

# Rules of War

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Summary: In the final installment of the “Rules” series, Lois and Clark return from their honeymoon and find themselves knee-deep in an investigation into the odd behavior of government officials. When prisoners are released from Metropolis Penitentiary, Superman faces a team of villains bent on revenge. (10 of 10)

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A/N: It’s finally here. The end of this ten-part series has come to a close. Thank you to everyone that stuck it out with me over the last few years to watch Lois and Clark go from biting each other’s heads off to madly in love. I hope you all enjoy the final installment. What better way to bring everything to a close than to go out with a bang?

Huge thanks to Vicki and Feli for helping Beta this one and bounce ideas off of them. Thanks to Julie for GEing this one. Thanks to everyone in Hangouts for their sound advice and support to keep this one going. Last but not least thanks to all the FOLCs out there that have read, commented and indulged in this fun series. It was a lot of fun to write, and I’m glad it was so well received.

This story follows after “[Rules of Marriage](#).” View the [complete list of stories here](#).

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*Previously on Rules of Marriage...*

Outside, with the breathtaking view of the ocean behind them, Clark held his place at the altar, standing with Perry and Jimmy in their tuxes. Lois prepared to walk down the aisle of flowers that had been lain on the ground with the small crowd of silk covered chairs on the back patio of the hotel. The ukulele played along with the soft chords from the piano, the wedding march.

Lois hooked her arm in her father’s standing with him at the end of the aisle, staring back at Clark who beamed back at her. She felt a flutter of anticipation in her abdomen as she stared back at him. Her heart filled with such love and joy.

“You ready?” Sam asked, patting her arm. She nodded, swiping at the tears that had escaped her eyes as she walked down the aisle to the super man of her dreams.

A short moment later, they reached the end of the aisle where they stood in front of Clark. He turned to her father, shaking his hand and holding his arm out for her to take. “You look gorgeous,” Clark whispered. She smiled at him, gently squeezing his hand.

They turned to face Perry who was watching them with a broad smile. “Well, it’s a perfect day to get married, what do you all think?” he asked, looking to the small crowd of family and friends that stood behind them.

A light chuckle erupted from the crowd, and Perry continued, “You know last week when Lois and Clark came to me with their plans to get married this weekend I was thrilled. I couldn’t imagine a more perfect match than these two.”

A stern look crossed his face as he added, “Even if they couldn’t see it in the beginning.” Lois felt Clark squeeze her hand and let out a light chuckle at that remark. “But that’s how the greatest partnerships start out. What makes a relationship survive...what makes love survive is perseverance. You two have

seen your fair share of trials and come out on top time and time again.”

“Now, marriage is nothing to be entered upon lightly. Just like a newspaper, it takes a lot of hard work to make it a success. But, if anybody can do it, these two can. Now, Clark, you’re about the most perfect guy I know. And Lois...” He smiled at her with a long pause. “... you’re perfect, too, just the way you are.”

‘Always.’ Clark mouthed to her.

“So, basically, these are two wonderful people... who love each other... and deserve each other.

And now, as the King himself might say... It’s time for the big finish. Lois, Clark, will you please join hands.”

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

Clark’s hand reached up to cup her cheek as he responded solemnly, not taking his eyes off of her for a moment. “I do.”

Lois smiled, holding her hand over Clark’s as Perry continued, “Lois, do you...”

“I do! I do!” Lois cheered enthusiastically, swaying closer and closer to him as she stared back at him, feeling the love she felt for him threaten to overtake her.

Perry didn’t say anything, letting out a good-hearted chuckle as he motioned to Jimmy and Lucy, “Okay, now the rings.” Jimmy nodded, pulling the velvet ring box from his pocket, “Clark?” Perry gave him the ring.

Lois smiled shyly up at Clark as he took the ring from Perry and took her hand in his. “Lois, I have been in love with you from the moment I met you. I don’t remember what it was like not to love you, Lois, and I don’t want to know,” he said earnestly. Meeting her gaze, he continued, “I love everything about you. Your humor, your passion, the way you just dive right in...” Lois couldn’t help but smile at that, “...even when you shouldn’t. You’ve saved me from myself so many times... You refuse to just watch the world and injustice from the sidelines. You demand that the world be a better place and because of you, it is. That fire inside you is what made me fall in love with you in the first place. I can’t imagine my life without you in it. You are everything to me, Lois.”

She could feel tears stinging in the corners of her eyes as he continued, slipping her wedding band on her finger, “Today, I give you my heart, my soul, and our future.”

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

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

The reflection of the sunlight on her wedding band caught her eye, and she couldn’t help but smile at how good it felt to know for the rest of her life she could call her best friend her husband. Not everyone had that luxury. It was what made her and Clark’s relationship so blissfully wonderful.

Lois bit her lip, trying to find the words to tell him what she was feeling in that moment, “Clark, you’re my best friend. Until I met you I never had a best friend.” A frown crossed her face briefly, and he squeezed her hand, encouragingly. “A lot of people fall in love every day and get married and start a family but not everyone gets to do that with their best friend.”

She smiled back at him and added, “Falling in love with you has been so easy. I don’t know why I fought it for so long. You have such gentle grace; quiet strength; but mostly, such incredible kindness. I’ve never known anyone with as pure a heart.” His hand tightened around hers as she added, “I could never love anyone else as much as I do you. You are the love of my life. I can’t imagine my life without you. Today, I give you everything I am. I give you my heart, my soul, my honor, and our life...together.” She

slipped the ring on his finger, smiling shyly up at him.

With that, she leaned into him, capturing his lips with hers, reveling in the knowledge they were finally husband and wife. Both his hands moved up to cup both sides of her face, tracing the outline of her face as he deepened the kiss, forgetting the small crowd of loved ones behind them for the moment.

A soft collection of laughter filled the air, and she heard Perry say, “By the power vested in me by this state and the First Church of Blue Suede Deliverance ... I now pronounce you man and wife. You may .... continue kissing the bride.”

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Bill Henderson made his way through the abandoned underground subway tunnels, following the sound of clicking against the concrete floor and water dripping. These tunnels had been here for ages, ever since New Troy first began developing the cities. Not many people knew their way through these tunnels, but, as luck would have it, his love of history came in handy for something more than a hobby.

The old maps from 1775 of the original towns in New Troy had fascinated him as a child and young adult. These tunnels had seen many crimes over the years. He’d been able to stop a child trafficking ring and a car thief in the last year. Now he would stop Lex Luthor’s doctor and anyone else working with her from whatever plans she may have been hatching before Luthor’s early demise.

He caught sight of a white lab coat at the end of the hallway he was on and called out, “Freeze! This is the police! Keep your hands where I can see them!”

She looked to her left and to her right, realizing there was nowhere to go, she turned to face him. “Inspector, this is a surprise.”

“Dr. Gretchen Kelly, I presume,” he called out with a smug grin, keeping his service weapon trained on her as he inched closer and closer.

Her hands remained in the air where he could see them, and she remarked, “I’m afraid you’ve got me in a bad predicament. You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

He reached for her hands, holding the handcuffs out to slap them on her wrists, tightening them as he secured her in the metal binds. “You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to...”

A hard thud rendered him motionless as he fell to the ground in agony. His vision grew blurry as he struggled to hold his gaze on the woman hovering over him in handcuffs. She looked at him in disapproval. “Was that really necessary, Lex?”

“Always hold the higher ground.”

The last thing he saw before darkness overtook him was Lex Luthor’s very alive face staring back at him.

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### Teaser

It had started as innocent flirting. They both were just as equally to blame and now all Clark seemed to be able to focus on was the insatiable appetite he had for his wife as he explored every delicious curve. He ran his hands down her shoulders, allowing them to move through her hair and cup both sides of her face as he captured her mouth with his again and again.

She sighed against him as he leaned them back on the bed, rolling them on their sides, so they were facing each other. “I love you, Lois,” he whispered against her lips.

“I love you, Clark.” She ran her hand up and down his chest, fingering the skin beneath his shirt. His hands moved up and down her sides with a featherlight caress, kneading her sides as he tugged on her lips with his teeth.

He slowly broke off the kiss, resting his head against hers as he cupped her face, running his hands down both sides of her cheeks. “I love you, Lois Lane Kent,”

“I love you....Clark Kent,” she breathed out in a sultry moan

as he allowed his hand to move up the length of her leg and explore the smooth skin beneath the fabric of her dress. She sighed against him, running her hands up and down the smooth muscles as she helped him shed the cotton shirt before throwing it to the ground. She let out a soft purr of appreciation as she ran her hands up and down the solid form of his chest, needing to feel his skin against hers.

