

# Rules of the Game

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Summary: In the next installment of the "Rules Series," Lois and Clark deal with a nosy Top Copy reporter who's determined to expose Superman's secret identity just as a secret witness is readied to testify against an Intergang assassin. (7 of 10)

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This story follows after "[Rules of Guilt](#)." View the [complete list of stories here](#).

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*Previously on Rules of Guilt...*

Lex Luthor stared at the darkened cell door in front of him, contemplating his next move. He'd heard of the recent prison escape by a few lowly criminals. How they hadn't anticipated getting caught in their plans was beyond his comprehension. Creating a new identity and establishing a way to avoid being caught should have been their first priority. Instead, their greed and ability to be controlled by the elusive Intergang made them fail before they'd even made it out the door. A mistake he himself knew all too well.

He had failed himself, and by association, he'd let down those that looked to him for guidance. Nigel and Gretchen were both still in the wind. He hadn't heard any updates from either of them on whether the money transfer had gone through before Bender had turned himself in.

Bender. There was another sore subject for him. His trusted attorney had stabbed him in the back in exchange for witness protection. His latest attorney, Barry Barker, was as ruthless as they came, but he lacked a certain class about him that Lex had enjoyed during his relationship with Sheldon Bender.

"Luthor!" The cranking of metal against metal grated on his nerves as he saw the cell door open. In the doorway one of the guards stood, waving his baton in his hands as he spoke. "You got a visitor."

Lex did his best not to react, standing to his feet and moving down the corridors as he had been told to. This was his life for now. The time would come when he could plan his escape from this hell, but until then he would have to play the good soldier and fall into line. His day would come though. He would reclaim everything that was once his...even Lois Lane. He'd made the misstep of making her think she had a choice in the matter. He wouldn't make the same mistake again. Next time she wouldn't see him coming. Next time Superman wouldn't be able to interfere. Next time was what kept him going.

The large metal door opened and he smiled, seeing the elderly gentleman sitting at the table. "Hello, old friend."

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***Nuclear Disaster Diverted!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

Lois looked over the front page of the Daily Planet with her and Clark's byline. Another front-page article for Lane and Kent. Shortly after breakfast this morning, Clark had gotten a call for help and had to leave. She hadn't even gotten herself a cup of coffee before she'd found herself lost in thought again. Four words. Four simple words that held so much meaning.

<<"Will you marry me?">>

<<"What?">>

"Nothing. Just admiring the view."

"I think you're looking in the wrong direction, Farmboy."

"No, I'm not.">>

<<"I know we've had our ups and downs these past months, but I want you to know how much I love you...how much I need you. Every day I wake up, and I still can't believe how lucky I am to have you in my life.">>

"Looks like another Kerth win to me," Perry said, peering over her shoulder.

"Or two," she said, pointing to the article on Stanley Gables' arrest. "I still can't believe he thought Mayson would cut a deal with him."

Perry nodded, shaking his head. "I'd give my set of gold-plated Elvis spoons to know what makes a guy like Gables tick."

Lois sighed, running a hand through her hair. "That's the way it is today. Everybody sees themselves as a victim."

"How's Mayson doing?" Perry asked, looking at her in concern.

"Fine. Glad the DA's office isn't pursuing a deal with Gables." She flashed him a smile.

"I'll say," Clark said, walking up behind her and setting a cup of coffee in front of her. "Morning."

She flashed him a smile, taking the cup from him gratefully. "Morning." She took a sip of her coffee, looking up at him over the rim of her mug.

"Kent?" Perry checked his watch. "A little late to be rolling in. It's nearly ten."

"Yeah, I had a—"

Before he could come up with another lame excuse she knew he was wracking his brain for, Lois interjected, "Well, he had a last-minute interview this morning with, uh, Bobby Bigmouth. We're trying to see about picking up where we left off last week on our investigation into Nigel St. John."

"Uh-huh," Perry noted, looking between the two of them before clearing his throat. "Any, uh, leads?"

"We might have a few," Clark said, placing a hand on her shoulder as he spoke.

"Well, good." Perry nodded.

"Chief, publisher's on line one!" Jimmy called from his desk, holding the phone away from his ear.

Perry grunted. "Oh, what now?" He moved past them and headed into his office to take the call.

Lois laughed, shaking her head. "Never a dull moment around here."

"Yeah." Clark smiled at her.

"So, how did everything go?" she asked, pointing to the monitor that showed Superman holding up two bank robbers and floating them back to the ground.

"Nothing too bad," he said, perching himself on the edge of her desk. He gestured to the newspaper in front of her. "Admiring your handiwork?"

"Our handiwork," she corrected. "Perry thinks this one will bring in another Kerth next year."

"Yeah, but whose name is going to go first?" he teased.

"Mine of course." She grinned back at him, recalling the conversation they'd had so long ago after his departure during the heatwave last year.

"Of course." He chuckled, sharing a look with her. She felt her stomach flutter as she stared back at him. So much had happened in the last forty-eight hours since their return from Hawaii.

His proposal still weighed heavily on her mind—even more so after seeing him shot down in cold blood by Ryan Wiley. Every day he put himself at risk. More and more people were discovering the existence of Kryptonite which put him in more danger. Was that something she could live with? Knowing that every rescue he went on, he might not come back?

She fingered the end of his tie and smiled up at him. "So, I was thinking..." she began cautiously as he leaned toward her. "Maybe if we don't have any disasters pop up we can pick up that

conversation we left off on the other night.”

A smile crossed his lips, and he murmured, “Of course, I would love that.”

“Hey guys.” The intrusion of Dan Scardino pulled them apart.

She sighed, tucking a strand of hair that had fallen across her face back behind her ear. “Agent Scardino, shouldn’t you be on a plane?”

“Yeah, funny thing.” Scardino said, pulling a chair up as he held one of the crutches in his hand. “My boss in Washington was so impressed with my work yesterday he’s decided to push through a transfer to Metropolis.”

“Transfer?” Lois could see Clark’s face crestfallen as he stared at the DEA agent. She knew Clark didn’t like Dan Scardino, but the man had saved Superman yesterday, so maybe he wasn’t all bad. “Well, I hope you like excitement cuz there’s never a dull moment.”

“Sounds like it’ll be right up my alley.” Scardino flashed her a smile. “I’ve gotta go check in, but I thought I’d share the good news with you two. I’m sure our paths will cross from time to time.”

“Great.” Clark forced a smile and Lois reached over to place a supportive hand on his arm. Dan Scardino grabbed his crutches and began hobbling back to the elevators. Clark groaned. “We were so close.”

“Maybe we won’t have to work with him that much.” Lois reasoned.

He glanced at her, grabbing the stack of files on her folder. “Are you forgetting the follow-up we have to do on the resurrection pill?”

“Oh yeah.” Her face fell.

“Everyone gather around, I’ve got an announcement to make,” Perry announced, waving a piece of paper in his hands. The newsroom quieted down, and they turned to Perry. “Now as you all know we’ve had quite a bit of success this past year. Our subscriptions are up forty-five percent from last year. That’s fifteen percent higher than the Metropolis Star mind you.”

“Is there a point to all this?” Kathy interjected. “We heard these numbers last week.”

“Yes, there is a point,” Perry said, waving the paper in his hand. “All of the stories and hard work pay off when we have one of our own recognized for their hard work.”

Lois’ eyes widened when she saw the blue paper in Perry’s hand. The blue paper with the familiar lettering for the prestigious Meriwether Award.

“The candidates for this year’s Meriwether Award for Journalistic Excellence have just been released, and the Daily Planet’s very own Lois Lane and Clark Kent are among the nominees.” He looked to Lois and Clark with a twinkle in his eye. “Congratulations you two.”

A light applause filled the room, and Jimmy walked up to them cheering, “Congrats you guys! I’m sure you’ll knock ‘em dead.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Lois said, doing her best not to appear overly excited. After all, last year they’d been nominated but never made it past the final vote.

“Top notch writing you two.” Perry praised them as the crowd of congratulating colleagues dispersed. “The committee would have to be out of their minds not to give you the nod.”

“Thanks, Perry,” Clark said, taking the extended hand Perry had offered to shake.

Perry patted him on the shoulder then moved on. “Jimmy, where are those photos from this morning’s robbery?”

“Right here, Chief!” Jimmy held up the 8x10s in his hands for him to see.

“Bring them in my office and let me have a look.” Perry waved for him to follow.

Lois swiveled in her chair, turning to face Clark. “So second time’s a charm?”

“Maybe so.” He smiled, running a hand down her jawline. She stared back at him, feeling her stomach do somersaults as she stared back at him.

<< “A date?”

“Several.”

“What makes you think I would want more than one date? What if it ends badly.”

“Not possible. We’ve already spent the last two hours proving how very right the end of any date would be.”

“Aren’t we full of ourselves?”

“Very.”

“Okay. After all, this mess is cleared up .... A date.”

“Several.”

“Whatever.”>>

<< “Just think about it, okay?”>>

< “If Clark makes you happy then take a leap of faith.”>>

<< “So talk to him.”>>

<< “Are you really going to let a great guy slip away because of how screwed up our parents are?”>>

“Clark?” She fingered the end of his tie.

“Yeah?” He looked back at her, and she could feel it hit her like a wave. Every doubt and fear that continued to plague her. Every relationship that had failed and hardened her as she had closed herself off from the rest of the world.

“I love you, you know that, right?” She managed to say weakly.

“Yeah.” He smiled, cupping her cheek. “I love you too.”

She smiled back at him, mentally badgering herself for not being able to say what was weighing on her mind. “So, a Meriweather nomination. That gives us two weeks to show them why we’re the best. Think we can track down Nigel in that time?”

“We can give it our best shot.” He grinned, leaning in to kiss her.

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### Teaser

The large metal door opened and Lex smiled, seeing the elderly gentleman sitting at the table. “Hello, old friend.”

Nigel St. John adjusted his collar, looking at his former employer, now reduced to a common inmate in the Metropolis Penitentiary. “I see you’re doing as always, sir.”

“Did it work?” Lex asked, looking at him expectantly.

“Like a charm,” Nigel sneered, setting a single blue capsule on the table, and watching the window as the guards paced outside back and forth. “Intergang now has an enormous target on its back. I got what I could before they turned on me, but that’s to be expected. We never anticipated Mr. Church would let the wool be pulled over his eyes for long.”

“Get out when you can,” Lex mused, pocketing the blue capsule before it could be noticed. “What about Bender? That worm has disappeared off the radar.”

“We haven’t been able to reason with him just yet,” Nigel said with a sinister expression, trying to decide whether to divulge everything they had on Sheldon Bender or hold onto the information he had for later. “We’re moving into the next stage. Zurich has been very forthcoming in the adjustments that needed to be made to accommodate LexCorp’s needs.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Lex grinned happily.

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*Two Weeks Later...*

Lois Lane finished putting the last dab of perfume on her wrist before checking her reflection in the mirror. For the first time in two weeks, she and Clark had both been able to leave the Planet at a decent time. They had yet to pick up on their conversation from a few weeks ago, given that Superman duty seemed to have multiplied recently. Every time there seemed to be any lull, either Superman was needed or a story would break. She sighed, running a hand through her curled hair. Hopefully with the warrant for Nigel St. John being issued they’d be able to get some time

together without Perry or Jimmy interrupting every five seconds.

It had been two weeks since they had rounded up the resurrected criminals and stopped them from stealing a truck full of nuclear warheads from the military. They had spent most of the last two weeks digging back in to their investigation of Nigel St. John and trying to track him down, and helping Clark's friend Chen. After Perry had been robbed, they'd traced the robber to China Town, which led them to an expose on Son Kwan Industries and Harlan Black.

She ran a hand down her side, smoothing out the creases in her wine-colored dress. She had picked out a few dresses in hopes that their Merriweather nomination would turn into an actual award. They would find out tomorrow evening if they were on the shortlist. After eliminating a few choices, the current minidress she wore had been selected as a date night option. It came down to her knees and had a halter neckline with a keyhole design in the back just above her shoulders.

She glanced at the clock. It was almost six. Hopefully, Clark's patrol around the city wouldn't take too much longer. Tonight was about celebrating the big win. They were a little closer to having the rest of Lex Luthor's team of thugs behind bars where they belonged. Dr. Gretchen Kelly remained in the wind, but Lois was sure sooner or later she would show up.

She'd gone back and forth over the last few weeks, internally weighing the good and the bad in regards to Clark's proposal. She still hadn't come to a decision. She knew she loved him, but she also knew there was a lot she needed to work through to even determine if she was ready for marriage. Clark had been true to his word though. He hadn't brought up the proposal since they'd left the island with the exception of reassuring her that he would wait for her answer when she was ready.

<<“If Clark makes you happy then take a leap of faith.”>>

Her sister's wise words had stayed with her for the last few weeks as she tried to work through everything. The question wasn't whether she loved Clark, but rather if she could see herself with him forever. Given her history, that question always brought up the pain from her past -- mostly her parents' divorce. The idea of putting her own potential children through that pain was unbearable. Family and permanence weren't something she could rely on growing up. The only person she could rely on completely was herself... until she met Clark.

<<“You leave us and your family and your entire career as a brilliant surgeon for what?”>>

<<“You think you know him? I thought I knew your father. He was a brilliant surgeon. I was his loyal nurse. We had it all! But that wasn't enough. It was never enough for him. You'll see... Sometimes love isn't enough.”>>

<<“Are you really going to let a great guy slip away because of how screwed up our parents are?”>>

A knock at the door pulled her attention back to the present. She glanced at the clock, seeing it was a few minutes after six and still no sign of Clark. Curious, she went to the door and opened it, finding her missing boyfriend standing in the doorway. “Forget your key?” she asked, hanging on the door with a sly grin, letting her eyes linger on him. He was dressed in a charcoal suit with a black dress shirt.

“Nope.” He pulled out a small bouquet of red roses from behind his back.

“Oh, they're beautiful,” she cheered happily, opening the door for him.

“You look... *incredible*,” he complimented, pulling her to him.

“Well, it is a date, right?” She ran a hand over his chest and leaned in to kiss him.

“Yeah, but... *wow*.” His eyes wandered up and down her with a mesmerized expression on his face as he held her in his arms.

“Too much?” she asked, looking down at her dress self-consciously.

“No, no, you look absolutely stunning,” he grinned, running

his hand up her back.

She glanced at the bag in his hand, spotting a bottle of wine poking out, “What's the bag for?”

“Well, I thought maybe a change of pace was needed, considering it's been two weeks since either of us has had any downtime,” he said, closing the door behind him.

“You're telling me,” she said, running a hand through her hair. “It's starting to feel like a conspiracy. Every time we make plans some disaster happens...”

“...or a story breaks...” he added with a wry expression.

“I still don't know how Bobby got my cell number,” Lois added ruefully.

“...or someone falls out of a burning building,” he finished with a tired expression.

“Burning building?” she asked, looking at him in concern.

“Yeah, right when I was leaving I picked up a distress call on Fourth Avenue. The new set of condos that just opened up last month caught on fire,” he said, walking toward the kitchen and setting the bag down on the counter. “You won't believe who decided to jump off the roof.”

“Who?” she asked, watching him unload a bottle of wine with some vegetables and cheeses it looked like he'd picked up at one of the foreign markets where he liked to shop.

“Diana Stride,” he said, pulling out a bushel of berries and a block of chocolate.

“The *Top Copy* reporter?” Lois frowned, “I didn't even think she lived in the city.”

“Apparently she moved into the new condos,” he said, pulling two long-stemmed candles out of the bag along with a pair of copper candlestick holders.

“Is everyone all right?”

“I think so,” he nodded, “The fire marshal was inspecting the building when I left.”

“So, what's all this?” she asked with a grin.

“I promised a romantic evening and I plan to deliver, but the idea of trying to spend time together in a probably-crowded restaurant was losing its appeal more and more.” He set the two candles up on the table and lit them. “So, give me ten minutes and I'll have a dinner and dessert ready that'll knock your socks off.”

“That's some pretty big talking for someone who's never cooked with the Recipe Killer before,” she shot back with a grin.

“Recipe killer?” he asked in surprise.

“The oven.” She pointed to her oven with a shake of her head. “Recipes go in and come out charcoaled.”

“I think I can manage,” he said with a wry grin.

“We'll see,” she beamed back at him, taking a bite of the strawberries he had laid out on the counter.

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Ellen Lane tapped her foot impatiently while waiting in line at the Metro Hotel. Ever since it had been bought out, the place had lost a lot of its luster. The towels were cheap. The decor was tacky. The management left a lot to be desired, but it was the only hotel in the area that had a vacancy.

“Thank you, and enjoy your stay, Mr. Little,” the clerk at the front desk said as the man in front of her moved on with his luggage. “May I help the next guest?”

Ellen hurriedly moved to the counter to cut off one of the other women from her floor who was trying to cut in line. The nerve of that Betty Roland. Just because she married into money didn't mean the rules didn't apply to her.

“Yes, I'd like a room. Queen bed without the balcony. The smell that comes in from the city is atrocious and aggravates my sinuses,” Ellen began to ramble, pulling her identification cards from her purse as she spoke.

The clerk typed in a few keys in her computer and frowned, “I'm afraid we don't have anything available.”

“Okay, I can live with the balcony, but I...”

“Well, that's not the problem. We only have our executive and

honeymoon suites available. Between the fire and the Meriwether awards being hosted here we're..."

"All booked up. Yes, I know. I've heard that line from *five* different hotels now. I was told you had a vacancy..."

"I can get you a discounted rate on the Honeymoon Suite," the clerk suggested, trying to be helpful.

"Hell will freeze over before I step foot into one of *those* again," Ellen snapped angrily, grabbing her identification cards and shoving them in her purse.

"I'm really sorry, ma'am," the clerk apologized.

"Yes, I'm sure you are," Ellen grumbled, turning on her heel and storming out the door.

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Lois set her fork down, smiling broadly at Clark, "I'm impressed, Mr. Kent. Dinner from the Recipe Killer."

"It just needed to be calibrated," he pointed out, leaning in to kiss her. "Now you don't have an excuse to blame your culinary skills on."

She swatted him with the napkin in her hand. "Not funny."

"I beg to differ," he murmured, leaning in to kiss her. His hand moved to cup her cheek and she let out a soft moan of approval.

"Thank you for cooking for me," she whispered against him.

"I hope you saved room for dessert." He disappeared in a blur and reappeared in front of her with a tray of chocolate-covered berries.

She giggled, "Do you have to do everything that fast?"

"No," he grinned, "but it is really fun."

She smirked at him, standing up from the table, "I think dessert's going to have to wait. At this rate, you'll have to cut me out of this dress." She reached over to grab a plate and he stood up, pulling her to him.

"Hey." He wrapped his arms around her from behind, brushing his lips against the nape of her neck.

"Hey, yourself," she grinned back at him, enjoying the feeling of his hands running up and down her sides.

"Leave them. We can clean up later," he whispered in her ear, nibbling at her earlobe with his teeth as his hands roamed up and down her sides.

"Are you sure?" she asked, "I mean you did do all the cooking and..." She glanced back at the clock, "It'll only take a minute."

"Why do you keep looking at the clock?" he asked, running his palms up her side as he nibbled at her earlobe.

"It's been two hours and there hasn't been an interruption. I wanted to make sure we weren't stuck in some weird time loop," she teased.

"Time loop?" He wrinkled his nose at her as he tightened his arms around her. He leaned in, feathering his lips against hers as his arms hung around her waist while they made their way to the couch. His arms tightened around her as they settled on the cushions together, not losing contact with one another for a second.

Each kiss brushed against her as she tried to focus on the conversation they were having while feeling her skin tingle from his touch. "You know where time is just kinda stuck and you keep repeating the same day over and over again?" she said breathlessly as his body pressed against hers.

"If I had to pick a day to repeat, today is a really good day," he murmured, running his lips against the nape of her neck, and she sighed against him. "I love you," he murmured, moving his attention down her throat. Lois extended her leg, running it against his calf.

"I love you too," she whispered breathlessly, feeling the heat from his kisses begin to overtake her. She could feel a familiar tightness in her abdomen as his hands moved up her sides suggestively. "Oh, Clark," she traced the length of his tie with her index finger, pulling him to her as she tugged on his tie, wrapping the silk tie around her hand as she moved up toward the knot of his tie to loosen it. She was surprised to see his eyes darken with

desire.

