you?”

“Well, I didn’t think Perry would let me live it down if I didn’t,” Clark responded following her down the line as she gathered up the different samples on her plate.

“Probably not,” she agreed.

Clark claimed a chair next to Lois’ at the high top table, looking on as the bidding continued. Though he knew the

event would benefit the children he could find much less embarrassing ways of raising money for charity. He turned to Lois who was sipping her glass of chardonnay. "So, how often do they throw this thing together?"

"Once a year," Lois answered, handing him a bowl of chocolate covered pretzels she had gathered up from the buffet. "Here, you look like you could use this more than me."

"I don't know, you were the one fighting with Luthor earlier..." Clark teased as she flashed him a quick smile.

"I wasn't fighting, I was putting him in his place." Lois corrected him, taking a bite of her cracker.

"Ah, is that what they call it now?" Clark asked, unfazed by the dirty look she gave him.

"You okay?" Lois asked, pointing toward the stage. "I mean, not everyone can rake in fifty thousand dollars in one bid and only have to pay with a smile and a camera..."

"I'm fine. It was...not as terrible as I thought it would be. Just more nerve wracking. I'm still not used to all the attention." Clark responded with the tap of his hand.

"Yeah?" Lois took another sip of her glass, holding his gaze for a long moment. A smile slid across her face and she leaned in to whisper, "For the record I was not bidding."

"I..." He bit his lower-lip, trying to hold back his laughter in his response. "I didn't think you were."

"Good." Lois smiled back at him. "Because that would have been weird."

"What would?"

"Well you know..." Lois waved her hand in the air, trailing off as she spoke.

"I know what?" Clark asked.

"It's just not a good idea to mix friendship and ... other stuff." Lois amended as she reached her glass for another sip.

"Of course," Clark nodded feeling the gut-wrenching blow as every fiber of him screamed at him for not arguing with her.

"So, we're agreed then? Friends?"

Clark chuckled, shaking his head in misery as he repeated, "Friends."

Chapter 8 ***Southside Fires Take Over the City!***

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

The front page of the Daily Planet was wrinkled beneath the stack of thin manila folders and a coffee ring from day-old coffee mugs. Johnny Taylor ran a weary hand across his face as he looked across the smoke-filled stage where the try-outs of different girls stood vying for a spot in his elusive club. Not that he could blame them. The

Metro Club was known for its elusive clientele and gorgeous girls.

"Johnny?"

He looked over to where his sister Toni was standing over him with a disapproving scowl. He let out a low chuckle, "Boy, you get that look on your face, and you look like ma."

"What are you going to do about this?" Toni slapped the latest edition of the Daily Planet on the table for him with a glossy photo on the Southside district in flames.

"I'm working on it," Johnny said with a noncommittal wave. Not really sure what he was supposed to do about the arson that had erupted almost overnight.

"Leo's place was burned last week and now Donnie's," Toni fumed, shaking her head.

"I'm handling it!" Johnny slammed his fist on the table, causing Toni to jump back.

"They pay us for protection," Toni reminded him coolly. "Protection we can't offer." Before he could counter her comment, she turned to storm off

"They pay us for protection," Johnny muttered under his breath, mocking his sister as he turned back to the stage, returning to his task of selecting a new dancer for the evening act.

Lois raised her arm above her brow, shielding the sun as she gazed up at the clinic that was set ablaze. The crowd around her was filled with patients and nurses that had been rescued and fellow journalists covering the fires. This was the third one in the last week, and yet again, the flames had overtaken the firefighters fighting the blaze.

She walked past the LNN Announcer, giving her take on the day's troubling events as the camera rolled.

"Another case of arson has drawn firefighters to the Southside district. This makes three in the last week, and tensions continue to rise as Metropolitan Fire Department officials have no leads."

A rumbling of activity near the awaiting ambulance caught her attention, and Lois moved toward the barrier to investigate. Detective Henderson and Fire Marshall Lawrence stood by with a small trio of awaiting ambulatory workers.

"What's going on?" Lois asked, pointing toward the clinic that was still ablaze that held the group's attention.

"Another fire in less than a week's time," Lawrence muttered, shaking his head.

Henderson's jaw tightened as a chirp came across the radio hooked on his belt, and a frantic cry came on the frequency.

"This place is going to cave in. There's a custodian trapped on the top floor, but we can't get to him..."

A loud crackle screeched through the frequency, and a loud crack was heard. Lois looked up, spotting the familiar red and blue streak as glass shattered from above.

A voice in the crowd shouted, "Superman!"
"It's Superman!" another voice cheered.

Lois felt the corners of her mouth twitch when she spotted an exhausted Clark carrying the dazed man in his arms. The crowd grew more frantic and chaotic as Clark landed, and ambulatory workers approached with a stretcher, assessing the victim's vitals as Clark helped answer the questions that were being hurled at him from varying directions.

"Not going to join the jackals today, Lois?" Henderson asked, clearing his throat.

"Same story, different day." Lois raised her brow, turning back to Henderson with her arms crossed over her chest. "I'm more interested in covering why these fires keep happening."

"Not interested in keeping the same story going all week, huh?" Henderson chuckled, shaking his head.

"Every fire is in Southside. I can't be the only one to have picked up on that," Lois observed aloud.

"We are investigating the source of the arsons that have erupted in Metropolis."

"Any comment on the fact that the last three arsons have been on businesses supposedly protected by the Metro Gang?" Lois asked, tapping her hand on the edge of her notepad.

Henderson chuckled, shaking his head. "I enjoy reading your stories, Lois. It always gives me a new perspective."

"Is that your way of saying 'No comment'?" Lois guessed with a heavy sigh.

"Can't wait to see what you have in store for us tomorrow," He held his paper mug up and took a sip, then moved off. Lois narrowed her gaze at him, staring across the chaos that had been left in the wake of the recent arson.

Lois let out a defeated sigh and turned to leave, backing away from the crowd and finding her way to the alleyway she had parked on. The chaos from the distance continued to ring in her ears as she looked around the narrow street, noting the passersby seeming to be unfazed by the arson. She set her sights on the small neon light dimly lit at the end of the alley with a 'Now Hiring' sign under the white and black script sign that read '*Metro Club*.' Before she could talk herself out of the idea that had begun to form in her head, she quickly ducked inside her Jeep to change.

The music from the club reached her ears as she walked inside, keeping her eyes peeled as she pushed the door open. The barkeep at the front pointed her toward the

dining room where the stage was lit up, and the girls were performing their auditions.

The newsroom was filled with a chaotic buzz as Lois set her sights on the coffee station, where she found her partner preparing his own cup for the afternoon. "You read my mind," she smiled at him, reaching over to pour her own cup.

"Busy afternoon?" Clark asked, turning to follow her back to her desk with his own coffee cup in hand.

"Something like that," Lois sighed, shaking her head as she pointed toward the coverage from earlier on the recent arson. "I've been following this string of arson attacks in Southside and seeing if I can find a connection."

"Anything spring to mind?" Clark asked, following her gaze. "The Fire Marshall is stumped, and the detectives assigned to investigate aren't much help either."

"I have a lead, maybe," she shrugged her shoulders. "But it's a stretch."

"What's a stretch?" Clark asked curiously.

"Well, the fires have all been at businesses paying the Metro Gang for protection," Lois summarized, taking a sip from her cup. "So, I'm going to go undercover at the Metro Club and see if I can flesh out anything."

"Are you crazy?" Clark's jaw tightened into a square as he shook his head adamantly. "Lois, those guys aren't just club owners. They're gangsters. Sleep with the fishes and disappear, never to be heard from again... Ring any bells? Their calling card has been littered across the obituaries for the last month."

"I know how to handle myself, Clark. I've gone undercover with dangerous characters before. I'll keep a low profile and see what I can find out."

"You're in over your head on this one, Lois." Clark advised, running a hand through his hair. "I don't get why you didn't at least talk to me about this before trying something so risky."

"Just because we're partners doesn't mean I can't chase a lead on my own," Lois countered with a heavy sigh. "Not that it's even a solid lead yet." She let out a huff, "I can handle myself without backup."

"And if something went wrong, what's your plan?" Clark asked.

"I don't need back-up."

"Don't need back-up on what?" Perry asked, walking up to them with a curious look.

Lois shook her head, "Nothing."

Clark turned to Perry and pleaded, "Chief, try and talk some sense into her, would you?"

"Ever try to milk a steer, son?" Perry smirked, turning to Lois with a heavy sigh.

“Ha, ha,” Lois rolled her eyes and then gestured at Clark, “It’s nothing, Chief. Clark here would rather give up the scoop on the Southside arsons than let me take a few small chances.”

“A few chances?” Clark echoed aghast. “You want to go undercover where an exit interview is being taken out back and shot and that’s a little chance?”

“Now, Lois...” Perry gave her a stern gaze.

“Would Woodward and Bernstein have won that Pulitzer if they didn’t take a little risk?” Lois countered.

Perry sighed, shaking his head, “Now, Kent, it’s always been my policy to stand behind my reporters one hundred percent.” He pointed to the window above them and continued. “Now, if you went up to those windows and told me you could fly, I’d back you up. I’d miss you, but I’d back you up.”

“Thanks, Chief,” Lois cheered.

“Now, that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t go in without backup,” Perry advised, wagging his finger at Lois.

“Backup?” Lois cringed as Perry pointed at Clark.

“No.” she shook her head at Clark. “Perry come on, I don’t need a baby-sitter.”

“You can always take Jimmy,” Perry offered.

Lois groaned, shaking her head as Perry moved off with a soft yodel. She turned back to Clark with a scowl. “This is a bad idea.”

Clark tucked the pen behind his ear as he looked around the large office, catching a glimpse of the large table Lex Luthor had set up on display for the crowd. A photographer stood next to Luthor, snapping the promotional photo.

Lex looked on as he motioned for everyone to gather around and then pointed to the colorful display. “Schools, shops, restaurants, theaters, offices, apartments: a self-contained community. A giant step forward in urban reawakening. A new, bright jewel in Metropolis’ crown.”

“With the uptick in arson in Southside, aren’t you worried about making such a large investment in Southside at this time?” Clark asked, catching the miffed expression on Luthor’s face as he met his gaze.

“I never worry, I act,” Lex responded, offering a charismatic smile, turning back to the crowd of reporters, waiting for the next question.

Unwilling to let Lex get off so easily, Clark pressed the issue with another question. “So, is your plan to rely on faith to protect your multi-million dollar investment, Mr. Luthor, or is there something more substantial being implemented?”

A flicker of a scowl crossed Lex’s face for a moment before he recovered and smiled, “Metropolis must strike at the root of the plague that continues to drag its citizens

down. When a tree is sick, you don’t merely trim its branches, but you cut down the entire tree.”

“Are you suggesting the Southside district is a plague on Metropolis?” Nicole Knight from the S.T.A.R. asked.

“Suggesting, no,” Lex shook his head. “Every city has its blemishes, and Southside is Metropolis,’ but with this revitalization project, we hope to rectify this and restore the city to its true glory.”

“By cutting down the blemishes?” Nicole asked with a smirk.

“If necessary,” Lex smiled, “Southside is currently a blight on the face of our fair city. LexHarbor will change all that.”

“How do you respond to accusations that coercion was used to pressure the city council to approve this project without appropriate study?” Clark asked, watching for a reaction from Luthor.

The scowl returned to Lex’s face once more. “I don’t respond to accusations. I’m more concerned with results. I believe in this city. I believe we can empower ourselves and take back our streets from crime and gang influence.”

Clark tugged on his tie, looking around the dimly lit room of the Metro Club. From the cusp of the crowd, he could see the glamorous sparkle from the dancers on the stage amid the misty smoke that filled the air. It wasn’t his first time in a setting like this, but he wasn’t exactly in his own skin. The shimmering lights and overflowing drinks among the patrons kept the ambiance of the Metro Club going. From the corner of the room, he spotted Lex Luthor with Miranda on his arm, talking with the bartender.

Lois had been undercover for the last three days as a new trainee at the Metro Club. So far, nothing but tips to avoid being harassed and a visual on the clientele that visited the Metro Club had been garnered from experience. He had thankfully been able to blend into the crowds and keep tabs on the happenings at the club without drawing attention to himself.

Not only had he had the challenge of working undercover alongside Lois, but he had also been pulled into rescue after the rescue to assist the Metropolis Fire Department in keeping the out-of-control fires that had taken over the southside of Metropolis.

He moved through the crowd, trying to get close enough to catch the conversation Lex Luthor was having with the blonde-haired woman at the bar. He walked toward the stage, keeping a close eye on Luthor as the conversation transpired.

“Mr. Luthor, this is a surprise.”

“I always like to examine the product before investing.”

A hand poked out from behind the curtain, beckoning him toward it - which he immediately recognized as Lois'. Her soft murmur tickled his eardrums, droning out the conversation with Luthor and the woman at the bar he had been trying to listen in on. "Clark, what are you doing? You're going to stick out like a sore thumb pacing around back here?"

He pulled the curtain back and stepped inside as Lois faced him with a scowl on her face. "It's kinda hard to keep tabs on everything with you interrupting me every two seconds."

"You're the only one over here," she gestured to the back stage before crossing her arms over her chest, "I thought you were supposed to be keeping a low profile."

"I was...I am." He corrected as he looked around the dressing room he was standing in. He pointed to the yellow feathers poking out from beneath her robe, "Are those feathers?"

"No..." Lois tightened the robe around her.

"Looks like feathers to me," Clark chuckled, pointing to the yellow feather on the floor.

She quickly shook her head, "Did you find anything out from the Fire Marshall?"

He grinned, knowing exactly what she was doing, but decided not to press his luck. "Message came in while you were out. Unknown source of the fires remains the same."

"Four fires in the last three days with the same heat source no one can identify," Lois muttered in disbelief.

"Anything show up while you were training today?" Clark asked with a smirk. "I mean, besides the chicken feathers?"

"Ha, ha," Lois rolled her eyes. "Don't you have a billionaire to go spy on?"

"Five minutes!" the stagehand called out to her through the door.

"I was, and then someone insisted I come back here," He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Rather forcefully if I might add."

"That's it. Go back to working the crowd."

Clark shook his head, "But then I'd miss your debut. I promised Jimmy pictures..."

"Places! That means you, sweet thing." The stagehand called out.

"Don't you dare," she scolded, wagging her finger at him. He fought the chuckle in his throat, wondering momentarily how far he could push the teasing banter before she snapped. Her lower lip pursed into a pout as her eyebrows narrowed and she looked as if she was about to add to her threat when a loud bang and the screams of the crowd in the dining room startled them both, causing them to jump.

"Something tells me that's not the opening act," Clark muttered, pulling his glasses off and preparing for a change in costume. He quickly spun into a blur of red and blue pixels, changing into his Superman suit within seconds.

With a gentle push he flew out into the dining room, preparing to face whatever threat had made its presence known to the patrons of the Metro Club. What he found was an empty room with four men dressed in metallic suits aiming their weapons at the stage and blasting the room with flames from the devices in their hands.

"Metros, there's a new act in town!"

"You're dead, Johnny!"

Clark spotted a blonde-haired bewildered man bolting toward the office just before it burst into flames. '*That must be Johnny,*' he guessed as he flew toward him, shielding the unsuspecting man from the flames and aiming a blast of freezing breath at the flames.

"Out! Everyone out!"

He looked over to see Lois ushering the patrons toward the door. Toward the back of the stage, he spotted the blonde woman who had been sitting with Lex Luthor earlier cornered by the flames. With a blast of freezing breath, he snuffed the flames out and reached over to lift up the wooden door that had fallen and trapped her.

"Come on," Lois waved toward the door as Johnny was making his way toward the exit. Clark flew the woman to where Lois was, ushering her out as well.

He looked back to where the intruders had been standing a few moments ago, shaking his head in dismay when he saw they had disappeared. He aimed a blast of freezing breath at the flames, snuffing them out before he cleared the air with a deep breath, inhaling the smoke and revealing the damage the intruders had done.

'*Toasters*' was printed in ashy residue the arsonists had left on the wall above the stage.

"I guess we finally know what the unknown cause of those fires was," Lois commented, walking up to him with a shake of her head. "Toasters. How original."

"Flame throwers turned into deadly weapons." Clark pointed to the wall. "I'm guessing that's the Toasters' M.O."

"How do we stop them from burning Metropolis down?" Lois asked, looking around the ashy debris.

"I don't know."

Chapter 9

Jason Trask peered across the room to where an elderly couple stood at the counter with an older man, exchanging pleasantries while checking out. The clerk motioned to the bags and the couple waved good-bye with the other man they'd been conversing with. Trask placed the paper he'd

been hiding behind back on the shelf and followed the couple from a safe distance.

Three names had shown up on the Bureau 39 report as suspected interference in the bureau's retrieval of the unidentified object that had crashed in Smallville in 1966. Though the object had been retrieved eventually, he still had nothing linking him to the traitors that had harbored the alien known as Superman all these years.

That would soon change.

The double doors to the waiting room opened, revealing an irritated Lois Lane as she tore the hospital bracelet off her wrist, shoving the paperwork from her visit into her purse as she pointed toward the door. "Have you been out here this whole time?" she asked as she walked up to him with an arched brow.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay," Clark responded, shoving his hands into the pockets of his suit jacket as he followed her toward the exit.

"I'm fine," she harrumphed with a heavy sigh. "I don't know why everyone's making such a big deal about this. It's just a little smoke inhalation. The doctor said it's nothing to worry about."

"Mixed with whatever that stuff was that the inspector found under the stage," Clark reminded her, keeping himself a few paces behind her.

"For all we know it could be a bad batch of moonshine," Lois sniffed, shaking her head in dismay as she turned the corner to where the parking garage was located, searching for her Jeep.

Clark let out a low chuckle, "Well, it certainly had a stench to it."

"Tell me about it," Lois commented.

They reached the end of the walkway and came to the elevator leading up to the parking garage. Lois reached over to press the call button, looking around the parking garage. Her face softened as she turned back to him, jutting her chin out as her eyelashes fluttered against her cheek.

"So, I'm guessing Perry's put you on protecting Lois from herself duty?" she asked, twisting her mouth into a tight purse of her lips.

"Perry didn't send me," Clark responded shyly, shrugging his shoulders. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

She held her hands up for him to examine, "I'm not sure if you noticed but it take a little more than an exploding building to knock me down." The elevator doors pinged open and she stepped inside with him close behind her. "I'm still in one piece and not going anywhere."

A good-natured smile crossed his lips and he murmured, "Let's hope not."

Her eyes twinkled with a sparkle, twitching her lips into a bright smile accompanied by the dark intriguing eyes staring back at him with an almost magnetic hold that drew him to her on instinct. "I guess we have to figure out another angle to research the Metros. With the fire nearly torching the place I don't know how solid my undercover assignment is going to be."

"Well, maybe that's a *good* thing," Clark pointed out, brushing his thumb against the scrape on her left cheek.

"Not if we lose the trail on these bozos," Lois muttered with a defeated sigh. "I thought we were finally getting somewhere."

"We have a name," Clark reminded her.

"Yeah, for all the good that does us," Lois leaned her head against the elevator wall behind her. A smirk crossed her lips and she crossed her arms over her chest, looking at him expectantly, "You know, if it weren't for me working undercover we never would have learned about the Toasters."

"Uh-huh," Clark shook his head, sensing where she was going with this.

"I mean, it's almost like working undercover helped the investigation." She continued with a bright twinkle in her eyes, pacing in front of him. "Like it's a part of the job."

"There's a fine line between taking unnecessary risks and following a lead," Clark let out a deep sigh, feeling the jabs from the point she was making grow more and more obvious.

"I don't think that's how you say '*You were right, Lois*,'" she grinned back at him, teasing the knot of his tie with her index finger.

He smirked at her, fighting the urge to lean in closer to her. It was really hard to think straight when she was standing this close to him. The intoxicating pull he felt when he was around her was enough to drive him mad. He wanted so desperate to push past the barrier that had been built between them, labeling him as '*just a friend*' and explore the ever-evolving feelings he had for her. He wanted so much more, but the risk of losing what they shared now terrified him. He wasn't just risking his friendship with her but everything he'd built in Metropolis up until this moment.

"You can say it." She grinned at him with flirtatious whisper.

"Say what?" he croaked out, wondering if he had missed something as he continued to push the almost impossible urge to kiss her out of his mind as she giggled.

"Repeat after me, '*You're right, Lois*.'" She bit her lower-lip, leaning closer to him as she whispered in a sing-song voice, "Come on. You know you want to."

His tongue darted out of his mouth, wetting his lower-lip as he felt his mouth go dry, trying to keep his focus as

he stared into her entrancing dark eyes. "I..." The elevator doors pinged on the third level and he chuckled, pointing at the open doors and added, "Saved by the bell."

Toni Taylor bit her lower-lip as she settled into the office chair that had once been her father's and, later on, her brother, Johnny's. She had hungered after the power that was held in this chair for years. Salivated over the changes she could make to the empire her family had built and nodded quietly as she had been pushed aside and put into the role of dutiful sister and obedient daughter.

They couldn't even to begin to comprehend her potential. That was how she had been successful in claiming ownership of everything. Johnny had been a fool playing mob boss under the thumb of Lex Luthor expecting to cling onto the power their father had once wielded. It was a pipe dream that would never come.

A light knock on the door frame drew her attention to the unexpected visitor that had darkened her doorway.

"Lou," she smiled faintly at the right hand man she had inherited from Johnny. Though his loyalty had been fierce to her brother it was to the business and the organization of the Metros that Lou truly stood by with unfaltering allegiance. "Johnny make it to the airport okay?"

"On the flight with an escort just like you asked, Ms. Taylor." Lou nodded with a flick of his wrist, pointing his thumb behind him. "You, uh, expecting a visitor?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Toni's lips pursed as she looked curiously over Lou's shoulder, wondering who might be dropping by while the club was still in disarray from the attack on her brother a few nights ago.

"Want me to announce ...?" Lou began to ask but found himself cut off as the visitor made his presence known.

"I don't believe that'll be necessary."

Toni's lips pursed when she saw Lex Luthor standing next to Lou with a stern gaze,

prompting her to wave to Lou, signaling Lex was welcome. "Thanks, Lou, I'll take it from here."

Lou nodded, looking between them before moving off and leaving her to handle Lex on her own.

Toni tapped her fingertips against the wooden grain of the executive desk she was seated at, watching as Lex strode inside the office, giving it a once over with his nose in the air before turning his attention to her.

"I see you've wasted no time in moving in," he ran his finger against the ashy residue that covered the desk. "I suppose it might look a bit too eager to spruce the place up the day after you claimed your seat at the table."

"I've had more important things on my mind, Lex," Toni rolled her eyes, shaking her head as she gestured to the seat across from her. "Take a seat."

"I think I'll stand," Lex countered, pulling a copy of the Daily Planet's city section out and opening it to the second page where he pointed to the list of businesses that had been destroyed by the Toasters. "It appears your control on those hoodlums is slipping. Lex Labs was hit last night by the Toasters."

"I'll talk with them," Toni said dismissively.

"You better, or I'll be the one reminding them those weapons they enjoy so much can be reclaimed just as easily as they were given to them."

"I'll make sure they stay away from LexCorp," Toni promised.

"Like you kept them away from Miranda's Revenge formula?" Lex countered with a snarl.

"That was a mistake, Lex," Toni fumed irritably. "No one knows it was here and any evidence linking back to LexLabs blew up with the backstage."

"Just be glad your Toasters were the only ones exposed." Lex fumed, shaking his head. "Another mess up like that and I'll be sure everyone knows just how the Toasters came into power."

"You do that and you're sinking yourself, Lex." Toni warned.

"Am I?" Lex countered with a sly smile. "Your precious Toasters have only met with you. The only one with even an inkling of the connection between those fires and my real estate venture is you. How exactly do you think that'll go down in front of a judge and jury?"

"Get out." Toni fumed.