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The music played in the background through the speakers as the last of the appetizers were laid out. Lucy noticed with amusement that her sister still hadn’t returned from ‘changing into something more comfortable’ as she had put it. She also noticed the groom appeared to be missing as well. A fact that wasn’t lost on her mother either as she continued to grumble about the supposed schedule.

“What is taking her so long?”

“I’m sure they’ll be out soon,” Lucy reasoned aloud, doing her best to reassure her mother and prevent her from going into a tirade. Not exactly how she envisioned spending the day in Hawaii. She peered out toward the landscape windows that were partially open, seeing the gentle waves crashing against the shores. It was paradise.

“I never kept the caterers waiting at *my* wedding.” Ellen sniffed irritably, looking at Lucy pointedly and tapping her on the shoulder. “It’s been half an hour. Why don’t you go see if you can find your sister, hmm?”

“Not for a million dollars.” Lucy shook her head adamantly. “When she’s done...getting changed. She’ll come out and join us.”

“What is the big deal?” Ellen stood up from her seat. “Oh, for the love of God, I’ll go find her.”

Martha stood up, leaning in to whisper in her ear, “You might not want to do that.”

“And why not?” Ellen looked at her in surprise, not following what she was inferring. Martha leaned in to whisper in her ear, and Ellen’s eyes widened, and a blush crossed her cheeks. She took her seat, pulling her plate to her. “I don’t want to hear any complaints if the food’s all gone by the time they get out here.”

“I think that’s the *last* thing they’re worried about,” Lucy said in between fits of laughter, watching her mother’s face turn beet red.

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A slow smile spread across Clark Kent’s face as he held his wife in his arms. His smile grew broader as he focused on the new term of endearment he could finally use to describe his connection to the woman he loved.

‘Wife.’

Never had he imagined his dream of having something so many people took for granted would be, so life-changing. He had been a goner the moment he’d met her and continued to fall hopelessly in love with her despite the walls and neon signs she put up, warning him to stay away. It hadn’t been easy. None of it had been easy but right here in this moment—holding his wife in his arms and knowing he’d finally found the place he belonged—this is what made it all worthwhile.

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Warden Nichols walked through the darkened halls of the Metropolis Penitentiary, making his way to the courtroom for the emergency hearing he’d been called to. Mayor Berkowitz had requested a review board on three inmates’ files. Two of which weren’t even in the prison’s care due to unforeseen circumstances.

He reached the end of the hallway and scanned his badge to unlock the door. A loud beep sounded and the click from the lock echoed before the door opened. Warden Nichols stepped into the dimly lit courtroom, nodding to his colleagues that were seated in the front row.

He took a seat next to one of the detectives he recognized, frowning to himself. “Surprised to see you here, Jim. Doesn’t Bill

usually handle these things?”

Jim Burrows shrugged his shoulders. “They were paging him but no one’s able to get through. You know Bill. He’s probably somewhere with no signal, hunting down another big case to make us all look bad.” The elderly detective let out a low chuckle.

“Any idea what Berkowitz wants with these three’s files?” Nichols asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine. Not much threat given one is a missing robot, one is dead, and the other is sitting in his cell awaiting trial.” Burrows acknowledged, standing to his feet as the judge entered the courtroom.

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Lucy Lane walked along the beach, feeling the ocean waves hit her ankles, washing the sand on her toes with each collision.

“That water is freezing,” Jimmy commented from a few feet away.

Lucy turned to see him standing there in a pair of khaki pants, rolled up just below his knees and his white dress shirt from earlier, rolled up to his elbows. The top button was left unbuttoned, and his tie and jacket had been ditched. She gave him an appreciative glance before turning her attention back to the ocean where the sun was beginning to set. “Just taking advantage,” she threw him a quick smile.

A warm smile crossed his face, and he took a step toward her. “Pretty amazing how they pulled this off in a week, huh?”

“Well, you don’t know my mother.” Lucy let out a long breath, staring back at the ocean where the waves continued to roar in the distance. It was so peaceful here. She could almost forget everything that had happened this past year with Johnny Corbin and the shooting that had taken place at her apartment just last week. It seemed trouble was always not far away.

But this. This was paradise. This was a dream come true. No worries. No stress. The water hit her ankles again. She heard the sound of a soft whine from fireworks being set off in the distance.

It was paradise.

“Did you want to get a drink?” Jimmy asked, pointing to the small hut in the distance where a bar was set up. Music and laughter could be heard even from this distance.

“Sure,” Lucy responded with a smile.

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The lights from the fire show lit up the night sky. Lois sighed to herself, leaning against her husband’s solid frame as she stared at the mystical display of red, yellow, and orange that lit up the sky.

‘*Married.*’ She couldn’t help but smile to herself, feeling a flutter in her abdomen, reveling in the knowledge that they were now husband and wife. Would it always be like this? His hand intertwined with hers. She ran her index finger over the gold band that now wrapped snugly around his ring finger.

Clark leaned in to whisper in her ear, “I think we’ve been discovered.”

She looked in the direction where he’d gestured with a nod of his head. There in the corner was her irritated looking mother being led through the crowd by an enthusiastic Martha Kent. She couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight of her mother in a Hawaiian shirt and a lei. Just a few feet away her father was wading his way through the crowd with Jonathan, and from the look on her father-in-law’s face, whatever conversation they were deep into discussion with had both of their attention. It appeared everyone had found a way to keep themselves occupied throughout the afternoon.

Hopefully, her mother wouldn’t be too disappointed at the failed reception. She and Clark had assured her there would be plenty to do without planning a big event. It just seemed unnecessary given that the guest list consisted solely of family and friends.

“Hey, you two,” the friendly voice of their editor came from a

few feet away.

“Perry.” Lois beamed at the friendly face. She glanced at the Hawaiian shirt and Elvis themed margarita glass in his hand.

“Enjoying yourself, Chief?” Clark asked good-naturedly, allowing his arm to loop around her waist as they turned to face Perry.

“Well, what’s not to enjoy?” Perry asked, looking around. “I’m in paradise with everything I could ask for. Good food. Plenty of Elvis tributes. Good music, beautiful...”

“Careful.” Alice White approached from behind him, carrying a tall glass with a pink umbrella sticking out of it.

“Aw, darlin’ you know I’ve only got eyes for you.” Perry quickly recovered, turning his attention to his wife. “Quite the show they’ve got.” He pointed to the stage where the dancers continued to move around with the flames and music. If Lois didn’t know any better, she’d say Perry was trying to deflect from his misstep with Alice.

“Well, now that we’ve finally tracked you two down,” Alice started, jokingly giving them a warning glare. She reached out to hand them a small white envelope as she continued, “Congratulations and thank you for having us here. It was a beautiful wedding.”

“Thank you, Alice,” Lois said, taking the envelope from her and turning to share a look with Clark. “We’re just glad you were able to make it.”

“Well, who am I to turn down a flight to Hawaii from Superman?” Alice grinned at her.

“It is hard to turn down,” Lois reasoned, sharing a look with her husband just before she found herself face to face with a very irritated Ellen Lane. “Mother, hi.”

Her mother just stared at her with an irritable expression and Martha interjected from behind, “Ellen’s learning to relax and enjoy herself.”

A large flame lit up the stage causing everyone to gasp.

“I don’t know how any of the things you’ve made me do today are *relaxing*,” Ellen sniffed, glancing at their surroundings.

“There’re crowds *everywhere!*” Ellen pointed accusingly at Martha. “She made me climb that God-awful volcano...”

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself when we were taking the scuba diving lessons...” Martha countered with a glint in her eye. “The instructor was very nice, wasn’t he?” She bumped Ellen’s hip with a knowing smile and her mother blushed.

“Yes, yes, I suppose that was...” She didn’t finish her sentence, seeing Sam and Jonathan approach.

Another large flame lit up the stage and fireworks lit up the sky causing the crowd to hush. They all looked toward the stage where a man moved back and forth with several dancers behind him holding wands of fire in their hands and moving with the flames.

A loud crack filled the air, and a collection of fireworks lit up the sky. The dancers fell into line and stood at the end of the stage, taking a bow as fire lit up behind them in a straight line. The lead dancer approached the microphone. “Thank you, everyone. Dinner is served.”

The double doors leading to the dining room opened, and a flood of red and green suited waiters stepped out in perfect synchronization, beckoning the guests to enter. After finding their way to the table, Lois and Clark joined their family and friends at dinner, exchanging stories of the daily adventures on the island. As the night came to an end, Lois took note that two people were missing at dinner.

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Lucy Lane was drunk. She knew Jimmy was just as inebriated as well. She knew it, and she didn’t care. All she did care about in that moment was how good it felt to not think anymore. Her lips found his, smoothing her hands through his hair and crashing into one another outside her hotel room.