"I love you, Lois Lane," he murmured against her earlobe.

"I love you, Clark," she murmured against his lips, pressing him back against the couch. She slid her other leg to the other side of his leg so she was hovering above his lap, supporting herself on her knees. She let out a soft murmur as he moved his attention to her collarbone, pulling her to him so she was settled on his lap comfortably. They never did pick up on that conversation from a few weeks ago, but right now she didn't care.

He nibbled at her earlobe with his teeth as his hands roamed up and down her sides, bunching her dress up on the sides. She let out a soft moan, running her palms up and down his chest seductively. "Clark..." She ran her right hand through his hair, fingering the back of his neck with her hand. "What is that?" she murmured against his lips.

"What is what?" he mumbled breathlessly as she pulled away, craning her neck to look at the back of his head.

"It looks like..." she crinkled her nose, seeing a white residue, when she heard a hard knock at her door. "Oh, for the love of..." she let out a muffled groan, pulling herself off his lap. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back." She leaned in to kiss him before jumping up from the couch and darting to the door to answer it at record-breaking speed.

Two weeks of nothing but interruptions. They planned to catch a movie and Perry got robbed. They planned to have dinner and the story broke on the human trafficking in Son Kwan Industries. They planned a romantic evening for just the two of them, and Chen -- Clark's friend at the China Town Daily -- ended up kidnapped. Now, after breaking the scandal of Harlan Black's connection to Son Kwan Industries, they still couldn't get a quiet evening alone.

"I'm coming already!" she called, unlocking the seven deadbolts on her door. She sighed in relief when she found the last lock and opened it, "Mother!"

"Well, don't just stand there. Do you have any idea how cold it is outside?" Ellen gave her a disapproving look, staring at her dress.

"Yes, I'm well aware, but I'm not going anywhere and..." Lois stopped when she saw the bag in her mother's hands. "Why do you have a bag?" She felt a cold breeze against her back and turned to see Clark had cleaned up the dishes from dinner and dessert and stood by the couch readjusting his tie.

"Some idiot set fire to my new condo and they've kicked everyone out while they're investigating," her mother explained with a bite in her tone. "I went to five different hotels and no one has any rooms, so here I am."

"Oh," Lois said, feeling the plans she'd had for a romantic evening with Clark slipping away by the second.

"Hi Clark," Ellen nodded to him, seeming to finally realize Lois had company.

"Hi," Clark gave a polite wave, but Lois could tell from the expression on his face that he was just as disappointed as she was.

"Did they say how long it was going to take them to investigate?" Lois asked, trying not to sound too put off at the idea of her mother staying with her. After all, it wasn't her fault that her condo building was set on fire.

"No, no, no," Ellen took a seat on the couch. "I'm hoping it'll be before the end of the week though."

"End of the week?" Lois practically choked out.

"Yes," Ellen spotted the tray of berries Clark had moved to the coffee table and grabbed one. "Mmm, these are divine. Where did you get these?"

"Uh, Clark made them," Lois said half-heartedly, walking toward the couch.

"Really?" her mother's eyes widened. "Absolute perfection." She wagged her finger at Lois, "You know, finding a man who's willing to cook for you is rare. Your father never once came in to the kitchen for anything other than a glass of scotch. Even the

plumbing repairs had to be done by a professional.”

“Yes, well...” Lois began to cut her off, knowing full well what was coming next. Clark remained quiet, choosing to let her mother ramble to get it off her chest.

“I’m telling you, you don’t know how good you have it. Why, in my day, a woman couldn’t be single and have a career like you do. You had to settle down, and you know, you and your sister are not getting any younger. At least your choices have improved somewhat, but your sister’s? Oh, don’t even get me started on that last boyfriend of hers. You know your choices get slimmer and slimmer as you get older,” Ellen rambled on and on. “Not that I don’t think you’re a good choice, Clark,” Ellen began to backtrack, “I just mean being young and single is nice and fine when you’re twenty, but as you get older it’s not as...” She took another bite of the chocolate-covered berries. “How in the world did you find fruit this fresh in Metropolis?”

“Uh, a little out-of-the-way market I know,” Clark supplied quickly.

Another knock at the door pulled Lois’ attention away from her mother’s conversation with Clark about the freshness of fruit. She opened the door and found her sister on the other side with several bags in hand. “Lucy...”

“I got kicked out and I know the timing is horrible and I’m sorry but I tried calling mom and dad and no one’s answering their phones. I know you said not to call or anything tonight but...” Lucy rambled with a sob. “Can I stay here?”

“Uh,” Lois opened the door the rest of the way for her sister to come in, “Come on in.”

“What happened?” Ellen asked, pouncing to her feet and moving to where Lucy was standing in tears.

“Mom?” Lucy wiped the tears from her face, trying to compose herself.

Clark walked up behind Lois and whispered, “I think that means our date is over.”

“I’m sorry,” she gave him a pleading look.

“It’s okay,” he leaned in to kiss her. “I’ve got to do a patrol tonight anyway.” He cracked a smile, “Raincheck?”

“Don’t think I won’t collect. We’ve racked up quite a debt,” she teased.

“I know,” he brushed his lips against hers once more.

“What do you mean you got kicked out?!” Ellen’s voice raised a few octaves.

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Diana Stride sat in her limo, sipping a glass of champagne as she watched the chaos of residents grabbing what they could and walking up and down the streets. Rolf, her cameraman, sat across from her with his own glass. “You’re sure you tagged him?”

“On the neck,” she said, pointing to the tracking device in his hand. “Are you getting a reading yet?”

“Not yet,” Rolf frowned, looking down at the screen in front of him. “Wait, I’ve got something!”

“What is it?” Diana asked.

“He’s flown out of range,” Rolf frowned.

“We’ll get him in range again. And then it’s just a matter of time before we have... Superman the exclusive!” She took a sip of her champagne and cheered. “Let’s get out of here.”

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## Chapter 1

“Morning,” Clark said, pouring himself a cup of coffee. A smile spread across his face when he saw the spread his mom had laid out. No more charcoal-briquette bacon, thankfully. Two days of his dad taking on mom’s to-do list had left him thankful for his stomach of steel. Though he could easily whip up breakfast on his own, insulting his dad’s cooking wasn’t something he could do either. So for the last two mornings, he had choked down the grainy coffee, burnt toast and soupy grits his dad had made -- thankful that the wager was only for two days.

“Morning, son,” his dad gave a good-natured chuckle, “As

you can see, the bet is over. I’m sure everyone’s relieved I’m no longer in charge of breakfast.”

Clark smirked, uncertain how to respond. Thankfully, his mom chose to change the subject. “You got in pretty late. We saw the fire. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just a long night is all,” he said, not looking up from his plate, where he’d made a breakfast sandwich from the eggs and bacon his mom had whipped up. He reached up to scratch his neck, still feeling the uncomfortable tightness back there from last night. Truth be told it had been unusually quiet last night. He’d been hoping for something -- anything to keep his mind off how out of control things had gotten at Lois’ before they’d been interrupted. After his patrol, he’d spent two hours swimming laps in the Arctic. The closer they became, the harder it was to maintain control over himself when he was around her. The flirting, the kissing, and the touching -- Oh, the touching... It was enough to drive him insane.

Though his experience was limited, he had had a few serious relationships before Lois, but none of those relationships had tested his patience the way Lois had. Everything with Lois had been different. Unlike his past relationships, he could be himself -- the real Clark Kent -- without having to hide anything. Being that vulnerable and exposed, especially after his proposal, made it harder for both of them to not push the boundaries on the physical side of their relationship. He’d been tempted many times before, but his rationale had always been that he couldn’t have a physical relationship with someone that didn’t know him -- all of him. Lois knew him completely.

The bad timing of Mayson’s shooting and the arrival of the irritating DEA Agent, Dan Scardino, in their lives had put a damper on any conversations about his proposal. After having every date or plan they’d made over the last two weeks ruined, he’d gone out of his way to make sure nothing interrupted them last night. He just hadn’t considered the fact that that there were some things completely out of his and Lois’ control. Ellen and Lucy showing up had killed any chance of resuming their date. It seemed like it would take an act of God to get some time alone with Lois these days.

“The news said the police closed the block the fire was on,” Jonathan said, shaking his head. “Do they know how it started?”

“No, the fire inspector was still looking things over when I left,” Clark sighed. “One of the condos that burnt up was actually Lois’ mother’s.”

“Oh, no, that’s awful,” his mom shook her head, taking a sip of her coffee.

“Yeah, and thanks to the medical conference going on this week and Metropolis hosting the Meriwether luncheon, there are no hotel rooms, so she’s going to be staying with Lois for awhile,” Clark explained, trying to hide the disappointment in his voice.

His mom and dad exchanged a look before his mom gave him a mischievous look and asked, “So, how was dinner with Lois?”

“It was...” Clark said, unable to wipe the grin off his face. He looked back down at his plate, picking up the sandwich and taking the last bite to keep from answering. He really didn’t want to have this conversation right now. He reached on the back of his neck to scratch it again. He’d showered repeatedly and still, the itching persisted.

“That good, huh?” Martha teased with a knowing look. “You did get back from your patrol pretty late.”

Clark felt the back of his neck flush as he recalled last night with Lois in vivid detail. “Oh, Martha, leave the boy alone,” his dad interjected, saving him from his mom’s teasing.

“I should get going. Perry’s going to want Lois and me there early for Mr. Stern’s announcement,” Clark said hurriedly, standing up and carrying his dishes to the sink to wash them. “Thanks for breakfast, mom.”

“Uh-huh,” his mom grinned mischievously.

“Bye,” he called over his shoulder, grabbing his suit jacket and

heading out the door before he could be bombarded with another round of questions.

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“Morning,” Lois grumbled sleepily, taking a sip of her coffee as she maneuvered around her sister in the kitchen. Between the ruined evening with Clark and the bickering between Lucy and her mother, she’d barely been able to get more than four hours of sleep last night. They’d spent at least three hours straight arguing through the guest room walls.

“You okay?” Lucy looked at her in concern. “You look like you’ve been hit by a truck. No offense.”

“Gee, thanks,” Lois gave her a wry expression, grabbing a piece of toast from the toaster and spreading some jam on it. Perry had told both her and Clark to be at the Planet half an hour before their normal time, so between the early wake-up and the chaos from last night she was exhausted. “I just have a lot on my mind, is all.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” Lucy smiled at her, setting her coffee mug down. “So, have you thought about it yet?” she edged cautiously.

“Thought about what?” Lois asked innocently, knowing full well what she was referring to.

“You know what,” Lucy countered, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, but I’m still thinking about it,” Lois said in a harsh whisper. “And I haven’t told mom so if you don’t mind...” She made a zip motion over her mouth with her hand and Lucy laughed.

“You know he’s head over heels in love with you,” Lucy teased happily.

“It’s not about love,” Lois began cautiously.

“Since when is marriage not about love?” Lucy practically choked.

“I’m done talking about it right now,” Lois cut her off, shaking her head. “I have to meet Clark at the Planet.” She grabbed her bag, thankful for the escape.

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Mayson looked around the heavily guarded cabin wearily, taking a sip of her latte as she climbed the steps. “Don’t you think the Humvee out front is a bit much?” she asked. “Not exactly blending in.”

“We’ve got round the clock surveillance,” DA Michael Clemmons said, motioning for her to follow. “Now, this is one of the biggest cases for us. I need my best people on it. Are you up for it, Ms. Drake?”

“I’m ready. I’ve been working the Intergang angle since I arrived in Metropolis, sir.” Mayson reminded him. “This is the first big break we’ve had. Whatever you need.”

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Clark looked around the dimly lit walls of the lobby. Mike was just setting the newsstand up with the latest copy of the Daily Planet and newly printed magazines for the week. “Morning, Mike,” he said, laying a dollar on the counter. “Coffee brewing yet?”

“I just started a pot,” Mike said, pointing to the pot behind him. “The usual?”

“Yeah,” Clark flashed him a smile.

“A bit early for you to be in,” Mike observed, grabbing two to-go coffee cups by the stand as the last of the coffee dripped into the pot.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Clark said wryly. “Lois and I are supposed to go over some stuff this morning with Perry.”

“Boy, you two never stop, do you?” Mike asked, pouring the coffee into the cups and stirring in the appropriate creamer and sugar and low-fat cream and low-fat sugar in the other. He placed two to-go lids on the cups and handed them to Clark. “Here you go.”

“Thanks, Mike.”

“Oh, it’s way too early in the morning for this,” Lois complained behind him.

He smiled, turning to hand her her cup, “Here, maybe this will help.”

“*Ohhh*, you’re a lifesaver,” she said, holding the cup with both hands as she took a long sip, savoring the smell and taste for a moment before meeting his gaze. “Morning,” she smiled at him.

“Morning,” he whispered, allowing his eyes to linger on hers for what felt like an eternity.

“Quiet in here,” Lois observed, running a hand over his chest briefly before pulling away and heading to the elevator.

He followed behind her, clearing his throat. “Yeah, it’s less busy for sure.”

“So, how was everything?” She gave a flying motion with her hand after he pressed the call button.

“Quiet. Unnervingly quiet.” He frowned. “I feel like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“It has been a busy few weeks, though,” Lois reasoned aloud. “Maybe the criminal element has taken the hint?”

“Maybe,” he said, stepping onto the elevator with her.

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A poster hung on the wall advertising ‘*Diana Stride’s Top Copy — Sundays at 8:00.*’ The room was covered in framed posters from some of the rich and famous she had interviewed over the years: William B. Shockley, Ryan White, Ted Bundy, Ferdinand Marcos, Jimmy Doolittle. Diana Stride wore a chic white business suit with a long slit in the skirt that came up to just above her knee. She looked to the reporters and executives sitting at the conference table and laid the morning edition of the Daily Planet in the center for them to see. A photo of Superman standing with two firefighters from last night was on the cover with a large red question mark across the page.

“The story of the century!” Diana cheered, pacing around the executive office. Rolf sat in the corner with an encouraging smile on his face. “Face it. Our show has always been uplifting and intellectually challenging. And that’s why our ratings suck. So I’ve decided -- People want dirt? We’ll give them the *dirtyest*, starting with Superman. Everything the public is dying to know. What are his weaknesses? Who are the women in his life?”

“I for one would love to meet those girls,” Rolf said, jabbing one of the fellow photographers in the side as he grinned.

“But most importantly... who is he when he’s out of uniform? Does he have another life... a secret identity? If he does, we’re going to expose it on worldwide television! It’ll be sensational, it’ll be...”

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“...the story of the century,” Perry said, setting a black and white photo on the table in front of the crowd of reporters sitting at the conference room table. Lois picked up the photo to examine it before passing it down the line for the others to see. A man in a black hood was being escorted under heavy guard out of the courthouse. “A key member of Intergang’s been arrested, made a deal... and is gonna testify.”

“Who is it?” Lois asked, glancing at Perry as he paced in front of them.

“We don’t know,” Perry answered. Lois glanced across the table at Clark, frowning when she noticed him rubbing the back of his neck. “The DA’s calling him Mr. X. Word is, Intergang’s been killing world leaders for decades, making it look like accidents, and this fella’s gonna finger their number one assassin.”

“I’m guessing we don’t have a name on the alleged assassin yet either,” Clark guessed, looking at Perry.

“Not yet,” Perry said with a shrug. “That’s going to be your job.” He pointed at Lois and Clark. “Now I want the story on this guy, so by the time he takes the stand, the Planet has the headlines -- who he is, where he came from, what he’s gonna say. All right?” Perry tapped his hands on the table to indicate the end of the meeting.

They stood up, gathering their things, when Perry stopped them, “Lois, Clark, hang back just a minute, will you?”

The rest of the reporters made their way out into the newsroom and Perry held the door, looking out in the newsroom for someone. Lois glanced at Clark, "It's almost nine and still no sign of Franklin Stern. What do you think this big announcement is?"

"Maybe we're getting raises?" Clark suggested with a smirk.

"I've been barking up that tree for over a year and Perry isn't budging on that one," Lois said dryly. "Although, those annual reviews are coming up..."

Franklin Stern appeared in the doorway, "This a good time, Perry?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Stern, we just finished the staff meeting," Perry explained, gesturing for him to enter. "You remember Lois and Clark."

"Yes, of course, you two have kept the rest of the journalists on their toes this past year," Mr. Stern said with a broad smile, holding a yellow envelope in his hands.

"Well, it's not our fault that they can't keep up," Lois joked smugly. "They should get better sources."

Mr. Stern and Perry chuckled good-naturedly. "Let's hope they don't," Stern said, handing them an envelope. "Just came in over the wire. I wanted to personally congratulate you two on a phenomenal job this year."

"Thank you, Mr. Stern," Clark said, taking the envelope from him.

Lois opened the envelope and pulled out two tickets to the Meriwether dinner Friday evening. Only the reporters who made it on the shortlist were invited. The award would be presented to the winner. She had yet to make the short list until now. A smile spread across her face, and for a moment, she forgot about the audience she and Clark had. She looked up at him, grinning ear to ear. It was an honor to be nominated, but it was an even bigger honor to win such a prestigious award. "We made the shortlist!" she said excitedly, patting Clark on the shoulder enthusiastically.

"Yes, the dinner starts at six. So dress sharp and..."

She didn't hear the rest of what Mr. Stern said. Instead, she reached up to plant her lips against Clark's, forgetting the fact that her boss and the Planet's owner were in the room with them. At the moment, she didn't care. His arms moved to her waist and she grinned, feeling the somersault her stomach did before he pulled away.

"I assume you both only needed two tickets," Mr. Stern said with a knowing look.

They pulled apart briefly and Clark shook his head, "No, two tickets is fine."

"Congratulations, you two," Perry said, patting them both on the back. "This will go a long way in cementing the Planet's place as the number one source for news."

"Enough for a raise?" Lois inquired with a smirk.

Perry visibly cringed, "We'll talk after you bring home that Meriwether." He moved toward the door and walked Mr. Stern out.

Lois watched them leave, then turned her attention back to Clark, flinging her arms around his neck. "Can you believe it? A Meriwether Award? I've never gotten this close to winning one before."

"Well, maybe we can bring one home this time," he grinned back at her, moving to cup her face before leaning in to kiss her.

She ran her hand over the back of his neck and frowned, pulling away, "What is that?"

"What?" he asked, looking over his shoulder. "I've tried everything I can think of. I'm not sure what it is."

She stood up on her tip-toes to see the white residue on his neck. "Clark, there's..." She ran her hand across his neck again and frowned. "It looks like super glue." She circled around him to get a better look, forcing him to bend forward at a forty-five-degree angle. "There's something there."

His head jerked up with a faraway look on his face, "I've gotta

get out of here."

"What?" She looked at him in disbelief. She was accustomed to 'I've gotta go there's a fire or someone who needs rescuing' and not 'I've gotta get out of here.'

"In the elevator," he pointed his head toward the elevator where Perry and Mr. Stern were waiting for the elevator car to arrive. "Diana Stride. She just said something about Superman being in the building."

"What? Clark!" Lois' eyes widened, seeing the elevator doors opening.

"Just cover for me," he said hurriedly, racing toward the corridor and the supply closet.

"Great," Lois muttered, walking back toward her desk, saying a silent prayer when she spotted Diana Stride with a cameraman behind her. She held a handheld device in her hand that kept beeping.

The reporters, who were usually busy finding their next lead, had frozen in place when they saw the celebrity talk show host in the newsroom. "Get the camera ready," Lois heard Diana say as she walked past the line of desks leading to where Lois was standing.

"Superman is definitely in the building," she heard the cameraman say. He held his camera steady as the device beeped louder and louder.

"Superman might be disguised as anyone, so whoever the tracker says we tagged --"

'Over my dead body,' Lois thought to herself, spotting Diana as she moved toward the restroom where Clark had disappeared. "Excuse me!" Lois shouted, trying to distract them and hopefully give Clark enough time to come up with a plan.

-- get it on film," Diana finished saying.

"Is that who I think it is?" she heard Mr. Stern say from behind her.

"Lois Lane," Diana smiled at her, trying to peer past the corridor where the restrooms and supply closet were located. "If you'll excuse me..."

"Covering a story?" Lois bobbed and weaved, trying to block Diana from entering the corridor.

"Why, yes, my latest piece on..." Her smile fell and her eyes widened. Lois turned behind her and breathed a sigh of relief when she spotted Clark in the Superman costume. "Superman."