Bill Henderson let out a heavy sigh as he pushed through the glass doors of the Metropolis P.D. lobby with Lois Lane and Clark Kent in tow. The glossy polaroid Lois was waving in his face showed the name of the 'Toasters' etched onto the Metro Club's wall as she excitedly demanded the police do something.

"I'm not sure what you expect me to do here, Lois." Henderson mused with a defeated sigh.

"Well, can't you search for these guys in that database of yours?" Lois asked, motioning back toward his office.

Henderson rolled his eyes, "Sure, let me just hop on over and search for four guys in metal suits that respond to Toaster." He shook his head, looking at her over the brim of his glasses. "Or did you have some other database in mind that isn't the standard Metropolis P.D. issue?"

Clark's jaw tightened to a square and he spoke up to ask, "What do you need in order to track these guys down?"

"Names, address, some kind of description to help narrow down the search other than non-descript characteristics that can be any average Joe off the street."

Henderson explained. “We want these guys off the street as bad as you do, but there’s not enough to go on.”

A loud crack echoed in the dark room as Jason Trask lifted the crowbar against the crate, prying the lid open. He let out a low grunt as he reached up to wipe the sweat from his brow. Another grunt and shove against the wooden crate revealed the contents of the crate. He smiled to himself, reaching in to pull out a large manila envelope with a small globe in the shape of the Earth.

He scanned the file, searching for anything that might hint at who or where to start in his search for the traitors that had given refuge to Superman all these years.

‘He didn’t just crash into the middle of nowhere without drawing attention to himself,’ Trask thought to himself, tossing the globe in the air. He pressed the top of it with his thumb, hoping for a reaction but found no response.

‘Useless,’ he tossed it back in the crate and turned back to the file in his hand.

Lois reached over to claim an eggroll from the takeout carton in front of her, skimming through the list of delinquents that had been arrested in the last year for arson. It was a long shot but it was the only place she or Clark could think to start. They had to do something and sitting around waiting for the Toasters to strike while they worked undercover was getting them nowhere.

“Well, there goes that one,” Lois sighed, crossing another name off the list and taking a bite from her eggroll. She pointed to the receipt on the table printed in Chinese and wondered aloud, “So do you get jetlag flying all over the place or are you invulnerable to that too?”

“No jet lag.”

“So not fair,” She took another bite of her eggroll. Her gaze moved across the table to where Clark was seated as she mulled over the conversation from earlier. What had come over her? She had lost all sense of restraint in a matter of seconds. Her lips tightened into a round ‘oh’ as she watched the tip of his pen brush against his lips before pulling it away.

What is wrong with you?

“Sorry. Can’t help it.” He shrugged his shoulders, pointing at the file in front of her she was working through. “You were saying?”

Saying? I was saying something?

Her mind went blank as she looked down at the file in front of her, trying to will her brain to focus on the story.

Stop it.

Don’t you remember what happened with Claude?

Obviously not.

“Kinda hard to plan mass arson of the city when you’re in Shady Brooke,” Lois responded, crossing the name one last time and moving to the next on her list. “This feels so pointless. We’re never going to get through them all.”

“I can go through these in a few minutes,” Clark offered.

“And cross reference them with the database each time?” Lois asked, pointing to the laptop setup in front of him.

“Okay, maybe several minutes,” Clark acknowledged with a smile.

Her lower lip tucked inside her upper lip and she felt her jaw tighten to suppress an inward groan.

Get a grip.

“Uh-huh,” Lois smirked back at him. “I like to pull my own weight.”

“I’ve noticed,” Clark responded, tapping at the keyboard, leaning in to hold up the name in front of him and compare it to what’s on the screen. “This is taking forever.”

“Well, look on the bright side.”

“What’s that?”

“You only have twenty-two more letters to go.” She rolled her eyes and offered him a quick grin. “Besides, it could be worse.”

“I know, but the longer it takes the more time these guys have to set fire somewhere else.” He let out a defeated sigh, “They’re getting more and more bold with each fire.”

“Somehow I suspect this latest one was personal.”

“The leader called out to Johnny Taylor.” Clark mused. “Maybe it was personal?”

“Maybe,” Lois shrugged her shoulders. “He didn’t get where he is by making friends.”

“Which is another reason you shouldn’t be...”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Lois wagged her finger at him. “Don’t even try it. We wouldn’t even know about the Toasters if I weren’t working undercover.”

Clark let out a begrudging nod before adding, “I can think of less dangerous ways to work an investigation.”

“Sure, when we’ve got time to work sources, but unless you want downtown Metropolis to resemble a charcoal briquette this is the only way. Besides, we can use this to see who else in this city is corrupt.”

“Other than Luthor you mean?” Clark ventured.

“And Senator Harrington.”

“That one didn’t surprise me,” Clark acknowledged, reaching over to take a sip of his cola.

Lois pushed the paperwork in front of her away and turned to Clark, “I think this is as far as we’re going to get for now. I’ve got to get going.”

“Early shift?” Clark asked.

Lois smiled, “You’re looking at the Metro Club’s newest singer.”

“Is that a good idea?” Clark asked, “Being out on stage like that might draw attention to yourself and put a target on your back.”

Lois caught the concern in his eyes, but brushed him off with a confident smile, patting his shoulder as she stood from her seat, turning to leave.

“Or give us a chance to draw the Toasters out and stop them for good.”

Velvet chords flowed through the air as Lex Luthor strode into the Metro Club, taking a moment to admire the scenery as the dancers moved past him with a flirtatious grin. A reaction he was used to by now, but he had little time to divulge in the desires of the flesh at the moment.

He strode toward the back office where he found Toni chatting up one of the bartenders. He held a stern gaze, pointing toward her office, “Ms. Taylor, I believe we’re overdue for a chat about our mutual friends?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Toni asked innocently.

Lex held up the cover of the Daily Planet’s evening edition with a photo of herself next to Johnny’s blasting the power move of the Metros that covered the page. An aghast expression filled her eyes as she grabbed the paper, shaking her head in dismay.

“How did this become front page news?”

“It seems to me you have a leak, Ms. Taylor.” He looked around the club suspiciously.

“No one knew about this other than those in the boardroom,” Toni mumbled aloud.

“Your trusted allies,” Lex mused before countering. “Or are they?”

Clark stood at the end of the bar, sipping on his drink and watching as Lex Luthor led Toni Taylor toward the back room away from prying eyes. He tuned his super-hearing into the room to overhear the conversation while nursing the drink in his hand.

“I can’t just shut them down now. How will that look?”

“It’ll look like you’ve used them to their full potential and are eliminating those that can destroy the both of us.”

“You mean destroy you, don’t you? What’s wrong, can’t handle not having your every word worshiped?”

“You need me.”

“I don’t need anything or anyone.”

A loud tapping of the drums and cymbals by the band immediately tuned the conversation out as he tapped at his ear, trying to recover from the loud intrusion. He spotted the familiar silhouette on stage and smiled when he heard the introduction.

“Introducing Lola Dane...”

His gaze darkened when he spotted Luthor exiting the back room with Toni Taylor catching sight of Lois on stage.

‘Oh, no,’ Clark thought to himself, moving toward the stage in an attempt to warn her.

The lights dimmed and Lois stepped out on stage as the spotlight shone on her. She spotted Toni Taylor, the new head of the Metros sitting off to the side at the same table as Lex Luthor.

What is he doing here?

She held it together, forcing a smile to the patrons, hoping not to blow her cover. Surely Lex wouldn’t rat her out in the middle of her performance, right? The fact of the matter was she didn’t know. She had no idea what to expect from him, but the suspiciously narrow eyes he was giving her didn’t give her the warm and fuzzy feelings either.

Where was the exit?

Hmmmmm I’ve got a crush on someone. Guess who

I’ve got a crush on you, sweetie pie

All day and night time give me sign

I never had the least notion that

I could fall with so much emotion

She caught a glimpse of Clark off to the right who seemed to be trying to signal to her. Try as she might behind the bright lights she couldn’t make sense of it. Her head turned to where Lex was seated, feeling goosebumps raise up on her arms, wondering what he was doing here. Was he in with the Metros? Here for the entertainment? Trying to get a rise out of her?

Could you coo, could you care

For a cunning cottage, we could share

The world will pardon my mush

‘Cause I’ve got a crush my baby on you

‘Breathe,’ she told herself.

How glad the million ralph from millionaires to caddies

Would be to capture me

But you had such persistence; you wore down my resistance

I fell, and it was swell

‘Crap!’ She’d looked at Lex again. Why was he staring at her like that?

She needed to get out of here...

She couldn’t fight the urge that had washed over her, nudging her to run toward the nearest exit. She wanted to leave. Desperately wanted to grab Clark and just...

‘Where did that come from?’

Her eyes met Clark’s watching as his lips moved, mouthing to her ‘Get out now.’

She scanned the room and noticed a couple of the Metro goons by the back door with Lou.

'Double Crap!'

*You're my big and brave and handsome Romeo
How I won you I shall never never know
It's not that you're attractive
But, oh, my heart grew active
When you came into view*

'Focus. You can do this.' She told herself.

*I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie
All the day and night-time give me sigh
I never had the least notion that
I could fall with so much emotion
Could you coo, could you care
For a cunning cottage
That we could share
The world will pardon my mush
'Cause I have got a crush, my baby, on you*

Clark darted behind the stage, waiting for Lois as she exited the stage. He caught a glimpse of the glittering sequin dress Lois was wearing glimmering in the dimly lit hallway leading to the dressing room. The dark suits that had been following Toni Taylor throughout most of the evening had dispersed through the crowd almost immediately. The conversation he'd overheard with Toni Taylor and Lex Luthor had sent a chill through him, reminding him of just what kind of danger Lois was in by continuing this charade.

"Lois?" he called out to her, waving her toward him as he heard a scream from out in the dining room.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching down to take her heels off as she walked with him toward the dressing room.

He scanned the dining room and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it was one of the waitress' accosting a patron at the club. He shook his head, "It's nothing." He pointed to the door leading out to the back exit. "You need to get out of here. Did you see him?"

"Yes, I saw him," Lois responded reaching her hand over the other as he noticed a tremble in her fingertips and shoulder as she walked with him. "I..."

"Lois, are you alright?" Clark asked, reaching over to cup her cheek as she attempted a quick nod.

They turned the corner to the hallway leading to her dressing room and came face to face with Toni Taylor who was blocking them from leaving with a stern gaze across her face.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" She pointed to Clark, "You know VIP specials with the singers usually go through Lou."

Clark bit his lower-lip, preparing to shield Lois from whatever was about to go down. The cross expression on Toni Taylor's face and the arch of her brow hinted at the superior complex she had. Her nose twitched and her eyes darkened with a sharp glare as she stared them down, daring either one of them to make a wrong move. He caught a glimpse of the pistol in her hand tucked behind her left elbow as her arms rested across her chest.

Lois' mouth opened to argue, and he reached over, clasping her hand in his and motioning to her not to say anything. She closed her mouth and Toni smiled smugly, turning to him as she snidely tapped her chin and accosted him with a sharp cluck of her tongue. "Tsk tsk tsk, but something tells me that's not what you're doing here, is it, Mr. Kent?"

He stood firmly in place, not reacting to his name as he stared blankly at Toni Taylor, keeping himself as a barrier between the weapon Toni had in her grasp and Lois.

"What's the matter, Mr. Kent? Cat got your tongue?" Toni turned to Lois as her hand tightened around the pistol in her grasp, "Ms. Lane, you really should look into a career in show business. That's quite a set of pipes you have." She pointed the barrel of the gun at them both moving it from side to side, "Not that it'll do you any good."

Clark held his gaze on Toni, lowering his glasses far enough to aim a beam of heat vision on the handle as she squeezed the trigger, causing her to drop it. In that moment he moved at super-speed, moving Lois out of the way as the entire hallway burst into flames and a loud booming voice came from the dining hall.

"We're back, Metros! And we're not leaving until we desecrate this place!"

Clark set Lois down just by the doorway, pointing toward the exit, "Run. Get out of here and call the police. I'll take care of these guys."

"But..." Lois began to argue but stopped, seeming to question her argument mid-sentence as she nodded and ran toward the exit.

Clark quickly removed his glasses, tearing open his shirt to reveal the emblem of his Superman suit before disappearing into a blur of red and blue. At super speed he flew into action, moving around the club at an impossible speed, moving the club patrons out of harm's way. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted two of the large thugs running from the fiery blaze being directed in their direction by the Toasters.

Clark let out a blast of freezing breath, snuffing the fire blazing weapons out and covering the weapons with ice. The clacking of heels in the corner caught his attention and he turned to see Toni Taylor making a run for it with the pistol tucked in her bag as she raced toward the exit. There

was no way he was going to let her escape. Using the singed curtain, he wrapped her up in the heavy cloth, tying it securely and then standing back to survey the scene.

Police sirens approaching from the distance echoed outside and he smiled confidently, looking at the fuming Toni Taylor as realization began to dawn on her.

A low moan came from the life size icicle form of the Toasters and he smiled, striding over to where the police officers that had entered moments ago were standing.

He looked back to where the Toasters stood frozen in place, ensuring they wouldn't be moving anytime soon. The first officer smirked, pointing to the icicles dripping from the nose of the first Toaster. "Like to see 'em burn their way out of that."

"Careful not to tempt fate, hmm, Wright," Detective Henderson said, nodding to Clark as he looked around the club, surveying the scene. "Well, Superman, what do we have here?"

"Detective, these are the gentlemen responsible for the fires in Southside." Clark explained, gesturing to the burned name of 'Toasters' imprinted on the wall behind him.

"This is insanity." Toni fumed from the corner. "These hoodlums break into my club and destroy the place and this buffoon attacks me and treats me like a common criminal..."

Henderson cocked an eyebrow at Clark. The silent question written on his face as Clark motioned to the curtain that held Toni Taylor and explained. "Ms. Taylor appears to have been the mastermind behind this. An attempt to push her brother out of power."

"You can't prove anything. I want my lawyer."

Henderson rolled his eyes and motioned to the officers to take her into custody, "Yes, yes, I'm sure they'll get this sorted out downtown, but until then you'll be coming with us, Ms. Taylor." Henderson looked over his shoulder, "Thanks for your help, Superman."

Clark nodded watching as Toni Taylor was taken into custody before leaving the scene. He ducked into the back alleyway and changed back into his street clothes. After a quick scan he found Lois waiting patiently at the coffee shop across the street, sitting at one of the tables just outside the shop.

"You look like you could use this." She handed him the paper mug.

"Thanks," he held it up briefly, giving it a sip as he claimed the seat next to her, eying her as she grinned ear to ear, scooting closer to him. "You okay?"

"Perfect," her sing-song tone caught him off guard as she looped her free arm across his shoulders. "Everything's perfect."

His mouth twisted as he caught her gaze, noting the carefree expression across her face. She seemed uncharacteristically at ease considering she had been facing the barrel of a pistol less than an hour ago.

"This coffee is wonderful," she grinned gleefully, leaning her head against his shoulder.

The fragrant scent of lavender and vanilla teased his nostrils, catching him off guard as his brain went into a fog, numbing itself to all reason. Question after question arose as he stared into her dark brown eyes, but the desire to search for answers was non-existent. Her fingertips teased the back of his hairs.

Something is wrong.

His mind screamed it but his brain couldn't comprehend the warning signs as he felt she tilted her head toward him, running her index finger against his chin. Her eyes sparkled as she leaned closer and he felt his mind go blank as her lips caressed his. A low moan escaped the back of his throat and the world around him quickly dissipated.

Bill Henderson ticked his tongue against the inside of his mouth, shaking his head as he looked across the table where Toni Taylor was seated. "My, my, my, Ms. Taylor, you certainly have built up a reputation for yourself in such a short tenure as the leader of the Metro Gang."

"What are you rambling on about?" Toni Taylor gave Henderson a sneering glare as she leaned back in her chair. "I run a legitimate business and keep the books."

"And the under the table blackmailing and gambling is just a perk?" Henderson smirked back at her.

"I think I want my lawyer now," Toni responded coolly.

"I'm sure you do," Henderson remarked, placing a pistol that had been tagged as evidence in front of him. "You want to tell me about this?"

"I'd rather not," Toni replied turning away.

"We can pull the cameras," Henderson reminded her.

"Nice try," Toni smirked. "The heat from those weapons would have destroyed any film from that low grade security system my brother installed."

"And how would you know that exactly, Ms. Taylor?" Henderson's brow raised as he tightened his jaw.

"I want my lawyer." Toni shot back.

"Certainly," Henderson replied, tapping his hand on the table. "I'm sure you'll have plenty to discuss what with Lex Luthor's statement on the events from tonight."

"Lex Luthor?" Toni echoed the name seeming to be thrown off her game at the mention of the billionaire's name.

"Apparently you threatened him tonight," Henderson prompted innocently. "We can discuss that when your lawyer gets here."

“Wait, no.” Toni grew quiet for a long moment, seeming to be contemplating her next words carefully before she continued.

“No? You don’t want to wait to talk to your lawyer?” Henderson asked.

“I want a deal,” Toni challenged.

“What kind of deal?”

“Immunity.”

“You must be joking.”

“I never joke when it comes to life or death,” Toni insisted. “Believe me you’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

The front door closed sharply behind him as Lois’ lips vibrated against Clark’s sending a ripple of desire through him. Her lips tore at his, unwilling to part from his as he walked with her into her apartment. Her hands twisted in his tie, toying with it from side to side and her lips ushered him closer and closer.

His mind jumbled in the serenity of the warm cocoon Lois held him in as her hands slid up and down his chest in an enticing rhythm that sent his mind through a hazy fog, struggling to make sense of the intoxicating euphoria that Lois had enveloped him in.

“Lois,” his voice rasped her name as he sank down on the loveseat with her, letting out a shuddered moan as she collided with him. “I think ...we need...to slow down.”

Her sultry whisper teased his earlobe, jolting him out of the spell he had fallen under, “Why would we want to do that, Clarkie?”

The faint hint of her sing-song tone and glint in her eyes left him panicked as he reached up to hold his hand up, pushing her away, “Lois, just take a minute.”

“But why?”

There it was again, that teasing tone that felt so out of place for Lois to use as she leaned closer, “I mean it’s not like I don’t know all your secrets...unless you have another side job you disappear to?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” He managed, letting out a low breath as he scrambled to come up with a reasonable excuse to make a quick exit. “We just really need to slow down,” Clark whispered pulling back and resting his forehead against her shoulder.

“Mmm, but I don’t want to slow down,” Lois reached her arms up over her head spreading them like wings over her head

“Yeah, I noticed,” Clark nodded, standing up and walking back toward the kitchen in hopes that he could find something to help spark an idea for how to convince Lois there was something wrong here.

She reached her hand out, toying with his tie as she playfully continued her intoxicating persuasion, “Slow is boring. Snails and tortoises don’t win any Pulitzers.”

“Tortoises?” Clark arched his brow at her, trying to follow her rambling.

“You don’t win any journalism awards by sitting on the sidelines and doing nothing,” she traced an invisible ‘S’ across his chest with her index finger. “Or stop any runaway trains.”

“Last I looked the story was already written and I haven’t heard any runaway trains lately,” Clark smiled, pulling her hand back and stopping it from further distracting him as she leaned in closer.

“It’s a figure of speech,” Lois giggled.

“Not one I’ve heard of,” Clark chuckled, biting his lower-lip as he swallowed the hard lump in his throat. She was gorgeous and the out of character behavior continued to nag at the back of his mind.

How long had she been like this without him noticing?

“Clarkie,” she whispered in a sing-song voice hanging onto him with a sultry purse of her lips.

“Lois,” he reached over to tilt her face to him, “you’re not yourself. Something has changed and...”

Before he could finish her lips were on his once more, consuming him with an intoxicating caress of her lips that sent ripples through him that would easily make a lesser man forget his name much less the fact that the gorgeous woman in his arms was not herself.

“I don’t need to be myself,” she responded, tugging him to her by the knot of his tie and then uttering three words he never thought he’d hear from her lips, “I love you.”

It was intoxicating.

The intense emotions and overpowering tug that drew him to her. He wanted so desperately to just give into the desires of his flesh and allow himself to be drawn into her arms without a second thought. Every word uttered and every soft caress was a reminder of everything he had longed for from her over the last few months. He wanted so desperately to hear those words from her without the hint of Lois’ inhibitions being stripped from her.

He couldn’t. He wouldn’t do that. He wanted so desperately for those words to be true. Perhaps in some capacity they were, but he would never be sure if he allowed himself to give in. She meant too much to him.

“Lois,” he let out a heavy sigh, reaching over to cup her cheek. “If you still feel that way when whatever this is has worn off then we’ll talk then.” He pushed her away, straightening his tie and smoothing his hand across his chest.

To her credit she didn’t try to argue any further, instead opting to push her lower-lip out into a pout seemingly

resigning herself to the clear limits he had drawn. "I'm not sick."

"I didn't say you were." Clark replied with a heavy sigh. "Let's get you over to S.T.A.R. Labs to see if we can get some answers."

"S.T.A.R. Labs?"

Lex Luthor boarded his private jet, tucking a copy of the Daily Planet under his arm as he claimed his seat with an exquisite spread waiting for him. To his left was Nigel St. John, his trusted advisor and bodyguard accompanying him on the flight to Kansas City to investigate the sighting of Jason Trask that had been reported earlier in the week.

He was certain the man held the key to both understanding Superman and his origins and possibly discovering the Achilles heel to the indestructible man.

Joey Bermuda tapped his hand across the table, waiting for the usual spiel with the officers that pulled in all related contacts in their raids of mid-management drug lords. He had gone through this exercise time and time again and he envisioned it wouldn't be his last.

It came with the job when working with the mob.

He was good at what he did though and loved a challenge.

The door creaked open and he spotted the tall man in the doorway holding up his shades as he clipped them on the collar of his dress shirt before claiming the seat across from Joey. "Mr. Bermuda?"

"That's me," Joey grinned back, waiting for the inevitable 'You're free to go,' only to be sorely disappointed as the detective claimed the seat across from him.

"Seems you and I have a lot to talk about," the man introduced himself as he set a folder down with the label, 'Antoinette Baines.' He cleared his throat and nodded to his badge, "I'm detective Henderson. I'll be conducting the questioning...."

"Questioning?"

"On your involvement in the arson and sabotage of E.P.R.A.D." Henderson advised. "You have a right to an attorney. You have the right to..."

Chapter 10

Professor Daitch scowled as he examined the latest report on his desk. He had run the tests at least a dozen times, but he had to be sure. He reached over to type in the coordinates once more, watching the screen as the simulation ran again.

The screen showed the meteor's diameter to be 22.2 kilometers as the trajectory moved directly into Earth's orbit. He stared at the preliminary timeline of the imminent

doomsday clock that blinked back at him in red digital letters.

A heavy sigh escaped the back of his throat as he reached over to dial the number for the Pentagon.

Lois cradled her head in her hands, looking up at the blinking clock in front of her. She vaguely recalled climbing under the covers a few hours ago. Her hand reached over to brush it against the bruise on her arm from where her IV had been. Her lips separated, peeling away from one another after the long rest as she cleared her throat, trying to find her voice.

<< "I don't think that's how you say 'You were right, Lois.' You can say it."

"Say what?"

"Repeat after me, 'You're right, Lois.' Come on. You know you want to." >>

<< "Introducing Lola Dane..." >>

<< "Ms. Lane, you really should look into a career in show business. That's quite a set of pipes you have. Not that it'll do you any good." >>

She reached her hand up to cradle her head as she sat upright on the edge of the bed, recalling the chaos at the Metro Club and the narrow escape she had made from the clutches of Toni Taylor. Despite her better judgment, she'd run right back into danger. She couldn't rationalize it any more than she could explain why Superman could fly.

Why?

Superman.

Her cheeks turned a crimson red, recalling the way she'd thrown herself at Clark. Her lips tingled, recalling the sensation of Clark's lips caressing hers. Flashes from the previous day trickled to the forefront of her mind.

<< "I think ...we need...to slow down."