'This is a bad idea,' the thought came to her just before she found the hotel keycard and swiped it.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked breathlessly.

"Are you?" he asked, running his hand against her cheek.

She didn't answer. Instead, she reached her arm around his neck, pulling him with her inside the darkened hotel room. The door closed behind them.

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"You said Henderson went in here?" Detective Zymack inquired, running a hand against his square jaw. The years on the force had taken their toll on him. His once young, spirited face was replaced with one of a tired and worn detective that had seen it all. His jet black hair was now colored a grayish tone. He had been on the force a long time. He'd seen things he had been sworn to silence on and had gone up against criminals with no respect for law and order. He'd seen men who claimed to uphold the law become criminals. He'd seen it all. Today was no different.

On his way home, he'd heard the request for help at the old subway entrance from the unit his friend, Bill Henderson, had been dispatched to. Normally, he'd have continued on and let someone else handle it, but Bill Henderson was a good friend of his and if anything happened to him...

"Detective, he went in, and he never came out. I've tried calling his radio, but I keep getting dead air," Officer Ryan explained with a worried expression.

"We've been waiting on the call from him for over an hour," the SWAT Leader, Mike Rogers explained. He was a short man with a solid frame, piercing green eyes and light brown hair cut down in a traditional crew cut. He took a long puff from his cigarette before adding, "This isn't like Bill at all."

"Let's split up," Zymack ordered, making the hard call as he pulled out his radio. "Dispatch, this is Zymack responding to the 10-65 on Inspector Bill Henderson. Unit is splitting up to search the area."

A chirp came from Zymack's radio, and the dispatcher responded, "10-26, Detective. Please advise if Henderson is in need of an 11-99 when his location is known. Do you copy?"

"Loud and clear," Zymack responded, hitting the off button on his radio. "Everyone silence your radios. We don't need any surprises when we get in there."

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From a safe distance, a dark sedan sat in an alleyway as the last of the officers disappeared inside the entrance to the underground subway. Lex Luthor held up a handheld device, mentally counting the seconds before placing his thumb on the trigger. "What a perfect day for terrorism, wouldn't you agree, Nigel?"

"Indeed, sir," Nigel acknowledged with a firm nod.

There was a rumble, and a second later concrete and rubble filled the air as fire and smoke shot up from the ground, dislodging the arch entryway of brick and concrete, causing it to fall and sealing everyone inside. "Impressive work," Lex admired as the smoke cleared. "Mr. Bermuda knows his stuff."

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It was morning. That much Jimmy was sure of as he stared up at the ceiling, taking in his surroundings. He felt a lump in his throat as he contemplated the numerous reactions that would come from his bedmate when she finally arose from her slumber. He was in trouble. He knew it from the moment he woke up and realized the intoxicating evening of liquor and rekindling of an old relationship had been very much real.

They'd both been equally to blame but explaining the extremely bad timing to either Lois or Clark wasn't something he envisioned going over well. He wasn't even sure how well it would go over when Lucy woke up.

"Hi."

It was a simple word said every day all around the world in

different languages—sometimes even exchanged with strangers, but she was no stranger. He glanced back at the dark brown eyes staring back at him and felt his throat go dry, uncertain how he should respond.

"Hi," he finally found his voice. She bit her lower lip, giving him an odd expression before she jumped into something he'd often called Lane-babble mode.

"This is going to be weird, isn't it? Do we have to do the whole morning after awkward routine?" Lucy rambled, clutching the lightweight sheet to her face as her cheeks turned a crimson red. "I really don't want to do the whole weird routine where we both act like we haven't seen each other naked and try to pretend that..."

"Luce, take a breath!" Jimmy finally choked out in laughter.

"Sorry," she smiled back at him. "I just..."

"What?" he asked.

He never got the answer.

Everything felt like it was happening in slow motion. Lucy's panicked face. The hair standing up on his back. The sound of the hotel room's keycard being used to unlock the door. The deafening sound of Lucy's mother's screams as he found himself unceremoniously yanked from the bed by his ear as she shouted at the both of them.

Any attempt to keep last night's activities to themselves died in that moment.

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Lois Lane sighed happily, resting the back of her head against her husband's chest as she stared up at the ceiling. A smile cracked across her face as she gazed up at the soft features of her husband's face.

'*Husband.*'

The word had teased her brain over and over as she lost herself in Clark's arms again and again throughout the night. All she cared about was how incredibly at peace she felt to have her body intertwined with his. She knew she'd have to get up eventually. Clark had to take their family back to Metropolis and Superman had to do one last patrol around the city before they finally started their honeymoon. She still had yet to find out exactly where he was taking her.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," her husband's sleepy voice murmured in her ear.

She smiled, looking up at the tired features on his face as he stared back at her, running a hand across her cheek. "I was just thinking..."

"Uh-oh." He grinned, leaning in to kiss her forehead.

"Very funny," she retorted, running a hand through his hair.

She held his gaze for a moment, taking in the serene surroundings and the rare peaceful expression she saw on Clark's face. Moments like this were hard to come by. It was a rarity for either of them able to enjoy quiet moments like this together. She enjoyed seeing him like this. No glasses, no cape, just...Clark. It was the face that only she and his parents had the luxury of seeing.

"Sorry," he apologized, rolling on his side to face her. "You were thinking...?" he prompted, looking at her expectantly.

She propped her head up on her hand, looking back at him with a sigh. "Yes." She allowed a smile to cross her face as she gazed over the length of his solid form she'd explored thoroughly for most of the night. "Thinking about how it is officially our honeymoon and I still have no idea where we're going for the next two weeks. Seriously, where are we going?"

He grinned back at her and responded, "Well, now if I told you that'd ruin the surprise, wouldn't it?"

She reached behind her to grab a pillow and swat him with it. "I hate surprises."

He leaned in to kiss her. His hand moved to trace the frame of her face, and he whispered, "No, you don't." His other hand

moved over the curve of her hip, and she let out a soft sigh as he murmured, “It’s still early. Checkout’s not till...”

A loud scream from outside the door caused them both to jump back, startled from the noise. “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” “Calm down!” Another muffled voice came.

Recognition crossed Lois’ face when she heard the second voice. “Lucille Elizabeth Lane, don’t you dare tell me to calm down!”

Lois sprung up from the bed, untangling herself from the sheet as she searched for something she could quickly throw on and allow her to investigate what was going on in the hallway. Before she could finish pulling the cotton dress over her head, she felt a brush of air behind her. She turned to see Clark had already dressed and showered. She combed a hand through her hair and headed toward the door to investigate the situation that had her mother up in arms.

When she entered the hallway, she saw a half-naked Jimmy on the ground where her furious mother had a strong grip on his ear. Lucy stood a few feet away with a sheet wrapped around her as she stood halfway in and out of the hotel room’s doorway. Lois stared at the scene for a moment before backing her way into the hotel room with Clark once more and closing the door behind her, desperate to unsee what she’d just discovered.

They were both silent for a moment, neither one wanting to admit to what they’d just walked in on in the hallway. She didn’t dare open the door until she was sure the sight of her almost completely naked sister, angry mother, and half-naked Jimmy Olsen were gone. She glanced at Clark who was staring at the ground, shaking his head and fighting the urge to laugh.

She cringed, recalling the scene once more, and let out a half-hearted laugh. “Did I just see both Jimmy and Lucy half-naked in the hallway...with my mother?” Lois finally asked, uncertain how to process what she’d seen in the hallway. “Did I imagine that?”

“Not unless we’re both having the same hallucination,” Clark responded, shaking his head. “From the looks of it, I’m guessing your mom discovered them.”

Another shout came from outside the door, and Lois groaned. “I don’t know who I feel sorrier for, Jimmy or Lucy or myself for seeing...*that*.”

“I think it’s time for Superman to take everyone back home,” Clark said, letting out a chuckle when Ellen’s voice echoed through the door once more. “I don’t think anyone’s going to be enjoying the rest of their visit after that.” Lois nodded, unable to form a response as she let out a muffled giggle. Clark chuckled along with her as she heard her mother continue her tirade.

“You might want to wait until it calms down out there,” she giggled, pointing at the door behind them. It was silent for a moment, and she turned to Clark. “You think it’s safe to go out there and get coffee?” She motioned for him to scan the door and laughed when he shook his head adamantly.

“Nuh-uh,” he said, still shaking his head. “You couldn’t pay me enough to look out there.” He pointed to the phone by the bed. “Room service it is,” she grinned back at him.