"The Planet has a policy about paparazzi in the building," Lois said tightly. "Did you check in with the front desk?"

"I am not the paparazzi." Diana grinned broadly, turning to Clark, "Why, Superman, whatever are you doing here at the Daily Planet?"

"I could ask you the same question," Lois interjected with a disapproving look, as Diana hooked her arm into Clark's arms even though they were folded tightly across his chest.

"Let's just say I heard something from a little birdy that I didn't like," he said, removing Diana's hand from his bicep forcefully enough to ensure she didn't attempt the gesture again.

She frowned, "Superman. You didn't hear about my story, did you?"

"Afraid so," Clark growled tightly.

Diana's face tensed for a moment before a smile quickly spread across her face, "Well, there goes my surprise." She turned to the room, "Everyone -- I'm Diana Stride and Top Copy is doing a tribute to Superman." A light applause filled the room, but Lois didn't budge. She didn't trust Diana Stride as far as she could throw her. Clark looked like he was thinking the same thing.

"We know he has a lot of great friends here at the Planet and I want to interview all of you. I had hoped it would be a surprise for him --" Diana looked back at Clark and shrugged with a smile, "But I guess there's no keeping secrets from the Man of Steel. So. Let's get started, shall we? Who wants to talk about Superman?"

Fellow staffers shot their arms up, vying for attention and the chance for their fifteen minutes of fame. Lois rolled her eyes and

Diana turned to Clark, “And Superman, I can count on you for an interview soon?”

The device in her hand was still beeping. “Careful, whatever you’ve got in your hand there...” Lois suppressed a laugh as she watched Clark aim a short blast of heat vision at the device, “... has a short. Let me take it before you get burned.” Clark took the device from her, crushing it with his hand and staring her down.

Lois smiled smugly, watching as Clark turned to leave and disappeared in a gust of wind. “Well, look at that. I guess you won’t be getting that interview after all. Gosh, I was really looking forward to not watching it.”

Diana smiled at her, “Lois Lane. Tenacious as always, I see.”

“Well, I try,” Lois shot back dismissively, suppressing the urge to throttle her. Diana was trying to go after Clark. That wasn’t something Lois could allow to happen.

“This is a real honor,” Diana said with a smile. “I understand there’s no one in the world closer to Superman. I hope we can spend some time together on camera.”

“I don’t give interviews. I do the interviewing,” Lois scowled, looking at the camera in the cameraman’s hands. “You know, being a reporter and all.”

“Yes, well, maybe you’ll change your mind.” Diana smiled at her.

“I don’t think so,” Lois said.

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“No.” Mayson shook her head defiantly, standing up to leave. Lois had asked to meet her for lunch. Mayson thought it was just an innocent lunch, given that the dynamic had changed between them after they began working together on the Luthor case. Unfortunately, it seemed Lois’ motives for lunch had been about her mystery witness.

“No?” Lois echoed in disbelief. “It was just a question.”

“That I can’t answer,” Mayson said, looking around the cafe for their waitress. “Excuse me, miss? Check?” She made a motion with her hand to signal the need for the urgent bill. “I knew this was a mistake.”

“Look, all I’m trying to find out is if it’s true or not,” Lois pressed. “Do you have a witness against Intergang in police custody?”

“I can’t confirm or deny anything officially,” Mayson countered. “Look, I can’t help this time. There’s too much at stake.”

“You and I both know Clark and I wouldn’t be irresponsible with the information,” Lois said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I already know you have someone in custody. Perry was all over us this morning about it.”

“Then why are you here?” Mayson huffed irritably. “You know how big a case this is. I can’t afford to let anything slip out.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s the fact that we had to find out about this from our editor instead of the ADA, who we thought would at least give us a heads up about what’s going on?” Lois snapped angrily. “I mean, we’ve only been helping you build your case against Intergang since September!”

“This has nothing to do with that,” Mayson hissed, trying to keep her voice down as she looked around the crowded restaurant. “You’re going to make a scene.”

“You want a scene, I’ll give you a scene. I thought you were better than this, Mayson. At least give us a... heads up or something. Let us know the case is about to go public. I mean, I’d think that after almost six months of providing witnesses and convincing sources to go public that we have earned that much.”

Mayson’s face fell and she glanced at Lois, meeting the other woman’s eyes. It was more than just frustration about not being told information about a story. It was more than disappointment. It was hurt.

<< “I want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do. But I don’t know who to trust anymore.”

“Seems to be going around these days.”

“I guess if you want trust, you have to start by giving it.”>>

<< “So what is it going to take for us to work together?”

“You tell me.”>>

<< “It seems silly to act like this. I mean we’re grown adults. Professionals. We should be able to work together without letting our jealousy get the better of us.”>>

<< “I heard what happened. I wanted to make sure you were all right.”>>

<< “For the record, I’m glad they missed.”

“Me too... and thanks.”>>

Though their relationship had begun on rocky ground, they had moved past their differences over the recent months and come to rely on one another. Mayson chewed on her lower lip, unsure how to respond. Lois wasn’t angry about her story; she was angry because she felt betrayed. Never in her wildest dreams would the attorney have thought she’d come to think of Lois Lane as anything other than a nuisance, but after working with her time and time again on the recent cases, she’d come to respect her and even think of her as a friend. A friend who now felt betrayed.

“I’m sorry,” Mayson finally said. “You’re right. You and Clark have been more than fair to me and helped with a number of these Intergang cases. But my orders are coming from way up. This is huge. We can’t afford for anything to get out,” she said, reclaiming her seat and whispering in a harsh whisper.

“Do you seriously think we’d print classified information?” Lois asked in disbelief.

“No, but you have no idea what kind of pressure we’re under right now. It is literally kill or be killed in my office right now. Half the administrative staff has been replaced thanks to the leak of this information this morning.”

“Mayson, you know us. We wouldn’t be irresponsible with the information,” Lois pointed out. “I know what Bender’s going to say on the stand next month, but it still hasn’t seen the light of day, now, has it?”

“No, you kept that one close to the vest,” Mayson admitted. “And I appreciate that.”

“The story Perry was told was that this guy is going to ID an Intergang assassin,” Lois began cautiously. “You and I both know if that’s true, they’re going to be coming for him.”

“Thanks to our leak, yes,” Mayson grumbled irritably. “We have him under round-the-clock protection.”

“If you want, I could talk to Clark about having Superman help keep this guy safe? He wants to see Intergang taken down as much as we do,” Lois reminded her.

“That would require disclosing his location, and I can’t do that,” Mayson said, shaking her head.

“Not to us,” Lois countered. “It’s not like he hasn’t helped protect a witness before,” Lois smirked at her, and then continued. “You said yourself there’s a lot at stake. Just think about it. Say the word and we can send Superman to your office, no questions asked.”

“Let me talk to the person in charge of security and see what he thinks,” Mayson relented. “Given how big this case is, it wouldn’t hurt to have an extra pair of eyes keeping watch over our witness.”

“Okay,” Lois set her notebook on the table. “Now, this assassin: do you think bringing this person down will be enough to cripple Intergang?”

“All I can tell you is that the assassin who will be named is apparently someone with a lot of power and influence. We still don’t have a name, but from what I gather the assassin is very famous and had the opportunity to take anyone down that Intergang saw as a threat.” Lois opened her mouth to respond and Mayson stopped her, “And no, you can’t print that. Not until Mr. X has taken the stand and the assassin is in custody.”

“Can we get a one-on-one interview with the DA’s office after the testimony?” Lois inquired.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Mayson said.

“Okay,” Lois gave her a half-smile. “How’s the shoulder?”  
 “Starting to be able to move it more,” Mayson grinned. “I’ll just be glad when I can take this sling off.”

“Sorry,” Lois apologized. “I remember when I broke my ankle skiing a few years ago. Drove me crazy not being able to move in that cast.”

“Here you go, ladies,” the server said as she laid the bill on the table and stepped away. “Just take your time.”

Mayson rolled her eyes and Lois laughed, “Took her long enough.”

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## Chapter 2

Diana Stride sat in her luxury apartment, looking out at the moonlit sky. She turned to Rolf, who was sitting next to her and pouring her a glass of chardonnay. “Maybe he works there as someone else?”

“Ah, your secret identity theory,” Rolf reasoned aloud, taking a sip from his glass. The bulb on the lamp next to him flickered twice. She tensed and he tapped at the lamp. “Must be the bulb.”

“I’ll get it. You go on home,” she said quickly, trying to distract him.

“But...” He looked at her with a knowing look. “I mean, aren’t we...” His eyes motioned toward the bedroom.

“Not tonight,” she said smoothly, “I want to be alone.”

He looked torn for a minute and then nodded, seeming to accept defeat, and gathered his things to leave. She waited for the door to close, then grabbed a remote on the television stand and typed in a code. The monitor zapped on and Mr. Darryl, her supervisor at Intergang, appeared.

“Hello, Diana. You’re looking well.”

“I’m assuming you have a location for me now?” she asked, sipping her chardonnay.

“Well, your work in orchestrating the leak of Disanto’s testimony went a long way in getting the phone lines buzzing. Everyone wants to tell their story to get their name in the papers. Every reporter wants the story.”

“Of course,” she grinned. “It’s the story of the century.”

“We have a report of a highly protected campground just out of town. There’s been a lot of movement by military personnel at the local diner. Waitress’ name is Kelli with an ‘i.’ She’s cooperating fully with our team.”

“And in return?” Diana pressed.

“Her daughter gets to make it to school every day in one piece.”

“You’re a monster,” Diana sniffed.

“Just do your job,” Darryl chided. “We’ll talk soon.”

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Lois set her things down on the couch, breathing a sigh of relief. She hadn’t seen Clark since this morning and was avoiding Perry like the plague so she didn’t have to come up with a lame excuse. After her lunch with Mayson, she had made a detour to her apartment to try and see what she could find out, calling a few sources around town. Her apartment was eerily quiet compared to what it had been the night before. She poked her head in the guest bedroom and noticed that the bed had been made and fresh towels were in the linen closet. *‘Well, there’s one good thing about them being here,’* she thought to herself.

She heard a knock at the window and smiled, spotting Clark floating outside her window. She reached for the latch to let him in. “Hi,” he said, then looked around the apartment and she shook her head. “No one’s here. Lucy had class and mom is nowhere to be found. Hopefully, she’s talking with the building owner to find out what the story is with her condo.”

He quickly spun back into his grey suit and checkered tie from earlier, readjusting his glasses as he followed her to the couch.

“Unfortunately, I’ve got some bad news on that front.”

“Oh, no,” Lois whimpered.

“There’s extensive smoke damage to all of the buildings. They

probably won’t be able to move the tenants back in for at least six weeks,” he explained, rubbing the back of his neck as he spoke.

“Oh, no, I can’t do this. She’ll drive me insane,” Lois hissed. “I left for college a semester early just to get away. Six weeks?”

“The building manager is paying for everyone to be put into a hotel for now, but as you know there are no rooms right now.” He gave her a sympathetic smile.

“Great,” Lois grumbled. “Think your parents would mind an extra guest?” she joked. “Maybe they can distract her from digging into mine and Lucy’s personal lives with a scalpel.”

He let out a soft chuckle, “I’m sure it won’t be that bad.”

“Do you remember Christmas Eve?” She looked at him in disbelief. “Imagine that without anyone to distract her.”

“I seem to remember you having a few too many glasses of champagne.” He grinned at her, “And her grabbing me by the coat and telling me to get you out of there before you embarrassed her and yourself any further.” His eyes twinkled at her.

“I was not embarrassing her,” she sniffed.

“You compared her guests to leeches in a very loud... *very drunk* voice.” He laughed. “I think that qualifies as embarrassing.”

“I was illustrating a point,” she countered, fighting the smile that was threatening to spread on her face.

“So, how long did it take you two to start talking again?” he asked, placing an arm around her shoulders.

“Um, I don’t know. We just didn’t really bring it up. She called when the story about Lex broke and that was it,” she said with a wry expression. “Was I *really* that loud?” she cringed.

“Mmm, hmm,” he shook his head with a grin.

“Oh, God...” Lois groaned, recalling in vivid detail the Christmas party.

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### *Christmas Eve...*

“Lois, for the last time. Quit slouching,” Ellen chastised, walking up to Lois as she directed the waiter to pick up the discarded glasses in front of her.

“Would you cut it out?” Lois huffed irritably, standing to her feet a little too fast. “Whoa.”

“Cut it out?” Her mother echoed in a harsh tone.

“Yes, chill!” Lois said lazily. “Why are you always so tense all the time? Why must everything be perfect every second of every day? Guess what, life isn’t perfect.” She glanced toward the crowded dining room, seeing most of the crowd had already left. Another successful dinner party. Another waste of time.

“I think you need to slow down.” Ellen gave her a disapproving look, picking up one of the champagne glasses from the side table. “You of all people should know better than to allow yourself to...”

“What? Have a good time?” Lois snorted. “Sorry if my idea of having a good time isn’t sitting around making small talk with people that smell like they took a bath in *Chanel Number Five*. Those leeches couldn’t care less about how much you spent on your precious party.”

“Lois Joanne Lane...”

“Oh, she used my whole name,” Lois giggled, holding her hand to her mouth. “I must be in trouble now. You know, if you would just lighten up, you might actually have friends that don’t require you drop a grand on dinner for them.” She snickered, “I mean, how long did it take Gertrude what’s-her-name to fly out of here?”

“She had an appointment, and you are making a scene,” Ellen snapped angrily.

“Right, a scene. We wouldn’t want to do that. Can’t make a scene in public and prick the precious image of the perfect Lanes.”

“Sit down!” Ellen ordered, grabbing her by the arm and trying to force her to sit down.

“No. *You* sit down,” Lois said irritably. “Don’t you get tired of it? It’s been twelve years and you still play the part of the doctor’s wife. Dad’s gone. He left us, remember? You don’t have to

impress the country club or some muckety-muck at the hospital. Or throw these God-awful parties with people you and I know you secretly hate.”

“That is enough!” Ellen growled angrily, storming out of the room. “I don’t have to take this from you.”

“You never do,” she mumbled quietly. A moment later she felt a tap on her shoulder and looked up to see Clark standing with a disapproving expression on his face.

“I can’t leave you for five minutes, huh?” His eyes looked at her in concern. “Are you okay?”

“I want to go home,” she said, allowing him to help her to her feet.

“I think that’s best,” her mother said from the corner of the room. “Make sure she makes it home okay.” Lois turned and saw Lucy standing by the door with her coat.

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*Present Day...*

“I was horrible,” Lois grumbled aloud, more to herself than anyone.

“You were... not yourself,” he said with a humorous expression.

“When I was a kid, I hated those things,” Lois said, leaning her head against his shoulder. “A bunch of fake people trying to impress everyone with how much they could ruin someone else, all of them gabbing on and on about how people’s marriage or family was falling apart... failed business. I hated them. Most of all I hated the fact that mom just sat there and smiled, knowing full well that they were talking about the things my dad had done to her.”

“I’m sorry,” he tightened his arm around her. “I can’t imagine what you had to go through when your family started falling apart.” He turned to cup her cheek, “It must’ve been really painful for you.”

She could feel the sense of dread on the back of her neck. Talking about her father leaving and the pain that came with it was hard. Normally this was the part where she’d try and deflect by making a joke or changing the subject. Normally it worked, but seeing the concern and vulnerability in Clark’s eyes, she knew she couldn’t do that. She trusted him completely... even with her more painful memories.

She let out a sigh, leaning against him, “You know... When my father left... I thought it was because of me. Then I realized it’s just the way people are. They make the deepest commitments to each other... have children, even... and just walk away from it all.”

“Lois, not everyone walks away,” he reminded her, tilting her chin to look at him.

“I hope not,” she whispered, running a hand across his cheek.

“No way,” he murmured, leaning in to kiss her.

The front door opened, slamming against the chain. “Lois?” She heard her mother’s voice on the other side.

“I’m sorry,” Lois frowned, pulling away. “Hold that thought.” She got up to answer the door. “Just a sec,” she called as she removed the chain from the door and opened it. Her mother was holding a bag of groceries in her hand with an annoyed expression on her face. “Uh, what is all this?”

“I noticed you didn’t have any groceries so I went and picked up some things.” Her mom noticed Clark approaching. “Hi, Clark.”

“Hi. Here, let me take that,” he greeted her, then took the bag from her and carried it to the kitchen.

“You won’t believe the lines down at CostMart. Insanity,” Ellen rambled, taking a seat on the chair next to the couch. She noticed the crushed device Clark had laid on the table and picked it up, examining it. “What is this?”

“It’s something I need to take to STAR Labs later,” Lois said, eying Clark, who was still rubbing his neck profusely. Recalling her mother’s days as a nurse, she asked, “Hey mom, how do you

get super glue out?”

“Nail polish remover,” Ellen said nonchalantly. “Acetone-based. It softens the cyanoacrylate in the super glue.” She looked up at her daughter curiously. “Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” Lois said with a shrug. “Just curious.”

“Uh-huh,” Ellen gave her a look of disbelief. “All of the tenants are supposed to meet the building owner in half an hour to find out what the verdict is. Hopefully, I’ll have somewhat of an idea by this afternoon on how long I’ll be out on the streets.”

“Mother, you’re not on the streets,” Lois countered.

“It certainly feels like it. Look at me, sleeping on my daughter’s couch...”

“Spare bedroom,” Lois corrected, seeing Clark motion to her and mouth ‘nail polish remover’ to her, pointing to the bedroom. She gave a quiet nod and turned back to her mother.

“As if that’s any different,” Ellen sniffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “I paid good money for that condo, and now I can’t even enjoy it.”

“I’m sorry,” Lois said, placing a sympathetic hand on her mother’s shoulder.

“Yeah, well, I still have to tell your father. Not looking forward to that conversation.” Her mom shook her head in disgust. “I better get going. I should be back this afternoon. I’ll make dinner. It’ll be just like old times.”

Lois did what she could to muster up a smile and followed her to the door. “Great, uh, good luck.” She closed the door behind her and then went into the bedroom to check on Clark. She found him in the bathroom, shirtless, with a bottle of nail polish remover and a bag of cotton balls, trying to swipe at his neck with one of the cotton balls. She let her eyes linger over the perfectly sculpted muscles for a moment before finally making her presence known. “Need some help?”

“Please.” He gave her a pleading look. “I have no idea what I’m doing here.”

“I can see that,” she smiled, taking the cotton swab from him. She took the bottle of nail polish remover and doused the cotton ball with it, then began blotting at the white residue on his neck. Slowly but surely it began to loosen and she could feel his skin beneath it again. Then she saw it. A small microscopic red bead-like device right at his hairline. “I think I found something.”

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“What is it?” Clark asked, standing over Dr. Klein’s shoulder as he examined the crushed device Clark had confiscated from Dianna.

“Well, Superman, it appears to be some sort of radio transmitter.” Dr. Klein frowned, “Unfortunately, you crushed the internal mechanism so I won’t be able to get a reading...”

“The frequency tied to it. Can it be replicated?” Clark asked nervously, once again rubbing his neck where the tender skin still felt foreign to him after Lois had helped him remove the device.

“I don’t know,” admitted Dr. Klein. “I suppose it’s possible, but a lot of these transmitters are programmed at the manufacturer.”

“And this?” Clark pointed to the red device which Lois had removed from his neck earlier. “I don’t know what it is, but I have a feeling it’s what that transmitter was tracking.” He frowned nervously.

Dr. Klein turned on the lamp hanging above him and tugged on the neck to pull the light closer. “Let me see.”

Clark watched as Dr. Klein placed the bead under a microscope so he could get a good look. “Seems to have some sort of microscopic computer mechanism in it.” Dr. Klein looked over at the crushed tracker. “I’m going to have to run some tests, but I assume your hypothesis is correct. This tracker was used to read the signal being sent out by this little guy right here.”

“I don’t suppose you could destroy it?” Clark suggested.

“I think you already did a good job of that,” Dr. Klein said pointedly, “but I’ll make sure it gets sent in with the rest of STAR

Labs' malfunctioning devices to be melted down."

"Thank you, Dr. Klein," Clark said, turning to leave.

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DA Clemmons looked up at Mayson in disbelief, "What?"

"I said I think we need to bring Superman in on the protection of Mr. X," she repeated, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Since when?" Clemmons scowled, shaking his head, "No, no, we have everything under control."