"Why would we want to do that, Clarkie?" >>

<< "Lois, you're not yourself. Something has changed, and..."

"I don't need to be myself... I love you." >>

She reached for the bottle of Aspirin, twisting the top off and taking a capsule from the bottle, and tossing it to the back of her throat. She reached for the bottle of water and took a swig to help swallow the aspirin go down.

She let out a heavy sigh, recalling the events from yesterday. She clamped her eyes closed, processing the memories one by one and calming her nerves as she fought back the tidal wave of emotions.

<< "I love you." >>

A shudder rippled through her as those three words echoed in her mind, forcing her to reflect on how she truly felt about Clark Kent.

The atmosphere was tense within the war room as General Zeitlin looked across the table to the President, awaiting a response. The chiefs of staff surrounding the President stared at the footage, silently taking everything in as the simulation played on the large screen for them all.

The President cleared his throat, tapping his hand across the table before finally breaking the unnerving silence. “How many people know about this?”

“Everyone in this room and the scientist that found the irregularity. Dr. Daitch.” General Zeitlin responded calmly, trying to read the President’s pregnant pause as his attention moved back to the simulation once more.

“Bring him to the pentagon and see that this doesn’t get out. No sense in initiating a worldwide panic until we have all the facts.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

Clark hung the phone up and turned his attention to the empty page open on the screen, blinking expectantly for him to put to words the events over the last several days. He rested his chin into the crook of his palm, contemplating if he should check on Lois or wait for her to reach out. S.T.A.R. Labs’ evaluation had left more questions than answers for him, and the more he dug, the more questions that arose.

“Hey, C.K.,” Jimmy walked up, waving the handful of files trying to get his attention. “You okay?”

“Fine, Jimmy,” Clark fibbed, biting his lower lip as he turned back toward his screen. “Just fine...” he trailed off, feeling the weight of the word *‘fine’* press down on him. He was anything but fine at the moment but explaining all the events that had transpired over the last few days to Jimmy would take more time than he had to spare.

Jimmy pointed to the screen where the police had taken another group of lovesick victims into custody. “The world’s crazy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Clark nodded, feeling the burning of his ears at the memory of how close he’d come to making an irreversible mistake. Thanks to his inability to discern the fact that Lois had been drugged, he would forever be taunted with the fact that he had nearly...

He shook his head in dismay, pushing the memory away. Looking back, it was obvious, but in the moment, he had been clueless. How many others had been exposed to this drug? How many others would wake up with no recollection of what had happened?

Revenge.

That was the name the police had given it. A drug used to remove inhibitions was how S.T.A.R. labs had classified it during Lois’ evaluation. He still had so many questions, but it appeared those would have to wait.

The elevator doors pinged open, revealing Lois Lane with the usual crowd of reporters shuffling in from the morning commute.

“Here goes nothing...”

The faint hint of freshly cut grass hung in the air with a clean, fresh scent that was like nothing one would experience in Metropolis. It wasn’t the first trip outside the city and certainly wouldn’t be the last for Lex, but the small-town setting felt different from other places he’d visited. There was no rich culture to cater to as he tried to barter his way through the town’s inner politics but rather a homey small town richness that felt quaint.

Looking across the fields, he could see the clear skies for miles, and with it, he could feel the heat from the sun that bore down on him. A fact he was growing more aware of by the second as the sweat dripped down the back of his neck.

“So, Smallville,” Lex mused to himself, taking in the homey atmosphere as he entered the quaint hotel that claimed to be the best of Smallville. The linens and quilts on display felt like a play to an old country-western song than an elegant hotel his assistant had claimed it to be when booking the room for him.

Lex fidgeted with the keys in his hand as he allowed himself to be escorted to the executive suite. He bit his tongue from vocalizing his thoughts on the décor, nodding quietly to the woman – Maisie – who was setting him up with a key and refreshments. The chatter was of nonsensical musings over a festival of wheat or corn coming and so many rooms being unavailable. He mildly nodded, unable to tell if she was making up excuses or actually convinced this was how to carry on a conversation with him. When he didn’t respond, she quietly nodded and pointed him toward the bathroom where towels were laid out.

He nodded his thanks and offered a tip for the trouble, letting out a heavy sigh of relief when he found himself finally alone. He still wasn’t sure where to begin in his search for Jason Trask but he had to start somewhere.

Jason Trask reached up to wipe his brow, examining the ground below him as he walked through Schuster’s field. He stopped in front of the large oak that according to the sitemap from 1967 was in the middle of the estimated crash site. He placed a marker on the tree and turned to look over his shoulder to where the crew he had with him stood waiting.

“Tear it down.”

“Miranda Thatcher has brought in for questioning in the Toasters arson ring and the drug ring that was unveiled

during the investigation. Miranda Thatcher was recently seen with Lex Luthor at a charity event but has yet to confirm or deny the couple's relationship status..."

Lois stared at the image of Miranda being escorted into the police station, shaking her head in dismay. She had spent most of the morning doing what she could to avoid the reminders of just how much of the day had disappeared amid her exposure to the drug the police had dubbed, Revenge.

The footage changed from the scene outside the police station to a breaking news alert with a red ticker. Curious she walked toward the screen, reading the update that ran across the footer of the screen. 'Breaking News: Bob Fences Files Lawsuit Against LexCorp'

"This past weekend Bob Fences, founder of Nanosoft, has filed suit against LexCorp claiming the latest medical advancements LexCorp announced were the property of Nanosoft. The claim concludes the technology was stolen in a recent fire that broke out in the lab from the Toasters arson attacks ..."

"Well, this just got more interesting," Lois commented, tapping her finger on her chin. She vaguely recalled the suspicions that had been raised when the fire at Nanosoft had broken out. All suspicions over the fire's timing diminished as each fire ignited by the Toasters was seen as a random attack.

"What got more interesting?"

She turned, craning her neck to see Clark standing behind her. A flush of pink tingled in her cheeks as she felt the heat of embarrassment flood through her, suddenly face to face with him for the first time since her exposure to Miranda's Revenge potion.

"Clark, hi, um..."

She bit her lower lip, letting a lull fall between them for longer than necessary. Breaking the silence felt impossible as she ran a nervous hand through her hair, fingering the silky strands.

'Say something.'

"Uh, hi," Clark pointed to the television screen showing Bob Fences at a podium addressing the reporters in front of City Hall. "I guess the Toasters weren't the only ones starting fires."

"Or the other fires were a diversion to cover up the true target," Lois said with a nervous chuckle.

Clark's brow furrowed, raising on his forehead for a brief moment before prompting her with a question, "You think?"

"Stranger things have happened." Her eyes met his briefly, and a flash of white heat crossed over her. She felt a hard lump in her throat, keeping the racing thoughts from being vocalized.

"I guess so," Clark nodded, clearing his throat as he took a step closer to her, "How's your head?"

"I'll live," Lois shrugged it off. "It's not the first run-in with a gun-wielding gangster and probably won't be the last." She grinned as she let out a soft chuckle. "I could have done without the ...I'm fine." She finally answered, unable to finish her sentence.

"Are you?" Clark asked with his eyebrow cocked, staring at her as if he was looking right through her. He probably could. Though the part she desperately wanted to hide wasn't something he could see on an x-ray or scan. She felt frozen in place as the crippling fear of revealing feelings she didn't even know existed washed over her. She struggled to move as she tried to quickly cover up the panic that rose inside her over the last twenty-four hours.

"Yeah, of course," she brushed his concern off, flashing him a quick smile. She tucked her lower lip inside her mouth and held his gaze for what felt like an eternity. Unable to hold off the dread any longer, she finally bit the bullet and vocalized her concern over what had transpired between them. "Listen, I'm sorry about ...I, uh, thanks for taking me to STAR Labs." She finished weakly.

Clark shrugged, waving it off, "I'm glad they were able to help. I'm sorry it took me so long to figure out something was wrong."

"Yeah, about that..." Lois began at the same time Clark added, "At least we know it was just the drug that Miranda concocted, right?"

"Right," Lois smiled weakly, feeling a chill run through her spine as reality settled in. It was an out — a perfect out for the both of them. Blame her behavior on the drug and not face the feelings that had risen up in her, but that wasn't the whole story. She felt something, really felt something that scared her.

Could she shrug it off as just losing her inhibitions to a drug?

Bill Henderson held a clipboard in his hand, whistling as he walked down the long corridor to where the holding cells were. He counted each door silently until he found himself outside the door to Toni Taylor's holding cell. He had kept her isolated from the other prisoners and stopped her transfer to the general population until he could get an official statement. If even half of what she'd told him was true it would be enough to bring the crime lord that operated in Metropolis to his knees.

He just had to get her in front of a jury.

He fished out the key to the door and slipped it with ease inside the metal lock and turned it, pulling the door open as he stepped inside the doorway. His face flushed white with panic as he looked across the empty room turning to the guard standing outside.

“What happened to the prisoner?”

“She was released. Bailed out an hour ago.”

“Bailed out? She had no bail...” Henderson argued, struggling to follow.

The guard pulled out the paperwork and pointed to the status on the page with a hundred-thousand-dollar bond listed. “Says her bond was approved right here by Judge Winkler.”

Henderson shook his head in disgust. “Who bailed her out?”

“Name on the check is hard to make out, but it’s on a LexCorp check...”

“Of course, it is.”

A dark sedan pulled up to the Metropolis train station, hanging back from the cars in front as the trains whistled by. The clerk at the ticket booth watched as a woman with blonde hair and dark shades stepped out and walk toward his booth. He grinned as he spotted the smile on the woman’s face, nothing that she was purposefully walking toward him.

He tugged at his collar, straightening up in his chair as she reached the booth and waved her ticket in hand. He grinned as a hint of crimson red crossed his face, and she handed him her ticket.

“Traveling alone?” he asked.

“For the moment,” she grinned back at him.

He caught sight of the name on the identification he was presented with and stamped the ticket, handing it back to her. “Well, have a safe trip, Ms. Taylor.”

“Please, call me, Toni,” she flashed him a flirtatious grin as she walked past him.

“Toni.” He repeated the name. It certainly had a nice ring to it.

Jason Trask eyed the glimmer of green beneath the soil and dirt that had been kicked up from the tree removal outside Schuster’s field. He had of course, paid off the team to dissect the tree and ship its remnants to LexLabs in Metropolis, where he hoped to find an ally that would be willing to listen to his side of things. He reached for the large rock beneath the soil, brushing the years of dirt and mulch away to reveal the glowing stone that called out to him.

“Eureka.”

A hard crunch of the dry grass beneath Rachel Harris’ boot followed by the hard slam of the patrol car door as she shone a light through the tall grass of Schuster’s field. She footed the toe of her left boot against the gravel walkway leading into the open field – or what had been an open field. In its place was a large pit and tracks leading

out of the field through a broken fence to the roadway covered in red dirt tracks.

Red and blue lights flashed in the background as she turned back to where her deputy had just pulled up.

“Sheriff? What have we got here?”

“Looks like someone’s been searching for something...” Rachel pointed to the large crater in the middle of the field. She let out a low whistle. “Seems like they found it.”

“You want me to set up a perimeter?”

Rachel nodded, “Call it in. I’ll have to make my rounds and see what I can find out. Don’t let anyone in here until we’ve confirmed what happened here.”

“You got it, Sheriff.”

Clark shoved his hands in his pockets, following Lois through the maze that was the Daily Planet’s parking garage where she had arranged to meet a source from the Police Department. The lights in the corner dimly flickered in the already darkened setting as the sun slowly began to set in the distance.

A heavy sigh escaped his throat as he followed Lois to the roof of the parking garage. Lois had remained evasive over who the source was within the police department but agreed to let him tag along to meet with him on what promised to be a huge break in the E.P.R.A.D. arson story they were still following up on. With the recent string of fires and the lead on Nanosoft’s suit against LexCorp, the puzzle pieces appeared to slowly be coming together.

“I thought I told you to come alone,” a sharp voice growled as they turned the corner and Clark spotted Bill Henderson standing by the edge of the rooftop, looking down on the city.

“That’s your source? The lead detective at the Metropolis P.D.?” Clark asked, surprised to see the detective at the end of the chaotic maze Lois had sent him through.

“Anonymity, Kent,” Lois reminded him. “Right now, he’s just an anonymous source for the Planet.”

“Obviously, that means nothing to you, Lane,” Henderson spouted, shaking his head.

“He’s not going to say anything, Bill,” Lois reassured him, waving her hand at Clark as if to show how little of a threat his presence was. “You said you had some news on the E.P.R.A.D. case.”

“There’s a lot of whispers around town about how that fire that killed Dr. Baines wasn’t an accident. You and Kent brought up your own theories and compound that with losing a witness willing to name the quote-on-quote ‘boss of Metropolis’...” Henderson let out a long breath. “We have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“An ‘*I-don’t-know-who-to-trust*’ kind of problem,” Henderson responded, shaking his head.

“But you trust me?” Lois inquired.

“Something tells me we want the same thing,” Henderson replied with a shrug of his shoulders.

“You said you think Baines’ helicopter crash wasn’t an accident?” Lois arched her eyebrow curiously.

“I have a confession that says it wasn’t, but he’s holding out for a deal before he’ll put pen to paper on it,” Henderson said grimly.

“Do you have a name?” Clark asked.

“Goes by Bermuda. Or the Handyman, as he’s more commonly referred to as.” Henderson answered.

“The Handyman?” Lois echoed, thrown back.

“I guess we look into the Handyman and see how he connects with Baines,” Lois contemplated aloud.

“Be careful. These guys are dangerous.” Henderson advised.

“We will,” Clark reassured, walking with Lois toward the exit. “Thank you,” he called out to Henderson. The detective nodded in his direction and headed toward the stairs on the other end of the roof. He looked to Lois with a prompting smile, “I guess we’re following two leads?”

“I guess so,” Lois shrugged her shoulders. “Certainly makes things exciting.”

He nodded to agree with her when a chirp came from his coat pocket. He looked down to see the mobile phone in his pocket ringing. He reached out to answer it and was surprised to hear Rachel from Smallville’s voice on the other end.

“Hey, Rachel, everything okay?”

“I don’t think so,” Rachel looked around the field she was standing in, wiping her brow as she kicked the dirt up from the large crater that had been dug up. Whatever had been there, had been completely removed from the surface and left the land in aching need of repair.

“We got a call about someone poking around Wayne Irig’s property earlier and checked it out, but it seems we got here too late. Old Irig’s tree is completely gone along with everything planted around it.”

“Gone?” Clark’s voice cracked over the phone line, and Rachel bit her lower lip, uncertain how to explain what she was seeing.

“I think it’s something you’ll just have to see for yourself, Clark. I’ll survey everything and send you the photos, but you may want to see this for yourself.”

Chapter 11

The room was pitch dark as Dr. Daitch pointed to the image on the screen, clearing his throat nervously as he addressed the long table of key leaders in the room with

him. “Nightfall is close to seventeen miles across and has been tracked traveling close to thirty-thousand miles an hour.”

Daitch surveyed the grim expressions across the table and released a heavy sigh as he leaned over to key a few strokes on the keyboard. A digitized countdown appeared with a simulated trajectory of the Nightfall asteroid headed to Earth. The digital numbers on the screen read, ‘435:54:27 *Estimated Time to Impact.*’

“If my calculations are correct, Nightfall will impact Earth in a little over two weeks.” He let out a low breath and addressed the room, “The sky is falling, gentlemen, literally.”

The President, seated at the end of the table, tapped his fingertips nervously against his binder. He tapped his chin with his other hand and cleared his throat to speak up, “Any idea what kind of damage this could cause?”

“Mr. President, this could knock the Earth off its axis. Even throw us out of our current solar orbit.” Daitch shook his head in dismay, “It’s far larger than the meteor theorized to have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. The crater alone could throw enough dust into the air to start a new ice age.”

The President turned to the others seated at the table, “So, what are our options?”

The heat from the Kansas sun’s rays bore down on Lois as she looked across the street to where a small group had gathered. This was probably another dead end, much like the last few hours of talking with the Smallville locals. When she had offered to come with Clark to investigate, she had suspected there may be something worth digging into. She hadn’t expected the complete culture shock of seeing Clark in his hometown.

The difference felt like night and day as she struggled to acclimate herself to the town, working through the small-town culture that had been home unwittingly to a super-powered local without anyone being the wiser. It seemed strange to imagine even after just a few short months of covering Superman’s rescues and seeing the impact Clark’s alter-ego had on the world that at one time, there was no Superman. Clark’s innate sense of helping others and doing what was right wasn’t something formed overnight. She was sure if pressed hard enough, the locals could recall a time or two that unexplained miracles happened with Clark around. Though out of respect for her friendship with Clark and keeping his secret safe, she opted to hold onto that tidbit, enjoying her inner musings of wonder as she took in the small town of Smallville.

They had spoken with the local deputy earlier, hoping to gain some insight into what had happened, but the deputy hadn’t been able to provide much more than

Clark's friend had. The same story was heard from a majority of the locals they spoke to. With the road leading up to Schuster's field and Wayne Irig's property blocked off, it didn't seem like anyone was willing to let even Superman investigate the origins of the mysterious sabotage of a thirty-year-old oak tree. She had hoped to talk to the residents to see if anyone had seen anything out of the ordinary. Though she wasn't as adept at dealing with the locals as Clark, she thrived on the open nature within small towns and how everyone seemed to know everything about everyone.

She waved her notepad in her hand as she walked with one of the locals outside her shop, "I don't know what to make of it. That big oak has been there for ages...."

"Have you seen anyone out of the ordinary around?" Lois asked, looking at the auburn-haired woman expectantly.

"Now that you mention it, there was a new face in the diner this last week." She waved over an older man and called out to him, "Hey, Jim, remember that man that came in this week? Real uppity type?"

"Yeah, I know who you're talkin' about." Jim nodded, approaching them as he pointed across the street to a white and green inn. "I think he's stayin' over at Masie's."

Lois nodded, wondering who may have sparked the small town's interest, "Thank you for your time. We'll check it out." She looked over her shoulder where she caught sight of Clark in a deep conversation with an older gentleman who was waving his arms around. Curious, she excused herself and walked over to him, picking up on the conversation as she approached.

"It was gone. Just gone in an instant. The whole place lit up like the Fourth of July." The man explained to Clark.

"What was gone?" Lois asked, notepad in hand.

Clark gestured to her, then turned to the man he was talking with. "Wayne, this is Lois Lane, my partner at the Daily Planet. Lois, this is Wayne Irig. He owns part of the property that was sabotaged."

Lois' ears perked up as she turned to Wayne Irig, "Mr. Irig, any idea who could have done all that damage to your property?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, little missy. I've lived in the same ol' farmhouse for years and drive the same beat old truck. Anyone that would want to do me harm would know where to find me."

Clark nodded his thanks and tugged her arm with him as they made their exit, "Thanks for the update, Wayne. We'll see what we can find out."

"Thanks, Clark," Wayne waved at them as they left.

As soon as they were out of earshot of Wayne Irig, Lois turned to Clark with an arched eyebrow, "Is everyone always so friendly here?"

"Not everyone suspects the mailman of being involved in an underground theft ring," Clark commented with a smirk.

"He is always losing my mail," Lois growled back at him in defiance, losing her cool momentarily before collecting herself. She waved the notepad against her face, trying to catch a breeze in the heat.

"And of course, it's just got to be a conspiracy," Clark shook his head with a cluck of his tongue. "It couldn't possibly be a mistake."

"You're impossible," Lois rolled her eyes, pointing toward the gravel walkway leading to the front porch of the inn the clerk had pointed to earlier.

"What about you?" Clark lifted his left brow, silently prompting her before asking, "Any luck finding anything?"

"Your local grocer, Lydia, thinks it's aliens. Jim at the hardware store swears someone's been stealing tools and can't find them. Phyllis and Jim over here found an 'uppity stranger' at Masie's." Lois read off her notes. "Not much to go on, but it's a start."

"Want to check it out?" Clark asked, pointing toward the sign of the inn.

"That's what we're here for," Lois shrugged her shoulders and followed him to the walkway leading to Masie's Inn. Lois noticed the diner on the back of the inn where several patrons were dining. A woman in a black apron stood by the fancy sign, waving as a couple exited.

Clark pointed to the woman, "That's Masie. If anyone's seen anything, it'd be her."

"Apparently, we're looking for an uppity-looking character," Lois advised, looking around curiously at the signs posted on the window with 'Annual Corn Festival Sign Up' printed on the top. Lois paused, craning her neck and looking at the sign curiously and looking back to Clark, "Corn Festival?"

"Just a small-town festival with games, some crafts, and good food." Clark gestured to the residents as they walked by, "It's a lot of fun. They have the Corn Queen Pageant. The Husk-Off. The Corn-o-Rama. Popcorn, creamed corn, corn-on-the-cobb...It's a corn-a-rific time..." He managed to say without laughing.

"Corn Festival?" Lois echoed the name aloud with an arched eyebrow.

"It's Kansas," Clark shrugged as if that explained the name of the festival. He opened the door they were standing at, "Come on, we'll grab something to eat and see what Masie knows."

Lois stepped inside the diner, taking a look around the room and noticing the almost immediate lull that came over the room. She gave a weak wave to the patrons, following Clark's lead as he walked toward the high bar

where the woman in the black apron was wiping down the counter and setting menus out.

Lois looked around, trying to survey the dining room for anyone that appeared out of place as Clark picked up the menu and handed it to her. "See anything you like?"

Lois skimmed the menu as she perched herself on the edge of the high bar stool.

"Clark Kent?"

Lois looked on amused as the woman behind the counter stopped, grinning ear to ear as she recognized Clark, pouring a glass of iced tea from a large pitcher in her hand.

"Hey Masie," Clark flashed the woman a bright smile, and a floodgate erupted from the woman as she rambled her enthusiasm.

"This is certainly a surprise. I thought you had hightailed it out of Smallville with the city folks for something bigger and better. You know, the place hasn't been the same. Old man Henry's still running that paper of his with his blood, sweat, and tears..."

"I'm sure he'll manage," Clark chuckled, pointing to Lois, "Masie, this is my partner at the Daily Planet, Lois Lane."

Maisie's eyes widened at the mention of the paper's name and let out a low whistle, "Your mom mentioned you had settled in Metropolis." She turned to Lois and extended her hand for Lois to shake, "Don't mind me, darlin' I'm all gab and no bite. Good to meet you. You all keepin' Clark in line?"

"I suppose," Lois glanced at the woman, trying to make sense out of what the rambling the woman was doing.

"Well, to listen to Clark's mom, I'd say you're doin' something right. All the stories about Metropolis seem to begin with your name." Maisie chuckled as she pointed at Clark who was groaning with a flushed pink tint to the back of his neck.

"They do, do they?" Lois bit her lower lip, chuckling under her breath as Clark interrupted.

"It's not every story..." Clark cleared his throat and pointed to the center of the menu with a picture of burger and fries. "Just the burger for me."

"Sure thing, Clark," Maisie turned to Lois, "How about you, sugar? Anything?"

"Club sandwich," Lois said, handing the menu back to Maisie. Maisie nodded and took the menus before disappearing in the back. Lois turned to Clark, spinning on the stool to face him, "You know, when I offered to come out here, I had no idea I'd have stories to live up to."

"It's just the stories we covered. That's it," Clark explained with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's nothing."

"Uh-huh," Lois shook her head, not sure if he was even convinced as she watched Maisie approach a couple in the

corner as she looked back to where Lois and Clark were seated.

Clark looked back at her with a helpless smile, "It's a small town, Lois. There's nothing to do but get into trouble and gossip."

"I think we've become the gossip for the week," Lois rolled her eyes as she looked around the room in dismay. She was just about to turn back to the countertop when she spotted a familiar figure racing down the steps outside the large panel windows. "Is that...?"

"What?" Clark asked, following the direction she was pointing with a turn of his head. "Luthor? What's he doing out here?"

"Maybe he's the uppity stranger?" Lois guessed.

"If the shoe fits." Clark shrugged, pulling a few bills from his wallet and placing them on the counter. "I was really looking forward to that burger."