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### *Gotham City*

The glossy 8x10s sat on the desk, staring back at him as he pondered the next steps of his plan. Intergang’s presence in New Troy had become almost nonexistent in the papers after Diana Stride’s testimony put away the supposed leader. Now it seemed the criminal organization had reached out to the scum that continued to multiply ten-fold in Gotham’s dark alleys.

The image of his former friend, Harvey Dent stared back at him—taunting him with the fact that once again he had failed. How many lives would be lost in the war over Gotham? Before Dent had been lost to him for good he had taken the reigns in a diabolical plot to not only bring an end to Gotham’s recent epidemic in crime but for Metropolis and National City as well.

The reach of Intergang across state and even country lines was astounding to watch. Harvey Dent always was a straight shooter but now he was gone and he, Bruce Wayne was left with a choice: let Dent’s efforts go to waste or pick up where he left off.

He held up the card he’d carried with him since his first encounter with the Joker years ago. If this worked, the days of organized crime could come to a screeching halt. People could actually leave their homes and feel safe. He squared his jaw, determination washing over his face as he reached for the phone to make the call. “Alfred, bring in the scrambler.”

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Pain. That was all he could think about as Bill Henderson took in a shallow breath. His eyes opened, and all he could see was darkness. A cough tickled his throat, and he became painfully aware of the cracked ribs he had as he stared into the dark nothingness that surrounded him. A flood of memories came back to him as he struggled to sit up.

Gretchen Kelly.

Mysterious gifts tracked to a mysterious courier.

Death threats.

Underground.

Lex Luthor.

<< “*You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to...*” >>

<< “*Always hold the higher ground.*” >>

“Hellooooo?” the echo from someone in the distance calling out in the darkness, reached his ears, and he braced himself for the pain as he stood to his feet. A rumble from aboveground could be heard, and he frowned, trying to find some source of light for his eyes to see with.

He hadn’t traveled very far underground. The tunnel should have been bringing in light.

“Hellooooo?”

Realization dawned on him as Henderson felt the rumble above ground once more. He was trapped.

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### **Chapter 1**

The suite was filled with exquisite tastes and luxurious linens. Gretchen Kelly allowed her eyes to wander to the door leading to the bedroom of the Presidential suite. It had been a long time since she’d been able to enjoy the life of luxury. Her torrid affair with Lex, in the beginning, had been filled with carnal desire and fine wines. There was something that drew her to that life she’d left behind...the life that they’d left behind. How anyone could turn their back on Lex the way Lois Lane had she would never understand.

“Everything ready, darling?” Lex’s voice came from behind.

“Yes.” Gretchen cleared her throat and turned to him. “Nigel has the target in place, and the press release should hit the stands within the hour.”

“What would I do without you?” Lex smiled at her, straightening his tie in the mirror. “Metallo’s ready to go?” She nodded her agreement. “Superman won’t be a problem.”

The muffled shouts from the corner reached her ears, and she sighed. “Those binds can be tighter.”

Lex turned his attention to the corner where President Garner and his Secret Service agents were tied up. He turned the president’s head toward the television that was playing the press conference for this morning’s Presidential address. “You don’t want to miss this, Mr. President.”

Garner’s eyes widened as he stared at the screen and Gretchen Kelly smiled gleefully at the image of himself walking across the stage to the podium with the Presidential seal in front of it.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the president of the United States.”

\*\*\*

Jimmy set his things down, looking around the apartment with a sigh. Once again, he was alone. His mind momentarily drifted to

the events that had transpired that morning. Before he and Lucy could even process what had happened between them, he'd found himself on the receiving end of what Lois commonly called an 'Ellen Lane tirade.' He'd barely had time to respond before the hotel manager had intervened. Unfortunately for them, that resulted in everyone being asked to leave.

He stared at the empty apartment feeling a gaping hole of loneliness surrounding him. His mind drifted briefly to the evening before. The crashing of the ocean waves on the shore. The moonlit walk to the hotel. The intoxicating evening spent in Lucy Lane's arms.

<< "This is going to be weird isn't it?" >>

<< "I really don't want to do the whole weird routine where we both act like we haven't seen each other naked." >>

What was last night?

He glanced over at the phone sitting on the side table next to him. He could just pick up the phone and ask her, but the numerous times he'd been burned by being too forward prevented him from reaching out. They'd been here before. One date that ended with uncertainty. He'd reached out then and been stonewalled.

He didn't want to go through that again.

Determination washed over him, and he stood up, reaching for his suitcase and heading to the bedroom. He just needed to keep busy. He had enough on his mind right now. Adding more on his plate wouldn't help things.

He stopped halfway, catching sight of the picture hanging on the wall of himself, Clark and Lois after the Kerths that year. His range of emotions had subsided some after last night. Whereas before he'd felt mostly numb and hurt, now he felt more curious than anything. Where was the line that separated Clark Kent from the superhero that came in and saved the day? Was there a line?

So many times, he'd missed the biggest clues that were sitting there for him to find. The disappearances. The lame excuses. The way Clark seemed to know things about Superman that no one else did. It all added up.

And he had missed all of it.

Did Lois know?

Recalling the wedding he'd witnessed yesterday he hoped the answer was yes. No way could Lois forgive him for hiding such a huge part of himself. Given that Lois made her living investigating stories and people it wouldn't surprise him if she'd found out on her own. After the fiasco with Molly Flynn's ex-fiancé, there was a shift in their relationship. Was that when she found out?

It was like, out of the blue, Lois Lane stopped seeing her partner as just another co-worker, and then the two of them were in a relationship. He remembered the look of panic on his friend's face when he'd pointed out the lipstick on his face. That was the first time he'd caught them. It wasn't until a few weeks later that they finally stopped the charade and made it clear they were an item.

The gossip that ensued afterward had been legendary. There were, of course, the catty comments about it not lasting and the jealous remarks on both sides of the fence but on the whole, the common theme was: how did it happen? Lois Lane had gone from being head over heels for Superman to falling madly in love with her partner.

Whatever it was that had triggered the change it seemed to have worked out well for both of them. Jimmy's mind drifted to last night once more, and he shook his head.

'Not now,' he told himself as if that would somehow help stop the memories from intruding on his brain. How exactly was he supposed to function with his day-to-day routine and responsibilities if all he could think about was Lucy Lane?

He quickly grabbed his laundry bag, shoving random articles of clothing into the overstuffed bag and heading toward the door.

He just needed to keep busy.

\*\*\*

Lois Lane wedged her fingers through the hair on the back of her husband's head, reveling in the feeling of being in his arms. The luggage from earlier laid scattered by the front door as she let out a low moan. Her back came in contact with the wood-paneled wall. "I thought you had to...patrol the, um, city," she prompted, allowing her hands to move through his silky hair.

After the fiasco, this morning with her mother the plans of them leaving from the hotel for their Honeymoon disappeared in a puff of smoke. Her mother had been anything but sorry as she'd been throwing insults left and right at Jimmy for supposedly taking advantage of her daughter. The management staff had been more than accommodating, but they all knew they'd overstayed their welcome after her mother's tirade. Now, after Clark had dropped everyone off at their respective homes, they were finally alone. Neither of them were too concerned with leaving the apartment at the moment.

"Patrol can wait," he murmured in her ear, tracing the curve of her neck with the edge of his palm. She felt the skin on her arms raise up as his breath tickled her ear.

"So *where* exactly are we...going?" she asked between uneven breaths as he leaned into her.

"I was planning a..." his voice trailed off and his body stiffened, his head cowered down as the familiar expression crossed his face.

"What is it?" she asked, curiously.

"The neighbor's T.V." He released his grasp on her and turned toward the living room to turn the television on with the remote.

The television lit up, and the image of the News Anchor for LNN filled the screen. "Sources say the reason for the pardon is still a mystery. All pardons handed down by the president were for inmates that died while in custody. Some experts actually question the political motives behind this decision. The president has planned a trip to New Troy to address the concerns and announce his intent to run for a second term..."

Lois read the blue and white ticker at the bottom of the screen, Lex Luthor Pardoned! She felt a sick feeling wash over her as she stared at the screen in shock. "What in the world?"

"Unbelievable." A hardened expression washed over Clark's face and he clicked the remote off with the flick of his wrist, tossing it on the couch.

She watched the range of emotions cross his face uncertainly. They couldn't have just a few weeks for themselves? Was that too much to ask for? She looked toward the television Clark had turned off, recalling the text of Lex Luthor Pardoned in all caps across the screen. It was a big story. There was probably something involved that would require Superman's help.

It was also their honeymoon. It was a time she and Clark could never get back. They could stay. They could put the honeymoon on hold and dive into whatever sinister plot was slowly rising to the surface. It could be done. A hard knot began to form in her abdomen as she stared at her husband's features wondering what he would do.