"What if we don't?" Mayson pressed. "We had a leak, Michael. Your secretary! Who knows how much information made it back to Intergang. How many cases were thrown out due to disappearing witnesses this last year? Do you really want to take a chance when we're this close to stopping them?"

"What I want is for this office to finally get a *win*!" Clemmons snarled angrily. "We can't do that if the public sees Superman flitting his cape around our witness. There are good men and women putting their lives on the line to protect this city, but none of them get any credit for their efforts."

Mayson was taken aback by her boss' admission. Was this what she'd sounded like when she'd been dismissing the Man of Steel all those months ago? "You're right that we need a win, Michael. But is it really worth putting our case in jeopardy because you can't set aside your ego?" He opened his mouth to retort and she cut him off. "I get it. Believe me, I do, but this isn't about who does more or who gets credit. It's about protecting our witness. I don't know about you, but I'd sure feel a lot better if we had someone on our side who can see the assassin coming before they start shooting."

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"How are you feeling?" Lois asked Clark as they turned the corner to the local diner where Bobby had asked to meet them.

"Okay, I guess," Clark sighed, running his hand over the back of his neck instinctively. "I still can't believe she did that." They reached the diner and he opened the glass door for Lois to enter.

"Well, the Superman Exclusive is a big draw. I guess some reporters are more nefarious when it comes to getting the exclusive than others," Lois said, looking around the crowded restaurant. In the back corner at the low bar, Bobby sat with two empty seats next to him.

"Hey Bobby," Clark said as they approached.

"Well, if it isn't my two favorite lovebirds," Bobby said, taking a large gulp of his lemonade. The sound of the dwindling drink echoed loudly and the waitress approached.

"You need a refill, sunshine?"

"Please," Bobby handed her the glass. "And tell the chef I'll have another." He tapped the plate in front of him.

"Are you sure?" She looked at him in disbelief.

"It's on them." He pointed to Lois and Clark as they took their seats next to him.

"You got it." She looked to Lois and Clark, "How about you two?"

"Uh, no thanks." Lois shook her head, eyeing the questionable clientele throughout the diner.

Clark grimaced, following her gaze to the gang of teenagers who couldn't be older than Jack's brother Denny. He spotted the handle to a pistol hanging out of one of the guy's pants pocket and shook his head. The sooner they could get the information from Bobby the better. "Just a water," Clark said.

The waitress rolled her eyes then turned to the double doors and hollered, "Hey Pete! Another Bobby Special and step on it!"

"Gee, you come here often?" Lois joked.

"Very funny," Bobby said, taking another slurp of his lemonade. "So, I hear wedding bells are in the air. Have you booked a venue yet?"

Lois, caught off guard, looked back at Clark, "Did you tell him?"

He shook his head adamantly and Bobby snickered, "I got it from the jeweler. Nice guy. He's such a romantic at heart."

"Can't keep anything from Bobby in this city," Clark grumbled under his breath.

Lois interjected, "How nice, but we're not here to talk about us."

"I don't see a ring yet." He looked at Clark, "Did you get the wrong size?"

"*Bobby!*" Lois cut him off. "Would you cut it out?"

"You know, I can totally see you turning into one of those bridezillas," Bobby snickered. "You know I hear that chapel off Main is real nice. There's also the Tabernacle... Now, it's a bit traditional but they do have a really nice..."

"Bobby, *please* stop," Clark cut him off. "We've only got an hour. You said you had some information about this Mr. X?"

"Right, work." Bobby nodded as the waitress came back with a sandwich the size of his head.

"Here you go, handsome." She shook her head, mumbling under her breath as she walked away. "Two Bobby specials in one sitting. Yet, I just look at a slice of bread and I gain five pounds..."

"So, this Mr. X?" Clark prodded, hoping to keep Bobby focused on anything else but his and Lois' hopeful engagement. It had been two weeks since he proposed and they still hadn't had a chance to talk since the night of Mayson's shooting.

"Mr. X and the assassin were apparently partners both with Intergang and with their public personas," Bobby said, taking a large bite out of his sandwich. "*Ohhh*, Frank did it again. Always the perfect temp on the rib."

"Partners?" Lois echoed with a frown. "So, someone famous that had a partner? That could be anybody."

"Well, the assassin didn't become famous on their own. Intergang made that happen," Bobby added, taking another bite. "How else were they gonna take down some of the world leaders that didn't play ball?"

"Any guesses on who the assassin might be?" Clark asked, taking a sip from his water.

"Your guess is as good as mine. But from what I hear, Intergang's already put a bounty on Mr. X's head, so it's only a matter of time till we know who it is," Bobby said, taking another bite.

Lois nodded, "Okay, thanks, Bobby." Clark laid a few bills on the counter to cover Bobby's meals and the tip before heading out. As they exited, Lois' phone rang. "Hello?" She stopped outside the diner, nodding, "Okay, yeah, we'll let him know." After hanging up, she turned to Clark. "That was Mayson. The DA wants Superman's help in protecting Mr. X."

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"What's taking him so long?" Clemmons asked, turning to Mayson, who stood against the wall of his office watching him pace around the room nervously. "I mean, he's supposed to be faster than a speeding bullet... Yeah, right."

"I'm sure he'll be here as soon as he can," Mayson said with a sigh.

"You wanted to see me?" a voice from outside DA Clemmons' office interrupted. They both turned to see Superman standing in the doorway with his arms folded across his chest.

"Yes, Superman, come on in," Mayson pointed to the door for him to close behind him.

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In her executive office, Diana held the new handheld tracker in her hand. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong. It's on the same frequency as the last one."

Rolf leaned over her shoulder, looking at the device with a critiquing eye, "The settings are the same. Could the power have gone out on the tracking device? Maybe the signal died?"

Diana shook her head, "No, damn." She set the handheld tracker down. "Obviously Superman found it."

"So, how are you going to expose his identity then?" Rolf asked with a questioning stare.

"That's for me to worry about, darling," Diana patted him on

the cheek. She glanced at the clock, seeing the time. "I've got a meeting with an old partner. Would you mind locking up?" She sashayed past him, leaving him alone in the office.

\*\*\*

Lois took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. Mayson had called an hour ago to let her know Mr. X would be giving a recorded statement to police with the assassin's name tonight. Superman was supposed to help transport him to a secure location where hopefully no one in Intergang could get to him.

They had agreed nothing he learned protecting Mr. X could be used in their investigation. That meant she would have to take the lead. It was one of the things that made his dual identities twice as hard. What he learned as Superman -- especially in a case like this -- couldn't be used to help their story.

Superman had to be trusted.

"Lois?" Her mother called her name, waving a hand in front of her.

"Huh?" Lois looked up.

"Oh, my God, my everything hurts," Lucy said, slamming the front door closed behind her as she entered the apartment. She dropped her books on the coffee table and fell back on the couch.

"There's dinner," her mother said simply, sipping on her glass of water and pointing to the table.

"Too tired to move," Lucy groaned from the couch.

"You want me to bring you something?" Lois asked, moving to sit next to her sister who was attempting to sit up on the couch.

"As long as it's not statistics," Lucy grumbled, placing both hands over her face.

"That *bad*, huh?"

"How in the world is any of this of any use?" Lucy asked.

"You know, I heard a lot of these universities have you take courses like that so they can charge you more. Adding classes that aren't required for your major," their mother piped in. "You should complain to your advisor."

"No, she hates me," Lucy sighed. "I'm already having to take over a full load right now to make up for last semester."

"I still don't understand how you got mixed up with that Metallo character," Ellen piped in.

"Mom, not now," Lois tried to hush her.

"His name was Johnny," Lucy corrected, and let out a defeated sigh. "And I guess it's just my dumb luck."

"I don't understand you girls. Both of you given all the chances in the world to succeed. One risks her life for stories that will be lining bird cages the next day and the other can't decide what she wants to major in from one moment to the next..."

"Mom, please don't," Lois cut her off with a long breath. It seemed her mother was in rare form tonight.

Ellen rambled on bitterly. "You know, Rita has *two* grandkids? Not one, but *two*. How do you think that makes me look?"

"Like your daughters are sensible adults that don't have kids before they're ready?" Lois answered, crossing her arms over her chest in defiance.

"Didn't Naomi get pregnant in high school?" Lucy reminded her.

"That's not the point," Ellen scolded.

"Of course not," Lois sighed, "I'm sorry. Lucy and I aren't going to have a baby because your friend's daughter wants to play house."

"Yeah, at your rate I'll be dead and gone before I see any sign of children from either one of you," Ellen grumbled.

"Don't be so sure of that," Lucy muttered under her breath.

"What was that?" Their mother looked over at them sharply.

"Nothing," Lois covered, glaring at Lucy. "Absolutely nothing."

"Oh, come on, you and I both know what your answer is going to eventually be," Lucy shot back. "You might as well tell her."

"I thought we agreed to you keeping your mouth shut?" Lois reminded her.

"You agreed," Lucy reminded her, rolling her eyes. "Fine. Whatever. You want to continue torturing yourself over Mom and Dad's divorce. Be my guest." She stood up, shaking her head and walking into the kitchen. "You know, if you're not careful, you could end up all alone because you're too scared to take a chance."

"What is she talking about?" Ellen hissed, turning to confront Lois after Lucy disappeared into the kitchen.

Lois looked down in defeat, feeling she had no other option but to tell her mother. "Clark proposed to me."

Lucy reappeared in the doorway with a plate of food, "This is delicious. Did you make it?" She turned to Lois.

"No, Mom did," Lois said, glancing anywhere but at her mother at the moment.

"Okay, both of you stop," Ellen cut them off. "Back up. He proposed?" Lois could see the excitement in her mother's eyes.

"In Hawaii," Lucy added, reclaiming her seat next to Lois.

"Superman owed him a favor," Lois said hurriedly. She really wasn't ready to discuss this. She certainly wasn't ready to discuss it with her mother of all people.

"I don't see a ring," Ellen observed.

"I haven't given him an answer yet."

"Come again?" Ellen choked out, looking at her in disbelief.

"I really, really don't want to talk about this," Lois harrumphed, leaning back against the couch and crossing her arms over her chest in defiance.

"Let me get this straight: your boyfriend took you to a tropical island to propose to you... You haven't given him an answer yet, and you thought this wasn't something you should share with *me*? Is that everything or do you have a secret family I haven't met too?" Ellen scolded her in disbelief.

"See, this is why I didn't want to tell you!" Lois snapped irritably. "You always do this!"

"Do what?"

"Make it about you!" Lois shouted angrily. "This has nothing to do with you, and whether I decide to marry Clark or not is not something I want to discuss right now with either of you." She glared at the two of them and stormed out of the living room, slamming the door to her bedroom behind her.

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### Chapter 3

Clark stood in the corner of the cabin, examining it with his x-ray vision to make sure there were no hidden surveillance devices. One of the soldiers helping with the transport of Mr. X -- whom he'd immediately recognized as Michael Disanto, former newscaster at Top Copy before he disappeared last month -- pointed to the window. "We have a secure perimeter around the place. No one gets in or out without us knowing."

"I still want to check before we open that door," Clark instructed, motioning for the soldier to step aside. He flew out the door at super-speed, scanning the perimeter. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He turned back to the cabin and knocked three times to signal it was safe to begin movement.

The door opened, and Michael, with a black hood over his face, stepped out with two plainclothes agents and two soldiers creating a perimeter around him. "It's about ten feet from..." He stopped, hearing the sound of a rifle being loaded. He turned, seeing a red light from a telescopic lens, and quickly moved in front of the witness and agents to protect them from being hit.

He heard another muttered curse and aimed a beam of heat vision to the rifle. He didn't dare move yet without knowing if there were others out there. "Keep moving," he instructed.

Keeping his cape extended to help protect the agents as they moved to the car, Clark kept an ear tuned to the heartbeat of the assassin. The rifle was discarded and the assassin's face was covered in black soot, but he recognized her.

After Disanto was safely in the car, two tankers followed it to a location on the outskirts of Metropolis. He kept guard, keeping watch from the sky. No sign of the assassin. Hopefully, she'd

given up. Once Disanto was secured inside the new safe house, he headed back to the original location where he'd protected him from gunfire.

Retracing the steps, he found in the grass the melted rifle and a golden necklace with a small charm on it. He frowned, looking down at it. It appeared he'd found his first clue.

\*\*\*

Mayson Drake stood with DA Michael Clemmons, newly elected Mayor Reed and FBI Agent Rawlins. Superman had requested they call a press conference tonight after the attempt on the witness' life had been made. She still wasn't sure how good an idea it was to threaten the assassin. She stared out at the crowd of reporters, noticing one of the news circuits seemed to be missing.

Top Copy.

"Yes, we'll take your questions in just a moment," Mayor Reed assured the crowd of reporters who were chomping at the bit to get the latest news on Mr. X.

The sonic boom from the air announced Superman's arrival. Mayson looked to DA Clemmons, who already appeared to be trying to work the crowd. 'A born politician,' she thought to herself.

A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Superman landed on stage. In his hands was a badly burnt rifle scope. The lens looked to be completely destroyed and the barrel looked to be melted into oblivion. "I'd like to make a statement," he said, approaching the podium with a grimly determined expression on his face.

The crowd was silent as the cameras and lights directed themselves to him. "An attempt was made on the life of a state's witness. I want to say to anyone out there thinking of making a second attempt..." Right before their eyes, he snapped the rifle in half without breaking a sweat, and added, "Don't." The broken metal fell to the floor and he continued, "I am now personally protecting this witness and if anything happens to him, I will hunt his killers relentlessly."

\*\*\*

Clark unlocked his front door, completely exhausted from the day. He saw a note on his front door from his mom saying they were getting dinner with Al and his wife and not to wait up. He sighed, closing the door behind him. He still wasn't sure how to explain everything to Lois.

He knew she was already chomping at the bit to go after Diana Stride after this morning's close call. He wasn't sure why she was coming after him, but given that he'd discovered her night job was a trained assassin for Intergang, he knew the two couldn't be unrelated.

"Hey," he heard a voice come from the living room.

He smiled, seeing Lois on the couch with a pile of notes on the floor and a throw blanket wrapped around her. "Hey, yourself," he said, taking a seat next to her.

"Your parents left for dinner with your dad's friend," she said with a yawn.

"Yeah, I saw the note," he said, resting his hand on her thigh. "Hiding out?"

"Something like that," she said, leaning her head against his shoulder. "I just needed to get out of there. Hope you don't mind."

"No," he said, wrapping an arm around her. "I like it when you're here. Makes the place feel more like a home."

"That's sweet." She seemed distracted by that comment.

"What's wrong?" he asked, tapping her shoulder with his index finger.

"Just another crazy night at the Lane household," she said with a frown.

"You want to talk about it?" He nudged her shoulder and she sighed, resting her head against him. "I'm a pretty good listener."

"Is that so?" she looked at him with a half-smile.

"Yeah," he gave her a lopsided grin.

"I don't know how I'm going to make it through the rest of this week." She let out a long sigh, shaking her head.

"Well, we do have that really complicated story about an Intergang assassin turned state's evidence to distract you," Clark added with a smile, trying to coax her out of the current mood she was in.

"Yeah, that and Ms. Stride circling like a vulture around the Planet. Who does she think she is? Over there trying to sweet-talk Perry while spinning her little story as if it's a publicity stunt. You and I know better than that. Diana Stride is as fake as they come in the news business. Even her dye job comes out of a box."

"Gee, Lois, tell us how you really feel," Clark teased, hugging her tightly as she grinned against his chest.

"I'm *very* territorial," she responded, fingering the collar of his shirt with her index finger.

"Yes, I've noticed," he grinned back at her. "Although, you might have to add assassin to your list of complaints against her."

"What?" Her ears perked up as she turned to look at him.

"I found this next to the melted rifle where the assassin threw it." Clark held up a gold chain necklace with a half crescent moon charm on it. "Recognize it?"

"Wasn't Diana Stride wearing that this morning?" Lois asked, holding the necklace to get a better look at it.

"Yes, but it's not exactly a rare design either. We'll need more than that to connect her to Mr. X," Clark explained with a frown.

"Has Mr. X given the assassin's name yet?" Lois asked, running a hand up and down his chest.

"I'm not sure. I left before they completed the questioning, but I do know what I saw," he said, shaking his head.

"Which was?" Lois prodded, leaning in to kiss him. He let out a soft moan, enjoying the feel of her in his arms as she peppered his neck with featherlight kisses.

"It looked like Diana Stride," he said with a grimace.

"Unbelievable," Lois muttered, shaking her head as she leaned against him.

"Though, I have a feeling we'll need more than just Superman's identification. We can have Jimmy run some background checks in the morning and maybe check and see how common this design is? Then have him pull up everything he can on Diana Stride," Clark suggested, letting out a low moan as he fell back against the couch cushions, pulling Lois with him.

She grinned against him, "Sounds like a plan." She grew quiet for a moment and he moved to cup her cheek. A grin crossed her face and she sighed, "Hey, maybe we can get this wrapped up before the end of the week and solidify that Meriwether award."

"Yeah," he ran his hand against her jawline, seeing her glance down with a sad smile. "Hey, what is it?"

"It's just...everything," she said sadly. "You know, I'm supposed to be able to get to the bottom of a problem and... I can't even figure out where or when everything broke with my own family... My parents' marriage. My relationship with my parents. It wasn't always like this. We used to actually be happy. *Normal*. Now I can't even get through dinner in one piece."

"I'm sorry," he soothed, running a hand up her back. "I know it can't be easy having your mom and Lucy all under one roof."

"Lucy's not so bad. It's just when they get together..." Lois sighed, leaning back against him. "They drive me nuts."

"I've noticed." He grinned at her, ducking when she flung a pillow at him. "Hey, careful. Those things do break."

Lois grinned up at him, "Only on Superman."

He chuckled, "So you hiding out for the night or the week?"

"Can I do both?" she giggled, looking up at him impishly.

"It might get a little crowded whenever my parents get back here," he pointed out with a grin.

She sighed, resting her head against his shoulder blade, "I love your parents. They're just so... *not insane*."

"Come on, your mom's not that bad," he tried to reason.

"You didn't have to grow up with her," Lois retorted.

"Everything is a disaster. She never thinks before she does anything and then she..." He did his best to hide his amusement,

listening to Lois complain about her mother. “What is so funny?”

“Nothing. Just finding it comical that you’re complaining about someone not thinking things through.”

“That’s different,” Lois harrumphed, sitting back on the couch and crossing her arms over her chest.

“Of course it is,” he grinned, “Just like I’m sure she told your grandmother the same thing.” She took the pillow and hit him across the chest with it and feathers went everywhere. “What did I say about the pillows?” he teased, throwing a wad of white feathers at her.

She giggled, throwing another handful at him. He leaned in to kiss her, enjoying the feel of her in his arms as she relaxed against him, dropping the feathers in her hand as he cradled her in his arms. Her hand moved to caress his cheek as he concentrated on savoring the taste of her lips against his.

“I love you,” she murmured against his lips with a grin. “Even if you do have feathers in your hair.” She giggled against him and he gave her a lopsided smile, shaking the feathers off.

“You laugh, but the next set of pillows are going to come with plastic vinyl covers...” he threatened and she laughed harder.

She caught her breath and a silence fell between them. He reached down to flick a stray feather out of her hair, and she placed a hand over his, looking at him with a pained expression, “What if we end up hating each other?”

He stopped, looking at her in concern, “What?”

“It happens all the time. People grow apart and divorce and then can’t even be in the same room with one another. What if...”

“Lois,” he cupped her face, turning to look at her.

“Right now we only see each other when we want to, but what about when we don’t? What if you’re in a bad mood, assuming that’s possible, should I go stay in Missouri for a while?” She rambled at full-speed and he did his best to hide his laughter, knowing full well that this was serious to her.

“Lois, I’m sure there’ll be hard times... just like in any relationship, but we’ll work it out.” He pressed his lips against her cheek, “Like we always do.”

“What if we don’t?” She looked up at him tearfully. “My parents loved each other at one point, and now they can’t stand each other, and I can’t bear the thought of...”

“We’re not your parents any more than they are us,” he reminded her. “Unlike your parents, we have this thing called communication going for us that comes in handy.”

“It started out small,” Lois pointed out, sighing against him. “We’d plan vacations and then Daddy’d have to cancel at the last minute because of some emergency. Mom grew bitter from having to quit her job and move to the city to be near Daddy’s work.”