"Well, I guess you'll have to wait till after we figure out what Lex Luthor is doing in Smallville." Lois said, tugging on Clark's hand and pulling him with her out the door.

The car rumbled over the gravel, tossing stray pebbles behind each tire as the dark sedan turned on the dirt road leading into the open space of the Smallville Paper Mill. The sign outside showed its age as the lettering of the mill's sign was peeling away. Below the lettering of '*Smallville Paper Mill*' was an old block lettering that read '*LuthorCorp*'. The car came to a stop outside the mill, and the door opened. Lex Luthor stepped out of the car, footing his toe against the gravel as he cast a glance across the property. His eyes settled on the sign with a glare, noting the name of his father's company in red print. After his parents' demise, he had rebranded the company after his namesake to separate himself from the history his father had built.

He reached out to light his cigar, taking in the abandoned property's appearance. The rough exterior and cracked siding showed the age of the property as Lex puffed on his cigar. He turned on his heel, contemplating momentarily if he dared to break through the barriers that still held the gate to the mill closed. He had searched the usual places around town, trying to see if he could sniff out where Jason Trask may have disappeared to. The last sighting had been by the diner owner two days ago.

"Something wrong, Mr. Luthor?" Asabi asked, standing next to the car with a curious gaze.

"No, just remembering something," Lex commented, pointing to the gate.

"You're confident Mr. Trask is here?" Asabi asked, gesturing to the gated entrance.

"It's the only reasonable place left in this small town to look." Lex puffed on his cigar. The mobile phone in his jacket pocket chirped, and he pulled it out to answer it, "Yes?" he responded sharply to the individual on the other end of the line.

"Mr. Luthor, this is Dr. Lee from the R&D Department. LexLabs received a suspicious shipment that we're not sure what to do with."

"What kind of shipment?" Lex asked, intrigued.

"Parts of a tree and a mysterious mineral substance. It appears to be a meteorite."

"Meteorite?" Lex asked, puffing on his cigar. "Who is the package from?"

"We don't have a name. A P.O. Box was given outside Kansas City."

Lex arched his brow, tightening his jaw as the tech spoke. "Run every test you can and have them sent to me immediately when the results are in."

"Yes, Mr. Luthor."

The soft hum of crickets in the night sky chirped softly as Lois leaned outside the window sill, arching her neck to look toward the long pathway Lex Luthor had disappeared down moments ago. She let out an exasperated groan, looking around for anything to explain what Lex Luthor was doing in Smallville. Though his presence didn't immediately link to the damage in Schuster's field, it was too coincidental to overlook.

"Anything?" Lois asked, growing impatient as she waited for Clark to finish examining the property from the impossible distance they were parked at so as not to draw attention to themselves.

Clark sat leaning against the window sill with his glasses across the dashboard of the rental they were in, staring intently at the long narrow pathway, setting his jaw in a hard square as the crease across his forehead grew more intense. "He's just standing there."

"Where?" Lois asked, arching her brow at him, waiting for more information to be divulged.

"In front of one of the abandoned old mills from the seventies." Clark frowned, shaking his head.

"Is he looking for something?"

"No..." Clark tapped his jaw. "Looks like he's just sitting there."

"This is a waste of time. So, what now?" Lois asked, letting out a sigh of frustration.

Clark let out a heavy breath, "I guess we head back to Schuster's field and see what all the fuss is about."

"So, we're not following Luthor around town?"

"Unless you want to continue sitting here while he stares off into the distance at a place that's been empty for the last thirty years..."

"Well, when you put it that way your field of dirt sounds much more exciting." Lois smirked at him as he reached for the glasses on the dashboard of the car and placed them on his face before turning the ignition to start the car.

Jason Trask moved through the abandoned mill, placing a small chunk of green glowing meteorite on the workspace in front of him. He had shipped most of the findings from the crash site to LexLabs for further observation, but his gut told him what he'd uncovered would be the undoing of the supposed Superman. The people in this town knew what had happened thirty years ago, and he wasn't leaving until he discovered just who had been masquerading as an ordinary human for all these years.

He reached his hand out to touch the meteorite with the small globe-like structure he'd unearthed from the Bureau 39 files and watched with amazement as the globe emitted a white light and changed its form to a red and blue image that was unrecognizable.

"Well, just what have we got here?" Trask asked aloud.

"Agent Trask, if you wanted my team to examine this substance, don't you think you need to provide them with all the information?"

Trask jumped, startled by the sound of a voice from the corner of the room. He moved his flashlight beam to where a very familiar man stood leaning against one of the support beams to the abandoned property.

"Mr. Luthor? How did you...?"

"Let's not waste time with the obvious." Lex Luthor strode into the room, brushing the dust and dirt from his jacket, and pointed to the globe in Trask's hand. "What exactly do you have there?"

The night lit sky covered the small town in a blanket of stars, guiding the path for both Lois and Clark beneath the crescent moon as they made their way to the edge of Wayne Irig's farmhouse. Lois pointed to the dirt road that was covered in caution tape and markers from authorities that had been swarming around the property over the last few days. "They've certainly been thorough, haven't they?"

Lois pointed to the two large tents that had been set up on the property, "What's with the setup?"

"Wayne said some guys from the EPA came out digging up his yard to collect soil samples."

Lois glared at the site in disgust, shaking her head as she followed him down the dirt road. "Of course they did."

Clark cleared his throat, noting the 'do not enter' signs that had been posted along the property line. Two guards in army green uniforms stood by the barrier, preventing either

of them from going any further. He pulled out his press credentials and waved them in the air, "Who's in charge around here?"

One of the guards looked to the other and motioned for a woman in a smart black suit to approach. She wore an EPA badge around her neck as she walked up to the barrier and looked between them with a stern gaze. "I'm Carol Sherman, EPA Field Liaison. What can I help you with?"

Clark took the lead as Lois seemed to be silently critiquing the scene and dissecting each clue she could find. "I'm Clark Kent. This is Lois Lane. We work with the Daily Planet and were interested in what the EPA is doing out here."

Sherman seemed to hesitate a moment before responding with a quick smile, gesturing to the scene behind her. "Well, what you see here is an ecological risk assessment." Sherman pointed behind her. "During the sixties, the owner used a lot of pesticides, and we're concerned about the seepage into the local ground water."

"Giving people more than what they bargained for at the dinner table?" Lois asked.

"That's it. Public safety. No big story, I'm afraid."

Clark shook his head, lowering his glasses to look inside the tent only to find the inside sealed with the one surface he couldn't see through. Lead.

"And the owner, Mr. Irig? What's he supposed to do while you're completing this...risk assessment?" Lois asked, tapping her hand impatiently against her hip.

"I'm not sure. Mr. Irig's been given relocation money during testing. He didn't say where he went." Sherman answered.

'Liar,' Clark thought as he picked up on the raised heartrate of the agent.

"Well, I'm sure you've got that information somewhere," Lois pressed firmly, pointing to the tent behind Sherman. "We'll check back."

Clark frowned as he walked with Lois away from the barrier, shaking his head. "She's lying."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," Lois commented as she stopped outside the broken fence that had been torn down. She pointed to the opening left with little supervision as the guards were heavily focused on the area the tents were setup at.

"I'm going to try flying overhead and see if I can see anything from the aerial...." He paused, watching as Lois pulled her hair back and rolled up her sleeves. "What are you doing?"

"I'm making a run for it." Lois pointed to her target a half-mile away from where the large crater was located.

"Are you crazy?" Clark asked in a hushed whisper. "There are guards all over the place."

"Yeah, well, not all of us have super-speed, and they're only a problem if they catch me." Lois shrugged, not bothering to give it a second thought before sprinting toward the gaping hole in the center of the field. Clark let out a sigh of defeat, looking over his shoulder before quickly racing after her to stop her before she was caught by one of the guards.

As he approached the large hole and piles of dirt that sat unevenly on the field, an unsettling feeling washed over him. Each step seemed to go slower and slower, and the ease with which he moved felt pained and weighted down.

"I thought you were supposed to be faster than a locomotive," Lois teased, looking back at him with a grin as she surveyed the scene.

A grimace covered his face as he came to a stop at the edge of the ground that had been dug up. He looked down into the pit of at least six feet deep and dropped to his knees, feeling them buckle beneath him. He felt a sharp pain in his back and grimaced. He groaned, feeling the pain run down his spine once more.

"Clark?"

Her voice echoed around him as the colorful red and blues of the sky drowned into a pitch dark.

"Clark!"

Chapter 12

Martha Kent tapped the water off the bristles of her paintbrushes, preparing to close the art studio up for the evening when the phone rang. She reached her hand over to answer the phone, cradling it between her neck and shoulder. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Kent?"

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

She had yet to hear from the woman her son had spoken so fondly of for the last few months, but she had spoken to her a few times over the phone, but not like this.

"I...I need help."

Martha felt a lump in her throat, and the hair on the back of her neck stand up when she heard the plea from the young woman. The Lois Lane she'd heard her son talk about didn't waver. Martha knew if she was asking for help, it was because she was out of options. Martha quickly closed up the studio, walking with the cordless phone to the farmhouse and motioning to Jonathan who was seated comfortably on the porch.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"It's Clark...Something's not right. I don't know...."

Martha felt her blood run cold at the mention of her son's name. Lois continued to explain the situation, but all

Martha could comprehend from her pleas was that her son was in trouble.

“Where are you?”

<<“Clark!” >>

Lois’ throat felt raw from the gut-wrenching screams that had escaped her lungs. Her hands gripped the coffee mug in front of her with a vice-like grip. Her knee bounced up and down beneath the kitchen table. She turned to the corner of the room, catching a glimpse of Clark’s disoriented body slumped over the edge of the couch as his parents attempted to help him to his feet.

The last hour felt like a bad dream as the flashes of chaos from the panic that had rushed through her as she had been faced with the prospect of getting Clark to safety and finding help. The Kents were quick to respond when she had flagged down the sheriff to get help and attempted to walk Clark away from whatever had knocked the wind out of him. The paleness to his face and unnerving blank stare left her chilled to the bone.

Lois tucked her lower-lip inside her mouth, watching with concern as Jonathan helped Clark walk up the stairs. His mother stood by the bottom of the steps, watching with apprehension as Clark disappeared up the stairs with his father’s help. A pained expression covered Martha’s face as she turned back toward Lois, forcing a weak smile as she pointed to the mug in Lois’ hand.

“You look like you could use a fresh cup. I’ll put on a pot...”

Lois glanced down at the mug of coffee that had hardly been touched, silently nodding as she understood the activity was more for Martha than her. The painful silence was cut with the soft rustling sounds from the kitchen of water running and cabinets opening and closing. A moment later, an uncomfortable silence hung in the air.

Lois looked to Martha, feeling her heart hammer in her chest, wondering what she could be thinking. She didn’t have to guess much longer as Martha claimed the seat across from her.

“He’s never been sick a day of his life.”

The raspy whisper cut her like a knife as Lois stared back at the glistening eyes that gazed into hers. The panic that had risen up inside her a few hours ago stirred again, and Lois swallowed the hard lump in her throat, looking to Martha with a tearful, “I’m so sorry. I have no idea what happened. I turned around, and he...”

Martha reached out to squeeze her hand, “Lois, I’m just glad you were there to help him. I...” Martha let out a chuckle, shaking her head.

“What?” Lois sniffed, not understanding how she could find humor in the current situation.

“No, it’s just...all these years, and you’re the first person outside of Jonathan I’ve talked with about Clark. It’s...nice.”

“I just wish it was under different circumstances,” Lois shook her head in dismay.

“Me too.”

Lex Luthor reached his hand out to touch the globe, holding it in his palm and watching as it changed from one image to another, then went dark. He turned to Trask, looking at him expectantly as he called out, “You’re certain this is connected to Superman?”

“You refer to him as Superman, Mr. Luthor, but I know him as something far more dangerous.” Trask growled, pacing around the room as he continued his rant. “He’s been sent in to lull us into compliance before the army of alien superheroes is sent in to destroy us. If we don’t resist him, they will send in others. His very existence is hostile. The advance man... the public relations guy here to soften us up for the hordes to come.”

“Interesting theory, Mr. Trask,” Lex mused, not certain how much he could believe of the man’s ravings of an alien invasion coming to Earth, but he could certainly get behind anyone willing to stand against the hero. After all, the enemy of his enemy was his ally. “How exactly do you plan to counter this Superman’s attack?”

“You’ve seen this?” Trask pointed to the globe in Lex’s hand. “It was found with a spacecraft uncovered here in Smallville by my team in 1966.” Trask’s face went from a sinister chill to an almost calm as he interjected, “The same emblem on the ship is what we see on the hero the world calls Superman. It was uncovered in the same place I was able to successfully uncover a meteorite. The substance that was sent to your lab for analysis.”

“You think this meteorite could be used to destroy Superman?” Lex formulated his assumption aloud, looking to Trask for confirmation.

“My theory is that if Superman were to come in contact with a little piece of his home planet for any length of time, the result could be as lethal as any human coming in contact with radioactive material.”

The room was spinning. The pounding of his head centered around his temple. Slowly he began to open his eyes, wincing at first from the pain as he peeled his eyes open. The bright light from the sun shone into his eyes, and he grimaced in pain, letting out a soft moan.

Clark blinked, groggily coming to as the sun peaked inside his childhood bedroom, spraying rays of sunshine across him. He opened his mouth, feeling the ominous pain run through him as his sore muscles ached with the slightest movement. He winced, pushing past the pain as

he let out a low groan, forcing his torso up from the bedsheets. His hand gripped the side of the bed as he turned to swing his legs over the side of the bed. The small effort felt like a sprint across the globe as he gritted his teeth, padding his feet on the carpeted floor, trying to find his bearings.

He spotted the shirt laid out on the nightstand, saying a silent prayer of thanks for his mother's intuitive nature of always being one step ahead. He found his footing, balancing himself on the wavering muscles as he stood up straight, wincing as he caught a glimpse of the red cut lines across his shoulder in the mirror on the other side of the mirror. He reached up to brush a finger against the scabbed-over injury, wondering momentarily what could have caused the pain he was feeling.

For as long as he could remember, his body had been invulnerable. He had lived most of his adolescence free from the worries of illness and injury and often found himself yearning to catch a common cold or flu for just a glimmer of what he deemed normalcy. As he stared at the wound on his shoulder, he wondered what his adolescent self was thinking to wish harm on himself. He reached down and pulled the soft navy shirt over his head, then slipped the plaid button-down over his t-shirt.

The door cracked open, and he heard a light knock, and he turned to see his dad in the doorway with a concerned expression. His jaw was squared, set with his mouth in a tight line, "I guess it's too much to ask for a little help around here when you visit," his dad joked.

Clark cracked a smile, "I may be a little slower moving than the normal two-minute sprint."

His dad's smile faded, and he let out a heavy sigh, "You ready to talk about what happened out in Schuster's field?"

Clark shrugged his shoulders, uncertain where to begin. "There's not much to say. One minute I was standing over a big ditch where the old oak used to be, and the next, I'm on the ground. I can't explain it."

"You were bleeding," his dad reminded him solemnly.

"I know," Clark shook his head, unsure what to make of the sudden loss of his powers.

His dad nodded, silently agreeing to drop the subject with a subtle nod, and then gestured to the hall, "Well, your mom wanted to go drop off the pies for the Corn Festival. Maybe a little sunshine will do you some good, hmm?"

The steel doors opened, and Dr. Lee zig-zagged through the crowded laboratory, approaching one of the lead researchers with a large cut of tree root under a fluorescent light. The illuminated root glowed a light green

beneath the light as the researcher scraped a sample from the aged oak.

Dr. Lee moved to the back of the room where a crowd of researchers surrounded a clay-covered white and blue spacecraft that had arrived with the other shipments. To the left was a large metal box with the lid ajar and the green glowing meteorite sat under heavy scrutiny from his team.

He pulled back the heavy tarp that was strewn across the spacecraft, revealing the small emblem on the front of the craft, mirroring the emblem seen on that of the hero Metropolis had come to know as Superman.

"As soon as the results are back, I want them on my desk," Dr. Lee instructed before moving toward the back office.

Clark stood off to the side, watching as the tables covered in plaid tablecloths began to fill up with treats from pies to homemade candy apples and caramel corn. The initial soreness that had overtaken him earlier had subsided, and he was left in a vulnerable state, watching the world continue as he came to terms with the life-altering change to his life. Everything he thought he had known was gone.

How could a single moment destroy something that had been a part of him for so long?

Lois looped an arm across his shoulder, handing him a caramel apple, "You looked like you could use this."

Clark flashed a weak smile, taking a bite of the apple with a nod of his head walking with her through the festival's attractions.

"Gee, is the apple that bad?" Lois asked sarcastically, looking at him with a frown.

"It's not that," Clark responded, shaking his head.

"Still nothing?" Lois asked, turning to him with a worried expression.

"Nothing," He tossed the remnants of the caramel apple into the trashcan.

"It's so bizarre," Lois commented with a frown. "Has anything like this happened before?"

"No," Clark shook his head, "I'm guessing it has something to do with whatever was under that old oak tree in Schuster's field, but getting a second dose of whatever stripped me of my powers isn't exactly at the top of my to-do list."

"Well, they had to take that tree somewhere," Lois sighed, taking a bite of her apple.

"The entire town is looking for the person responsible. They'd have to be hiding out somewhere no one would think of going." Clark snorted, "That's assuming they're still in Smallville."

"Well, what about that old mill we saw Lex Luthor hanging around?" Lois asked.

"It's abandoned," Clark reminded her.

"It's a perfect hideout." Lois countered.

"Even if you're right, it's not like we can go charging in there. In case you haven't noticed the usual escape plan of being able to just fly away is gone." He gestured to himself as they approached the booth labeled with 'Test Your Strength' and a comical artist's rendering of Superman at the top.

Lois opened her mouth to argue with him, and he let out a defeated sigh, cutting her off. "Look, I think it's time we face facts. Superman is gone."

Her mouth twisted in a scowl as she quietly approached the clerk at the booth, handed him a ticket, and then took the mallet from him and passed it to Clark.

"This is ridiculous," Clark's right brow raised and Lois pushed the mallet into his hands.

"Humor me."

He sighed, taking the mallet and giving it a hefty swing, standing back to watch as the ball moved up to reach the marker that read '*Very Strong.*'

"Want another shot?" the attendant asked as Clark handed him the mallet.

"No." Clark sighed, pulling back and turning to Lois. "It's hopeless."

"Okay, now you're just depressing me." Lois shook her head, pulling a ticket out of her pocket and handing it to the clerk. "Here."

"This is pointless. I just..." Clark shook his head as Lois handed the mallet back to him.

"Then you won't have a problem remembering how to do it," Lois shot back, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'mwaiting."

"Fine. Here goes nothing." Clark took a step back and hefted the hammer up, giving it a good swing before he brought it down. He and Lois both watched the ball moved up...up...almost. He was just a hair off of reaching 'Superman.'

"Ooh, so close yet so far away." Lois gazed up at the sign then turned to Clark, "Still think it's hopeless?"

"One more time," Clark handed the clerk a ticket, then hefted the hammer up once more, giving it a little more swing then slamming down once more. The ball moved up..up... until it reached the sign that read 'Superman' and rang the bell.

Clark lifted his arms in triumph, turning to face Lois, who wrapped him in an enthusiastic hug. The smug confident grin on her face sent a rush of joy through him. The discouraging cloud that had hung over him disappeared as he stared into her eyes. Her eyes held his for what felt like an eternity as he felt the impulse to kiss her. He desperately wanted to kiss her. Every fiber of his being told him to give in and take the leap of faith, but he

couldn't bring himself to break past the invisible barrier that barred him from crossing that line from friendship to something more.

Just as quickly as his opening appeared, it disappeared as she pulled back, giving him a half-smile. The attendant interrupted, holding two stuffed dolls for them to choose between. "You get your choice." A teddy bear with an arrow running through it and a plush Superman doll. Clark looked at Lois expectantly. She hesitated for a moment, then reached for the bear.

They walked through the crowd, arms around one another. "He is so cute." Lois crooned, hugging the bear to her chest as they turned the corner to where the picnic tables were set up with small booths of treats. She juted her chin, nodding to Clark as they stopped at one of the tables that were farther away from the crowd. "So, I guess we need to come up with a plan on how to flesh out our mysterious oak thief...."

Clark let out a low chuckle, "You want to go stake out the mill."

"Lex Luthor's presence is suspicious." Lois countered, hooking her arm in his as she looked at him expectantly.

"And what if we run into trouble?" Clark asked, pointing out with an aggravated sigh that he was in no condition to help them escape. "It's not like we can fly out of there."

"You give yourself too little credit," Lois observed, looking to him with a subtle nod. "You don't think that maybe there's a little more to being Superman than superpowers?"

"We still need a plan," Clark reminded her.

"I have a plan." Lois grinned confidently.

Lex Luthor approached the small tent set up on the hillside, nodding to Agent Sherman as she opened the gate for him. He looked around the property, noting the cover-up operation appeared to be in full swing. The EPA agents he had hired to search the surrounding properties for additional meteorites or evidence from the original crash of 1966 that had apparently brought Superman to Earth.

What he couldn't understand was why he would wait so long to make his presence known. Perhaps he was recovering from the crash? He shook his head, unsure of his own inner musings as he peeled back the tent opening to enter.

One of the agents looked to him in surprise, "You're not supposed to be back here."

"He's fine, Agent Dawson."

Lex turned to see Agent Sherman standing behind him. Sherman motioned for the agent to leave and then turned to Lex with a sharp gaze, "Mr. Luthor, I assure you I have this operation under control."

“You’ll need to double the efforts. New information has come to my attention.” He pointed to the farmhouse on the hill behind them. “I want every rock turned and every speck of dirt examined.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Luthor,” Sherman nodded in agreement.

The Chief Director of E.P.R.A.D. watched from his vantage point as the glass double doors slid open with ease allowing entrance to the entourage of Secret Service agents across the open bridge. He looked to the crowd of agents coming toward him. As one of the agents flashed a visitor badge against the door, it chirped open, and the agents moved to make a human wall against the bridge they were on, revealing their protected asset in the middle. The President nodded to him, stepping inside the large conference room, followed by chiefs of staff and generals. Each of them stood behind one of the seats surrounding the table. They each looked to the President, who claimed the seat at the end of the table.

The doors closed, and the blinds closed as the President took his seat, followed by his entourage of elite advisors.

“Mr. President,” the Chief Director swallowed the hard lump in his throat as he looked across the table.

“I’m told you have some answers for me, Mr. Roberts,” the President replied, folding his hands across the table in front of him.

“Yes, sir,” he nodded.

“I’m all ears.”

Lois reached her hand over to wipe the dirt off the door in front of her as she pushed it open. She looked over her shoulder to Clark, who wore an apprehensive expression. “I guess they forgot to lock up? Door’s open. I guess we just go in.”

“Isn’t that what they always say right when the ax murderer comes out killing everyone?” Clark breathed out with a shake of his head.

“Well, if there’s an ax murderer, we’ll have a really good story to write,” Lois countered with a smug grin.

“Famous last words,” Clark said with the shake of his head.

Lois pointed toward the light coming from the long hallway, “Looks like someone’s been here recently.”

“And what exactly is your explanation if it’s Luthor?” Clark questioned her under his breath.

“There are no cars out front. It’s not Luthor.” Lois rolled her eyes. “He wouldn’t be caught dead dirtying up his designer clothes in a place like this.”

“Well, what do we have here?”

The flap of the tent entrance whistled in the wind as Agent Sherman turned to her field agent liaison with a sharp glare. “Mr. Luthor wants us to double our efforts.” She looked to where Wayne Irig was seated, strapped to the chair with blood dripping from his forehead. “Any luck with this one?”

“Nothing,” the agent shrugged with a sardonic smile. “Perhaps it’s time for another dose?”

Sherman tapped on the syringe in her hand and watched as Wayne struggled in his binds, attempting to escape. “You’ll feel a little pinch....”