"We need to get going." He finally spoke, turning toward her.

"What about your patrol?" she asked, noticing the worried lines on his forehead.

"It'll be fine." He shrugged it off, allowing a smile to cross his face. She could tell he was still concerned as he looked back at her. "I did a scan of the city when I was dropping everyone off."

"Clark..." she placed a hand on his chest, meeting his troubled gaze.

"Let's just go," he gave her a pleading look. "This mess will still be here when we get back." He ran a hand against her cheek. "If we don't go now something else will come up. Something *always* comes up."

She nodded, running her hand against his chest. A playful smile crossed her face, and she asked, "And *where* exactly are we

going?”

A smile crossed his face, and he took her hand in his, pulling her to him. “Fiji,” he planted a kiss on her cheek. “Rome,” he planted another kiss on her jaw. “Kyoto,” he brushed his lips against hers and murmured. “Just to name a few.”

“You say that like it’s nothing to fly across the world,” she whispered, running her hand across his cheek.

“Well, we are flying Superman express,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss her.

\*\*\*

A flood of light filled Bill Henderson’s eyes, and he squinted, turning his head away to protect his sensitive pupils from the light. “Bill?” he heard the familiar voice of Detective Zymack call his name and he let out a grunt of acknowledgment.

The light shone in his face once more, and he groaned, doing his best to adjust to the light. “Rollins! Get Atwater over here!”

\*\*\*

Lex stood in the corner of the bar, awaiting his guest’s arrival. The smoke in the air created the perfect cover as he kept his face hidden from the patrons that came and went with ease in the dimly lit room. He tucked the hat he wore over his face to as further precaution

. Though he was a free man, he wasn’t ready to make his presence known to the world just yet.

A shadow crossed the table he was standing next to, and he turned to see a man with a cigar in hand and an expensive suit, holding an envelope in his hands. “I take it you are X?” His lip curled up with a twinge of a smile as he stared back at him with a chuckle.

“Are those the names?” Lex looked at the envelope in the man’s hands.

“Ah, ah, ah.” He shook his head, waving the envelope like a dangling carrot. “The payment?”

“Everything you need to create an army of half-machine powered criminals...even after the soul has left the body,” Lex hissed in a sinister tone, waving the file in his hand.

“How do I know it works?” the man asked.

Lex motioned to where Gretchen was sitting a few seats over, and she smiled, standing up with Metallo who wore a black one-piece suit with a silver x across the chest. They crossed over to where Lex was standing, and he smiled motioning to the man, “I give you Metallo.”

\*\*\*

Lois felt a breeze against her back, looking behind her to see the golden hills curving with the wind as they overlooked the majestic river below. She could see the deep creviced valleys below where the water flowed through freely. It was breathtaking.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” she murmured, turning her head to look back at Clark who had an arm hung loosely around her waist. They’d flown to Fiji a few hours ago and checked into the hotel. Instead of following the typical tourist attractions, Clark had flown them to the more reclusive parts of the country to take in the spectacular sights that weren’t a part of the usual tours.

Her husband’s arms tightened around her as he whispered in her ear, “There are a few things that can put even this place to shame.” The curve of his lip twitched as he looked back at her, brushing a loose hair out of her face. “Unfortunately, we don’t have time to explore all the parts of Fiji, but we can at least see the highlights while we’re here.”

She smiled back at him, tightening his hand in hers as she let out a long breath. “How many places are you trying to fit into two weeks’ time?”

“Eight or ten,” he shrugged, pulling her toward him. “It depends,” he whispered in her ear.

“On what?” she asked.

“How distracted we get.” He leaned in to kiss her, and she

grinned, feeling the wind brush through her hair as his hand moved to cup her cheek.

\*\*\*

Lucy Lane set her things down on the bench, glancing over at the washing machine she’d just loaded with her clothes. Thankfully the crowd that was usually taking over the Metro Mart’s Spin and Save seemed to have found something else to do. It was just as well. Sharing an overheated room that reeked of bleach and moldy detergent wasn’t how she envisioned spending her afternoon. She’d taken off two days at the restaurant and had been hoping to spend today relaxing. Unfortunately, the vacation had been cut short by her mother’s interference.

Why was it such a big deal anyway? She and Jimmy were both grown and consenting adults. All she could make out of her mother’s high pitched screams was that she was angry about how it looked. That was always how it was with her.

The person she’d been most concerned about having something to say about her and Jimmy’s relationship was Lois. She’d been quiet about the whole thing when they’d been waiting for Superman to take everyone back home. There wasn’t any yelling or hurt feelings just silence on the subject. She wasn’t really sure how to take that but given her sister probably had other things on her mind she didn’t ponder too hard on the subject.

Jimmy was another matter altogether. She wasn’t sure where they stood or if there was anything to talk about after the fiasco with her mother. Looking back on everything, she knew it was not the smartest move on either of their parts to sleep together. They were both drunk. It was her sister’s wedding. It wasn’t the time or the place to start something with him. But it had happened. It wasn’t like she could take any of it back.

She still didn’t know where to go from here. Should she call him? Should she wait for him to call her? Would he even want to after what had happened with her mother?

She shook her head in disgust, uncertain if she could blame him for not wanting to pursue anything with her after being dragged out of the hotel room by his ear. It had been humiliating for all of them and what was even worse was the fact that her mother was too consumed with her anger to realize what she was doing to all of them. Lois had to be holding onto some resentment after being asked to leave the hotel early on her honeymoon. She knew she would.

She sighed, running a hand through her hair. “What a mess,” she mumbled aloud as she dug out the book she’d been reading for her Critical Thinking class and notebook, hoping to catch up on some of her coursework before class later that week. Of course, that meant she would have to actually read the book in her hand. Reading and thinking of anything other than the events from this morning and last night didn’t seem to go over well today.

“You keep staring at that book like that, it might get offended,” a voice came from behind her.

She turned and looked, feeling a blush cross her cheeks as she saw Jimmy Olsen standing in front of her. “Uh, Jimmy, hi,” she nervously twirled her hair on her finger, looking back at him.

“I’m not following you, I swear,” he said patting the bag on his shoulder.

She smiled back at him, shaking her head. “Please don’t pay attention to anything my mother said this morning. She’s...”

“Nuts?” Jimmy prompted.

“Reality challenged.” Lucy nodded with a laugh as he took a seat next to her. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re not the one that should be apologizing.” Jimmy sighed, looking over at her. “I, uh, guess our timing could have been better though.”

“Yeah,” Lucy twisted her mouth into a half-smile.

\*\*\*

Carmine Falcone exited the Lexor Hotel, walking purposefully to the awaiting limo parked out front. He nodded to the driver who

was standing by the door. The driver opened the door for him, and he slid inside the limo, waiting for the driver to close the door before addressing the guests waiting inside for him.

"Make sure all the soldiers know what's coming," he ordered, looking to John Denetto, one of the key players in the Intergang operation in Gotham. A light chuckle escaped his lips, "We can't afford for anyone to back out now."

"They won't know what hit them," Denetto grinned gleefully.

\*\*\*

Lois bumped Clark's hip, looking toward the waterfall behind them. "So, is there a reason you didn't want to take the official tour down here?" She inquired with a twinkle in her eyes. After lunch, Clark had brought them to Mt Lushan Falls to explore the natural beauty of China. Instead of following the typical tourist path above ground he'd brought her through one of the caverns below. Finally, they reached the end, and she could see sunlight and the powerful waterfalls crashing against the stone walls and ceiling that surrounded them.

"Is this even on the map?" she asked curiously, glancing back at her husband with a playful grin.

"Nope," he took her hand in his, running his thumb over the gold band, pulling her to him. "This is one of the best spots. You get a perfect view of the waterfall away from everything. No crowds and no interruptions."

"It's beautiful here." She observed, looking toward the smooth stones that arched into a smooth curve, protecting them from the water crashing down around them.

"Last time I was here I found this place by accident. It has a very calming effect, listening to the water, and gives you a chance to enjoy everything without the over-crowded experience." Clark explained, following her down the path that had been smoothed out to lead them to the plunge basin of water below and closer to the waterfall they were behind.

"It's certainly a unique view," she remarked, steadying herself as she took another step to where the crystal clear water ran into the pool of water inches from their feet. She turned to look over her shoulder, smiling to see Clark floating half an inch above the slick stones and laughed. "That is not fair."

"Someone's got to make sure we both don't fall in," he responded with a grin, tightening his hand around hers.

She stopped, turning to face him fully, "Floating makes you suddenly have better balance than me?"

"Nothing to trip on," he retorted, his grin widening as he spoke. "And I have better coordination on uneven surfaces."