“So, you know what not to do,” he pointed out. “Lois, I don’t know the future any more than you do. I do know that I love you... and you love me. And that’s the best, and strongest, foundation we can have.” He was quiet for a moment before adding, “When I was a kid, my home meant permanence... a place to be safe. I spent years traveling the whole world but never found that anywhere until I came to Metropolis. I know there’s still a lot of things we both have to figure out but isn’t that what marriage is about? Compromise. Give and take. Permanence and building a life together.”

Lois stroked his cheek and sighed, “When I was a kid, home was where Mother sat in the lounge chair, getting drunk, while Daddy burned steaks at the barbecue trying to explain why he was kissing Mrs. Bellcanto in the church parking lot... Permanence... wasn’t so permanent.” He could hear the crack in her voice as she spoke and almost see Lois as the hurt little girl watching her family be torn apart.

He chose his words carefully, trying to reassure her the best way he knew how. “Lois. You and I are as *permanent* as permanent can get,” he promised, hoping his words could reach down to that little girl who couldn’t trust forever meant eternity to him.

He hated what she’d had to endure and wanted to kiss away every tear and every ounce of pain. The memory of her father so blatantly disrespecting his children and his vow to their mother struck a chord with him. After everything he’d learned about Claude, Paul, and Sam, he knew he needed to reassure her. She needed to hear it even though the fear was unfounded.

“I don’t cheat,” he said, looking at her sincerely.

“I know.” She gave him a watery smile. “You’re pretty good with those speeches,” she said, fingering the collar to his shirt. “How do you always know what to say?”

“I had a really good teacher,” he grinned, “My dad’s speeches put mine to shame.” He leaned in to kiss her.

“Is that so?” She smiled, linking her arms around his neck.

He looked back at the feathers scattered everywhere and grinned, “Yep, I can already hear the lecture for the feather incident now...” She laughed against him and let out a long sigh before tossing a handful of feathers in his hair. He smiled, mesmerized as he looked into her eyes, seeing the love he felt for her reflected back as he leaned in to capture her lips with his.

Her arms tightened around him, fingering the hairline on the back of his neck. He let out a moan as her hands moved up and down his back. He moved his hands up her sides, enjoying the feel of her in his arms as he settled the rest of his weight on her. She let out a soft moan and moved her hands through his hair encouragingly as they deepened the embrace.

“Clark...” she sighed his name, whispering in his ear with a sultry moan. He could feel the heat from her body press up against him as she devoured him. Each kiss grew more and more insistent and he could feel himself beginning to respond to her touch.

“I love you,” he murmured, brushing his lips against her jawline. He let out a guttural moan as she pressed against him. He felt a tightness in his groin as he felt the heat from her body surround him.

“I don’t know which key it is.” His super-hearing picked up his mother’s voice from outside the apartment and he groaned, pulling away.

“What?” Lois looked back at him in exasperation. Her chest was rising and falling heavily and her face and neck were still red from their embrace. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to put two and two together.

The door opened and his dad looked around the apartment with amusement on his face. His mom followed his gaze, then looked to Lois, a twinkle in her eye as she spoke, “Hi, Lois.”

Lois cleared her throat, pulling her feet back under her as she straightened up on the couch, “Hi.”

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“I am now *personally* protecting this witness and if anything happens to him, I will hunt his killers *relentlessly*.” The voice of Superman came from the television and Diana scowled, nursing the burn on her hand and placing an ice pack on her knee.

Superman was proving to become more and more of a problem. Her plan to expose his secret identity in order to neutralize him wasn’t panning out how she’d planned. She glanced back at the photos she’d laid on the coffee table earlier. Every article ever printed about the man of steel and every photo she’d been able to get her hands on lay on that table.

There was something he was hiding. That much she was sure of, but how to get to the truth she wasn’t sure. It was obvious he had plenty of people working to help protect him. In particular, Lois Lane. Diana rolled her eyes, recalling the sparring of words between herself and the famous investigative reporter. It was no secret Lois Lane had a special place for Superman. Plenty of talk had circulated over the first few months of his arrival, giving the tabloids enough to keep busy for years. Still, she wondered if there was any truth to the rumors...

The light on the lamp next to her flickered and she groaned, reaching over to grab the remote from the table and typing the familiar code. The TV flickered and Darryl appeared on the

screen. “Did you watch the news?” she asked.

“Not like you to bungle one, Diana,” Darryl chastised. “And now you’ve turned Superman into his own private bodyguard...”

“There’s been a rumor about a substance that can kill him... a chunk of meteor Lex Luthor got ahold of. Can you get it?” Diana asked, wincing as she rubbed the ointment on her hand.

“Are you telling me...?” Darryl began to ask.

“I’ll kill Superman. For free. Just get me the rock. Then get me in touch with the Science Division,” Diana ordered. Superman had become more of a problem than she’d originally anticipated. She was going to see to it he didn’t get in her way again.

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Lois took a deep breath, closing the front door to her apartment quietly and trying not to wake anyone. She glanced at the time. It was a quarter past eleven. The Kents had returned from dinner and thankfully hadn’t said anything about the feathers all over the place. A blush crept across her face as she recalled how heated things had begun to get on Clark’s couch. After exchanging greetings with one another she had grabbed her things and made a beeline for the exit. She tried not to think about what would have happened had Clark not heard them outside the door.

“It’s almost midnight,” she heard a voice from the dining table say.

She looked over at the table and saw her mother sipping from a coffee mug with a solemn look on her face. Lois sighed, recalling how she’d left earlier, “Yeah, I needed to clear my head.”

“Am I really that horrible that you can’t tell me your boyfriend proposed to you?” Ellen asked, looking at her with a hurt expression on her face.

Lois recalled the fight they’d had earlier and sighed, pulling up a chair, “No, you’re not. I just... You have to understand I’m still trying to process all of this. I don’t know if you’ve noticed but you’re a bit demanding when it comes to mine and Lucy’s relationships.”

“I am not,” Ellen argued and Lois gave her a look. She conceded and sighed, “I just want you to be *happy*.”

“I am.” Lois smiled at her. “I *really* am, but starting the conversation about grandchildren of all things puts a lot of pressure on an already stressful situation.”

“I’m sorry.” Her mother looked down at her empty cup. “But at the time I didn’t know about the proposal. I thought I was just venting.”

“I know,” Lois said quietly. “But I don’t think Lucy or I are going to be having kids anytime soon so maybe you should adopt a puppy.”

Her mother laughed, “No, I don’t suppose you will.” She grew thoughtful for a moment. “He seems nice... from the time I’ve spent with him, at least.”

Lois smiled, “He is. He’s a good man.”

“Just be careful,” her mother prodded, “I don’t want to see you make the same mistakes I did...” Lois grew quiet, watching her mother with a pained expression. Ellen placed a hand on hers and added, “But I don’t want you afraid to live your life because of my mistakes either. You and your sister put up with far more than anyone should have to at your age.”

Lois looked up at her mother, surprised to see tears in her mother’s eyes, “I know. It was really a bad thing that happened.”

“It was *betrayal*,” her mother corrected, shaking her head. “All these years and I still can’t even think about it without getting angry.”

Lois sighed, recalling her father’s adultery that had contributed to her mother’s drinking problems over the years. “You’re right. It was really bad, mom. Sometimes all I wanted was for things to go back to normal, and other times I just wanted him gone. But at some point, I had to decide whatever hell you and Daddy were going through was between the two of you, and choose not to let it wreck the rest of my life.” Lois sighed, running a hand through her hair as she recalled Clark’s words from earlier.

“Yours and Daddy’s divorce was horrible, but I think instead of hiding from the idea of marriage, I’m going to learn from it.”

“Those are some pretty wise words,” her mother commented with a smile.

“Yeah, well, I heard them from this pretty great guy I know,” Lois smiled.

“Does this mean you’re going to accept his proposal?” her mother asked.

Lois smiled, not willing to say more as she stood up from the table. “Don’t stay up too late.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

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#### Chapter 4

Diana poured over the news articles in front of her, circling dates as she sipped from her glass of chardonnay. Article after article of Superman’s daring rescues over the last year and a half were scattered everywhere. The man in red and blue was always dazzling the camera with a smile, but one reporter seemed to have caught his attention more than others.

She pulled out the copy of *Dirt Digger* that she’d found with an amateur photo of Lois Lane and Superman at the airport with the headline ‘*Super Girlfriend?*’ Given this was at the same time as the pheromone spray, she knew she couldn’t rely too heavily on the article. Though there was another photo that made its way on the newsstands a few weeks later during the Nightfall asteroid scare. ‘*A Kiss for Luck!*’ The image of Lois Lane and the Man of Steel in a tight embrace before he’d flown off to save the world -- literally -- adorned the front page of the *National Inquisitor*.

No other photos had made their way onto newsstands since then, but given Lois Lane’s failed engagement to Lex Luthor, that wasn’t a surprise. Still, one had to wonder if there might be something more going on between the two. The *Daily Planet* had over ninety percent of the exclusives with Superman. Of those exclusives, almost all of them had Lois Lane’s by-line on them. If that were true then Diana’s job in killing him just got a whole lot easier.

She pulled out the long gold tube that had been rushed to her through courier this morning. She examined it, smiling at the glowing green waxy tube. This would work perfectly in bringing Superman to his knees. She ran a hand over her bandaged hand and grimaced. She would have to find a way of hiding that burn.

She knew it was only a matter of time before Michael talked. She scanned the apartment with a sigh. It looked like she’d have to start making plans to get everything moved in case Michael had let her name slip. The sooner that burn healed, the better. She still owed Michael a house call.

\*\*\*

Lois glanced at the elevator for what felt like the hundredth time. Clark still wasn’t in yet, and she was growing antsy. After their conversation last night and her talk with her mother she felt she was ready to finally give Clark an answer on his proposal. She’d felt ready for some time but the inner doubts that continued to plague her had kept getting in the way. Not anymore.

Lucy had agreed to let their mother introduce her to one of the new members’ grandson from the country club this evening. Though Lois wasn’t sure if Lucy was ready to begin dating again, she was open to the idea of having her apartment to herself for the evening. The idea of having Clark alone without any interruptions for a few hours was very appealing.

She had Jimmy run what he could on Diana Stride this morning and surprisingly there was a lot of evidence pointing at her being the assassin. Why she hadn’t been questioned at least was still a mystery to Lois though.

“Lois?” She heard her name and looked up to see Mayson Drake approaching her desk with a coffee in her hand.

“Hey,” Lois smiled at her. “I heard you got your witness moved and the statement recorded. Congrats.” Lois held up her mug of coffee happily.

“Yeah, we finally got a name. The judge is signing the warrant as we speak,” Mayson said with a sigh. “Which brings me to why I’m here.”

The elevator doors chimed and the sound of Diana Stride’s laughter filled the newsroom. “Perry, you’ve just got to tell that story on film...”

Lois rolled her eyes, glancing back at the Top Copy newscaster, who was walking with Perry and Jimmy toward Perry’s office. “Give me a break.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Diana, I’m kinda shy...” Perry complained bashfully.

Jimmy let out a snort, “Yeah? Compared to what?” Perry shot Jimmy a glare and he added, “Sir.”

By the stairwell, she spotted Clark, who nodded to her and approached. Mayson leaned in and muttered, “Since when did this place become another episode of Diana Stride’s Top Copy?”

Diana turned to Jimmy, running a hand down his cheek and whispering, “And you. You are just delicious. Mmmm, j’adore.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy stopped when he ran into one of the columns scattered throughout the newsroom.

“Let me guess, the Superman story?” Clark ventured, looking to where Diana and Perry were walking together. “Hi, Mayson.”

Mayson shook her head in disapproval, looking toward Diana. “Typical.”

“Mayson stopped by with some news,” Lois explained, looking at Mayson expectantly.

“Yeah, we have a judge signing the warrant for the assassin as we speak,” Mayson smiled broadly.

“So you have a name?” Clark inquired cautiously.

“Well, *they* have a name. I won’t know it until the assassin’s been arrested,” Mayson said with a wry expression.

Perry walked up to them. “Diana, this is Clark Kent, the fella I was telling you about. Now he and Superman are *real* tight.”

Clark nodded toward Diana, and Lois stood up, getting an idea of how to test her. She grabbed the necklace Clark had found from her desk and held it in her hands, waiting for the right opportunity.

Diana extended her hand for Clark to shake, “It’s hard to believe we haven’t met. I’ve read everything you’ve ever written.”

“Really?” Lois moved to block Clark from shaking Diana’s hand as she held the necklace in her own hand, allowing it to drop and dangle from her hand. She smiled when she saw Diana’s eyes do a little dance. “I didn’t think TV people had time for newspapers.” She spotted the bandage on Diana’s hand and innocently asked, “What happened there?”

“Oh, fight with my oven,” Diana said, running a hand instinctively over the bandaged hand.

“That’s a pretty necklace, Lois,” Clark said pointedly, looking to the gold crescent that hung on the gold chain in her hand.

“Oh, it’s not mine,” Lois said with a shrug. “I found it...” She smiled, watching Diana visibly flinch, “It’s not yours, is it?”

“No.” Diana swallowed hard.

“You sure? I saw you wearing one just like it the other day and I thought it was so appropriate.” She allowed the necklace to dangle back and forth, delighting in making Diana squirm. Mayson looked at them suspiciously but didn’t say anything. Lois continued, “You know, Diana the Huntress, from Greek mythology, who stalked her prey by the moonlight. It’s really not yours?”

“No, it’s *really* not mine,” Diana lied.

Lois dazzled her with a smile. “Well, my mistake. Boy, I hope whoever lost this little charm finds it...” She grinned at Clark then looked back at Diana before adding, “... or they’re in for some *bad* luck.”

“Excuse me,” Diana said, pointing to Perry’s office. “I do hope to catch up with you later, Mr. Kent.”

Mayson watched Diana leave, “Okay, what was all that about?”

Lois held the necklace in her hands and Clark gestured to it

with a shrug, “Just seeing if she lost a necklace.”

Mayson looked at her with a critical eye before wagging her index finger at them to follow her. “Let’s talk in the conference room.”

\*\*\*

Rolf waited outside Lois Lane’s apartment, preparing for his opportunity. He had watched an older woman he assumed to be Lois Lane’s mother and a younger woman leave at around the same time. Diana had instructed him to find evidence of a relationship between the reporter and Superman. How he was supposed to do that he still wasn’t sure.

He picked the locks on the front door and made his way inside the apartment. One by one he rifled through drawers, closets, and bookshelves. Nothing anywhere indicated a relationship with Superman. There was, however, plenty to indicate a serious relationship between her and her partner. Photos, notes, and gifts were saved in a box in the back of her closet. He was just about to give up when he came across a leather-bound book on the top shelf. He opened it up and grinned to himself when he saw the collection of Superman articles inside. Not only with Lois Lane’s by-line but other reporters too. He picked up the phone and began to dial the pager number with the code 435 to let Diana know he’d found what he needed.

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“You know some people think Superman got the idea for his cape from Elvis...” Perry explained, pointing at the photo of the King above his head.

“You don’t say?” Diana said, trying to hide her boredom over Perry’s yarn about Elvis. Rolf had found what he needed. Which meant her plans for Superman had changed. She didn’t have to lure him out again and have him already suspicious of her. She could use someone close to him to deliver the deadly poison.

She glanced toward the window, watching as Lois Lane and Clark Kent followed the blonde from earlier into the conference room. She had seen Rolf’s page ten minutes ago and was dying to get out of the office. Now was as good as time as any. She stood up, pasting on her best smile, “I hate to cut this short, Perry, but I’ve got an appointment to see an old friend. We can pick this up tomorrow.”

“Of course,” he nodded, standing up to shake her hand. “Let me walk you to the elevator...”

She visibly blanched. She had to get to Lois Lane’s desk before the other woman returned. Thankfully the young man from earlier entered Perry’s office, “Chief, Joe in Printing is on line one. Says there’s a problem with the printing press.”

“Oh, for the love of...” Perry reached over to pick up the phone, “What did you do to my brand-new printing press, Jenkins?”

“I’ll show myself out,” Diana excused herself, heading into the bullpen. She glanced back at the conference room where Lois and Clark both had their backs to her. She smiled to herself. This was almost too easy. On the floor by Lois’ desk were two purses. One had a name badge clipped to it with a pager. The name on the badge read ‘Mayson Drake’ with the image of the blonde from earlier. Deducing that the other purse must belong to Lois Lane, she reached in her pocket and pulled out the green tube she’d had broken down by the Science Division. After a few minutes, she found what she was looking for and pulled out a tube of Lois Lane’s lipstick.

She looked behind her to make sure no one was looking and rubbed the waxy compound into the reddish mauve lipstick, ensuring it was well blended. Now all she had to do was wait for the next time Superman rescued Lois Lane and Lois would do the job for her.

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“Diana Stride?” Mayson laughed, looking between the duo in surprise. “You’re joking, right? What is she going to do, whack ‘em with her microphone? Bat her eyelashes and bore them to

death?”

Lois frowned, looking back at Mayson in disapproval, “I’m serious.”

“You’ve got to admit she does fit the profile,” Clark pointed out. “She’s famous and had access to a lot of powerful people over the years.”

Lois pulled up the notes she had from earlier on her laptop and pointed to the screen. “According to our research, she was in the army. The only woman ever in Special Forces. Then she pops up in a TV station in Omaha, and starts a *very* fast rise to legendary anchorwoman.”

“And?” Mayson prompted.

Lois typed the enter key into the keyboard to go to the next page, pulling up the screen of a few familiar faces. “What do all these men have in common?”

“They’re famous...” Mayson guessed.

“Powerful,” Clark added.

“Dead?” Mayson pursed her lips, looking at the names on the screen.

“And all of them were interviewed by Diana Stride,” Lois finished smugly.

“Oh, you’re right. I should just slap the cuffs on her right now,” Mayson said sarcastically.

“You make jokes but I’m serious.” Lois scowled. “You’ve got to admit it’s too coincidental for all of these men to die from heart problems right after an exclusive interview with her.”

“Fine. It’s weird timing.” Mayson frowned, “But that doesn’t mean...”

“Could you at least look into it? If she gets out of Metropolis before the warrant is signed...” Clark reminded her.

“I still think it’s ridiculous, but I’ll make the call,” Mayson agreed.

\*\*\*

Later that evening, Clark finished his patrol around Metropolis, preparing for dinner with Lois. After the call to bring Diana in for questioning had been made, the newscaster had disappeared. He hadn’t seen any sign of her or her cameraman, which bothered him. The announcement of the Intergang assassin’s name was supposed to be released at midnight. All they had to do was wait.

After his patrol, he went back to his apartment to change for dinner. His mom’s art show was two days away and she was hard at work, ‘sculpting’ with her laser. Apparently light was the newest technology being used to make art. His dad was sitting on the couch next to her watching the latest edition of Top Copy. He groaned when he saw Diana’s image on the television.

“Something wrong?” his dad asked.

“If I don’t see Diana Stride again it’ll be too soon,” Clark groaned, straightening his tie. Seeing his dad’s look, he decided to elaborate. “She’s not what she seems. Last night Superman stopped her from taking out a state’s witness.”

“What?” his dad looked at him in surprise.

His mom looked up with an impish expression and teased his dad, “Oh, that’s too bad. Your father always had a little crush on her.”

“That’s not true, Martha, I’ve just always thought she was very...”

“Sizzling? *Vivacious*?” his mom teased.

“... trustworthy,” his dad corrected.

Clark shook his head at that comment, “I don’t know about that, Dad. She wants to find out Superman is... me... Clark Kent... and tell the world. And I’m not sure I can stop her.”

“But if you and Lois could prove this theory about her being some kind of assassin...” his mom prompted.

“If we can find her.” Clark ran a hand through his hair. “I feel like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop. She attached a tracker to my neck. Who knows what she was pulling from it. Thankfully Lois was able to get it off and we were able to have it sent to Dr.

Klein, but still...”

“You feel like she’s closing in,” his mom said with a look of concern.

“I feel like I’m being stalked,” he said in disgust. “I just hope we can catch her before it’s too late.”

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Diana looked at the new handheld tracker, adjusting the frequency. “With any luck, we should have something show up on the scanner to allow us a chance to prove our theory.”

“You think this reporter is the key to Superman’s identity?” Rolf asked, taking a bite of an apple as he leaned back in his chair.