Wayne growled out an angry, “You won’t get away with this...” before he collapsed against the table in front of her.

“Mr. Irig, all this trouble over small-town friendships. Well, it won’t be long until you’re singing like a canary.”

“No...” Wayne moaned in pain.

“A broken hand, dislocated shoulder, and sodium pentothal...” Sherman clucked her tongue. “I told you Mr. Luthor doesn’t play nice when he thinks he’s being lied to.” She glanced over at the injuries Wayne Irig had sustained, “You can’t last much longer without medical attention....”

“No....” Wayne growled.

Lois swallowed hard, looking at the stranger that held the barrel of a pistol on both her and Clark. She stole a quick glance around the room, noting the images of Superman pinned to the wall with reports in bold letters that read ‘B39.’

“What’s B39?” Lois asked, brazenly trying to interview their captor in hopes she could get some information out of him until she could figure out how to call Sheriff Harris. The room was quiet. Too quiet, as she waited for a response.

A chuckle escaped the man’s throat as he snarled out a quick, “That’s classified.”

“1966?” Lois pointed to the bold letters on the table in front of her.

“Classified.” Their captor repeated.

She shrugged her shoulders, looking to Clark, who was inching further back into the hallway.

“What are you doing here?” the captor asked.

“You first,” Lois countered.

“I’m the one with the gun.”

“Right,” Lois shrugged her shoulders. “We were investigating the damage done to Schuster’s field.” She jutted her chin out, looking to the stranger expectantly. “Your turn.”

“Why do you care about an old tree?”

“It’s over thirty years old. Town treasure.” Clark responded as the man threw a sharp glare in his direction.

“You small-town locals are all the same. Same people and same activities. Abandoned factory perfect for hiding out in.”

“So you’re on the run?” Clark asked. “From who?”

“From the people that I dedicated my life to. Thirty-five years down the toilet in an instant.” He let out a sharp hiss and added, “I’m not crazy. I know I’m right...and I will prove it.”

“Prove what?” Lois asked, hoping to distract him from his unstable ramblings as she inched toward the doorway they had come in through. *‘So close yet so far away.’*

“I don’t think so...” A sharp click of the lock being released caught her attention, and a loud crash came from the distance as she heard a loud thud.

She turned in surprise, startled as she saw Clark had toppled himself on the man and managed to kick the pistol away from him in the struggle. Lois reached down to grab the pistol, holding it on the duo as Clark continued to struggle with the stranger.

The mad man laughed as he lunged towards Clark. Clark struggled to remain in control, keeping the stranger at bay. A hefty punch was thrown in his direction, knocking Clark down once again. The stranger stood up, “That was a mistake. Now to take care of unfinished business....”

“Ah, ah, ah...I’ve got the gun now.” Lois countered, waving it in the air to emphasize the point.

A flood of blue and red lights from outside filled the room, and Lois smiled as she gestured to the entourage outside, “Now, you were saying something about classified?”

The bang of the door opening and officers piling in took her attention from the captor. She watched with a confident smile as the stranger was led away, still remaining mute on any questions that were asked of him.

Lois handed over the pistol to Clark’s friend, Rachel. “Good luck getting him to talk. Nothing but crazed lunacy....”

Rachel nodded, taking the pistol from Lois and walking the criminal out. “We’ll see about that.”

“Lucky timing,” Clark commented, wiping the blood from his face. “This whole being vulnerable thing is really not all it’s cracked up to be.”

Lois gave him a sympathetic smile, walking with him toward the clippings the man had pinned up. “What do you think all this is?”

Clark flipped open a folder and read a report aloud, “Something called Bureau 39.” He pointed to the images inside, hanging his head in disgust.

Lois gasped when she saw the image he was pointing to. The black and white photo showed a spacecraft with an emblem that mirrored Clark’s Superman symbol.

Surrounding the spacecraft were four men, including a younger version of the man that had been taken into custody and one that looked eerily like the President’s chief advisor.

“Lois, Clark, I hate to break this up, but we’re going to have to gather all this up...” Rachel interrupted, peering over her shoulder.

“Can you give us just five minutes, Rach?” Clark asked, giving his friend a pleading look.

Rachel nodded, “I suppose we do need to secure the perimeter...” she wagged her finger at Clark, “Don’t run off with anything. It’s evidence until we can figure out what the heck he was doing up in here.”

Clark watched Rachel leave and turned to Lois, “Check the files for anything mentioning my parents.”

Lois nodded, helping him dig through the files marked with ‘1966’ on them, and pulled out a large stack of interviews. “Looks like they spoke with them briefly about the crash, but nothing else in here mentioning them by name.”

Clark continued flipping through the file in front of him, and Lois placed a hand over his. “Clark, if there was something here, he wouldn’t have been holed up here. He’d be at your parents’ house.”

Clark’s jaw tightened, and his eyes clamped shut. “I just have to be sure.”

Lois nodded, letting him continue to search through the large file as she looked around the room, noting the theme of the clippings and the reports all surrounded the idea of studying UFOs and Superman’s presence. A slanted view of them, but still, the common theme was there. Off to the corner, she spotted a small globe sitting on the table. She picked it up, holding it up as she stared at it for a long moment.

“Hey, this is a bit strange, isn’t it? I don’t recognize any of the lands on this...” She stopped mid-sentence as she stopped in front of Clark with the globe, and it began to glow an ominous yellow.

He reached his hand out, “Can I see that?”

The image of the globe began to change, and he took it in his palm. The image of the globe changed from red and blue to a green and blue globe that resembled Earth. An unrecognizable name escaped Clark’s lips and he mumbled out, “Krypton.”

The brightness in the room began to grow and Lois gasped as a man wearing a white suit with Clark’s emblem on it appeared with a woman dressed in a similar attire hovered over a baby.

“Kal-El.” The name escaped Clark’s lips as Lois turned to him, wondering momentarily if she should take the globe from him. As tempting as it was, she couldn’t seem to move as she stared at the images before her. As quickly

as they appeared, they disappeared, and the globe grew dark.

Lois turned to Clark, "Are you okay?"
"I...don't know."

The President leaned back in the chair he was seated in, looking around the room expectantly. "Are we certain there are no other options?"

"Accuracy for a missile this size is questionable at best, Mr. President. Our best bet is Superman." The director of E.P.R.A.D. responded.

"Are we certain we are ready to tell the world?" the President asked.

"It's our only option."

"Order all satellites to map the trajectory of Nightfall. All air traffic control is to be grounded until I say otherwise." The President ordered of his men.

"Yes, Mr. President..."

Lois placed a hand on the barn door, peeking inside where she found Clark leaning against the hay bale, looking up at the old beams that held the structure in place. The globe she and Clark had retrieved from the site the mad man had been holed up in. She pushed the door open, looking to him with a concerned expression.

"Hey."

Clark turned to look at her, shrugging his shoulders as he responded with a, "Hey."

"You okay?" Lois took a seat next to him, looking over at the globe he kept stealing glances at from the corner of his eyes.

"I guess so," Clark frowned, "I mean, I'm not really sure how to react about having an entire secret agency plotting how to destroy me."

"Well, they were tracking UFOs. I'm not sure the plot to destroy you is accurate." Lois prodded him gently. "We don't even know what this Bureau 39 is other than what was in those reports."

Lois reached her hand over to shake Clark's shoulder but stopped when she saw the forlorn expression in his eyes. The brief confrontation with the mad man had shaken him. She let out a long breath, looking to him as she placed a protective hand across the back of his shoulders, "Don't let one mad man's ravings shape your entire outlook. He's just one crazy man."

"I have no idea why I was sent here, Lois," Clark responded with a frown.

"That globe," Lois recalled the words he had said. "You said Krypton when you were holding it."

Clark nodded, shaking his head in dismay. "I have never heard the name before, but when I was holding it. It was like the name just came to me. I think ... I don't know.

For all, I know those reports written up by the Bureau 39 could be right."

"They're not."

"You don't know that."

"No, but I happen to be an excellent judge of character, and you are not a threat to anyone." Lois wrapped her arm around him, giving him a half-hug, and let out a sigh, "No matter where you came from or what the intent was, you decide your future."

"I wish I could be as convinced." Clark leaned his head back, looking up at the ceiling. "I spent my entire life wishing I was normal, wanting to know where I came from, and now I'm terrified to find out."

"Do you think that globe might be able to tell you something?" Lois asked.

"Maybe," Clark shrugged. "Who knows?" he cast a long glance toward the globe, shaking his head. "Whatever it was trying to do, it just stopped. I think because my powers are gone, I wasn't able to conduct whatever it was trying to do...I'm not sure I want to know now."

"Well, just give it time. Maybe they'll show back up in a few days."

"I don't know." Clark sighed, shaking his head. "I just...don't know if they will."

Chapter 13

The car door slammed from the distance as Carol Sherman gazed upon the glowing green stone in front of her. She pointed to the large box the stone was in, nervously shifting her weight from one foot to another. "I believe this was what Mr. Luthor was looking for."

"Sherman!"

She turned to see Agent Wilder by the entrance of the tent, pointing outside.

"We got company."

Jason Trask rubbed at his wrists from behind his back with the edge of his fingertips, looking to the windshield in front of him as the patrol car continued down the gravel road. His fury written on his face as the deputy drove in silence toward the brick building plastered with a hand painted sign that read, 'Smallville Precinct' in bold white lettering. The handcuffs rubbed against his skin as they rode over another bump and he felt a hard blow beneath the seat he was on. The car spun and the deputy let out a sharp scream before darkness took over.

The red and blue lights filled the night sky and a high beam fluorescent light shone across the abandoned tents that were strewn open with deputies inspecting each one for contraband. Rachel Harris bit her lower lip, tapping her hand across the hood of her police car, watching as more

and more impersonators of the EPA were escorted off the property.

She turned to the woman at the helm, jutting her chin out firmly as she asked, "Hey Sherman, still want to give me another line about pesticides or you ready to fess up about what you're really doing here?"

"I'll wait for my lawyer," the woman remarked coldly, allowing herself to be escorted away.

Rachel shook her head in dismay. It appeared finding the reason for the team that had been impersonating the EPA was something she would have to discover on her own. "Well, next time you want to run a scam make sure no one in town has contacts with the agency you're supposedly associated with. Enjoy prison."

"Hey Sherriff?" one of the deputies called out to Rachel and she moved through the matrix of abandoned tents until she found Deputy Blake at the end holding up a large metal box.

"What'cha got there, Blake?"

He lifted the lid off the box revealing a green glowing rock, "I'm not sure. Think we should bring in the big guns?"

"Not just yet," Rachel shook her head, gesturing for him to close it. "Let me take this and I'll meet ya down at the station."

"You got it."

Jonathan Kent peeked over the edge of his newspaper, glancing to the end of the couch where Clark was seated. The pale ghost white pigmentation that had Clark too weak to walk had subsided and in its place was the disheartened and lost expression that filled his son's eyes. For years he had heard the yearnings from him.

"I just want to be normal."

Normal seemed like some mystical idea to Clark as he sought to pursue this idealistic life he envied every neighbor and classmate for having. Now that it was facing his son square in the face like a ton of bricks, he suspected those yearnings felt much different. He had finally found himself in this alter-ego with a cape and boots, fighting against criminals and protecting those that couldn't protect themselves. He was making a difference.

Now, in an instant that was all gone.

It was unfair.

Normal was an illusion.

Normal for Clark was being super.

If only he could give that back to him.

Jonathan set his paper down, turning to Clark who looked as if the weight of the world sat on his shoulders. He leaned forward, standing up from his recliner and walking to the couch where Clark was seated and taking the open seat next to him.

"Quite the adventure you stumbled on, huh?"

Clark let out a low chuckle, shaking his head, "Something like that." He reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, looking down before turning to meet Jonathan's expectant gaze. "This agency...if they even really exist...I don't know. I don't know what to make of it."

"Well, you got that nutcase in custody. That's a start." Jonathan commented.

"For now," Clark shook his head. "We don't even have a name."

The Kent farmhouse was quiet as the hum from the fax machine let out a long shriek, printing out the pages and dropping the printed fax pages on the kitchen counter. Lois reached over to pick up the sheet, scanning it with a crease of her brow. "Looks like we have a match for our mystery man."

Martha Kent glanced over to her from in front of the oven where she was inspecting the inside of the oven, crouched over with a critical gaze. "The mystery man from the mill?"

"Some information on this Bureau 39 too. Doesn't appear anyone wants to claim this agency though there are reports of the name being mentioned in official White House briefings, FBI reports, and NIA reports." Lois paused as she continued reading. "Looks like our mystery man was a founding member."

Martha peeked over her shoulder and looked at the photo that Lois was pointing to. "Bureau 39?"

"Looks like it's some code name." Lois scrunched her nose up and pointed to the black and white photo with the names identifying each individual. She jabbed her index finger against the face of the man she and Clark had found at the Smallville mill raving about Superman. "That's him. Jason Trask."

"What in the world would an ex-naval officer want with Clark?" Martha wondered aloud as the timer went off and she turned to the oven, grabbing the oven mitt and opening the oven.

"I guess that's what we need to find out." Lois watched as Martha reached in the oven to pull out the golden-brown pie. "Do you need any help?"

"No, no, I've got it," Martha beamed, setting the pie on top of the stove to cool before flipping the oven off. She pointed to the papers in Lois' hand, "It doesn't look like this Trask was the only one..."

"No," Lois bit her lower-lip, looking across the names.

"Who wasn't the only one?"

Lois turned her head, catching Clark's gaze for a brief moment as she gestured to the papers that had been faxed

over. “My contact at the bureau came through. We have a name. Jason Trask.”

“That’s our raving mad man?” Clark asked, leaning over her shoulder to scan the page in her hand.

“Looks like it.” Lois let out a heavy sigh. “I wonder what Rachel was able to find out from his fingerprints...”

“Mmm, mmm, that pie smells amazing, Martha,” Jonathan crooned leaning over to taken in the aroma of the freshly baked pie Martha had sitting on the stove.

Martha swatted at his shoulder, “Careful, Jonathan, you’ll burn yourself. It has to sit.”

“Surely, a small taste won’t hurt,” Jonathan held up a fork to take a small bite with a teasing smile.

“Something tells me that’ll be your last slice if you do,” Clark chimed in from the other side of the table.

Lois felt the corners of her mouth twitch, watching Jonathan and Martha’s antics. She set the papers down, helping pull out the plates.

Jonathan gestured to her, “Now, look it would be a waste not to share such a perfect pie in its perfect state with company...”

“You’re impossible,” Martha held her hands up in protest.

Lois laughed, watching as Jonathan reached over to wrap an arm around Martha in a loving embrace. It was strange to see Clark’s parents so at ease with one another. Seeing the two of them together felt so surreal. They were so different from the way her parents had interacted when she was growing up. Watching the Kents together, she could understand how Clark had turned out the way he did.

A rapid tapping at the door interrupted her thoughts as Jonathan jumped up, mumbling to himself, “Who could that be?” He disappeared behind the corridor entryway, and she heard Jonathan’s gruff tone full of surprise, “Martha, it’s Rachel Harris. Put on some coffee.”

“Evening, Jonathan, Martha,” Rachel stepped inside and flashed a smile to where Lois and Clark were seated. “Clark? You doin’ alright?”

“Better,” Clark answered with a disheartened expression before flashing a quick cover.

“Glad to hear it,” Rachel responded, holding up a large metal box.

Lois’ eyes widened, and she looked back at Clark, who was shaking his head.

“Listen, I know some pretty strange things have been going on around here. First with the large oak. The accident in Schuster’s field and that Trask character...now with the attack on the station and Trask’s escape...”

“Wait, what?” Lois slammed her palm against the table and focused on Rachel with a steely gaze. “He escaped?”

“About an hour ago. Right after we rounded up all the imposter EPA agents off Wayne Irig’s property. If it

weren’t for my friend out in Topeka, they may have even fooled me with that song and dance. That Sherman character has a little too much confidence to be associated with any government agency. Tracy Oakes ...you remember her from KSU, right Clark?”

Clark nodded and added a quick, “Vaguely,” as Rachel continued her explanation.

“Well, anyway, she’ll be here tomorrow to start looking into what these guys were after.”

“I’m guessing this has something to do with it?” Jonathan asked, pointing to the box in her hand.

“I don’t know what this is. I don’t want it to fall into the wrong hands because we all know what’ll happen if we end up with another Trask out here.” Rachel gave a pleading look to Jonathan, and something came over him. It appeared to be an almost epiphany that washed over him. The same as Lois, looking back at Clark for some kind of confirmation but found none. She knew. Rachel knew. Whether she knew he and Superman were one and the same was yet to be determined. Though it was clear, Rachel at least suspected there was something different about him.

“So, what would you like to do?” Clark asked, cutting through the uncomfortable silence as the focus turned to Rachel.

“I have a feeling that whatever’s in this box is somehow connected with the accident the other day,” Rachel replied calmly, patting the top of the metal box. “I’m always a champion of facts. The more facts and information that can be gathered on whatever this is, the better-armed anyone that may or may not have an adverse effect to it is.”

“I agree,” Lois replied, nodding her head, looking to Clark. “But the technology needed isn’t something you’re likely to have in town.”

“It’s not like we can ship it off to STAR Labs,” Clark shrugged his shoulders.

“No, but we could take it to the lab out in Kansas City. There was a scientist from Metropolis presenting to the university. Not sure if he’s still there, but it may be worth a shot.” Martha reasoned aloud.

“Dr. Silas Stone,” Jonathan recalled the name. “If he’s still there...but what makes us think he’d help us.”

“We’ll take it to him,” Martha responded firmly. “We’ll plead our case.”

“There are no flights anywhere...” Jonathan reminded her.

“Then we’ll drive.”

Perry ran a ragged hand across his face, craning his shoulder out of the uncomfortable position it was in as he

readjusted the phone's earpiece with his neck. "Imposters? You don't say..."

"Yep, they had badges and everything, Perry. Whoever was footing the bill spared no expense. I looked them up, and they showed up in the EPA database." Lois let out a snort of disgust. "It's disgusting what's happened here, Chief. Someone's got to do something."

"And you think the Planet should cover this?"

"Government conspiracy and federal corruption...." Lois listed off the items on her hand.

"Well, even if I wanted to get you two back here, it's impossible right now. Every flight and satellite has been shut down by order of the President." Perry reminded Lois with a heavy sigh. "See what you dig up, and if there's enough there, we'll run it, but be ready. I don't like this quiet. Feels like the calm before the storm."

"You haven't heard anything from Phil on the shutdown?" Lois asked.

"Just be careful and keep your ears open," Perry advised once more before hanging up the phone. As much as he would love to be wrong, he had learned over the years to trust his gut.

Two Weeks Later...

The situation room was bleak as General Zeitlin turned to his fellow generals and the E.P.R.A.D. directors seated at the table with the tactical team. A large screen with the image of the Nightfall's projected impact countdown showed in yellow digital print, '168:23:27 Estimated Time to Impact.' At the head of the table was the President's Chief of Staff, waiting for the intel to debrief the President.

"Still no sign from Superman?"

"It's been over two weeks since the last sighting," the Chief of Staff remarked with a frown. He looked over the rim of his glasses to where Zeitlin was, "Unless your department has more current intel?"

"Unfortunately, no," Zeitlin shook his head as he tapped his hand across the table. "We're on our own, Gentlemen."

"And how exactly are we going to take care of this?" the E.P.R.A.D. director pointed to the screen. "We have days left until Nightfall is projected to hit. Then, our entire ecosystem will be destroyed and life as we know it completely destroyed...."

"We have a plan," Zeitlin assured him.

"A plan?" the director asked, raising her brow.

"A missile...well rocket is being developed. We're confident it will cause enough of an impact to throw the asteroid off the course of Earth's orbit." Zeitlin explained calmly.

"And if it doesn't?" the E.P.R.A.D. director asked. "How are we going to explain this to the world?"

"We won't have to." The Chief of Staff interrupted. "The world won't have to know."

The soft whistle of the tea kettle chirped through the farmhouse as Clark reached over to remove it from the stove, pouring the steaming hot water into the two awaiting mugs. He stirred each cup, tapping each spoon on the rim. Clark picked up both mugs and carried them with him to the table where Lois was set up with her laptop and the files they had collected on Bureau 39. A waft of steam crossed his face, and he winced, feeling the heat tingle across his cheeks as he set the mugs down on the table, setting one in front of Lois.

"Thanks," Lois flashed him a quick smile, reaching for her mug and stirring in a teaspoon of sugar.

Clark gestured to the screen in front of her, "Anything from Jimmy on this Bureau 39?"

"Nothing we haven't already been able to find," Lois let out a heavy sigh, shaking her head as she leaned her arms back to stretch them over her head. "Secret government agency formed to investigate the paranormal. Funds seemed to be siphoned from different government-aided programs. No documentation on who is giving the agency direction or authorizing the missions they feel are their territory."

"Feels like another dead end," Clark grimaced, letting out a heavy sigh.

"Just like Luthor," Lois shook her head, "Disappears in the blink of an eye along with any lead we had on Trask while we're all grounded. It must be wonderful to be able to buy your way out of messes like that." Her mouth twisted, looking at the screen with a curious glint in her eyes.

"What is it?"

Lois read the subject of the email aloud, "'Confidential - Next Steps in Nightfall Asteroid Destruction'."

"Who is it from?" Clark asked.

"It doesn't say," Lois frowned, gesturing to the email. "What is Nightfall?"

"Olsen!"

Perry waved the young man inside his office, turning on his heel and not waiting for a response. Instead, he returned to his desk, moving the large pile of folders from his desk to the table next to the plaid printed couch. The last two weeks had left him burning the candlestick at both ends. With the satellite freeze for all air travel, over half his staff was isolated to different parts of the world. Lois and Clark were stuck in Smallville. Ron Troupe was in Washington D.C. Steve Lombard was in Gotham. Thankfully the Planet was set up to operate with his journalists out of pocket. Still, he wasn't used to running

the Planet without key staff members for such a lengthy time. The more he tried to dig into the cause behind the grounding of all airports, the more his suspicions rose up.

“You wanted to see me, Chief?” Jimmy called out, entering the office.

Perry waved him in, “Come on in, Jimmy,” He gestured to the file in front of him. “That arsonist you were looking into...Bermuda?”

“Joey Bermuda,” Jimmy nodded. “He’s admitted to the helicopter bombing of Dr. Baines.”

“And Lois and Clark think this guy is connected to Lex Luthor,” Perry recalled, shaking his head.

“Detective Henderson has a signed confession from Bermuda naming a Mrs. Cox as the one that hired him to bomb Dr. Baines’ helicopter,” Jimmy responded with a shrug.

“Any idea who this Mrs. Cox is?” Perry asked.

“That’s where we’re stuck. Henderson said there’s a deal with the feds for him to turn over and give up the list of his jobs and the clients he worked for.”

Perry nodded, letting out a deep sigh. “Well, make sure you read Lois and Clark in. As soon as you all have something, I want to know about it.”

“You got it, Chief.” Jimmy nodded as he walked toward the door.

Perry let out a heavy sigh and turned his attention to the monitor he had with the latest layout of the Planet’s evening edition up for display. A soft ping echoed from the speakers as a new message icon appeared. He clicked on the message to open it.

The subject read, *‘Nightfall Asteroid Projected To Destroy Earth While Government Says Nothing.’*

“What in the Sam Hill?” Perry frowned, looking at the message he had received to see who had sent it. There was no sender.

“Olsen!”

Lois raked through the report that had been sent to her from an unknown source, feeling the static charge of uncertainty in the air as she contemplated her next move. In the report, she found details of secret meetings determining how to combat an asteroid the size of Metropolis and its projected impact in less than a week with Earth. Every level of the government had been informed of the imminent doom looming around the corner. Every time they had made a choice to not inform the public. Everyone would continue life as normal; not knowing each waking second could be bringing them closer and closer to the end. Not knowing it could be their last goodbye or hello.

“This is insanity,” Lois murmured, running her hand through her hair. “They can’t just *not* tell anyone.”