A smirk crossed her face, and she looped her arms around his neck, extending her neck, so she was eye-level with him. "You sure about that?"

Before he could respond, she leaned into him, capturing his mouth with hers. He let out an involuntary moan, cupping her cheek as he focused his attention elsewhere. He let out a groan as she parted her lips, dipping his tongue inside her mouth as he leaned further into her. She grinned, feeling the tension in her arms lessen as his feet came down to rest on the stone pathway beneath their feet.

"Still think you have better coordination than me?" she murmured against him, allowing her hands to wander up and down the front of his chest before giving him a playful push backward and capturing his mouth with hers once again. Sure enough, it was just enough of a distraction to cause him to lose his balance and fall back into the pool of water, taking her with him.

She let out a shriek as the cold water flooded her senses. She sat up, shaking her head and looking to Clark, who was watching her with an amused expression. The pool wasn't more than a few feet deep, coming up to her waist.

"See?" he floated a few inches above the water. "No coordination."

She splashed some water at him playfully. "Need I remind you

who lost their balance?"

"I was pushed." He shook his head, lowering himself next to her. "That doesn't count."

"Uh-huh," she splashed him with her hand, reaching up to grab the wall behind her and stand up. "You still fell," she retorted with a grin.

He reached over to help steady her, and she felt a warmth cross down her shoulders, over her chest and abdomen. She looked down to see steam rising off the cotton dress she was wearing. "Can't have you catching a cold," he explained, wrapping his arms around her.

"Well, we certainly wouldn't want that," she agreed. "We only have two weeks...and hardly any vacation time left when we get back."

"Yes, two weeks of no stories to chase, or disasters to divert..." he trailed off, leaning close enough so she could feel his breath against her skin. A shiver of anticipation ran through her as she stared back at him. "And mostly...no interruptions," he finished, capturing her mouth with his.

She let out an inaudible moan, feeling the vibration of his mouth against hers as his hands found their way to her damp hair. She let out a soft sigh, running her hands over his chest and whispering, "So, what exactly do you have planned for the rest of this visit?" She ran her hands over his shoulders and grinned back at him playfully, "I mean, besides failing to school me in the art of coordination."

He let out a light chuckle, "Was it really?" he challenged, leaning in to kiss her then adding in a low whisper. "I figured we could do some exploring and take in the sights before moving on to the next stop in Nepal." He looked at her and let out a low murmur, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes," she purred, toying with the collar to his shirt playfully. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, that's for sure." She looped her arms around his neck. "Thank you."

"Getting away from it all and recharging is something I think we both need after the crazy year we've had," Clark whispered, running the edge of his hand against her cheek and tracing the curve of her neck as he slid his hand down over her shoulders.

"It hasn't been all bad," she smiled, leaning against him.

"No, some parts have been pretty amazing," Clark whispered, leaning in to kiss her.

She leaned back against the stone wall, her hair damp from the recent fall into the pool, and turned to him with a knowing look.

"You think?"

"Oh, yeah," he whispered against her lips.

"So we've got, what, four hours to kill before we head out?" she prompted, scrunching her nose up at him.

"Something like that," he grinned at her, reaching over to stroke her cheek.

"We should make the most of it..." she let out a low moan, leaning against him as he captured her mouth with his once more.

\*\*\*

Jimmy glanced over at Lucy nervously, watching as she pulled each item of clothing out of the dryer and folded it. They'd sat in an unbearable silence for most of the afternoon, talking about anything and everything but what was weighing heavily on both their minds. He toyed with the drawstring on his laundry bag, unsure what to do next.

"So, they opened up a new theater on Fifth," he finally found his voice. He cringed inwardly, hearing the uneven squeak as she looked back at him with a perplexed expression.

"Yeah." She nodded, reaching in the dryer for another article of clothing.

"We could check it out if you wanted...might be interesting," he finished lamely.

"A new theater might be interesting?" She looked at him with a confused expression.

“Well, not the theater, per se, but maybe the movies playing?” he offered weakly.

“So, you want me to go to the new theater to see a movie with you?” she asked.

“No!” he said louder than necessary and then backtracked, “I mean, yes.”

“Which is it?” Lucy asked, looking at him in confusion.

“Yes,” he seemed to find his voice and cleared his throat. “I’d like to go to a movie with you...like on a date?”

“A date?” she echoed, her voice wavering slightly.

“Yeah, you know I figured after last night we at least owed it to one another to give this a real shot...” he walked toward her, and she glanced back at him with a panic-stricken face. “Luce?”

\*\*\*

Detective Jim Burrows took a swig of his coffee, descending the stairs that led into the squad room of the Metropolis P.D. The case had been presented to pardon the inmates that were a part of the prison corruption scandal that had taken control of the city’s news outlets. All anyone could talk about was how the prison had let these prisoners down. Never mind the fact that these were hardened criminals that would think nothing of hunting someone down in cold blood.

The case had been sent to Washington, and he had thought for sure it would be dismissed. Never in his wildest dreams did he think the president would actually sign the pardon. He had worked side by side with Bill when he’d been working the Luthor case after the Planet bombing. The cold, calculating measures Luthor had gone through to destroy the Planet and pin it on an innocent copyboy was astounding.

Once the glass ceiling had been shattered, and the case opened up the biggest conspiracy in Metropolis’ history there was no going back. Lex Luthor had been the mastermind behind a majority of the city’s crimes and had been instrumental in the city losing funds that could have gone to help those in need. Sure, he gave a public donation here and there to save face, but it was all to stroke his ego.

He spotted Bill sitting at his desk and approached hesitantly, uncertain how his friend would feel about the news of Lex Luthor’s pardon—even if the man was dead. “Morning, Bill.”

“Morning.” Bill Henderson kept his eyes down, looking at the paper in front of him in a studious way.

“Quite the news, eh?” Jim pointed at the television coverage of the presidential pardon being issued for Lex Luthor.

“Good news spreads fast, I suppose,” Bill Henderson remarked unfazed.

“Good news spreads...? Bill, are you feeling all right?” Jim asked, looking at him in concern.

“Never better,” Bill responded with a grunt.

A commotion from the corner of the squad room pulled Jim’s attention away, and he turned to see the very wanted Nigel St. John standing at the top of the stairs. “Easy, easy, I’m unarmed,” he called out to the police station filled with weapons directed toward him. “Officers, I’d like to turn myself in.”

\*\*\*

Bruce Wayne stood in front of the mirror in his master suite of the Wayne Manor, straightening his tie. He looked over at the suitcase Alfred had packed. He wasn’t sure how long this trip would take, but he was sure of one thing: he had to act fast. He did his best not to ponder too hard over what was at stake. He had already lost so much in the war over Gotham.

Once the word was out that Falcone had made the trip to Metropolis he knew there was no going back. There hardly ever was. In his line of work, he’d had to make hard choices for the betterment of mankind. Some of those choices had cost others their lives...many at the hands of thugs like Falcone. If he was interested in Metropolis, then so was he.

“Mr. Fox is expecting you, Master Wayne,” Alfred said

approaching him from behind.

“I’ll be in touch as soon as we land,” Bruce reassured, placing a hand on his worried friend’s shoulder.

“Just remember, many of the criminals in Metropolis are used to a superhero that’s indestructible. Your normal methods may not work if you’re caught in a tight spot,” Alfred advised.

“Well, then I guess I can always yell ‘*Help, Superman!*’ in those instances, right?” Bruce gave Alfred a sympathetic smile.

“We’ll get them this time, Alfred.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Alfred remarked before turning to the door. “Mr. Fox is waiting.”

\*\*\*

“I have to go,” Lucy Lane said hurriedly, standing to her feet as she shoved the last of her laundry still slightly damp into the hamper she was carrying. She avoided eye contact with Jimmy as she looked at the ground, unwilling to allow herself to get caught off guard again.

“Go?” Jimmy asked, looking at her with a perplexed expression.

“Go!” she said forcibly, heading to the door with Jimmy hot on her tail. “I, uh, have to, um...”

“Luce, wait!” Jimmy called after her, jogging to keep up with her. “Slow down.”

“This is too much,” she finally found her voice. “I can’t...I...”

“What’s too much?” Jimmy asked, looking at her in confusion. “All I asked was for a simple movie.”

She squinted her eyes closed, feeling a rush of emotions come over her. A single tear escaped her eyes, “I know,” she whispered in a barely audible tone. “I just don’t know if I...”

“What?” he asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Jimmy, you’re a really great guy. I just don’t have the best track record with great guys. I don’t want you to get hurt, and I don’t...” she stopped when she felt his hand move to her cheek, cupping it with his palm. “This is a bad idea.”