“I think if we get a match for the radioactive object I planted on Lois Lane then we’ll have all the proof we need,” Diana said with a sultry purse of the lips. Everything was falling into place. She glanced around the almost emptied office. “I’m going to miss this place.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re leaving,” Rolf enquired, “I mean, don’t you want to be here when the story breaks?”

“I’ve got bigger fish to fry,” Diana said with a sway of her hips. “Be sure to call me when you get a trace.”

\*\*\*

“Hot date?” Lucy teased, watching as Lois finished applying her eyeliner in the mirror.

“Aren’t you one to talk?” Lois asked, looking at her sister who was dressed in a green cocktail dress.

“It is Mom’s country club,” Lucy shrugged, smoothing the wrinkles in her dress. “I have to dress the part. Who knows, maybe the guy won’t be a complete bore.” She glanced over at Lois, eyeing the red silk dress that draped over her sister’s curves suggestively. “I see you’re pulling out all the stops. Red dress. Plunging neckline.” Lucy winked at her sister, giving her hips a suggestive bounce before sauntering out of the bathroom. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep Mom out late so you have plenty of uninterrupted time with Clark.”

“Bye, Luce,” Lois said, spreading her eyeshadow across her right lid. She heard the front door close and a click from one of the many deadbolts follow. She shook her head, turning her attention back to her reflection in the mirror. She wore her hair down, freshly curled. Her halter-top dress hung around her shoulders with a silver clip. Around her neck hung the star necklace Clark had given her for Christmas. The form-fitting dress hugged her body and moved with her as she bustled through the bathroom, putting the last touches on her ensemble.

She reached for the tube of lipstick and opened it up, frowning when she noticed a large imprint in the middle. “Lucy...” She muttered to herself, opening her mouth to apply the lipstick. She felt a tingle and ran her finger against her lips. ‘*Weird*,’ she thought, reaching over to grab a tissue. She blotted her lips then set the tube of lipstick on the counter. She frowned, rubbing at her lips and still feeling a grainy substance against her finger.

She wet a tissue and began blotting at her lips to remove the lipstick. When she looked at the tissue she saw what appeared to be a glimmering red residue. Looking back at her reflection she saw the color was still there without the grainy texture. She’d have to get herself a new tube of lipstick in the morning. She grabbed the tube and threw it in the trash. She heard a sonic boom outside and grinned, giving herself one last glance in the mirror. “Lois?” she heard him call from the living room.

“I’ll be out in a sec,” she called, tousling her hair with her fingers one last time before exiting the bathroom to greet Clark.

He was just setting a brown paper bag on the kitchen counter. “Patrol is done. Story is filed. I picked up Luigi’s and thought...” He froze, seeing her for the first time. The corners of his mouth twitched and his eyes turned dark with desire as he gazed upon her. “*Wow...*”

She felt a flutter in her abdomen and ran a hand against her hair, brushing it out of her face. “I take it you like the dress?” she asked with a half-smile, moving across the room to where he was

standing.

He stared back at her with a mesmerized expression, following her movements with his eyes until she was standing in front of him. “Wow...” His eyes wandered down her silhouette once more before returning her gaze with a lightning bolt of electricity sparking from him.

“You said that already,” she grinned back at him shyly.

“Then maybe I should just stop talking,” he whispered, moving his hands to cup both sides of her face. His lips found hers and she moaned against him, feeling the familiar softness of his mouth on hers. She felt a tingle against her lips and he let out a groan, pulling away. He hunkered down, letting out a shaky breath as he fell back.

“Clark!”

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## Chapter 5

Rolf sat in the car outside STAR Labs, looking down at the tracker in his hand. After it had gone off he’d traced it from one end of town to the other. Unfortunately, the first location Superman had been at hadn’t been recorded due to a malfunction with the device. Once he’d calibrated it, he had been able to follow Superman to this building.

The tracker was working. All he had to do was wait. He pulled out his phone to call in to the number Diana had given him. “*Bonjour? Oui, nous avons une trace. STAR Labs. Oui.*”

\*\*\*

“Are you sure about this, Mayon?” Henderson asked, looking at the photo of the celebrity anchorwoman in front of him. “I mean, I find this hard to swallow.”

“So did I,” Mayson frowned.

“You’re absolutely sure this is our assassin?” he asked.

“I just got the name from the special prosecutor,” Mayson said grimly. “Judge Arnold just signed the arrest warrant but I don’t expect her to hang around for it to get served.” She crossed her arms over her chest, glancing around the crowded station. “She’s after Mr. X. I need someone I can trust to help us hide him before he goes in front of the grand jury next week.”

“Well, I always enjoyed a good game of one-upmanship, but this might be a bit too rich for my blood.” Henderson sighed, pondering for a moment. “How soon do you need him moved?”

“Now.” Mayson gave him a pleading look.

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Lois hovered over Clark, watching in horror as his complexion went from pale to a greenish hue around his lips. “Clark?” She shook his shoulder, trying to get an answer, but his only response was to groan in agony. She glanced up at the clock on the wall. It had been half an hour since he’d collapsed. She needed to do something.

*Think.* She wracked her brain, trying to force the panic building up inside her to stop. She needed to do something. Clark was sick. Only one thing could make him sick.

Kryptonite.

She looked around the kitchen, trying to find where he could have possibly come in contact with the poisonous meteorite. She stopped, recalling the lipstick from earlier. “Oh my God,” she thought.

She bolted up, running to the bathroom to find the tube of lipstick. She returned to the kitchen where Clark was unconscious on the floor. “It’s going to be okay,” she reassured him, reaching for the phone.

He was obviously sick. She couldn’t take him to a hospital.

She reached for the phone and began to dial the familiar number...

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Diana positioned herself outside the cabin, watching through the telescopic lens for her opportunity. She had tracked down the numbers on the pager to three lawyers, a judge, and a maid, and now it appeared she had discovered the safe house for Disanto.

She watched as the armed guards moved back and forth in front of the door. This was definitely the place.

\*\*\*

It had been three hours. Lois stared at the blank walls around her. After changing Clark into the suit and calling Dr. Klein, she had rushed him to STAR Labs.

Dr. Klein had been waiting in the lobby and hurried Clark back. After what seemed like hours, but had only been half an hour, he had returned to the lobby to update her. ‘Kryptonite poisoning.’ How had he been fine one minute and not the next? She had offered up the lipstick tube that she’d retrieved from the wastebasket, uncertain how to explain its presence on Superman. Thankfully, Dr. Klein didn’t ask.

Then had come the testing for any further signs of radiation on her. A blue gel-like substance in way too large a cup had been forced down with a grimace. She had felt the goo go down with minimal gagging. Afterward, Dr. Klein had moved her into a room for monitoring to ensure the radiation had been absorbed. Then came the nauseating pains as everything she’d eaten throughout the day returned in a regurgitated form... again and again. The last test had shown less than one percent radiation.

Dr. Klein had said she wouldn’t be able to see Clark until she was at zero. Sitting here, staring into nothing and pretending that it was just a friend that was in trouble. It was just a friend that someone had tried to poison through her. She doubted Dr. Klein believed that any more than she did, but she was grateful for his silence on the issue.

She still needed to call the Kents and let them know what was going on, but right now all she could muster up the energy to do was think. Clark was hurt. Hurt in a bad he-could-have-died way. All she could think of was how stupid it had been to let her insecurities and doubts get the better of her over the last few weeks.

The doors to the room opened and Dr. Klein entered, with a syringe in one hand and the long tube he’d been using to test for radiation in the other. “Okay, let’s see if there’s anything left.”

“I don’t think I can take any more,” Lois groaned, sitting up.

“I know.” Dr. Klein grimaced, taking the long tube and running it across her abdomen once more. The device remained blue, pinged after each area had been examined. “So far so good.” He nodded to her with encouragement.

“Does that mean I can get out of here?” Lois asked hopefully.

“One more draw of blood and then you should be all right to leave,” Dr. Klein instructed.

“How’s Superman?” she asked, looking at him in concern.

“Groggy, and a little weak, but I was able to get it all out before it could do any damage.” Dr. Klein gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “He’s going to be fine.”

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Judge Brooks looked around the cabin, shaking his head, “This is a most unusual setting for a hearing, Ms. Drake.”

“I understand that, your honor, but the circumstances warrant it,” Mayson said with pleading eyes.

“Every defendant is awarded the right to confront his or her accuser,” Judge Brooks reminded her.

“Once the defendant has an attorney and we’ve ensured our witness’ safety, then she will,” Mayson promised. “That’s why you’re here.” She gestured to the man standing behind her, “I’d like you to meet Michael Disanto. Former assassin for Intergang.”

Judge Brooks looked at him suspiciously, “Hey, weren’t you on that show with what’s-her- name...?” He mumbled to himself, trying to recall the name.

“Diana Stride,” Disanto provided.

“Yes, that’s it.” Judge Brooks snapped his fingers.

“We went our separate ways,” Disanto said with a disapproving nod.

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“Lois?” Clark groggily began to come to.

“Hey,” Lois swiped the tears from her eyes, moving across the room to sit on the edge of the bed next to him. “How are you feeling? Do you want me to get Dr. Klein?” She looked back at the door that was still closed.

“No.” He pulled her in his arms, holding her close. “Just stay like this for a minute,” he whispered hoarsely.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured tearfully, looking up at him. “They wouldn’t let me near you until...”

“It’s okay,” he said, running a hand through her hair.

“No, it’s not,” she argued, feeling the tears overwhelm her. “I almost lost you and...” Her voice cracked, feeling the emotions behind her words begin to become too much once more.

“I’m right here,” he reassured her, cupping her face with his palm. “Everything’s fine.” He winced, trying to sit up.

“Are you sure you should be moving?” she asked cautiously, placing a hand on his chest.

“I’m fine. I promise. Just a little sore,” he reassured her.

“That’s not fine and you know it.” She ran a hand across his cheek.

“Dr. Klein said it’ll take a few days.” He grinned at her. “Just think: no running off to rescues for a few days. You may even get tired of me hanging around.”

“That’s not funny,” she countered, looking at him seriously. “I didn’t know what to do.” She looked at him tearfully, “If I lost you...”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he interjected. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

“I love you,” she whispered, dabbing her eyes. “More than I thought I could ever love anyone. You’re my best friend, and I’m so sorry, Clark. I never thought...”

“Neither of us did,” he soothed, holding her close to him. “You had no idea.”

“I nearly *killed* you,” she sniffed. “Then I never would have...” She stopped, taking a shaky breath.

“Never would have what?” he asked, looking at her.

“Never would have had a chance to tell you how much you mean to me,” she murmured, leaning in to kiss him. She let out a soft moan as his hand moved to cup her face, fingering the strands of hair. “I love you, Clark Kent, and I know this isn’t exactly the most romantic way of doing this, but if I don’t, I know something else will come up. Because something always comes up.”

“Lois, you’re babbling again,” he teased with a grin.

“I know,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. He ran his hand across the frame of her face and she smiled back at him in wonder. “How do you do that?” she breathed, feeling the tension disappear as she looked in his eyes. “Look at me like that and make everything disappear?”

“Like what?” he grinned at her.

“Like I’m the only person in the world,” she whispered, running her index finger against the bridge of his nose.

“I guess because you’re the only one I want to be looking at.” He grinned lazily at her.

“I love you,” she said tearfully, allowing him to tighten his arms around her. “I was so afraid I might lose you,” she said, looking up at him. “Like, really lose you, and I couldn’t bear that thought.”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily,” he joked, tightening his grip on her as he gingerly placed his feet on the ground, testing it with his toes before making a move to stand.

She looked at him in concern. “You sure you need to be standing just yet?”

“I’m fine.” He gave her a weak smile.

The soft hum from the doors opening and the groan from Dr. Klein said otherwise. “I can’t leave you for five minutes.”

“I’m fine, Dr. Klein, really,” Clark tried to reassure him.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Dr. Klein said with a disapproving stare.

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Nigel nodded to the familiar woman in front of him, readjusting the turban he wore to hide his appearance. Having his photo plastered everywhere made visits like this more difficult than before. Not only had Intergang turned on him before he had planned, but now a warrant had been issued for his arrest.

“Which way?” Gretchen asked, readjusting the wig on her head as she looked around the crowded airport.

He pointed ahead to the double doors that led to the parking garage. The sooner they left the crowded airport, the better.

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Clark leaned back against the passenger seat, watching Lois as they drove back to his apartment. It had been a long and trying day and even longer evening with him having to be rushed to STAR Labs. Why Diana had even thought to lace Lois’ lipstick with Kryptonite was beyond his comprehension. They’d been so careful in public.

“I called your parents earlier to let them know everything’s okay,” Lois said, not taking her eyes off the road as she pulled up to the curb on Clinton Street.

“I’m surprised they were still up,” he commented, glancing at the clock on her dashboard that read 3:47am. He looked around the dimly lit street, noting the dark night sky as he sat up, reaching over to unbuckle his seat belt. “I guess it’s a little late to do a patrol,” he tried to joke, knowing full well he couldn’t fly right now if he wanted to.

She opened the door and got out, giving him a serious expression that immediately sobered him. “Not funny.”

“Sorry,” he said, running a hand through his hair as he stepped out of the Jeep and followed her up the steps to his apartment.

Despite his reassurances that he was fine, it was obvious she was still very shaken by what had happened tonight. They reached his apartment door and she stopped, staring at the welcome mat outside his door. “Lois?”

“You could have died,” she croaked out in a whisper, still not looking at him.

“But I didn’t. You were quick on your feet like you always are.” He leaned against the door to force her to look at him.

“Getting Dr. Klein involved was probably the best solution in that circumstance.”

“But you could have,” she pressed, looking back at him tearfully. He felt his heart clasp in his chest, seeing the tears in her eyes. “I knew something was wrong. I should have told you about the lipstick. I should have...”

“Lois, there’s no way you could have known,” he interrupted, trying to reassure her. “You said yourself you wiped it off. There was no way you could have known what it was.” He reached over to cup her cheek, brushing away the tears that had escaped. “I’m fine. A little weak, but that’s to be expected.” She let out a sob and he pulled her into his arms, whispering reassurances, “I’m not going anywhere.” His arms instinctively tightened around her and he held her until the tears stopped.

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Diana watched for her window of opportunity, seeing the shadows move inside the cabin. The figure in the back window appeared to be guarded by two officers. One in the front and one to the left. Unfortunately for Michael, the position they had him in left him completely open and ready for her to deliver a deadly blow.

She smiled as she fired the grenade launcher into the window, shattering glass everywhere. Tear gas emitted in the air, forcing everyone outside the cabin. She grinned, holding her rifle steady as she shot the silhouettes coming out of the cabin one by one. The smoke cleared and she gasped in surprise, seeing three guards exit the cabin, covered in protective gear and gas masks.

“No!” she fumed angrily.

“Yes,” a voice from behind her spoke evenly, and she felt a metal barrel press against the back of her head.

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Lois let out a low moan as she felt the vibration of Clark's moan against her lips. He outlined her jaw with his palm, cupping her cheek as he deepened their embrace. Two hands clasped the back of his head, blindly murmuring distraught lips against his as he struggled to maintain enough focus and unlock the door behind them.

She leaned back against the unlocked door, linking her arms around his neck, letting out a soft giggle. "You sure... this is a... good... idea... with your...?" She managed in-between heated kisses. "What if someone...?" She gasped in surprise when she felt his palm slip up her back as he pressed against her.

She let out an inaudible moan as she felt a familiar twinge in her belly as he spoke. "I'm sure." The husky tone of his whisper sent a shudder down her spine.

"I love you," she let out a sultry gasp as the bridge of his nose nuzzled the lobe of her ear. He nodded, opening the door as he wrapped an arm around her waist as they fell into the open doorway. She let out a sharp gasp when they hit the ground, feeling where Clark had rolled them over to take most of the impact. Watching him struggle from beneath her to reach the door with his foot she couldn't help but laugh.

"Shhh," he chuckled, unable to hide his own amusement at the situation. She laughed harder, trying to sit up, only to fall back again, unable to sit herself up to reach the door. He finally found the leverage he needed to roll them over so he could kick the door closed, and the lights in the living room turned on.

"Everything okay out here?" his dad asked from the bedroom entryway.

"Fine," Lois managed to squeak out, trying to suppress the urge to scream and laugh at the same time. Clark let out an inaudible sigh and helped her to her feet. She glanced to the doorway where Martha had joined Jonathan, looking at them both in concern. She looked back to Clark whose face was full of regret.

"We were worried sick when Lois called to tell us what happened. How in the world someone would think to do something like that is beyond me..." Martha said with a yawn as she moved into the living room.

"I'm fine," Clark reassured them, wrapping an arm around Lois from behind. "Dr. Klein was extremely thorough. There's no Kryptonite left in either of our systems."

His parents exchanged a look and his mom looked to the kitchen. "I'm going to put on a pot of coffee. You two are probably starving..."

As if on cue, Lois heard her stomach grumble and groaned. "Great."

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## Chapter 6

"Hey," Lois smiled up at Clark, who was watching her. His arms tightened around her, rolling them over from where they'd fallen asleep on the couch last night. She ran a hand through her hair with her fingers, trying to smooth out the mess she knew her hair was probably in.

"Hey," he grinned back at her, and his eyes wandered down to the old t-shirt and shorts she'd borrowed to sleep in. Despite their best attempts to stay up after the Kents had retired to the bedroom at around five am, they both had given into exhaustion with ease.

"What time is it?" she asked through a yawn.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked, looking at her with a smirk.

"That late?" she grimaced.

"Welllll," he made a face. "Let's just say it's a good thing we called that story in to Perry about our suspicions on the Diana Stride story."

"How mad is he?" Lois cringed, expecting to hear grumblings of dog show duty.

He shook his head, "Like I said, it's a good thing we called that in because the unnamed assassin was picked up last night."

He pointed to the television that was on with the news station turned on and the volume muted. A ticker ran across the screen implicating the 'Intergang Assassin' in at least three hundred murders over the last five years.

"Looks like we have some calls to make," Lois said, peering at the clock on the television and groaning. "Eleven-thirty?"

"I already called Perry. Told him we'd be in this afternoon. I think Mom and Dad already left for her art exhibit," he explained before she could panic.

"Oh, that's right," Lois groaned, recalling the reason for the Kents' extended visit. "That's tonight."

"*Art Through Light*." He grinned. "Only in Metropolis."

She smiled, looking over at him. "So, Dr. Klein said he would keep Superman's visit to STAR Labs quiet. Do you think it'll be possible?" she asked gently, uncertain how to bring up the scare from last night without jumping in head first.

His expression sobered and he sighed, "Honestly, I don't know, but given that it was you who took me to STAR Labs and not an ambulance, I don't see why not. There's nothing to indicate her attempt was even successful."

"I still don't understand how she connected the two. I mean, we've been so careful." She sighed, running her hand against his chest.

"There's no telling," he mused, shaking his head. "The important thing is she's been caught."

"Yeah," she said, meeting his gaze.

Last night and most of yesterday she'd gone over and over every conversation, trying to understand why someone would want to hurt Clark. It was something that continued to haunt her over the last few months -- ever since she'd been let in on the secret. Superman did so much good for Metropolis and the world, yet someone somewhere was looking for a way to hurt and sometimes kill him.

This time had been different, though. She wasn't just holding his hand while he fought through it. She was forced to stay on the sidelines while Dr. Klein did what he could to save him. She couldn't call anyone. She couldn't turn to anyone. She'd never felt so much anguish and relief all at the same time.

She had been used to deliver the poisonous rock to him.

She had been quarantined and unable to stay updated on how he was.

The level to which Diana Stride had gone to ensure Clark would be exposed to Kryptonite was unnerving. He would always be a target. That was a truth that she'd come to accept over the past few months, but she knew she was also a target for some. Despite their attempts to keep Superman at a distance, there would always be a connection. For the first year of Superman's arrival in Metropolis, she'd staked her claim on the Man of Steel and practically marked her territory around him, daring any reporter to challenge her. That wasn't something that would disappear anytime soon. The closer they became, the harder it was to deny that connection.

She frowned, recalling the anguish she'd been through over the last twelve hours, unable to turn to anyone. Every conversation she'd had with him over the last few months had raced through her mind at lightning speed. He could have died. The reality of how close she'd come to losing him hit home in a painful way. Despite every fear and qualm she had about relationships and marriage, in general, the one thing she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was how empty her life was without Clark in it. Waiting another second to say what had been weighing on her mind for the last twenty-four hours seemed impossible.