“There would be panic everywhere.” Clark pointed out with a disheartened shrug. “They think they’re doing the right thing.”

“The world deserves to know what’s going on,” Lois countered sharply.

“I don’t disagree, but it’s a lot more complicated than that.” Clark gestured to the printouts in front of her. “What happens if they can’t destroy the asteroid? Then the world is in panic, and mayhem is everywhere. It’s not like they can call Superman for help either...”

“So, what do we do?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know,” Clark shook his head. “It’s been nearly two weeks, and Dr. Stone is no closer to having an answer on how to destroy that meteorite than I am to figuring out how to restore my powers.”

The phone rang, interrupting Lois’ train of thought, and she reached over to answer it. “Hello?”

“Lois? It’s Jimmy. Listen, you’re not going to believe what the Chief just got...”

The Nation Demands Answers: What is Nightfall?

By Perry White

The headline ticked across the twenty-four-hour news circuit, with the newscaster repeating the question that had been plastered in everyone’s vision across the nation. Every news circuit and tabloid that laid ink to paper was asking ‘What is Nightfall?’ while the mouthpieces to the government remained silent. Press conference after press conference remained nothing more than a dog and pony show attempting to distract the public with non-answers to the burning questions everyone was asking.

“I want to know how something like this happens,” General Zeitlin fumed angrily, looking across the faces seated at the table.

“A blatant breach in security, General,” the President cleared his throat looking around the table. “I want an investigation. Whoever is responsible for this will be answering to the highest court.”

“Of course, Mr. President, but right now our resources are preoccupied with getting the Asgard rocket launched to take out Nightfall.”

“And don’t you think it will be difficult to do that with a nation in panic?”

“Mr. President, we’ve been dealt a difficult hand, but we have little choice in the matter. The public will not continue to accept the answers we’re giving them.” General Zeitlin explained with a heavy sigh.

“The longer you remain silent, Mr. President, the worse the fall out will be.” the Chief of Staff advised.

“Schedule the press conference with the press,” the President said, shaking his head before stopping to wag his finger at Zeitlin. “I want every resource directed to getting

the Asgard rocket launched tonight. If I'm going to address the nation then it'll be with some good news."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Clark tapped his index finger against his chin, leaning over the coffee table as he stared at the screen in front of him with its empty page and blinking cursor. The words he had spent the better part of a year angling to write refused to come. The blinking cursor taunted him with the same callousness his powers did. The uselessness that continued to plague him fueled his frustration and he finally admitted defeat, slamming the lid closed to the screen.

Joey Bermuda's testimony and plea agreement connected the Messenger sabotage to one of LexCorp's top directors, Beverly Cox. And also connected Cox to several working theories the police had about someone referred to as 'the boss.' It was unclear if it was Cox that was the boss or someone higher up pulling the strings, but it was enough to investigate Lex Luthor and his fellow directors for their involvement. It was what he had been waiting for. A smoking gun to force Lex Luthor out of the shadows. But he couldn't help but wonder if it was enough. If any of it would be enough.

He turned his attention to Lois, who was jotting down her notes on the report from the anonymous source that had exposed the destructive asteroid headed for Earth. A chuckle escaped his throat, "Still obsessing over that whistleblower report, huh?"

"Existential threat and end of the world seem big enough to give it a second glance," Lois flashed him a weak smile as she set the report down on the table.

"Yeah," Clark nodded his agreement. Truth be told, had he not been stripped of his powers a few days ago, he would have been digging into the report and trying to find the source himself. Instead, he found himself in unfamiliar territory, unwilling to face the threat of Nightfall without a way to act on it. For the longest time, he solved problems he came across with action that typically tied into the powers he had been given. Now they were gone.

He felt lost.

"Jimmy said Perry had the same report sent to him along with several other editors at news outlets," Lois shook her head in dismay. "Someone really wanted this to get out." She pointed to the screen in front of him. "How are you coming with the Bermuda story?"

"I don't know," Clark ran his hand across his face. "We spent months trying to prove the connection between Luthor and the Messenger launch. Finally, a smoking gun comes through, and all I can think about is I should be doing something more."

"Well, we have everyone looking at Luthor. That's a start," Lois pointed out.

"I guess," Clark shrugged his shoulders.

Lois pointed to the television that was silently playing in the background with the news coverage from earlier replaying the President's message requesting Superman's presence at the White House. A pang of guilt ran through him followed by the bitter taste of hopelessness as his jaw tightened. He wanted desperately to run into action and do something.

The reality was he couldn't.

"Looks like that's all they're going to be covering tonight," Lois glanced toward him with a silent question written across her face.

"There's nothing I can do," Clark lamented, tightening his jaw as he looked toward the footage once more in despair. "Even if I could manage to pull off getting to the White House, I have no way of helping whatever emergency is so great they think Superman is the only answer to." Clark groaned, shaking his head in disgust. "It's time to face reality. Superman is *gone*."

"You *are* Superman," Lois reminded him, turning her head sharply as she stared intently into his eyes, piercing him with the subtle gaze that threatened to overpower him.

"Not anymore," Clark hung his head, running the back of palm against his chin.

"Superman is more than just a *suit*, Clark."

"I can't be Superman without my powers," Clark muttered in disgust, looking away as his shoulders fell in defeat.

The shock on her face hit him like a ton of bricks. The pained expression on her face sent a ripple of dread through him as he wondered momentarily if the friendship, he shared with her was based solely on the mutual agreement of her keeping his secret safe. Without it – without Superman – was there still a relationship to hang on to. In the depths of his soul he prayed there was. Her unconditional devotion to protect his secret had drawn him to her initially but the closer they became the more convinced he was of his love for her.

She was the lightning rod that kept him grounded in the chaos, but even with her unfaltering support, this wasn't something that could be fixed. He could not wave a magic wand and restore his powers and he couldn't put his family and friends at risk to satisfy his curiosity.

The intoxicating mixture of lavender and orchards overwhelmed his senses as he stared into her eyes, feeling each excruciating second slip by slowly. He wanted so desperately to pull her into his arms and kiss her over and over again. The night she had been drugged by Miranda's Pheromone spray remained forever seared in his mind, reminding him of how close he had come to succumbing to temptation.

'*Not like this*,' his mind screamed at him.

As close as he came to giving into temptation and telling her how he wanted to kiss her senseless from now until eternity, the thought never made it out of his mouth as he shrugged his shoulders and jokingly commented, “Somehow I doubt the government wants Superman for his strategizing skills.”

“Just give it some time,” Lois reassured, reaching her hand out to brush her palm against his cheek. “We don’t even know what caused any of this.” Lois pointed to the television, “Maybe this will give everyone a chance to strategize their own solutions to this threat. You can’t be everywhere at once. They have to understand that. It’s theoretically impossible.”

“I *am* impossible,” he pointed out.

“You...” She stopped, pausing for a moment as her eyes moved over him with a gaze that sent a shudder through him before continuing, “...still have your limits.” She placed a hand on his chest and moved it up to run a hand across his cheek. “There’s only so much one person can do.”

“And if it isn’t enough?” Clark asked, glancing toward the television. “It could be the end of the world.”

“Then it’s the end of the world and...” Lois’ voice faltered as she spoke, brushing tears from her eyes. “It’s not going to be the end of the world. Everything will be fine.” She seemed to be trying to reassure herself more than him.

“You’re pretty confident over there,” he commented with a wary grin.

“I have to be,” she swiped at a tear that had escaped the corner of her eyes.

He clasped his hand around her wrist, holding it inside his grasp for a brief moment before brushing his thumb against her cheek.

“I can’t be Superman without my powers,” Clark muttered in disgust, looking away as his shoulders fell in defeat. “The world is literally in peril and I can’t do a thing.”

Her hand reached over to take his hand in hers and she gave it a tight squeeze. “You’re not curious in the slightest what they may want from you?”

“Sure,” he shrugged his shoulders, “but the moment I show up there, the more questions that get raised. How am I supposed to explain why I can’t help them?” He raked his fingertips through his hair, letting out a ragged breath. “I can’t take the risk of someone finding out Superman is powerless.”

Lois seemed to relent, nodding her agreement.

“It’s been two weeks.”

Lois’ lower lip tucked itself beneath her upper lip, sliding her tongue against the tip of her lips as she seemed

to be taking in the gravity of what he was saying, “You don’t think your powers are coming back, do you?”

“I can’t even get a single spark off,” Clark admitted, shaking his head in dismay. Her eyes softened, holding his gaze as she slowly processed what he was saying and inched closer to him, resting her head against his shoulder.

He let out a heavy breath, feeling the intoxicating sensation of her in his arms. He wanted desperately to prolong this moment and cement it into time, but it was an impossible and temporary. He felt his heart pang against his chest as she turned her cheek to look at him, letting out a soft whisper, “You’re still Superman without the powers. It’s not the superpowers that made the hero.” Her voice cracked and she shook her head, “The world is ending and I can’t even find the words to write the story. How ironic is that.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Yes, we do,” she whispered in a hoarse voice.

Her arms snaked around his neck and he felt the intoxicating sensation of her soft flesh pressed up against him as she turned so she was a mere inch away from him. The soft pink lips that had taunted him for months inched closer and she whispered in his ear. “I love you.”

The admission felt like the release of a floodgate of emotion. Pent up frustration and longing fueled his lips as he uttered his own admission before allowing himself to be pulled into her arms. “I love you too.”

The small gap between them closed as her lips clasped against his in a soul-crushing kiss that threatened to overtake him. A low moan escaped his lips and she turned in his arms, hovering over him as her limbs flung around him, wrapping him in a tight cocoon as she enveloped him in her embrace.

“Lois...” he let out a muffled moan against her lips as she snaked her arms around him, pulling him closer. “I love you.”

A deep sigh of satisfaction escaped his throat as her arms wrapped around him, holding him close while he lost himself in her arms. For a brief moment he forgot about the threat that loomed over the world. For a brief moment he forgot and then his focus shifted from Lois to the blinding light that lit up the room.

“Kal-El.”

Lex Luthor leaned back in his office chair, looking out the balcony window as he took a long puff from his cigar, “You begin to take it for granted.” He mused softly, looking to the sky with a content gaze. “You assume that every day the sun will rise in the East and set in the West. You assume that every night the moon will be there for your inspiration. You assume that spring will follow winter.” He lowered his gaze to where the television screen

was mounted on the wall of his study. The image of the President addressing the nation played in the background. “Nothing is guaranteed. If I am to learn anything from this it is to assume nothing.” He gestured to the door where Asabi stood, “How are we coming with Mr. Trask’s arrangements?”

“A car is waiting to take him to Ontario where he’ll continue his work for LexCorp.” Asabi advised, stepping inside the office. “It took longer than anticipated with the government’s freeze on travel, but he’ll be out of Metropolis by tonight.”

“Once Mrs. Cox returns from her visit with Detective Henderson we’ll need to make the same arrangements for her as well.”

“Something come up, sir?”

“Assume nothing, Asabi,” Lex responded, taking a long puff from his cigar.

Image after image filled Clark’s mind as the globe that had lain dormant for over two weeks lit up, floating in the air, beckoning him to reach out and claim it. As his hand clasped around it, the globe changed its form and the image of a man dressed in white with a familiar ‘S’ emblem on his chest appeared.

“Do not be afraid, Kal-El.”

The image of the man he’d seen before reflected from the globe and spoke to him. “My name is Jor-El. And you are Kal-El, my son. The object you hold has been attuned to you. That you now hear these words is proof that you survived the journey in space and have reached your full maturity. Now it is time for you to learn our heritage.”

The images multiplied over one another and he found himself unable to turn away as he watched the entire history unfold before him. War. Famine. Women and children desperately seeking help as the very ground around them swallowed them whole. They were memories of a life...a world that had long since died off. The images finally changed to that of the one who identified himself as Jor-El — his father. No, *birth* father.

A flood of new images appeared and he saw the couple from the vantage point of looking down on them as they cradled a baby in their arms as the walls trembled around them. Jor-El’s voice resonated around him as the images came into focus.

“Time grows short, and we continue to search. The immensity of space is both a blessing and a curse. In that near infinite variety, there must be someplace suitable. Hope and desperation drive us in equal measure. Lara works by my side. She is tireless and endlessly patient. Considering what is soon to come, this is my greatest consolation: that we are together.”

The woman beside Jor-El smiled at the sleeping baby in her arms. As she spoke there was something eerily familiar about her that told him he knew her.

Lara. He had called her Lara but something told him she was his birth mother. ‘Yes, that felt right.’ Her tearful eyes focused on the baby in her arms and Clark felt a pang in his chest as he watched the scene unfold helplessly.

“He’s just a baby, Jor-El.”

“It’s his only chance, Lara. If he remains here he will surely die as...we will.”

“But why Earth, Jor-El?” Lara asked, “They’re thousands of years behind us.”

“He will need that advantage to survive. Their atmosphere will sustain him.”

“He will defy their gravity,” Lara said.

“He will look like one of them.” Jor-El countered with a pained expression of his own.

“But he won’t *be* one of them.”

Anguish filled Clark as he heard the words of his birth mother, feeling her love and concern for the life she was sending him to. For so long he wondered why he had been sent to Earth and the reason for his powers. Now he knew.

“His dense molecular structure will make him strong,” Jor-El responded, focused on the task at hand. “He’ll be fast and virtually invulnerable.”

“Isolated and alone.” Lara finished tearfully as she leaned in to kiss the baby in her arms.

“He will never be alone.”

The light from the globe filled the room and Clark felt an glowing aura run through him as he fell forward and as he had so many years ago he stopped himself from hitting the ground at the last second, floating inches above the ground.

‘Never alone, Kal-El.’ The voice in his head whispered in that of Lara’s voice.

Clark let out a shaky breath, looking around the room where Lois was standing over him, shaking his shoulder.

“Clark?”

Chaos.

Dread.

Unbalance.

The entire world felt off its axis.

The evidence she and Clark needed to finally print the story they had spent months on, proving Lex Luthor was behind the E.P.R.A.D. sabotage of Prometheus Messenger was finally within their grasp. The story of the year was about to go to press with both their bylines and Lois couldn’t even find the motivation to muster up enthusiasm over nailing Lex Luthor to the wall for his involvement in Baines’ death. She should be celebrating. Instead, she was

stuck in place consumed with worry over the continued absence of Clark's powers.

Clark's sudden powerless state combined with the whistleblower report she had received revealed an unknown threat that could end life as they knew it and sent her through a tailspin. She felt numb as she remained frozen in place, unable to act on the information as she weighed the impact this information could have on the entire world. As much as she would love the credit of revealing possibly the biggest story of the century to the world it felt wrong. Reporting on the doom that was sure to follow and hope for the best while everyone and everything she loved disappeared from this existential threat.

She had no answers.

Each time she attempted to find the words to tell the story in her mind she froze up, unable to put pen to paper the threat that hung over the unsuspecting citizens of Earth.

She looked to Clark who was seated on the edge of the front porch steps, staring off into the horizon. Her mind was still reeling from everything he had told her. Images and memories implanted by the globe they had found in Trask's possession.

How was that even possible?

"Clark?"

She stepped out onto the porch and leaned her head back against the door frame. A cool breeze bristled through her hair and she saw Clark turn to her with a disheartened sigh.

"It's like it was never gone," he pointed to the small burn marks against the large tree a few feet from the farmhouse.

"Well, isn't that a good thing?" Lois asked, noticing the uneasiness in Clark's expression.

"It is, but I still don't know if I'm at full strength or what triggered my powers to return," Clark looked to her uneasily. "Or if there is any more of that meteorite out there that may take my powers away."

"Well, whatever the globe did, let's just hope it can be repeated." Lois flashed a weak smile to him. He nodded his agreement and stood up from where he'd been seated. "I'll take you back to Metropolis in the morning and that should give me enough time."

"Enough time?" Lois echoed the words before the meaning hit her. He was going to the white House. He was going to try and stop Nightfall. She bit her lower-lip, shaking her head as she pointed toward the sun that was beginning to set. "They're sending the Asgard rocket. Surely that means they think..."

"They are doing what they can, yes, but based on everything they're not saying I don't think it's going to

work." Clark folded his arms across his chest, leaning against the door frame.

Reality of how much was at stake washed over Lois as she inched closer to Clark so she was just a faint whisper away from him, staring into his chocolate brown eyes. His eyes closed a brief moment before fluttering open and reaching out to cup her cheek, brushing the tears from her eyes.

"Lois..." His voice sounded so different. The faint hint of desire mixed with grief strained his vocal chords as he held her in his arms.

She felt a shiver run through her spine as she stared back at him, hearing her name on his lips. "You don't have to..." she wanted desperately to talk him out of what they both knew had to happen. She had seen him commit impossible feats over the past few months but this felt so different.

"Yes, I do. If I can help..."

"Clark..."

The tears rolled down her face of their own accord and she didn't even try to hide them. She closed the distance between them, claiming his mouth with hers. A low rumble vibrated against her and she heard him breathe out her name as a faint whisper.

He pulled his head back, catching his breath for a brief moment. Their eyes met and held onto one another as she smoothed her tongue against the warm tingle of her lips. Her eyes moved across him, taking in the effect she had on him in the raw and emotional state they both were in. The hard lump of his Adam's apple moved beneath the skin of his throat, tensing as she saw the muscle of his jaw flex.

His forehead pressed against hers and he whispered, "It's the only way."

She reached her hand around his neck, drawing him to her as she murmured in his ear. "I know."

The last of his resolve seemed to melt away and she pulled him into her arms, returning her beckoning embrace with enthusiasm. She felt the deep aching desire in the pit of her insides cry out as his mouth covered hers, devouring her as his hands buried themselves in her hair. He walked her back into the farmhouse, shutting the door behind them without losing contact with him. His lips covered hers in a warm caress as her hands moved across his chest, aimlessly searching for the closeness with him she was yearning for.

"I love you," she murmured in incoherent whispers. His hands smoothed their way up and down the frame of her face, hesitant to touch her anywhere else until she claimed hold of his wrist and guided it to her hip.

The hard surface of the living room wall hit her back and she felt a wave of desire run through her as his lips tore at her, pressing into her as she supported herself

against the hard surface. A low gasp escaped her lips and his hand drifted up the half inch of skin exposed beneath her blouse.

Words were lost on both of them as both hands moved to her backside, lifting her in his arms effortlessly, giving her the boost she needed to wrap her limbs around him before he carried her through the doorway to the upstairs bedroom.

Every fear and doubt that had plagued her mind melted away as the cool sheets hit her back. The heat from his lips against her bare navel sent a rush of desire as she uttered his name in a sultry whisper only meant for him. Her heart panged with unfettered desire, feeling the physical pain that threatened to overtake her if she didn't satisfy the overwhelming desire to devour him right there and then.

A million reasons for why she should stop died on her lips as the only thing that seemed to matter was that the end of the world was near and she didn't want to waste another second worrying about what she should or shouldn't say or do.

She wanted him.

She wanted him in a deep, painful way that made her body cry out each time his palm smoothed over her bare skin.

She wanted to take in every second and every caress as his lips covered her body with their heat and she held him in her arms for what could possibly be the first and last time. A low gasp escaped the back of her throat, feeling the powerful ripple of his taut muscles beneath her fingertips as his lips dragged achingly against her voice box.

Her hands wedged their way through his hair, momentarily fisting it before reaching down to run her hands against the front of his shirt, letting out short gasps as each layer of skin was exposed, revealing the pale golden toned skin beneath her fingertips.

She didn't want to think about the panic the world was in.

She didn't want to think of everything that could go wrong.

She just wanted this one perfect moment.

A low moan escaped the back of his throat as a ripple ran through her, claiming possession of him as her limbs covered him from all sides, enveloping him in her embrace

Chapter 14

The morning rays peeked through the flannel curtains of the bedroom, gradually coaxing Clark Kent awake from the sleep he had drifted into in the late hours of the evening. He rolled onto his side, casting a cautious glance over to the sleeping figure next to him. A soft breath escaped his lips as he let his gaze linger on each soft curve wrapped in the bed sheets. The curve of his lips twitched

as he let his mind push out the chaos that had transpired over the past few days and instead focus on this moment. He wanted to savor it. This moment of serenity for just a little longer before the unknown of the day brought forth more chaos.

He didn't want to think about what the day would bring. There was so much unknown.

The investigation into Lex Luthor could end up backfiring.

The treacherous journey into space to stop Nightfall could be a deadly one if he wasn't careful.

He had stopped forces out of this world before but this felt ...different.

It *all* felt different.

The world had been turned on its axis, preparing for doomsday.

Selfishly he wanted to forget the peril the world was in and focus on the serenity he felt, savoring the solace of lying in Lois Lane's arms. They both had succumbed to exhaustion early in the morning hours.

He'd never experienced anything like it in his life. He had scoured the Earth, traveling from place to place in search of where he would fit in and find where he would fit in. For so long, he thought he would be destined to live in isolation – a curse to bear as his cross – unable to find anyone who would ever understand or accept him for who he truly was.

It was a fate he had been sure would follow him until his golden years.

Until he had met Lois.

Something in him changed the moment he met her. As if he was meant to find her.

Not only had she helped him discover a way to use his gifts to help the world and not put those close to him at risk, but he had found someone he could share everything with. The one person that saw past the flashy superhero and from the beginning was able to see the man behind the 'S'.

Every second he had spent over the evening cradling Lois Lane in his arms and making love to her made him forget everything. The peril that loomed over him. The close calls. The rescues that haunted him. The fear he wouldn't dare admit to anyone.

Every caress.

Every touch.

He knew from the moment he had met her that he never wanted to part from her. She was the one for him. This was it. There would never be anyone else. He loved her. Every curve, moan, smile, frown, and sigh that was wrapped into Lois Lane. He loved everything about her and would continue to love everything that made her the woman he loved until the day he died.

He reached his hand up, brushing a stray hair out of her face as he did so. Lois' eyes fluttered open as she lazily stretched her arms over her head, sighing as her eyes met his with a brief smile crossing her lips. "Hey."

"Hey," his hand brushed against her cheek, cradling her face in his palm.

Her eyes fluttered open sleepily, reaching out for him. "You're still here."

A weary smile crossed his lips and he nodded, "Yeah."

He glanced down at their current state of undress. Her legs were still wrapped snugly around his waist from their lovemaking the night before. He wanted desperately to forget about Nightfall and pick up where they had left off in the early hours of the morning, he knew he couldn't. The weight of the world was literally on his shoulders. As much as he wanted to forget about the asteroid's imminent path toward Earth he knew he had to act now before it was too late.

Her lips pursed as she seemed to read his mind, "I guess you should talk with EPRAD about Nightfall. Any idea how long something like this may take?"

"I have no idea," Clark frowned, shrugging his shoulders.

Bill Henderson paced around the interrogation room and read off the list of charges, "Let's see, Beverly Cox. What do we have here?"

"I've already asked for my attorney." Mrs. Cox interrupted.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure Detective Ryder will come in with your attorney as soon as he arrives. Right now I'm just reviewing the list of charges. You do want to know what you're being charged with, right, Beverly?"

"It's your funeral, Detective," Mrs. Cox slowly smiled back at him. "What are the charges?"

"Let's see here," Henderson flipped through the pages in the file and let out a low whistle. "Murder conspiracy. Arson in the third degree. Oh, and Federal charges for racketeering....tsk tsk tsk... What did you get yourself involved in, Beverly?"

"That's a question, Detective. I'm waiting for my lawyer."

"Of course," Henderson claimed the seat across from her, looking toward the door that was still open. "How long you think it'll take him?"

"Got somewhere to be, Detective?" Beverly Cox challenged.

"Just curious."

"If you think you're going to get me to break down and confess or give you anything you're..."

"Who says I need you to give me anything?" Henderson asked. "Seems to me you're set up nice and pretty...until you take the fall."

"What are you muttering on about?" Beverly Cox rolled her eyes with a disinterested glare.