“Why?” he challenged, looking at her for an answer she didn’t have at the moment. “You and I both know there’s a risk with every relationship. Why not take a chance?”

“Because the last person I cared about turned into a cyborg. The one before that ended up shot. I’m a jinx!” she cried, shaking her head at him as the tears ran down her cheeks freely.

“No, you’re not,” he whispered.

“Jimmy,” she sighed, shaking her head. “This could end really badly.”

“Maybe I’m willing to take that risk,” he reasoned aloud.

“I’m not,” she shook her head. “You are best friends with my sister. What happens when things don’t work out? Are you going to quit your job to avoid her? This is too messy!”

“What happens if it does work out?” he prompted, leaning into her. She let out a sharp breath as she felt the heat from his breath against her. He was too close. Too close for her to think and too close for her to process all the emotions running through her mind.

“The chances of that aren’t exactly stacked in our favor,” she challenged.

“One movie. One date,” he pleaded with her. “If it doesn’t work out we’ll walk away as friends. I promise.” He was quiet a moment before prompting her, “What do you say?”

She gave him a slow smile, staring back at the hopeful expression on his face. If he was willing to put himself out there, she could too, right? What harm could come from just one date?

“Okay, one date.” she nodded, looking at him with a smile.

“Great,” he grinned back at her.

“I do have to go,” she said, looking at the door.

He nodded, removing his hand from her cheek and stepping away. “Right.” She headed out the door, and he called after her, “See you tonight.”

A smile crossed her face as she looked back at him. “See you tonight.”

\*\*\*

Johnny Corbin stood outside the Metro Mart, watching as Lucy Lane exited the Spin and Save on the corner. His jaw tightened as he stared at the young man waving after her like a lovesick puppy. He stared at his aluminum hands, watching as the green hue reflected on the metal of his arms.

“Metallo?”

He turned to see the woman he’d come to know as Gretchen Kelly standing behind him. He quickly covered, pretending was easier than to explain what he was doing out in public without permission. The jagged memories continued to flood through his mind as he stared at the young brunette walking toward the awaiting taxi cab.

“I guess I got lost,” he answered mutely, uncertain if his excuse was being bought by her.

“Come now, there are some people we want you to meet,” she motioned toward the town car sitting across the street. “We have a lot to talk about.”

\*\*\*

Jim Burrows stared at the screen in front of him, uncertain how to process Bill Henderson’s reaction to the news of Lex Luthor’s pardon. How could he just act like nothing was wrong with it? He’d spent months chasing down leads, trying to bring the boss of Metropolis down once and for all. Then when the scum bag cheated death, he’d beat himself up, wondering what he could have done to stop Luthor from jumping. All those months of guilt weighed on his friend. Luthor being found alive and living on the lamb had come as a shock to all of them. No one was more shocked than Bill Henderson to discover Luthor alive and well.

No way would he be okay with Luthor being pardoned.

No way.

He stood up from his desk, determination crossing his face. Something was up, and he was going to find out what. A rumble beneath his feet caused him to stop. He looked down and saw a crack in the floor beneath his feet. He fell to the ground, rolling on one side to escape the expanding ground attempting to swallow up anyone that dared get in its path.

Maniacal laughter came from the balcony. Jim looked up, lifting his head from where he’d flattened himself against the ground and saw a man with several scars over his face holding a machete in his right hand and aiming it into the crowd. Behind him was a group of thugs with painted faces armed with machine guns.

Realization washed over Jim as he rolled himself behind his desk just in time to protect himself from the rain of gunfire that filled the police station. “You have the right to remain silent...” the man dancing in a sleek brown suit taunted as he aimed the machete around the room. In the distance, he could hear a loud crash outside. He looked up and saw the tall building that held the prisoners engulfed in flames.

He didn’t dare scream and draw attention to himself, reaching up for the top drawer to his desk where the panic button had been embedded in all office equipment after the recent remodel. Just a few more inches...

“Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?” a voice came from behind him, pointing the barrel of a machine gun at the back of his head.

Jim Burrows turned, looking at the man in confusion. “Let me guess. Clowns. Guns. The Joker, right?”

A light chuckle escaped the man’s lips, and he leaned down to snarl, “I am nothing like that freak!” An unnerving calm washed over him, and he whispered, “You can call me Stitches!”

\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

Bill Henderson gritted his teeth as he tried to drown out the pain of his throbbing head. The blinding light that continued to flash his way caused him to cry out as he took a step forward.

Questions from the different officers echoed around him.

*Are you okay?*

*How long have you been down here?*

*What happened?*

“Luthor,” Henderson growled out.

Zymack looked back at him in confusion, “What?”

“Luthor,” Henderson growled, “He’s alive.”

\*\*\*

“You can call me Stitches!”

It happened so fast Jim Burrows wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t seen it with his own two eyes. A dark shadow flew through the police station, throwing high tech devices into the air that released a dark mist.

“You!” the man that identified himself as Stitches screeched out with a snarl, “Aren’t you a little far from home?”

“I should be asking you the same question, Johnny,” the dark tone escaped from the hooded man in black. Through the mist, Burrows could make out two pointed ears on the top of the hood the stranger wore beneath the gas mask.

\*\*\*

The sound of a siren blaring on the street followed by the barking of a dog filled the afternoon air. Lucy tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and turned toward Jimmy, “Things are getting kinda scary out here.”

“Yeah.” Jimmy gave her a half-smile. “Thanks for agreeing to an afternoon movie with me.” He twisted his mouth. “The whole mandatory curfew put a bit of a damper on the movie and dinner idea.”

Lucy smiled back at him. “Yeah, well, maybe next time.”

“Next time?” Jimmy asked hopefully as they reached the front of her apartment building.

“Next time,” she repeated, leaning in to give him a peck on the cheek. “I kinda like having you around.” She took a breath, holding his gaze as he smiled back at her before turning to leave. “Bye, Jimmy.”

\*\*\*

Two officers walked in perfect unison by Mayson Drake’s side, while two soldiers from the National Guard escorted her and Michael Clemmons into City Hall. Mayson felt her heart palpitate as she moved further and further into the empty building that had been evacuated just four short hours ago. Shards of glass and broken wood were scattered on the ground.

Mayson looked down as the glass crunched under her heels, spotting the blood spatter on the floor from where the mysterious gang of criminals led by Nigel St. John had overpowered the police all over Metropolis and freed more than thirty hardened criminals. She swallowed hard as they reached the end of the hall, leading into the courtroom of Judge Jackson.

The door opened, and they stepped inside where Mayor Berkowitz and Governor Wade were waiting by the jury box. Mayor Berkowitz turned to Michael. “Mr. Clemmons, glad you could make it.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice.” Michael looked around the eerie quiet courtroom. “It’s a ghost town.”

“It’s like this all over the city,” Governor Wade supplied. “Ten small groups of criminals all hit every courthouse and police station at the same time. Some of the most notorious criminals have gone missing.”

“Missing?” Mayson scoffed. “You mean escaped.”

“Kidnapped,” Berkowitz amended. “From what we saw no one went with them willingly.”

“Who are these people?” Mayson asked, an eerie calm coming over her.

“We don’t know,” Governor Wade said.

“What do you know?” Mayson asked.

“I’m told you’ve worked with Superman on the Intergang takedown case,” Governor Wade said, avoiding Mayson’s

question.

“Yes, but my only way of contacting him was to either yell for help or reach out to a source that is not available right now,” Mayson said looking back at Governor Wade with the shake of her head. “No one knows where he is.”

“What about this mysterious shadow guy everyone’s been talking about?” Michael asked. “Any word on who he is?”

“No,” Berkowitz said, loosening his collar. “No one knows who he is or if he’s friend or foe.”

“So, what do we do?” Mayson asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” Governor Wade said solemnly.

\*\*\*

The dark halls were covered in silver steel panels. The square bolts covered each panel with brown rust that told how long they had gone uncared for. Bill Henderson cleared his throat looking around the hidden room Zymack had discovered. Bunks covered one side of the room and unperishable food that had been stockpiled for who knew how long covered a long steel shelf. In the corner was an elevator panel that went somewhere. He was just too tired to figure out where.

“Found a lantern,” Zymack said, pointing at the antique looking light fixture that Atwater was currently attempting to light.

“Any ideas on how to get out of here?” Bill asked, turning to his friend.

“You’re the expert on these tunnels,” Zymack reminded him.

\*\*\*

*Two Weeks Later...*

The wind blew against Lois Lane’s face as she rested her head against her husband’s spandex covered arm. The clouds surrounded them in a cool cocoon as they flew over the city lights below. Two weeks of blissful, isolation from the rest of the world. It had been...perfect.