"Lois?" He nudged her arm, trying to get her attention, and she looked up at him, feeling a sense of determination wash over her. "You okay?"

"Perfect." She smiled up at him, sitting up and positioning herself in his arms. She sighed happily when she felt his arms wrap around her, pulling her into a tight cocoon. "You know,

yesterday really scared me,” she began cautiously. “I kept thinking what would happen if I lost you... really lost you. You’ve had close calls before, but nothing like this.”

“I know.” He whispered a kiss against her temple.

“I couldn’t bear the thought of not having you in my life. The idea of losing you...” Her voice began to quiver. “I don’t want to know what that’s like. Every fear and insecurity seems pointless and meaningless when you look at the big picture because I do love you.”

“I love you too,” he whispered, cupping her face with his palm.

“Enough to spend the rest of your life with me?” she asked, hearing the intake of breath as he turned to look at her.

“Enough to spend every last second with you until the end of time,” he said, leaning in to kiss her.

“I don’t want a big wedding... or a long engagement. I think that’s just asking for trouble considering how the last few months have been. I don’t want to change my last name on our by-line.” She began to ramble and he proceeded to scoop her into his arms and carry her across the room. “*Clark!*” she shrieked in surprise when he set her down in front of the shelf, pulling out a familiar velvet box.

He opened the box, revealing the diamond ring he’d proposed to her with back in Hawaii. A grin crossed his face and he teased, “Does this mean I have to propose again?”

“I don’t think you can top your last speech,” she beamed back at him, running a hand across his cheek.

His lip curled and his grin broadened, staring back at her with the ring in hand. “Is that a challenge?”

Lois giggled, watching him pull the ring out of the box. “If you remember, we had to actually leave Metropolis for that to happen. Knowing our luck, Perry or Jimmy will show up. Or a disaster will happen or...” she stopped, feeling his hand cup her cheek and turned her head to look up at him.

A smirk crossed his face and he took her hand in his, meeting her gaze. “Lois Lane, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she grabbed him by the collar of his t-shirt, pulling him to her in a soul-shattering kiss.

He moaned against her lips, slowly breaking off the kiss. A smile crossed his face and he took her hand, slipping the ring on her finger, then whispered, “Now it’s official.” He leaned in and recaptured her lips.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, wedging her fingers through the dark silky locks on the back of his head. It was too good to last. Like always, something got in the way. This time it was the simultaneous ringing of the phone and knocking at the door. They separated and Lois sighed, “Always something.”

Clark went to answer the phone, and Lois headed toward the door to answer the doorbell. On the doorstep was a white box with a red ribbon. She picked it up and headed back inside where Clark was finishing up his phone call, “Yeah, I’ll let her know. Thanks, Chief.”

“You got a package,” she said, setting it on the dining table.

“I’m not expecting anything,” he said with a frown.

He opened the box and Lois gasped in surprise, “Clark!” Inside the box was a torn cape and a note that read “*You’re Next*” in black ink.

The front door opened and they both jumped, slightly spooked after finding the note. They looked up and saw Martha and Jonathan standing by the door. “Looks like you two are finally up,” Jonathan said with a smile. “How are you feeling, son?”

Clark quickly placed the cover pack on the package, and answered, “Fine.”

His mom closed the door behind them. “Tickets for tonight’s show.” She waved them in the air. “Looks like it’ll be quite the party.” His mom seemed to pick up on the uneasiness on Clark’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Clark ran a hand through his hair. “It’s just been a

long night is all. What time is the show?”

Martha didn’t look like she believed him but didn’t say anything. “Uh, seven.” She handed them the tickets. “You sure everything’s okay?”

“Perfect,” he said with a grin, wrapping an arm around Lois from behind.

“Actually, more than perfect,” Lois grinned, holding her hand up for them to see the newly placed engagement ring. The room erupted in congratulations and hugs. She did her best to focus on her excitement about the new engagement, but found her mind drifting to the mysterious package that had arrived on Clark’s doorstep.

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“I... I... I...” Gretchen slammed her fist against the metal chest in front of her and the tone dropped an octave.

“Any luck?” Nigel asked, peering over her shoulder.

“Still nothing as of yet.” Gretchen frowned. “Don’t worry. I’ll get him up and running.”

“I have no doubt,” Nigel responded. “Mr. Luthor has big plans for Mr. Corbin. You never were one to disappoint.”

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“That’s not... helping,” Lois laughed, trying to focus on turning the key to the last deadbolt on her apartment. It was hard to stay focused on anything at the moment other than the hazy feeling that was washing over her as her fiancé’s lips moved up and down the nape of her neck and his palms continued trailing up and down her ribcage.

“Who said anything about *helping*?” he teased, grazing his teeth against the flesh of her throat.

“We were supposed to be at the office half an hour ago,” she reminded him breathlessly, turning in his arms to face him.

“We can’t do anything anyway until Mayson shows up,” he pointed out, leaning against her and pressing her against the door frame. His left hand moved to cup her cheek and he brushed his lips against hers.

The door jerked open and they pulled back, meeting the gaze of a very annoyed Ellen Lane. Lois cleared her throat, trying to find her voice. “Hi.” She hung in the doorway with Clark, uncertain what to say. Given how she’d left the apartment last night and the evasive voicemail she’d left on the answering machine, she could only imagine her mother’s reaction.

“*Hi*?” Ellen echoed, looking at her in disbelief. “You disappear and don’t show up until...” She glanced back at the clock. “Almost noon! All you can say is hi? Where have you been? I’ve been worried sick!”

Lucy was sitting on the couch, shaking her head as she read through her notes. “I told you she was *fine*.”

“Well, I didn’t know that,” her mother responded with a harrumph.

Lois sighed, closing the door behind them as she and Clark entered the apartment. “You didn’t call?” He looked at her in surprise.

“I left a message on the answering machine,” Lois replied, pointing toward the kitchen where the phone was still blinking red.

“I don’t know how to work that contraption,” her mother shrugged dismissively. “Too many options. I don’t know why you can’t just have a voicemail with one button and a tape to rewind like everyone else... I swear you do things like this just to make it more difficult. If you wanted me to know where you were, you would have left a note, not a voicemail that you know good and well I can’t check. I’m over here worrying that you’re dead in the street and...” Her mother’s ramblings came to a halt when her keen eye picked up on a certain piece of jewelry on a very important finger. “Is that what I think it is?”

Lucy bolted up from the couch and crossing the living room at record-breaking speed. “You finally said yes?”

Lois grinned ear-to-ear, waving her left hand in the air and sharing a look with Clark, “Yes, we’re getting married.”

“Oh, this is so wonderful! We’ll have to get a wedding planner... and see about getting a venue booked right away. Oh, I cannot *wait!*” Her mother’s eyes lit up with delight and Lois could sense the thunderstorm that was about to come raining down. If there was one thing her mother could do, it was to turn any small occasion into an extravaganza of an event. That was not what either she or Clark wanted. She was still trying to catch up to the one-eighty her mother had done on her, going from chastising her to wedding planning. Only her mother.

Before she could burst her mother’s bubble, however, Clark interjected, wrapping an arm around her as he spoke, “Yes, but we both agreed something small and simple is the way to go.”

“*Small?*” Her mom croaked out the words like venom.

“Congratulations, you guys!” Lucy squealed happily, reaching over to hug them both.

“Thanks,” Lois smiled, hugging her sister back, and turning to her dumbfounded mother who looked like she had just had the wind knocked out of her sails. “We also don’t want a long engagement, either. That’s why we wanted to keep things simple. We were thinking maybe two or three months, tops...”

“*Two months?*” her mother echoed in surprise.

“Well, if anyone can do it, you can,” Lucy chimed in with a grin.

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Diana stared back at the man in front of her, waiting for him to speak. He adjusted his glasses, folding his hands on the table in front of her. “You’re probably wondering how you got caught, right?”

“The question has come to mind,” Diana admitted, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You’re probably wondering how you ended up in front of the wrong safe house.” He grinned back at her giddily, celebrating her downfall.

“Maybe,” she admitted.

“Yeah, you want to know where it all went wrong, but see, we’ll have a lot of time to catch up. We’ll be talking a lot about your murder-for-hire occupation and your more recent assignment to kill a state’s witness.” His eyes narrowed, “You do know that’s punishable by the death penalty, right?”

“Not if I have something you want,” she replied coolly.

“And what is that?” he asked.

“The head of the snake,” she said with a satisfied smile.

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“Perry is going to kill us,” Lois whispered as she watched the numbers to the floors change inside the Daily Planet elevator. She let out a soft moan, drawing her hands through the hair on the back of her fiancé’s head. Her back pressed against the corners of the elevator wall as she ran her hands through his dark, silky hair.

“Uh-huh,” Clark gave an innocuous grunt, nibbling at the lobe of her ear with his teeth.

Two hours. It had taken them two hours to get to the Planet from the time Perry had called, ordering them in to his office for an update on Diana Stride. The call that came in at exactly three minutes after her fiancé had placed the ring on her hand. She couldn’t help but grin at that word.

“We’re late,” she murmured against his lips.

“We’re allowed,” he responded with a shrug, tightening his arms around her waist. “Mayson is supposed to come by with the update at three,” he reminded her. “That gives us plenty of time to get the story in for the evening edition. Perry will be fine.”

“I suppose we can always distract him with announcing our engagement,” she grinned mischievously as the elevator doors opened, fingering the diamond on her left hand.

“Mmm hmm.” He leaned in to recapture her lips as the elevator chimed, announcing their arrival on the newsroom floor.

The gentle ribbing from their co-workers and hollering from their editor quickly brought them back to the present. “Lane, Kent, what’d ya think that is, your own personal kissing booth?”

Lois fought the urge to throw a smart remark back, but seeing the look on her editor’s face, decided not to push it. She glanced back at Clark, sharing a smile, before following Perry into his office.

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### ***Diana Stride Assassin Exposed!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

Mr. Darryl read through the article in front of him, trying to calm his temper. Two assassins down, and still Disanto lived and Diana was in the wind. No one had heard anything from her. He frowned, pondering what his next move needed to be. Diana was too smart to allow herself to be caught without a way to leverage her freedom. Who would be the sacrificial lamb? A lowly lieutenant who had crossed her over the years? An undercover cop? A judge or senator?

He took a drink from his glass, looking to the building in front of him. He’d put a lot of work into this evening. He wouldn’t let himself lose focus. Diana would be taken care of, as would Disanto. Tonight was about the arts.

“Right this way, Mr. Darryl,” the coordinator pointed to the hallway in front of them, with a sign that read, “*Metropolis In Lights!*” Some of the most influential people in Metropolis would be here tonight and he wasn’t going to let a little wrinkle in his plans get in the way. After all, finding a good senator to turn wasn’t an easy task.

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The Metropolis Museum of Art was dimly lit, with light sculptures providing most of the light in the gallery. Glow sticks were being used as accessories by the guests and artists. Lois scanned the room, trying to find Martha’s exhibit. “This is very strange,” she said, looking up at the sculpture in front of her with different textures and colors displayed through the light. It didn’t look like anything.

“I think that’s supposed to be abstract,” Clark whispered in her ear as he wrapped his arm around her.

“If you say so,” she said, looking around the room. Every display had a different style.

After calming Perry down with the latest update on Diana Stride’s capture, and landing the one-on-one interview with the DA on Michael Disanto’s testimony, the story that every reporter wanted to know was printed in the Daily Planet. It was a great way to give a strong finish before the Meriwether Awards dinner.

Perry and Jimmy had been ecstatic when she and Clark had announced their engagement this afternoon. She could tell Perry was trying to hide how much the news meant to him. Perry had become like a surrogate father to her over the years. He’d listened to her rant about her troubled personal life more times than she could count before she’d been let in on the secret.

So much had changed over the last few months. Now here they were, happily engaged.

Clark was starting to get little bursts of his super abilities back, but so far the powers still hadn’t returned. Given how long it took after his first exposure to Kryptonite, they anticipated he’d be back to his super self by the end of the week. For now, she was enjoying being able to celebrate their engagement without a disaster getting in the way.

Thankfully the Metro had announced rooms would be available Saturday morning. Her mother had already booked her room with all the required amenities. The building owner announced a six-week wait until tenants could move back in. Given how booked city officials normally were on things like this, that was a pretty good turnaround. She loved her mother. She was grateful for her strength and perseverance over the years, but living under the same roof was driving everyone crazy.

“There’s Mom’s,” Clark pointed to a Greek-looking sculpture of a man with three faces. Lois nodded, following him to the exhibit.

Next to the exhibit was a man in an expensive suit and gray

hair, pointing to the light sculpture and talking to the crowd of bigwigs. “You see how the light reflects off the shoulders here? Pristine...”

Clark turned to his mom, who was standing to the side, listening, and asked “Who is that?”

“That’s Mr. Darryl. He organized this event,” Martha explained.

Lois noticed several familiar faces within the crowd. Many of them were officers or attorneys she’d come across from time to time over the past few years. She frowned, looking around the room suspiciously. “Since when do the DA and the ADA show up to an event like this with the leader of the SWAT team?” she asked, gesturing across the room to where Mayson and Michael Clemmons were standing by the entryway.

Clark turned to where she had gestured and his forehead crinkled in concern. “Oh, I got a bad feeling.” He tapped his mom on the shoulder and pointed to the corner, where it looked like an undercover team was working to close off all the exits. She looked over in surprise, then nodded, allowing Clark to guide her and Lois away from what appeared to be the intended target of the undercover team.

“What do you think’s going on?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know,” Clark said, “But they seem awfully interested in that Mr. Darryl.”

“I guess it’s a good thing your father went to grab my sweater from the car,” Martha frowned, looking toward the entryway where the police chief stood, hanging a pair of handcuffs by his index finger as he approached Darryl from behind.

“There’s still a lot of people in here,” Clark observed in concern, looking to the crowded room.

Lois reached into her purse and pulled out the camera she’d brought to take pictures of the exhibit. She waited until the police chief was standing in front of Darryl before she snapped the first photo. Chaos erupted as Darryl tried to run. She glanced at Clark, hoping he might have some inkling as to what had just been said. He shrugged back, placing a protective arm around her shoulders as they watched the scene unfold. She could tell from his pained expression that it was killing him to not be able to help. He was used to being there to help when things went south. All they could do now was to pray everyone remained safe during this scuffle. His arm tightened around her shoulders, and she sighed, looking back at him with a knowing expression before turning back to the camera in her hand. She snapped picture after picture, hoping at least one of them could be used by Perry.

Finally, she heard a loud shout as the police chief barked, “You’re under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder and crimes too numerous to count. Your days of running Intergang through this city are over!”

“Intergang?” Lois echoed, looking back at Clark.

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## Chapter 7

### *Head of Intergang or Ruse?*

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

### *Stride to Testimony Equals Death Penalty!*

*By Kathie Irwin*

### *Lane and Kent Partners For Life!*

*By Diane Reed*

Lex Luthor stared at the front page of the Daily Planet in front of him. He did his best to control his fury at the image of his former fiancée in the arms of Clark Kent. Not only had she moved on with someone so lowly, but she continued to flaunt the new relationship in his face. He took a deep breath, turning his attention to the articles on Diana Stride. Hiring her to expose Superman’s secrets to the world had been a stroke of genius on Nigel’s part. It was too bad she’d been caught before she’d been able to follow through. His plans for revenge against Metropolis would have benefited from knowing the man behind the spandex suit; a man who kept thwarting his plans.

He turned his attention to the small capsule tucked in his breast pocket. Soon he would be out of here. Keeping up the charade of the docile inmate listening to orders from lowly guards tore at him, but he knew it was only a matter of time before he could walk out of these prison walls and take back what was rightfully his.

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Lois set the paper down, smiling at the headlines which had graced the front page of the Daily Planet. She spotted Clark walking toward her with an extra skip in his step. “I take it everything’s back to normal?” she enquired. “He’d gone by STAR Labs for a follow-up with Dr. Klein. His powers had returned yesterday evening, within the time window he’d been given to expect them back.

“Yeah,” he said, perching himself on the edge of her desk. “Clean bill of health.”

Lois let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “Good.” She fingered his tie happily. “Then everything can start getting back to normal around here.”

“Almost everything,” he grinned, taking her left hand in his and bringing it to him to kiss. She smiled at the gesture and reached her hand up to stroke his cheek. He met her gaze. “I’m hoping that with the capture of the ‘supposed’ head of Intergang, that’ll be the last we see of these guys. I think we could all use a break.”

“Yeah, but you and I both know there was a lot of evidence leading to the Churches,” Lois reminded him. “Somehow, I don’t think they’ll be going quietly.”

“Hey, you two, what are you still doing here?” Perry asked, walking up to them in his tuxedo. “We’re supposed to be at the awards dinner in an hour.” The Meriwether Award dinner was tonight, and both Perry and Mr. Stern would be in attendance, along with the rest of the nominees on the shortlist and their dates.

“We were just heading out,” Lois said, reaching over to turn her monitor off. Perry grunted his disapproval at the time, then hollered to Jimmy, “Olsen! Any word from Franklin Stern?”

Jimmy popped his head up from his cubicle, “He said he’d be meeting you guys at the Metro.”

“Oh, brother, I’d better call Alice...” Perry walked into his office.

Clark chuckled, watching the door close behind Perry before turning back toward her, “I guess we’d better get moving before Perry comes back out here. I’m not sure how long this thing is going to run so I need to go ahead and do a quick patrol. Do you want to...?” He gave a flying motion with his hand.

Lois readjusted her purse on her shoulder as they walked toward the stairwell. “I’ll just meet you there with Perry. I brought my dress, just in case,” she pointed to the corridor leading to the storage lockers.

“Okay,” he leaned in to kiss her. “Hopefully this won’t take too long.”

“For your sake, you better hope not. You do remember that lecture you got after the Kerths, right?” She laughed, recalling the yarn Perry had spun when Clark showed up two minutes late.

“I remember... vividly,” he said, cupping her cheek. “Though I wasn’t really focused on Perry’s Elvis yarn at the moment. Someone was very distracting in that dress throughout most of the evening.”

“Distracting?” She grinned back at him innocently. “*Moi?* I thought you liked that dress.”

“I do,” he wiggled his eyebrows at her. “That’s why it was distracting.”

She bit her lower lip, suppressing the urge to explore more of what exactly Clark had found distracting about her that evening. They were already late and the car Perry had ordered would be there soon. “Uh-huh,” she fingered the knot on his tie. “I think you should get out of here before you distract either of us anymore.” He laughed, leaning in to kiss her before he turned to leave.

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Bill Church Jr. stared at the headline, shaking his head. Diana had been a good friend over the years but it seemed Intergang would have to cut its ties with her. The rumor in the department was that she was preparing to hand over evidence that would implicate Intergang in the assassination of some of the more influential world leaders over the past decade. He took a deep breath, looking over the ocean water below the private jet he was in. Perhaps a relocation was in order. Intergang would not be snuffed out by a few traitors.

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Clark readjusted the tie on his tux, looking around the crowded streets outside the Metro Hotel where the Meriwether Awards dinner was being held. After a quick patrol and change of clothes, he arrived with a few minutes to spare. He scanned the hotel lobby as he climbed up the steps, looking for Lois, but didn't see her. A gold-framed sign stood in the entryway directing everyone attending the awards dinner to make their way to the Regency Suite.

He made his way through the hallway until he found the suite. The doors were still closed with a note to wait at the bar until the event host arrived. He glanced toward the bar, hoping to catch sight of his fiancée. Unfortunately, the only familiar face he saw was a competing news anchor from WGBS News. Not exactly someone he wanted to kill time with while he waited for the rest of the Daily Planet guests to arrive. He looked around the lobby, spotting the reception desk with a sign that read, "Now accepting reservations."

He couldn't help but chuckle to himself, recalling how many interrupted evenings and moments he and Lois had had between both his and her family's impeccable timing. He used to think Jimmy just had bad luck, but Lois' mother and sister put his interruptions to shame. A smile spread across his face as he recalled how close they'd come to finally consummating their relationship before Ellen had arrived on Lois' doorstep, shortly followed by her sister. Then the other night after his scare with the Kryptonite, his parents had woken up immediately, killing the mood. Lois had finally accepted his proposal -- three torturous weeks later. They still had yet to actually celebrate their engagement without any interference from well-meaning family or friends. The arrival of that mysterious package on his doorstep and excitement over sharing the news with family and friends kept both of them busy -- along with taking down one of the biggest criminal organizations in the world. Something always got in the way.