"You were identified by several individuals at E.P.R.A.D. and the plans for Fences' antidote that magically disappeared was found to leave a trace on your property. We can go back and forth all day long, but we both know it's over. You want to wait for Sheldon Bender to come charging in and keep doing the dirty work that will most likely end up with you being cast out by Luthor taking matters into his hands, or you can do the right thing for once."

"I don't know anything."

"Have it your way."

General Zeitlin paced the E.P.R.A.D. Command Control room looking to where Professor Daitch stood at the large telescope the E.P.R.A.D. team had been using to track the Nightfall asteroid's projected path. Though he tried not to show it, he could feel his stomach churn in knots as time grew nearer to the impact date. This wasn't something he could simply fight or go to war with. An inanimate object from space was plummeting toward Earth and there was nothing he or anyone in this room could do. The glimmer of hope they had was to attempt to meet the asteroid's projected path with a rocket in hopes it would destroy Nightfall. Even that had little hope of success with so many unknown factors about the asteroid.

"Anything?" Zeitlin called out to Professor Daitch.

"Asgard rocket is approaching Nightfall." Daitch responded calmly, clicking a few buttons on his control panel and projecting the image of the rocket moving through space toward the large asteroid.

The room grew quiet as they waited for a sign that the prolonged uncertainty, they all struggled through over the past few weeks would finally meet its end.

"Oh, no," Daitch frowned, shaking his head as the rocket veered left of the center of the asteroid, knocking a clip of it off into the deep space and leaving the large piece of space rock to continue its trajectory toward Earth.

"That's it." Zeitlin let out a heavy sigh. "We're out of options." He looked around the room, preparing to give his apologies to the team he had been tasked with to stop the asteroid. As he swallowed the hard lump in his throat the red light on the phone in the middle of the table blinked and a voice came on the line.

"Professor Daitch, I have Superman for you."

Zeitlin's eyes widened in surprise, and he looked to Daitch who shrugged, "I had put out feelers but hadn't heard anything back." Professor Daitch reached over to

press the button to speak and responded. “Yes, please send him in.”

Sheldon Bender made his way through the maze of open cubicles in the Metropolis police station, craning his neck as he looked for the name he was searching for. He held in his hands a thick manila envelope as he approached the corner office of the police captain. He fished his wallet out of his pocket and tossed it on the captain’s desk. “My name is Sheldon Bender. *The Sheldon Bender of New Troy and legal counsel of Beverly Cox. I need to see the detective interviewing my client now. I don’t care what he’s doing or who he’s with. I can assure you nothing is more important than me.*”

The captain lifted up Bender’s wallet from his desk and tossed it in the trashcan. “Oops.”

Clark held his stance, squaring his shoulders as he looked up at the large asteroid that showed no signs of slowing down from its projected path to Earth. The room was somber as introductions were exchanged and Professor Daitch caught him up to speed. Some of what they covered had been revealed in the whistleblower report Lois and he had received. Some had yet to be discovered. The more recent news of a military rocket being used to destroy the Nightfall asteroid and failing caught him off guard as he contemplated how he would fare any better.

Professor Daitch pointed to the screen as he explained the gravity of the situation, “Nightfall is close to seventeen miles across and traveling close to thirty-thousand miles an hour.”

If my calculations are correct, in a little over four days it will hit Earth and knock the Earth off its axis.” He pointed to the digital white numbers printed across the screen. ‘99:54:23’

General Zeitlin cleared his throat, choosing that moment to add in, “E.P.R.A.D. and its team of scientists have been working day and night with the military’s personnel trying to find a way to destroy it. But our efforts have been futile, Superman.”

Daitch held his hands up over his head to symbolize the expansive size of the asteroid that loomed over the Earth, “All predictions show that Nightfall will throw Earth off its axis and possibly even throw us out of our current solar orbit. This is by far larger than the meteor that is thought to have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. The crater alone will throw enough dust into the air to start the new ice age.”

Clark’s brow furrowed as he took all the information in, reading the worried expressions in the room and recognizing just how little had been inside the report that had been lead to the Daily Planet had been leaked. The

entire world’s existence was at risk and though the people deserved to know the threat existed, hearing the worst-case predictions would do nothing but incite panic.

“Superman, the world needs your help.” Zeitlin pleaded with a weary palm running across his face. The stress and worry that he had been carrying over the past several weeks were painfully obvious on his face.

“You’re asking me to fly million miles into space to stop a piece of rock the size of Metropolis.” Clark held his stance, hiding the uncertainty from his tone as he looked across the room. He had been powerless a mere twenty-four hours ago and here he was contemplating a feat that was greater than anything he had ever attempted in his twenty-eight years on Earth.

“You’re our only hope.”

Henderson looked at the clock behind him, stretching his arms out over his head. He craned his neck to look at the clock, “Forty-five minutes. Hmm, maybe Sheldon Bender had an emergency come up.”

“Maybe,” Cox replied coolly as she repositioned herself in the chair she was seated in for the umpteenth time.

“Yeah, I mean, you’re one of Luthor’s most trusted comrades, right? He wouldn’t leave you high and dry, would he? He wouldn’t tell your lawyer to make arrangements for you before coming in here to set you free only to make sure you never talk, would he?”

“What do you want?” Cox snapped. “I have nothing to say. I ... You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Of course not,” Henderson responded, shaking his head. “You have no idea why Sheldon Bender is representing you and Lex Luthor. You have no idea why people keep dropping dead and go missing around LexCorp and you have no idea where your supposed attorney is. Do I have that right?”

“Lex trusts me.”

“Oh, it’s ‘Lex’ is it?” Henderson scoffed. A knock at the door caught his attention and he looked over to see Sheldon Bender standing with Captain Lawrence. “Well, look who isn’t lost after all.”

Lex stood on the balcony of his penthouse, taking in a deep breath as he took in the evening sky. He had planned it all out. Down to the infinite detail but what he hadn’t prepared for was the danger that fate and Mother Nature brought with it. He let out a heavy sigh and turned back to his emptied out penthouse.

“Is that everything?”

Asabi nodded, gesturing to Nigel who stood at the doorway. “Mr. Bender has confirmed the case against Mrs.

Cox is iron tight. With or without her assistance LexCorp is the next target.”

Lex muttered under his breath, holding up his thumb and index finger together, “This close to discovering where this Superman came from and I’m forced out of my home like a common criminal.”

“A necessary step to remain on the higher ground,” Asabi advised with a nonchalant shrug.

“Self-preservation.” Lex mused with a disgruntled shake of his head. He turned to Asabi with a raised brow “And the Kryptonite?”

“We’ve acquired a source from Mr. Trask,” Asabi assured him.

“Excellent,” Lex smoothed the wrinkle from his jacket and turned back to Asabi who was closing the briefcase on his desk for him. “Oh, Asabi? Do make sure Mr. Bender takes care of Mrs. Cox. We don’t want any temptations for her to succumb to while in custody.”

“Of course, Mr. Luthor.”

“Lex Luthor will never live in a cage,” Lex fumed.

Twelve hours.

He had bought himself twelve hours to prepare for a mission that could very well mean the end of life as he and the rest of the inhabitants of Earth knew it. Still, Clark couldn’t help but question the responsibility that had been bestowed on him. Hours. It had been hours ago that he had been wrestling with the stark reality of never being able to fly again and now here he was burdened with the responsibility of flying further than he’d ever flown and destroying something that remained a true mystery to him.

The news had been hard to receive and even harder to deliver. He had spent most of the afternoon struggling through the emotions, mentally preparing himself for what he was about to attempt. Seeing as how the resources in Smallville were stark with the shutdowns of all satellites, he had flown his parents to Metropolis in hopes that if things went south he’d at least know they were with Lois.

<< “I don’t believe you’re supposed to be back here, Ms. Lane.”

“Well, I won’t tell if you won’t, Smallville.”>>

<< “Lois, come on, there’s no reason for Mr. White to reassign you.”

“Well, I have no lead on the E.P.R.A.D. story...”

“You had a story.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You killed your story.”

“I did what I had to do.” >>

<< “I guess I owe you that exclusive.”

“As long as you’re not planning on running with your tail between your legs back to Nebraska...”

“Kansas.”

“Midwest Nowheresville without a syndicated paper...”

“They have newspapers...”>>

He swallowed the hard lump in his throat, pushing back the tidal wave of emotions that threatened to overcome him. It would be so easy to give into the world of what-ifs and fall apart but he couldn’t. He had to focus and approach this as if he would anything else. Everything depended on it.

He cast a wayward glance across the street to where the neighbors continued to chatter about nonsense from the balcony, oblivious to what was happening. His jaw tightened as he struggled through the emotions that continued to tumble within him.

“You get that look on your face and its it’s going to stick like that.” He turned his head to see Lois staring at him with a sheepish grin. “...or at least that’s what I was told growing up.”

A weak smile crossed his lips and he shrugged his shoulders, glancing up toward the moonlit sky with a defeated sigh. “Two-hundred thirty-eight nine hundred miles. That’s how far the Earth is from the moon.”

“Seems a lot closer from here,” Lois murmured, taking a seat next to him on the chair next to him.

“Nightfall’s at least two million miles away. By morning it will be one million eight hundred thousand miles and get closer with each second.” Clark murmured aloud, ticking off the statistics he had been running through for the past several hours.

“It wouldn’t be the first time you flew into space,” Lois responded calmly, reaching her hand out to cover his.

“No, but it would be my first time flying that far ...that fast.” Clark felt the hard lump rise up again.

“You can do this,” Lois gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

“Since when are you such an optimist?”

“Well, if you’re going to take up the pessimist mantle then someone’s got to do it.” Lois grinned, reaching a hand over to stroke his cheek.

“I’m being realistic,” Clark corrected, reaching a hand over to cover hers.

<< “Still think putting your life at risk for a headline is worth it?”

“Rule number one, always get there first.”>>

“This will work,” Lois leaned her head back to look at him, meeting his gaze with a gorgeous smile that threatened to undo him right there. He wanted desperately to have the faith she held in him. He wanted to believe that everything would turn out alright, but he couldn’t seem to shake the dread he felt looming over him.

“If it doesn’t...”

“It will.” Lois cut him off, shaking her head, refusing to give into the possibility of Nightfall getting the better of him.

“Just ...please take care of them.” He gestured toward the living room where his parents had fallen asleep hours ago.

<<“*The world is ending and I can’t even find the words to write the story. How ironic is that.*”

“*We don’t know that.*”

“*Yes, we do...I love you.*”>>

Her eyes clamped shut for a brief moment and then she shook her head, “This will work. I’m sure of it.”

His face softened in wonderment as he reached his hand out to cup her face, “You have so much faith....” He pressed his lips to hers, savoring the soft caress of her lips to his. “I love you.”

Henderson let out a low whistle, sifting through the papers that were scattered across the fine oak desk in front of him. Remnants of the office that had once run LexCorp filled the room but little evidence had been left for him to go on. He let out an aggravated groan, running a hand through his thinning hair as he tossed the warrant onto the wooden planked floor.

It was over.

Lex Luthor was one the run.

“*No!!!*” Henderson punched his fist against the wall.

Gone.

Everything was gone.

The news coverage showed the scene from Clark’s departure several hours ago. The newscaster relayed the events once more, “Several hours ago, Superman said his final goodbyes to the crowd. He was described as calm, but determined. Witnesses say his last words were to the President — I’m quoting now — ‘*ll do my best.*’ — And with that he took off, gaining speed as he rose into the sky. And this time the entire world was watching.”

Rule Number Two. Never Get Involved With Your Story.

The irony of the rules she had set for herself hummed through Lois Lane’s mind as she prepared to finish the last touches to what was the most earth-shattering piece of journalism she or anyone could write and yet she found herself unable to distance herself from the reality that she was writing. The world as everyone knew it would wake up to a new reality. A world where the only hope was a man they had come to trust and befriend and was willing to put everything on the line for the mere chance that he could stop the imminent doom that loomed over the Earth’s orbit.

<<“*Help! Somebody! There’s a bomb! Please! Oh, thank God! We’ve got to get the bomb squad down here and...*”

“*If you’ll excuse me, Ms. Lane,*”

“*How did you know my name?*”>>

<<“*Lois, trust me on this. I am not your typical male.*”>>

<<“*You had a story.*”

“*No, I didn’t.*”>>

<<“*Do you always rush onto the scene where bombs are set to go off?*”

“*If that’s the story.*”>>

Her gaze drifted to the corner of the apartment where Clark’s parents were glued to the television set, waiting for the glimpse of hope to grace the screen. She pushed the anguish and fear that threatened to consume her to the back of her mind as she focused on the task at hand. It had to be done.

<<“*We?*”

“*If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a bully. And stopping a bully and exposing them to the world is what I do best. Come on, I’ve got to get this checked out, and we’ve got to find whoever’s behind this.*”

“*There you go using that word again,*”>>

<<“*Still think putting your life at risk for a headline is worth it?*”

“*Rule number one, always get there first.*”>>

Hours. Had it really just been a few hours ago that she had stood in this apartment and said goodbye for what could have been the last time?

Everything felt so surreal.

<<“*Us?*”

“*Well, it was a team assignment, I wouldn’t want to be accused of being unfair.*”

“*No one could accuse you of being unfair, Lois.*”>>

Martha’s voice cracked with enthusiasm and Lois lifted her head up from the screen she had been focused on, “There he is!”

Lois walked over to them, watching as the footage from Clark’s flight preparation filled the screen with a side-by-side camera of the EPRAD Nightfall footage which had the familiar red and blue of his suit billowing in the air. With Clark on board, the true nature of the danger Clark was about to face had been revealed.

There was nothing left to hide.

<<“*I guess I owe you that exclusive.*”

“*As long as you’re not planning on running with your tail between your legs back to Nebraska...*”

“*Kansas.*”

“*Midwest Nowheresville without a syndicated paper...*”

“*They have newspapers...*”>>

“I’m being told we have a transmission from Superman. Let’s take that ‘live’ feed, direct from mission control.”

Lois winced as she looked over to where Jonathan and Martha sat with anticipation, staring at the screen and the crackle of Clark’s voice came through the speakers. She could barely make it out but it was there.

“I can see it now. It’s hard to see anything else. It’s immense.”

<<“*Lois, you’re not yourself. Something has changed, and...*”

“*I don’t need to be myself... I love you.*”>>

Mission Control crackled through the speakers and responded, “Roger, Superman. We copy you on the ground. Do you have stress point acquisition in visual?”

“Yes.”

“Stand by for final briefing procedure.”

“I know what I have to do.”

“Superman, you’re cleared for initiation on your cue.”

“Well, here I go.”

<<“*You are Superman,*”

“*Not anymore.*”

“*Superman is more than just a suit, Clark.*”>>

“Impact in five...four...three...two...one.”

The footage went blank and Lois looked to Martha and Jonathan on either side of her, hoping for some reassurance as she shook her head in a desperate plea, “His microphone went out. He’s fine.”

“This is EPRAD control. We have lost transmission with Superman.”

“His microphone went out.”

<<“*The world is ending and I can’t even find the words to write the story. How ironic is that.*”

“*We don’t know that.*”

“*Yes, we do...I love you.*”>>

On the outskirts of town, a dim yellow light shone across the parking lot of an abandoned building. The signage held a worn out red print where the words ‘Fish Fry’ could be made out from the shadows. A dark figure pulled away and a low brim hat could be seen as the light moved across the parking lot.

John DeVane flicked his whiskers with his hand as he moved his shift gear into park, reaching across the seat to grab the metal briefcase next to him. He eyed the dark figure standing on the edge of the alley entry to his left as he closed the door to his truck.

“You with Luthor?”

A smile crossed the man’s face behind the dark shades and hat as he responded, “In a manner of speaking.”

The man removed his hat and stepped out of the shadows, revealing himself to Devane. “Mr. Luthor...”

Devane corrected himself, looking around suspiciously. “I heard you were on the run.”

“Not without my prized Excalibur,” Luthor responded with a gleam in his eyes. “I trust you had no issues with Mr. Trask.”

“Taken care of.” Devane responded. He nodded to Luthor, pointing to the briefcase in Luthor’s hands. “Is that my money?”

Lex nodded, opening the case in front of him, “Five million dollars.”

“The price just went up to ten.”

Lex’s eyes narrowed, “The price was five million.”

“That was before I had to take care of Bureau 39 for you, Mr. Luthor.” Devane smirked, “You don’t exactly look like you’re in a position to negotiate. I have buyers lined up for this. You want me to walk away, I’m sure I can find someone willing to bargain.” Devane sneered.

“Fine,” Lex stared at Devane coldly. “Ten million, but only if you do me one quick favor...”

“I’m the one making demands here, Mr. Luthor,” Devane warned.

“Not anymore you’re not.”

A sharp pain washed over Devane as he fell to the ground, falling face first into the gravel below him as blood poured out of his chest. He struggled to gather his thoughts, mumbling, “You double-crossing...”

“Uh, uh, uh, careful,” Lex warned, cocking the trigger. “Might want to save that breath.”

Several shots could be heard in the background as Devane heard the hard crunch of Luthor’s footsteps walking away. Then darkness fell over him as a loud boom filled the night lit sky.

EPRAD control room was filled with technicians zeroing in on Nightfall, The military personnel and government officials stood sidelined, watching the screen as they waited for the moment of truth. Would Superman be able to come through?

“I mean, this is something that everyone talks about... history in the making...I guess we’ll finally get to see what it was like for the dinosaurs...”

“Dan!”

“What?” Dan, one of the lead technicians looked at the other technician irritated.

“Look!”

They both looked at the screen in awe as they watched as the infamous man in red and blue began to spin in space, heading head first toward the asteroid. “History in the making...”

Alarms began blaring over and over as the intercom announced, “Mission trackers reporting an anomaly. Switching to backup computers for corroboration.” The

intercom announced, “Roger confirmation. Asteroid velocity and density is decreasing....”

“Superman did it! The asteroid seems to be reversing its course and.....losing its density....” Dan responded in his radio headset just before the screen went black. He tapped on his headset. “Mission Control, do you read me?”

The force of the contact he made with the asteroid caused the air tank to explode. He couldn’t breathe. He could feel his body weakening as he fell toward Earth. Everything around him felt like it was on fire.

A loud thumping above echoed and he let out a low growl. A hard blow crossed his face as the wind whipped through his hair. His head fell back as he stared down at the ground below him. It felt surreal. The world was opening itself up and swallowing him whole as another blow came across his face.

‘Where was he?’

The dimly lit sky fell to the back of his focus as he doubled over in pain, crashing into the ground below him with a bang.

A foot crunched in the distance, and he could hear it extraordinarily well.

‘Why could he hear everything so well?’

His hands gripped the cracked pavement below him, crumbling it in his hand.

‘That’s not normal.’

He looked down at the blue and red scraps of fabric that had fallen from his chest.

A hard crunch of footsteps inching toward him pulled his attention away and he looked up to see a man with a low rim hat and dark shades. He felt like he knew him but couldn’t place him.

“Well, well, well, how the mighty have fallen, hmm?”

His eyes twitched into a frown and he looked up at the man in confusion, “Who are you?”

A chuckle escaped the man’s throat and he smirked back, “Playing games, eh, Superman?”

“Who is Superman?”

Chapter 15

The whisper of the wind flowing through the streets caught Lex off guard. He peered out of the corner of the building he stood behind, watching as the man he had sought a great battle with seemed to be nothing but a shell of himself, staring back at him.

“Who is Superman?”

Those words were like a delicious symphony ringing in his ears as he gleefully stood inches away from his hated enemy, seeking the rightfully sought vengeance with every breath while at the same time wanting to savor the moment. Here he was, staring at the source of his troubled

future as if the fates had delivered him the greatest triumph with the delicious irony of Superman being rendered helpless at his hands.

It was too good to be true.

A slow smile slid across Lex Luthor’s face as he positioned himself against the cold brick building behind him, plotting his next move with careful precision. The red cape flew across the broad shoulders of the fallen hero and the chiseled muscles laid beneath his torn suit with a large gash across the front of the emblem that had been plastered across Metropolis and flown to draw out the hero.

“Who isSuperman?” Lex repeated the words in a slow drawn out question, piercing his enemy with his stare. “Why, you don’t remember me, do you?”

His enemy stared at him for a moment, trying to piece something that was just out of his reach. “I..”

Lex reached out a hand and patted him on the shoulder. “Not to worry.” A grin crossed his face. “I’m sure it will come back to you.”

PHENOMENA IN SPACE!

The headline for the Metro Gazette read.

SUPERMAN SAVES EARTH FROM DESTRUCTION! MIRACLE SAVE!

The headline for the Daily Planet read.

A flash of white light went off in the left-hand side of the room, capturing the image of the President of the United States as he addressed the nation. “The fear of what the world would face without Superman’s intervention crippled this nation. Nevertheless, we are a grateful nation as we prepare to recover from this shocking phenomenon and thank him for his infamous save...”

“Mr. President, has there been any word from Superman since his save last night?”

“At this time, all communication with Superman has been radio silence since impact.”

“Are you at all concerned, Mr. President?”

“Of course not, he’s Superman after all.”

“Of course not, he’s Superman after all.”

The LNN logo rolled across the screen and Lois looked away from the screen. The news coverage had played on repeat with the president’s speech and the footage of Superman’s last communication. The gut-wrenching pound of space rock before the deafening silence took over the footage had been played over and over again.

No change to the story.

No new revelations.

It was all the same.

No one knew where Superman was.

No one knew anything.

<< “*The world is ending and I can’t even find the words to write the story. How ironic is that.*”

“*We don’t know that.*”

“*Yes, we do...I love you.*” >>

“Superman is still nowhere to be seen as the nation grapples with the aftermath of the chaos from Nightfall. We are in shock tonight as over the last few days ...”

Lois jerked her arm, clicking angrily on the power button to turn the television off.

“Enough of this!” Lois let out a heavy sigh, reaching her hands up to stroke her forehead. She looked around the living room wearily. She had been pouring over news outlets updates for the last several hours, looking for any sign of a clue that Clark had returned. No unknown objects and no unknown persons had been reported. She had reached out to hospitals, police and every source she could think of but still had not heard a word on where Clark could be.

The longer she waited the more apprehensive she became.

Martha and Jonathan had reached out to Rachel Harris to see if anything suspicious had been seen in Smallville, but still no word back.

She had called in the story on the Nightfall rescue to Perry earlier who was piecing it together with comments from EPRAD and people Jimmy had talked to around Metropolis. The emotional ups and downs she’d felt over the last week should be considered an Olympic sport. Revelations and daunting fear of the unknown had her on edge as she struggled to make sense out of the reality she had been faced with.

Clark was missing. Superman was missing. After the number of feats she had seen him overcome, it unnerved her to think this asteroid could have been anything more than a blip on his radar. He had stopped bullets in his hands, flown a space shuttle into orbit and stopped fire with a simple whistle of his breath.

Why was this time different?

She stepped outside onto the balcony, looking up into the night sky as she wrapped her arms around herself. There was still no sign of him. It had been hours since the news media had picked up the coverage of his rescue.

Where was he?

General Zeitlin peered over the printouts that inched out of the machine, tracking the trajectory of the Nightfall asteroid. He tapped his chin with a stern grunt, frowning his brow as he followed the peaks until they all but disappeared.

The asteroid that had looming into the Earth’s orbit was well out of the stratosphere. He stared at the last signal of Superman’s heartbeat on the screen before the mechanical

devices built to help him breathe had burned up. It was a blip of life that had been erased from his reach despite every attempt to seek out the fallen hero.

They had searched high and low but been unable to track any sign of Superman.

Where could he have gone?

The cars on the street sped by, and a hand reached out to wave at them as they raced by. A long wipe of his hand against his face brushed the long locks from his face. Jack motioned to his younger brother Denny, glancing at the line beginning to form. His jaw clenched, outlining his youthful features among the dirt that covered his face. It was too cold to venture to the harbor for a decent wash-up before the church opened the line for the soup kitchen.