Tonight was different, though. There were no bad guys to chase down. There were no deadlines to worry about. Tonight was about celebrating their success as partners. Being recognized by a prestigious group like the Meriwethers as a successful investigating team meant a lot to both him and Lois. It was an honor and said a lot about how well they worked together.

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked, pulling him back to the present.

Finally making his decision he nodded, placing his wallet on the countertop to pull out the appropriate ID and payment information. "I need to get a room for the night."

"I'm sorry, sir, we won't have any rooms available until after eleven tomorrow," she gave him an apologetic smile.

"You don't have *anything* available?" he asked, giving the receptionist his best pleading smile. He knew if he waited any longer he'd lose his nerve and back out. Then, given the extra time, the universe would find one more way to get in the way of him and Lois celebrating their engagement and what he hoped would be an award -- without the interference of friends, family, or groundbreaking stories.

"Well, we do have *one* room available," she said, turning the monitor for him to see it.

He smiled and nodded to her. "I'll take it."

"Great," she grinned, typing a few keys into the computer. "I'll need your ID and credit card..." she prompted.

"Boy, they just let anyone into one of these things, don't they?" he heard a familiar voice behind him.

He looked behind him, surprised to find Linda King dressed to the nines in a teal minidress with a plunging neckline. "Linda," he offered her a smile, "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, I'm assuming," she nodded toward the door, where two ushers were setting up the entryway for the Meriwether Award dinner.

Clark nodded, offering a half-smile, "Uh, congratulations on the nomination. I didn't realize you'd gotten back into journalism."

"Well, after the movie deal fell through, I began freelancing for the Tribune," she said, giving him a leering expression. "I see you haven't changed a bit. Let me guess: Lois is your date again?"

Clark did his best to suppress his annoyance at Linda's dig toward Lois. It had been over a year since they'd seen each other, and despite the recent engagement announcement, he knew it was quite possible she wasn't aware of either the change in his and Lois' relationship nor the dual nomination for the competing award. "Actually, we were both nominated for the award... as a team."

"Here you go, Mr. Kent," the receptionist laid the hotel key on the counter with his ID and credit card. "Checkout is at ten. Enjoy your stay."

"Stay?" Linda echoed, looking at him curiously as he tucked the key in his breast pocket and reinserted his ID and credit card back in his wallet.

"Looks like they're seating people," he pointed to the door.

"Looks like your date's not here," Linda said with a disapproving glance behind him. "Mind escorting me in?" She flashed him a smile, "For old time's sake."

Clark shook his head, "I'd rather wait on..." He stopped mid-sentence catching a glimpse of Lois at the entrance, followed close behind by Perry, Alice, Mr. Stern and his wife. "*Wow.*" His conversation with Linda King was long forgotten as he met his fiancée's gaze from across the room.

Lois was a vision in violet. The silk and chiffon flowed around her curves, forming a perfect A-line cut on the strapless gown. Her hair was pinned back halfway and a shawl hung over her shoulders as she approached him with a smile. She was breathtaking.

He ran a hand across her cheek, leaning in to kiss her, "You look incredible. Are you *trying* to kill me?"

She grinned up at him, "Well, you said the other dress was too *distracting.*"

"So your plan was to go for driving me even more crazy with distractions?" he guessed, allowing his eyes to gaze down the beaded bodice with a curved sweetheart neckline, then move to her bare shoulders which were only covered with the sheer material of her shawl.

"Is it working?" she teased, running a hand down the front of his tuxedo suggestively.

"What do you think?" he murmured, leaning in to kiss her.

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Lois walked through the entrance of the Metro Hotel, scanning the crowded lobby for Clark. The sign directed guests to the Regency Suite where the Meriwether Awards dinner was taking place. Two ushers were standing outside the doors, moving the red rope-line barrier to the entryway. She craned her neck, looking to see if Clark was inside yet.

Not seeing him, she turned her attention to the other side of the lobby near the reception desk, and spotted Clark staring at her with a smile lighting up his eyes. She grinned triumphantly, seeing the mesmerized expression on his face. Then she spotted her ex-best friend, Linda King standing behind him. "What is she doing here?" she wondered, moving toward him.

Clark took a few steps toward her, meeting her with a smile on

his face. She grinned back at him as he ran a hand across her cheek. She stared back at him, meeting his gaze and reveling in the feeling of being the only one he seemed to focus on. He leaned in to kiss her, allowing his lips to linger on hers. His arms slipped down the curve of her back and he whispered, “You look incredible. Are you trying to kill me?”

She grinned up at him. She’d gone to award dinners before, but this one was different. She’d gone through the painstaking process of finding the right dress to get just the reaction she wanted from Clark. Almost six months and a week of non-stop interruptions from her family and his. The morning after she’d accepted his proposal had been the last time she’d had him to herself. She hated the fact that she’d been too distracted by his proposal a few weeks ago to take full advantage of the fact that they were alone in paradise without any interruptions. Now here they were engaged and had yet to be able to celebrate their engagement properly. Something she planned to rectify tonight if it killed her.

“Well, you said the other dress was too distracting,” she reminded him.

He looked down at her dress, tightening his grasp on her as he whispered in her ear. “So your plan was to go for driving me even more crazy with distractions?”

“Is it working?” she asked, smoothing her palm up and down the front of his tux. She allowed her hand to linger just above the waistband of his slacks, meeting his gaze with a heated one of her own. She smiled up at him, running her palm back up his chest and over his right shoulder.

He let out a breath, pulling her close so she could feel the heat radiating from him as he stared back at her, his eyes dark with desire. “What do you think?” His voice was husky as he leaned in to capture her lips with his.

“I think if we don’t get our apartments back soon I may go insane.” She moved her hands up over his shoulders and linked her arms around his neck.

“Yeah, about that...” He pulled out a keycard from his breast pocket with the ‘M’ logo on it.

Her eyes lit up, seeing the hotel keycard in his hand. Trying to refrain from seeming too eager, she looked back at the doorway where the nominees were lining up, “How long is this dinner?”

“Excuse me,” the familiar voice of Linda King cut in, pulling them back to the present. “You’re blocking the aisle.”

“Linda, surprised to see you at an awards dinner for journalists. What happened? Get bored with acting?” Lois asked smugly, recalling their last conversation when Linda had been headed to Hollywood to play her in a movie about the takedown of Preston Carpenter.

She glanced down at the dress Linda was wearing, suppressing a groan. Linda was still flaunting everything as always. The plunging neckline and a hemline that should be illegal screamed “Look at me.” A few months ago she would have felt threatened by the return of her old rival, but that was the old Lois Lane. She didn’t have anything to prove or outdo when it came to Linda King. True, Linda had betrayed her in a painful and heartbreaking way years ago, but after all these years the woman still hadn’t changed. The trials and changes in her and Clark’s relationship and the change in the dynamic of her and her mother’s relationship helped her recognize the insecurity and inadequacies that were written all over Linda’s face. Linda was still playing the same game and hadn’t learned anything from her experiences.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Linda scoffed. “As I was telling your partner... err, boyfriend, here.”

“Fiancée,” Clark corrected, holding up the recent accessory on Lois’ left hand.

“Right, as I was telling your fiancée -- the movie fell through, so I’ve been working at the Tribune.” Realization seemed to dawn on Linda as the name she’d just called Clark hung in the air. The shock on Linda’s face kept Lois from saying anything else. “Well,

things certainly have changed around here.” She looked to Lois with envy, “Fiancée, *really*? I thought you swore off marriage until you won your first Pulitzer.”

Lois smiled, recalling the big dreams she’d set for herself back in college. She shook her head, “Yeah, I did... and then I found someone I wanted to have with me when we finally do get that Pulitzer. Success can be pretty lonely when you don’t have anyone to share it with.”

“Hey, you two, they’re about to start,” Perry said, waving them over.

“See you inside,” Lois said, turning toward the entrance with Clark in tow.

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Catherine Wilder stared at the paperwork in front of her. This was her chance. Her chance to give meaning to her father’s life’s work. Valhalla. It was something she had heard about for years when she was growing up. It was a name she associated with his love for her. The stories he would tell of Valhalla and the mythical gods who would retire there after battle.

“Do we have a deal?” her mother’s voice penetrated her thoughts.

She let out a long breath, looking to the blonde-haired goon standing next to her mother. Why she allowed herself to be reduced to such lowly characters was beyond her. “Make the call and I’ll take care of negotiations.”

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## Chapter 8

Perry patted Clark on the shoulder, looking at the award Lois held in her hands. “I knew you two would bring this one home.”

Clark scanned the suite that had been converted into a dining hall for the awards dinner. Most of the other networks’ representatives were beginning to head toward the bar to lick their wounds. He still couldn’t believe it. He stared at the gold pillar in Lois’ arms with their names etched on the front. Their first dual award.

“Our first award as a team,” Lois said, holding up the award as they walked through the exit and into the lobby.

“Well, you two have definitely earned it,” Perry said, pointing to the signs leading to the bar where the rest of the nominees were gathering. “I think everyone’s headed over to lick their wounds.”

Clark let out a chuckle as Perry craned his neck, looking over to see who was where. There were four tables set up in the dining area where Mr. Stern and his wife were seated with Alice. He suppressed a groan, realizing Perry was looking to make a night of the win. He wanted to celebrate their big win -- but *with* Lois. He glanced back at Lois who had the same distraught expression on her face. The look of yearning in her eyes was enough to break him into a cold sweat. All evening he’d felt every torturous caress and seen every heated glance his incredibly sexy fiancée had thrown at him. The keycard that sat in his pocket felt like an anvil weighing on him. Though he knew they should probably at least make an appearance at the bar with their owner and editor, the idea of spending another second on this floor that didn’t get him any closer to the suite he knew was waiting for them upstairs seemed like torture.

“You two up for a nightcap before we head out?” Perry asked. “My treat.”

“*No!*” Lois shouted a bit louder than necessary. Perry looked back at her in surprise and she blushed, “What I mean is we’re going to head out. It’s been a long day and an even longer week. We do have to find a home for this guy,” she patted the award.

“Oh, right,” Perry smiled, “I’ll see you two later then?” They exchanged a look, unsure what he was referring to, and Perry chuckled, “I’m losing track of my days I guess. I’ll see you Monday then?”

“Night, Chief,” Lois said. Perry moved toward the table to join Alice and Mr. Stern and his wife in the dining area.

“Oh, I thought he’d never leave,” Lois mumbled, turning to

face him.

“Let’s get out of here before he notices we’re still here,” Clark reminded her, pointing to the elevator doors that were opening across the aisle from her.

\*\*\*

Lois gasped, feeling a pleasurable jolt run down her spine as she felt her fiancé’s solid frame press against her. The hum of the elevator moving up the floors above them echoed in her mind as his lips devoured hers. His hands cupped both sides of her face, moving down her shoulders and to her wrists, intertwining his fingers with hers as he pinned them up above her head, against the elevator walls. “I thought... they didn’t have any... rooms?” she asked breathlessly between heated kisses.

“There was one room available,” he whispered huskily. She bent her leg, leaning back against the elevator wall and enjoying the pleasurable jolt that was running down her spine from every caress. His hands moved down her sides, running his palms up and down the chiffon dress she wore and creating a heated trail in their wake.

“I love you,” she murmured happily, running her hands through his hair. She let out a low moan against his lips as she felt his magical digits slip dangerously high up her thighs, scrunching the hem of her dress further and further up. She felt his breath against her, moving down the curve of her neck as she ran her hands through his dark silky hair. He pressed against her and she let out a low moan. He hoisted her up in his arms, allowing her legs to lock across his backside. “Oh, God... why didn’t we think about this... two days ago?”

“I don’t know,” he moaned as his lips reached the edge of her princess cut neckline.

His hands moved to her back, suggestively moving the fabric in a circular motion as he pressed himself against her. “Oh, Clark.”

The elevator doors chimed behind them, and without losing contact with her for a second, he reached down on the floor where she’d dropped the golden pillar upon entering the elevator. He handed it back to her and walked them into the hallway, sharing short frantic kisses as he repositioned her in his arms. She let out a sultry moan as her back pressed against the door. He pulled back for a split second to pull out the key to unlock the door.

She glanced at the familiar door as he swiped the card, letting out a heavy sigh as she put two and two together. “The Honeymoon Suite?”

“I didn’t think you’d mind,” he whispered in her ear, carrying her through the now-open door and kicking the door closed behind them.

“Hmm, oh, no, no, no, but this time I’m going to have to insist on closing the blinds.” She helped tug his arms out of his jacket, allowing it to fall to the floor as they made their way through the living area, tossing clothing item after clothing item to the floor until they reached the bedroom door. Shoes, his dress shirt, belt and her shawl lay scattered around the hotel floor.

His nose nestled against her collarbone and she let out a soft moan. He set her down, allowing her feet to hit the floor as she stood in front of him. His hands moved up and down her back until he found what he was looking for... the metal zipper on the back of her dress. He looked to her for consent, giving her one last chance to pull away and change her mind.

“Yes,” she let out a low hiss as the material pooled down on the floor by her ankles. She reached for the top button of his trousers, and he recaptured her lips.

This time there was no pulling away, no holding back. His eyes were dark with a fiery desire as his gaze bore into her, reaching the parts of her heart only he’d been given access to. This was different. Every kiss and caress felt like he was pouring his soul into her. The nervousness that came with her previous experiences wasn’t there. There were no doubts. No insecurities. This was it.

He leaned against her, running his hands up and down her

sides as she watched him kick the remainder of his trousers off his left ankle. “This time I’m insisting on sharing the bed,” he whispered, twisting the knob to the door behind her. He scooped her up in his arms and she wrapped her limbs around him, reveling in the feeling of being in his arms once more as he laid her back on the spacious king-sized bed.

She grinned back at him as he hovered over her, running his palms up and down her lengthy legs, “It is a big bed and... Oh!” His mouth sealed over hers. He ran his hand against hers, joining his fingers with hers to form a tight fist and lifting it above her head as he hovered over her, devouring her lips with his.

\*\*\*

Jimmy looked over at the food and liquor that had been set up on a table in the corner. The sign that had been printed hung over the back of the newsroom reading, ‘Congratulations Lois and Clark!’ Perry stood by the stairwell looking at his phone.

The elevator doors chimed and everyone stilled, preparing for the guests of honor to finally arrive. “Surprise!” they all shouted, but as the doors finished opening, they came face to face with a very annoyed Ellen Lane.

“It’s just me...again!” Ellen snapped irritably, looking at her watch as she made her way down the stairs.

“This is the third time,” Perry grunted.

“I know,” Ellen said irritably.

“I thought you said you knew where they were?” Lucy said with an annoyed expression.

“I thought I did!” Ellen chimed in. “I don’t know. They’re not at Lois’. They’re not at Clark’s. I don’t know where those two disappeared to.”

“Well, look at the bright side,” Jimmy said, holding up his plate of appetizers that had been served already.

“What’s that?” Ellen asked irritably.

“More food for us,” Jimmy grinned.

“All this trouble to plan an engagement party and those two don’t even bother to show up...” Ellen grumbled under her breath.

Jimmy chuckled, offering a chocolate icing-covered treat to Lucy, “Cupcake?”

\*\*\*

Clark ran his hands up and down his fiancée’s bare back, reveling in the feeling of having her in his arms. The pleasurable cries from their most recent lovemaking ran through his mind as he held her. The soap dish in the shower had come loose earlier. He’d have to remember to fix that. After the most recent encounter, the sheets and bedding had ended up on the floor, crumpled in the corner from frantic limbs seeking something to hold onto or kick during that moment of pure ecstasy in one another’s arms.

He stared toward the bed from his vantage point on the ceiling and grinned. She let out a satisfied sigh, running her palm against his chest, “Wow...”

“You can say that again,” he murmured in her ear. His hands moved up and down her bare shoulders as he held her close.

“That’s what that’s supposed to feel like,” she whispered through her euphoric haze.

“What what’s supposed to feel like?” he asked, looking at her curiously, running a hand across her cheek.

“This,” she placed a hand on his chest as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Blissful, uninhibited, mind-blowing...” She let out a heavy sigh, turning to face him. “I’ve never had that before.”

He smiled, stroking her cheek with the back of his palm. “Had what?”

“No regrets. No... fears. Just this.” She smiled, leaning up to kiss him. He smiled against her lips, moving his hands up her back to cup the sides of her face. She broke off the kiss and smiled back at him, love reflecting in her eyes, “I love you, Clark.”

It pained him that she had been hurt like that. His vibrant and tenacious whirlwind of a fiancée had had so many barriers put up to protect herself from reliving that pain again. He made a silent

vow to himself never to be the cause of pain for her. “I love you, Lois,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss her. He slowly floated them back down to the floor where the comforter and pillows had been tossed earlier. She sighed happily against him. “Better?”

“Much,” she grinned happily at him. “Perfect.” Her gaze wandered around the room that was scattered with clothing, bedding and everything they’d been so eager to remove hours ago. “God, we made a mess,” she giggled, looking back at him with a blush.

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to fix that soap dish before we check out,” he murmured in her ear. He chuckled when he saw the pink flush across her cheeks.

“Oh, yeah,” her eyes sparkled with mischief. “I guess we got a little carried away.” She let out a long sigh, “God, why did we wait *so* long? That first visit here would have been so much less stressful...” She giggled and he tightened his arms around her.

“I did offer to share the bed,” he teased, letting out a mock sigh, “You just weren’t open to that idea.”

“I think we more than made up for that tonight,” she grinned up at him, raising her eyebrow as she looked at him.

He smirked at her, letting out a light chuckle as she reached over to brush a stray curl that had fallen across his forehead out of the way. “I think our patience reached its breaking point. Too many interruptions.”

“And close calls,” she agreed, sighing as he nuzzled her ear.

“And close calls,” he agreed, tugging on her earlobe with his teeth. “And someone being way too handsy under the table this evening.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining,” she whispered, leaning back to allow him better access to her neck as he grazed his teeth against her throat. His hands moved to her sides, and her breathing hiked as she let out a throaty whisper, “God, how do you do that?”

“Do what?” he murmured against her, running his palms up and down the smoothness of her back.

“That,” she breathed heavily. “Know exactly where to... *Oh!*” she gasped as he rolled them over so he was hovering over her.

“Intuition, books, and a healthy use of super-hearing,” he whispered, accentuating each point with a kiss.

“Super-hearing?” she asked.

“When you’re really enjoying yourself your heart rate picks up,” he murmured, running his hands up and down the sides of her face as he leaned in to capture her lips. “Like this,” he moved his attention to her jaw, brushing his lips against the frame of her face. “And this,” he murmured, massaging his hands over her lower back.

“This,” she gasped in pleasure.

\*\*\*

Dan Scardino rolled himself across the office floor, keeping his cast in the rolling chair in front of him. Three weeks of nothing but paperwork and typing reports for other assignments the agents in the bureau had been assigned. He was itching to get back out there, but after his last case and defiance of a direct order from his supervisor, he’d been put on restrictive duty until his leg healed. “Three more weeks...” he muttered to himself, recalling the six-week window he’d been given by the doctor. Hopefully, everything would have healed correctly so he could get back to doing what he loved. There was nothing like rolling his sleeves up and digging into a complicated case. It was what drove him to do what he did.

“Here.” A folder crossed his desk and he looked up in surprise. “What’s this?”

“Suspicious activity from Fort Truman,” Agent Rogers said with a shrug. “I figured even you could take notes from a Humvee, right?”

“Right,” Dan beamed, feeling the adrenaline pumping through his veins at the new assignment.

“No stunts. You mess that leg up again and you won’t leave that desk till the next budget review,” Rogers warned, sauntering

off.

Dan chuckled to himself, looking at the photo in front of him. A middle-eastern man with a beard and a profile that was enough to give anyone nightmares stared back at him from the 8x10 glossy photo. Amir Mussano. Suspected leader of a terrorist group in Lebanon. Communications regarding a missing shipment of Ticeon.

“Time to get back to it, I suppose,” he mumbled to himself, reaching for his crutches.

THE END

Read the next story in the series, [Rules of Engagement](#).