Scruffy and worn-down occupants of the local street began to make their way to the line of volunteers that had set up the serving line. Though he didn’t like to rub elbows too often with Metropolis’ homeless, he wanted to take advantage of any free meal he could. Especially when the wind turned the way it had over the last few nights.

“Jack?”

Denny clasped his hand, and Jack tugged him with him as they pushed their way into the line. A woman at the end of the table handed him a foil-wrapped sandwich that still felt warm to the touch. Jack handed the sandwich to his brother and reached out for another to take for himself.

“Hey, no pushing!”

Jack peered over his shoulder and spotted an older man in a dark hoodie and well-trimmed nails push his way forward, “Out of my way.”

“Great,” Denny grumbled with an awkward shrug, inching toward Jack as the other patrons were shoved forward as the intruder moved through the line.

“He’s new,” one of the older men near the back shrugged with a nervous laughter.

“Apparently,” Jack muttered under his breath as he guided Denny down the line.

Denny shook his head and whispered to Jack, “He doesn’t look homeless.”

“Shh...”

Slop.

It was the only way to describe the scraps that had been dished out to him. His exquisite tongue had tasted the most delicate dishes yet was resorted to the slop of streetwalkers and drunks that could barely hold a conversation. Lex held the lukewarm bowl as he passed it across to the dark-haired man in front of him.

“Here, eat up, and then we’ll be on our way.”

Lex looked around, keeping his face tucked tightly in his jacket as he watched the crowded room grow

increasingly cramped. So this was what his life had become. A man with more power than he knew what to do with and the third richest man in the world, now nothing but remnants of their former selves.

He had to start over, and he would. But first, he had to take control of Superman before he recovered and remembered who he was.

Denny peered over his shoulder, watching as the dark-haired man moved in the corner with another man who wore a trench coat that appeared to be two sizes too large for him. There was something about him that didn't sit right. He knew Jack wanted him to mind his business, but he just couldn't. There was something about the man that struck him as suspicious. He felt his heart hammer in his chest each time he saw him.

"Quit staring," Jack whispered in Denny's ear, tugging him away as he stood up, pulling him from their table.

"But..."

"Come on, it's none of our business."

Denny watched as the two men headed toward the exit, keeping their faces hidden from view with dark scarves and high collars. Whoever they were, they were up to no good.

Lois tapped her hand on the doorframe, offering a subtle knock as she looked across the open room. An elderly man swaggered back and forth over the pool table as he readied his shot with the pool stick. Lois waved her hand across her face, scanning the room for her source. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the familiar silhouette at the end of the bar.

"Lois Lane," he nodded with a smile as she took her seat next to him. "Long time..."

"You still working the docks, Bibbo?" Lois asked, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

"You know me, doll. Always workin'." He let out a chuckle.

"You mentioned you saw something on the pier?" Lois asked, getting down to business.

Bibbo pointed to the long line of warehouses along the bay, jabbing his finger as he illustrated for Lois, "Came out of nowhere with a red and blue explosion just before nightfall."

"Anything else?" Lois asked, following the direction of his rapid arm movements.

"Nah, it was gone as soon as it appeared." Bibbo shrugged, "Crazy, huh?"

"Maybe."

Jimmy Olsen tapped his hand on the doorframe of the editor's office. It was all he could do to hold it together, pointing to the folder in his hand. "Hey, Chief, got a sec?"

Perry swiped a hand across his face, letting his index finger linger across his chin. "Maybe," He looked down at the file in front of him, shaking his head. "Any updates on EPRAD?"

Jimmy shook his head, "Still dodging everyone's calls, Chief?"

"Superman still missing?" Perry mumbled the question aloud, knowing the answer already.

"No one's seen anything," Jimmy answered, glancing at the full cup of coffee that sat on Perry's desk untouched. He had been holed up in his office for most of the day, barely leaving for more than a holler for updates or running copy down to press.

"Of course not," Perry grumbled. "And our fearless leaders remain absolutely silent." He let out a gruff snort, "I don't suppose any of my fearless journalists have uncovered any leads on why EPRAD and every agency has nothing to say about Superman's absence after such a world-shattering rescue?"

"Ralph and Cat are still chasing down some leads. Lois and Clark are working on it as well." Jimmy responded, tapping the file in his hand. "I haven't heard anything yet, but I'm sure something will turn up."

"What have you got there?"

"Piece Lois sent over on Superman's rescue," Jimmy handed the folder to him.

Perry motioned for the door to be closed, flipping through the file in his hands. "We ready to run a story without all the answers and no way to corroborate the facts presented to us?"

"It's not like we can call up Superman to validate anything," Jimmy explained, closing the door behind him.

"How convenient," Perry muttered with raised eyebrows.

"So, you want to hold off on running the story?" Jimmy asked.

"Until we have all the facts." Perry continued, jabbing his hand at the papers in front of him. He reached his arms back and leaned back in his chair, taking a long sigh before he firmly responded. "I think it's time we took matters into our own hands." He pointed to the door, "Get your coat."

The headlights shone across the roadway as Perry White drove down the long alleyway leading to Hobb's Bay. Jimmy held his flashlight as he peered out the window, looking for a sign of his fallen hero.

Perry pointed to the crowd that stood on the sidewalk, "I covered some of the worst scenes you could imagine in

Beirut before the Marines showed up in '82, but it was never as bad as this."

"Lots of leads coming in, claiming to have seen something over here."

"Well, maybe if we can find someone that has seen Superman we can get some answers. EPRAD certainly isn't giving us anything." Perry let out a low chuckle, "You know, in '82 we were sure no one would ever see or hear from us again. Bob Kerns and I got caught in a free-fire zone. Shot our tires out..."

"You really think they're hiding something?" Jimmy asked.

"You live as long as me, son, and you learn never to trust silence." Perry shook his head. "They're too quiet."

"Hey!" Jimmy pointed to a waving light up ahead. "What's that?"

"I don't know," Perry peered ahead as he slowed to a stop, spotting the moving lights on the street. As he slowed down closer and closer, he recognized the holder of the light. Noting the large pit, she stood in the middle of. "Lois?"

"Perry?" Lois held a hand over her eyes, looking back at him in surprise.

"Darlin', what are you doing here?" Perry asked, putting the car in park and stepping out to meet her on the pit's edge.

He spotted a torn sign on the ground that read, *'The End is Near.'*

Jimmy followed behind Perry, walking up to Lois, standing in the middle of a crater-sized pit. "What is this?"

"I can't be sure, but it looks like a landing." Lois pointed to the space she stood in, shining a light across the crater's center.

"Like a meteor or something?" Jimmy wondered aloud.

"Or something." Lois held up the ripped remnants of Superman's emblem.

There it was. The proof of Superman's return was here.

"So, where is he?" Jimmy asked.

"That's the sixty-four-billion-dollar question," Perry murmured, looking across the darkened streets of Hobb's Bay.

Chapter 16

Disaster. That was the only way to describe the events that had transpired over the last few days. Gretchen Kelly turned the lock to the door, watching as the lights lit up to indicate the system was armed. After all her hard work it was a shame that LexCorp would be the Achilles heel in her plans. Lex had a weakness that had put not only his own company at risk but everything they had worked toward.

Developing the cutting-edge cures and vaccines for some of the most debilitating diseases and cultivating the knowledge that they had obtained from the Prometheus venture and from that which had been obtained by Nanosoft. All of this had been a mission to achieve greatness for both herself and LexCorp. Developing cures for cancer was too great a mission to be bothered by proper protocols. So many doors stood in her way but Lex had opened them.

Now, all of her work was at risk.

She looked over her shoulder to be sure she hadn't been noticed, stepping up the long steps leading out into the Perpetual Pines Cemetery. The hidden lab she had cultivated with Lex remained safe so long as the samples remained at their required temperatures. Power was key.

Lois gingerly fingered the remnants of the Superman insignia that she had found in the middle of the crater in Hobb's Bay. Every fiber of her being was crying out, demanding she tear the strip of warehouses up piece by piece to find Clark, but as much as she wanted to scour the pier for answers she knew it was fruitless without any direction.

She needed answers and somewhere to begin her investigation, but as of now the only witnesses she had were street bums and the old cathedral on the corner that seemed to be more of a halfway house than a lead. Still, she had to start somewhere.

Beverly Cox sipped on her glass of champagne, toying with the stem between her fingers. Tapping at the rim with her finger tips. She looked to her left where Asabi was seated in the private jet, looking out the passenger window.

With Lex on the run, it was only a matter of time before the authorities came looking for anyone they could to put pressure on to draw him out. She had been on the receiving end of their attempts once and would not put a target on herself again.

"What do you mean the footage is gone?"

Bill Henderson ran a ragged hand against his face, realizing the impending dark cloud that hung over him was growing with each passing moment.

Lex Luthor was gone.

Beverly Cox had disappeared.

Sheldon Bender was missing.

All of Lex Luthor's inner circle appeared to have up and vanished into thin air.

The evidence they had gathered either disappeared or had been destroyed. The conspiracy to absolve Lex Luthor of his crimes appeared to run deep within the department.

He had him. He had everything he needed and then just as quickly it had been yanked from him at the last second.

"It's gone, Bill." The ADA responded with a grim shake of his head. "Look, I have nothing I can go on. Your evidence and witnesses are gone. I can't do anything with no case."

"This is a terrible idea," Jack mumbled under his breath, following his brother toward the winding dirt road that led to the four-way-stop at the end of the pier. He looked behind him to make sure Denny was close by, eying the boarded-up businesses that were a remnant of their former selves from before the end of the world chaos.

"I'm telling you, that guy is in trouble." Denny insisted in a harsh whisper. "Come on, Jack, we've got to do the right thing."

Jack held back, watching as the dark haired man walked with what appeared to be a wounded man toward the Perpetual Pines Cemetery. He watched from the safe distance he was at as the dark haired man moved with a purpose, almost dragging the other man with him.

Denny was right.

Something wasn't right.

Red and blue lights lit up the pier as police poured over the scene. Perry stood amongst the crowd of Metropolis' finest and agents from EPRAD that had shown up when he and Jimmy had called in the site of Superman's landing.

All the questions came from every direction, but still no answers.

He glanced toward the small cathedral where Lois was standing with one of the agents. Hopefully something came out of this that would lead them to some answers.

Gone.

Lois gripped the notebook in her hand as she walked with Sister Mary Ann outside the Mission Street cathedral that was running a soup kitchen just outside of Hobb's Bay. Every fiber of her wanted to scream in frustration over finding Clark's burnt and torn emblem inside the crater with no sign of him anywhere.

He had vanished and she was desperate for answers.

"We heard the noise and saw the blast just before dinner was served but never saw anything," Sister Mary Ann explained as they walked out toward the pier which was now lit up with police cars and blinking red and blue lights.

"Anyone show up out of the ordinary?" Lois inquired, hoping to find some answers on where to begin searching for Clark.

"We have quite a few regulars but had a few new visitors tonight."

"Anyone in particular stand out?" Lois inquired.

"Normally, everyone stays for prayer and the cocoa but there were a few that didn't stay past dinner."

"Any idea where they disappeared to?"

Mary Ann's face scrunched up, pointing toward the four way stop that led away from the pier and toward the cemetery on the outskirts of Hobb's Bay. "Neither of them seemed to really fit the normal crowd. They came in for a few minutes and then disappeared."

"How many of them were there?"

"Two. A really tall guy that seemed out of it and another that looked like he was hiding from something."

"Okay, thank you for your time," Lois thanked her before heading out. Hopefully this was what she would need to find Clark.

Gretchen Kelly let a slow smile cross her face when she spotted the familiar figure walk toward her just on the outskirts of the cemetery. Even in his ragged appearance Lex had a distinguished veneer hidden beneath the ragged clothes he hid behind.

"Lex," Gretchen called out to him, pointing at the man behind him. "Who's your friend?"

"A new piece to the puzzle, Darling," Lex pointed to the man. "I believe this is where we will finally find some use for you."

The man looked blankly at Lex, confused as he looked around his unfamiliar surroundings. "Use?"

Lex nodded, pointing to the sky above. "It seems I have a need to get out of town and you're my ticket to freedom." He tugged the trench coat back, revealing the ripped superman suit on the man.

"Superman," Gretchen gasped in surprise, looking at Lex for answers as she immediately asked. "Is this how you were planning to get out of the country? Lex!"

"Why does everyone keep calling me that?"

"Wait, what?" Gretchen asked, putting the pieces together. "He doesn't know...."

"Enough with the games." Lex pointed upward, "time to fly, Superman."

"I'm not Superman."

"Lex, you may want to try a different tactic." Gretchen soothed.

"No need to be nervous. I'm sure we can cut a deal for you. A generous portion of profits in exchange for the use of your gifts. We are friends, after all, right?" Lex prodded him with a sneer. "Up we go."

"I...I can't fly."

"Perhaps you need some incentive..." Lex pulled out a gun from his back pocket, pointing it at Superman.

A flash of fear crossed Superman's face, but he still seemed unable to muster the ability to do what had once come naturally to him. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Lex, what do you expect this to do?" Gretchen asked just as the gun went off and she let out a yelp in surprise.

Jack slammed Denny to the ground, pressing him against the pavement when he heard the gunshot. Even from several feet away the loud boom echoed in his ears as Jack gingerly reached his hand out, holding a protective hand over his shoulder as he tentatively reached up to pry himself from the ground.

'This is a bad idea.'

"What was that?" Denny asked in a shaky whisper.

"Trouble." Jack whispered, pointing to the phone booth on the corner and handing Denny a few quarters. "I think it's safe to say we need to call for backup."

Denny nodded, shaking his head in agreement. He stumbled toward the payphone and Jack slowly walked toward the two figures in the cemetery, trying to get a good visual of what was going on.

As he reached behind one of the larger tombstones he found it was already occupied by a woman with dark hair, motioning for him to get down.

A forceful jerk of his arm left him no choice but to squat behind the tombstone with her and before he could ask for a name or what she was doing he received his answer.

"If you know what's good for you you'll stay here. There's some very dangerous people over there with Superman and no offense but I don't think you or your friend over there want to get mixed up in this."

"And you do?" Jack asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It's my job."

The radio chirped with a red light and General Zeitlin pressed the volume button to lower the audio so he could focus on surveying the scene. This was the first sign of Superman's arrival they had found in the last twenty-four hours. Though the threat of the Nightfall asteroid was gone, the answers the public was currently demanding regarding Superman remained a mystery. Superman was the hero of the people and had put it all on the line to save the world from imminent destruction; however, after impact there had been no sign of him.

He turned to the pedestrians that had found the proof of Superman's landing. Unfortunately, they were after as many answers as he was.

Lois hovered just outside the cemetery watching in horror as she inched closer to where Lex Luthor stood next to a woman in black. With him was Clark who appeared to

be out of his element as Lex continued to ramble about using him to get him out of the country.

Why he was so set on leaving with Clark she wasn't sure but it couldn't be good. She turned to the young man that was squatted down next to her, wondering briefly what could happen if he overheard something he shouldn't.

"Are we really going to continue this charade, Superman?" Lex stared back at Clark with a prompting look.

"I can't fly." Clark repeated.

"You *can* and you *will*."

"Even if what you're saying is true...I don't know how."

"Then I have no further use for you..."

Lois let out a yelp when she heard Clark cry out, falling to the ground. Sirens began to sound off in the distance and she stared back at the scene of Clark slumped over, wondering what her next move was. Move in and risk giving her presence away or stand back and risk Clark being hurt further than he obviously was.

There was only one thing she knew of that could hurt Clark.

If Lex had gotten his hands on it...

Before she could finish that thought the young man beside her bolted from behind the headstone and charged forward.

Lex and the woman with him quickly disappeared into the patch of trees behind the cemetery and she quickly followed, taking a deep breath as she steadied herself for what she would find.

"Ca- Superman!" Lois knelt down next to him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He blinked, wincing behind the pain as her fingertips touched the blood on his shoulder where he had been shot. She looked around, noting that there appeared to be no sign of the bullet or of poisonous meteorite.

"You're okay," she whispered, taking his hand in hers.

"Sounds like the police are on their way," the man behind her spoke up, pointing to Clark. "Is he okay?"

"Startled I think." Lois explained with a quick smile, holding back the fear she felt rushing through her.

He was bleeding.

Superman – Clark was bleeding.

The sound felt familiar as the metal hit the ground and he felt the world around him shift, a wave of emotion rushed through him.

He could feel everything all at once.

The fear of the impossible rescue.

The passion and protectiveness he felt for those he loved.

Lois.

His parents.
 Jimmy.
 Perry.
 <<“*Help! Somebody! There’s a bomb! Please! Oh, thank God! We’ve got to get the bomb squad down here and...*”
 “If you’ll excuse me, Ms. Lane,”
 “How did you know my name?”>>
 <<“*I don’t believe you’re supposed to be back here, Ms. Lane.*”
 “Well, I won’t tell if you won’t, Smallville.”>>
 <<“*Such a typical male response.*”
 “Lois, trust me on this. I am not your typical male.”>>
 <<“*I said nine. I thought you’d be ...naked...um, ready.*”>>
 <<“*Lois, come on, there’s no reason for Mr. White to reassign you.*”
 “Well, I have no lead on the E.P.R.A.D. story...”
 “You had a story.”
 “No, I didn’t.”
 “You killed your story.”
 “I did what I had to do.” >>
 The memories collided onto one another as Clark felt the strength course through him. The injury he sustained moments ago seemed to heal itself as he stared at the familiar face before him. Relief washed over him as he realized his rescue had been a success.
 Nightfall had been destroyed.
 Metropolis was safe.
 Earth was safe.
 Lois was safe.
 <<“*Isn’t this the part where red, blue, and yellow rushes in to save the day?*”
 “Red, blue, and yellow?”>>
 <<“*Do you always rush onto the scene where bombs are set to go off?*”
 “If that’s the story.”>>
 <<“*We?*”
 “If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a bully. And stopping a bully and exposing them to the world is what I do best. Come on, I’ve got to get this checked out, and we’ve got to find whoever’s behind this.”
 “There you go using that word again,”>>
 <<“*Still think putting your life at risk for a headline is worth it?*”
 “Rule number one, always get there first.”>>
 <<“*Us?*”
 “Well, it was a team assignment, I wouldn’t want to be accused of being unfair.”
 “No one could accuse you of being unfair, Lois.”>>
 <<“*I guess I owe you that exclusive.*”

“As long as you’re not planning on running with your tail between your legs back to Nebraska...”
 “Kansas.”
 “Midwest Nowheresville without a syndicated paper...”
 “They have newspapers...”>>
 His jaw tightened and he felt the relief wash through him.
 The world was whole.
 But Lex Luthor had gotten away.
 His mind quickly turned to panic as everything came back to him.
 What was it he had said?
 He wanted to leave the country.
 He needed to leave the country.
 Why?
 <<“*You can say it.*”
 “Say what?”
 “Repeat after me, ‘You’re right, Lois.’ Come on. You know you want to.”>>
 <<“*I thinkwe need...to slow down.*”
 “Why would we want to do that, Clarkie?”>>
 <<“*Lois, you’re not yourself. Something has changed, and...*”
 “I don’t need to be myself... I love you.”>>
 <<“*You are Superman,*”
 “Not anymore,”
 “Superman is more than just a suit, Clark.”>>
 <<“*The world is ending and I can’t even find the words to write the story. How ironic is that.*”
 “We don’t know that.”
 “Yes, we do...I love you.”>>
 “Superman?”
 Clark bit his lower-lip, standing up and gazing around him at the officers and agents that had poured out toward him. He scanned the woods behind him but his vision still wasn’t quite up to par.
 Luthor was running.
 He would be caught eventually.
 “You okay?” Lois asked, placing a hand on his shoulder.
 “Great,” he forced a smile, glancing at the young man behind her with a questioning gaze.
 He held his hand out, “Jack.” He introduced himself. “My brother was worried about you. Afraid you were in trouble.”
 “Thank you.” Clark nodded. “I was, but not anymore.”
 “Superman,” General Zeitlin called out to him, climbing up the hill to where he and Lois stood. “You are one hard man to track down.”
 “I apologize, General.” Clark shrugged sheepishly. “I wasn’t exactly myself when I landed.”

“Well, I’m glad to see you made it home safe.” General Zeitlin remarked, extending his hand to shake Clark’s.

“Glad to be here.” Clark said, shaking his hand.

“We’ll need to debrief and go over everything at EPRAD,” General Zeitlin remarked, offering a reassuring smile. “When you’re up for it of course.”

“I’ll come by in the morning, General.” Clark responded. “There are some things I need to catch up on.”

“Of course.”

The private helicopter landed on the roof of Luthor Airlines and Lex Luthor stepped out with Gretchen Kelly on his arm. He lit his cigar, taking in the fresh air. “We’ll need to regroup until things have settled down in Metropolis. I suggest a trip out to London for the time being...”

“I do enjoy Europe this time of year,” Gretchen Kelly grinned, leaning into him as they walked toward the awaiting plane.

The doors opened and Nigel St John stood at the entrance, gesturing for Lex to board, “I see you were able to gather your wits, sir.”

“Yes, Nigel, I always land on my feet.”

“Of course, sir,” Nigel responded with a broad smile. “Ready for take-off.”

“The future waits for no one.”

Three Weeks Later...

The city lights shone across the water below, Lois looked down, taking in the breathtaking view from Clark’s arms. She took in a sharp breath as they came in to land behind her apartment building. She kept a lookout while Clark quickly changed into his street clothes, returning to his suit and tie from earlier in the evening.

A shy grin crossed her face as she met his gaze, taking his hand in hers as they walked up the steps to her apartment building. It had been a long three weeks since Clark had rescued the world from Nightfall. Not only had the asteroid been destroyed but with it the case the police had been working on to put Lex Luthor away had fallen apart.

In the last few weeks she and Clark had been consumed with covering the political bloodbath that the DA and Police Chief had taken while Lex Luthor remained out of the limelight. No one knew where he had disappeared to, but his businesses continued to run smoothly. Clark was convinced there was more to the story, but as of right now it was a mystery of where Lex had disappeared to and what to expect from him.

They reached the top of the stairs where Lois’ apartment was and she turned to Clark with a shy smile, “Thanks for dinner. I had a good time.”

“Was there really any doubt?” Clark teased with a half-smile, reaching out to cup her cheek.

“Well, not everyone goes to a baseball game on the other side of the country because you want to try some hot dogs at Fenway Park field.”

“It was a *great* game.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hey, anybody can take you to dinner. But not everyone can take you to a game with a view from that high up and the best hot dogs in town.” Clark grinned proudly.

“If I didn’t know any better I’d say you were trying to show off.”

“What if I am?” Clark asked, leaning in so his breath tickled the nape of her neck.

A smile spread across her lips as she felt a tingle down her spine. She tilted her head, looking up at him and brushed her lips against his, craning her neck to meet his lips with hers.

Lex Luthor set the paper down as he turned to Nigel, reaching his hand out to lift the coffee mug to take a sip. “Before we were rudely interrupted by the Metropolis P.D. and their fruitless attempt to rake me over the coals, we were addressing the open issue of what Bureau 39 had uncovered.”

“Yes, Mr. Trask came across many beneficial items during his time of studying Superman and his landing.”

“Yes, intriguing,” Lex commented. “Superman’s ship found in 1966 – thirty years prior to arriving in Metropolis.”

“Perhaps he was in a vegetative stage of some sort? Frozen animation?” Nigel suggested.

“Not with the ship in Mr. Trask’s possession,” Lex responded coolly. “No, I believe the answer is much simpler, Nigel. Superman arrived here years ago. Why he waited this long to make his presence known is a mystery. But I shall soon find out.”

“Bureau 39 is completely dismantled,” Nigel reminded him.

“But fortunately, as a prime benefactor all files and possessions are within my reach.” Lex remarked, lighting up his cigar. “I believe it’s time we returned stateside. A visit to Washington is warranted, don’t you think?”

“And what about this Henderson at the Metropolis P.D.?” Nigel reminded him.

“I’m sure I can find him something to keep him occupied.” Lex pointed to the door behind him. “It’s time we get down to business.”

THE END