With the constant trouble both she and Clark constantly found themselves in it was nice to have time for just the two of them and shut the rest of the world out. Superman had even hung up his cape for their two weeks abroad, allowing the rest of the world to survive on its own. She easily could have gone for another week of seclusion with him. It surprised her how quickly two weeks had gone by.

“Lois?”

“Hmm?” Lois lifted her head up and saw Clark’s dark eyes staring back at her.

A smile cracked across his mouth, and he whispered, “I said, we’re home.”

“Looks pretty quiet” Lois observed, glancing down below them at the familiar street. The cool air from the fall breeze flew through her hair as they slowly lost altitude behind their apartment building.

“Home sweet home,” he whispered in her ear as her feet hit the ground and she stepped back, looking around the abandoned street just in case. She looked back and saw Clark had already changed into the green button-down shirt and jeans he’d been wearing earlier in the day.

Before she could take the time to appreciate his change in wardrobe, he pulled her in his arms, capturing her mouth with his. His hands wandered through her hair, slipping up the back of her neck and cupping the back of her head with his palm. His other hand moved up and down her lower back, and she let out a low moan, feeling the intensity of his lips against hers send a familiar flutter through her insides.

Her fingers moved to the back of his neck, cupping the back of his head as she murmured against him, “It is so not fair you can change that quickly.”

“You’re forgetting how handy a quick wardrobe change can be,” he whispered softly, moving his hand from her cheek to join his other hand on her lower back, pulling her closer.

She smoothed her hands up the front of his chest, fingering the

soft fabric. “Well, maybe instead of wasting our time hiding outside like a couple of teenagers sneaking out past curfew we should go inside?” Her eyes sparkled as she grinned back at him, “I mean unless you have a thing for dark and rundown buildings?” A cold breeze rushed across her face, and she let out a soft giggle as he scooped her in his arms and moved them inside their apartment at super-speed.

\*\*\*

Bruce Wayne stepped off the elevator to the penthouse of WayneTech Tower. He looked around, spotting his friend Lucius Fox in the main room, hard at work in front of the four monitors he’d set up for handling Wayne Enterprises crucial issues from Metropolis. One of which was keeping an eye on the criminal element that continued to plague Gotham.

“Lucius,” he nodded to Fox as he approached. “Anything new?”

Lucius shook his head, “I’m still not finding anything on the scanners that connects this Stitches that attacked the Metropolis P.D.”

“How many escaped?” Bruce asked.

“Seven,” Lucius Fox pulled up the mug shots of the men that had been identified as attackers in the raid on the Metropolis P.D.

Bruce’s jaw tightened as he stared at the image of the ringleader that had identified himself as “Stitches.” He knew all too well what Johnny “Stitches” Denetto was capable of. His reign on Gotham had left the city in shambles. He had thought his days of terror were over, but it seemed he had just relocated to Metropolis.

“No sign of Denetto,” Bruce observed aloud.

“He always has been good about covering his tracks,” Lucius reminded him.

“Why Metropolis though?” Bruce wondered, looking out the large, room-length tall windows that looked over the city. “Why do you think they chose the city they knew Superman was looking over?”

“Superman hasn’t been seen at any of these attacks,” Lucius reminded him. “Do you think Denetto might have something to do with his disappearance?”

Bruce tightened his jaw. “It’s possible.” He let out a heavy sigh. He’d spent years trying to rid his city of Denetto and make him pay for his unspeakable crimes only to be faced with the deranged criminal’s escape from Gotham Penitentiary before his transfer to Arkham. He still didn’t know how Denetto had pulled that off.

He’d spent the last few weeks looking for information on the escaped members of Denetto’s gang that continued to grow larger and larger by the day. He’d come here hoping to get Superman’s help in his quest to bring the escaped criminals back in. Now it looked like he’d be the one helping Superman.

Bruce looked out at the night sky. “Something ugly’s coming here, Lucius, I can feel it.” He turned back to Lucius. “How are you coming with the ultrasonic wave?”

Lucius pointed to his computer that was hooked up to a large metal disc. “We’re just about ready, but I must stress that I think trying to call Superman with this high of a frequency and this high decibel—”

Bruce shook his head. “STAR Labs’ ultrasonic watch didn’t work so he’s either not in range or he’s not able to respond. Either way, we’ll find out for sure once we test it.”

Lucius nodded. “I’ll start it out at fifty decibels.”

“Ninety,” Bruce pressed. At Lucius’ concerned expression he countered, “We’ve been staying within the seventy decibels range the last few weeks. Let’s push it up to ninety. See if we can get a response.”

Lucius flashed him a concerned look. “You do remember this man you’re trying to find is invulnerable, right? Can bend the Batmobile over his head without blinking an eye? Knocked an

asteroid out of orbit with his bare hands?” His face tensed in worry. “Are you sure you want to push your luck? Fancy gadgets aside you are very human and very vulnerable.”

“I’ve got to try something,” Bruce responded with an agitated expression. “Make it a hundred decibels. Just to be safe.”

“It’s your funeral,” Lucius responded, browsing the controls to activate the ultrasonic wall.

\*\*\*

Addiction.

That was the only way to describe the pull Clark Kent felt as his mind went blank, blocking out the rest of the world as he pressed his wife back against the front door of their apartment. He barely remembered locking the door behind them before he found himself unable to focus on anything other than the mind-numbing movements of his wife’s body against his. All he could see, think, or feel was how intoxicating his wife’s limbs felt wrapped around him as he devoured every inch of her.

After spending the last two weeks flying to some of the lesser known beautiful wonders of the world with Lois, he felt closer to her than ever. Two weeks of nothing but uninterrupted bliss with his wife. He still couldn’t say the new title without grinning ear-to-ear. His hand smoothed across her face. She beamed back at him, her eyes shining as she leaned into him.

“I love you,” he murmured against her lips, allowing a grin to cross his face as he whispered her married name, “Lois Lane Kent.”

“I love y—”

A loud ultrasonic blast of frequency flooded his super-powered eardrums at maximum volume, echoing at an intensity well past anything he’d heard before. Jimmy’s ultrasonic watch and even Martin Snell’s high-frequency device hadn’t been this loud. It was almost as deafening as the wall of sound Lenny Stoke had created last year, but his vibrating eardrums felt the painful effects regardless.

“Clark?” He could make out Lois’ attempt to pull him back through the drowning sensation that flooded his eardrums with a piercing sound that made him fall back on the floor. “Clark!”

He could feel a bead of sweat dripping down his face as he hunkered down on the floor, waiting for relief to come. After what felt like hours but probably was only a few minutes the sound faded. His ears held onto the ringing as he let out a sigh of relief.

“Clark?” Lois knelt down next to him, placing a hand on his cheek.

He let out a sigh of relief as the sound of her voice echoed in his eardrums. “Are you okay?” she asked. He could hear the vibration of her trembling voice as he looked back at her.

“Fine...I think,” he managed, standing to his feet. “I think someone’s trying to get my attention...in a painful way.” He rubbed his index finger against the inside of his ear canal, recalling the pain from a few minutes ago.

“Who do you think it is?” Lois asked, tightening her jaw as worry lines spread across her forehead.

The quick drumming of her heart rate told him he hadn’t been the only one affected by the ultrasonic attack. He looked back at Lois, noting the tense features across her face that reminded him once more that every battle he faced left her anxiety-ridden as much as her daredevil stunts made his heart palpitate with worry. Everything that he faced as Clark and as Superman affected her just as much as it did him.

The tormented look in her eyes reminded him of his last encounter with Kryptonite during the Diana Stride fiasco. He could tell from the look on her face the painful attack had scared her. As much as he would love to brush the ultrasonic attack off as if it was nothing and pick up where he and Lois had left off, he knew he couldn’t do that. He had to find the source of that sound and put both their minds at ease. He ran the back of his hand against her cheek, “I’m going to go check the city. See if I can

figure out who or what was making that sound.”

“Be careful,” Lois placed a hand on his chest. He leaned in to kiss her before disappearing into a blur of red and blue, intent on finding the source of the ultrasonic sound that had put a cramp on his evening at home with his wife.

\*\*\*

The long, silver limo pulled up to the large mansion that towered over the perfectly manicured property. Music and lights were coming from the immense brick mansion. The roundabout in the courtyard had cars parked along it and the long driveway leading toward the quiet street the mansion resided on.

“Congressman Riley sure does know how to throw a classy party, doesn’t he?” Carmine Falcone commented, leaning forward as he lit his cigar from inside the limo. He turned his attention to the man sitting across from him—his right-hand man, Bruno Mannheim.

Bruno wore a steely expression as he ran his hand across his square jaw, fingering the neatly trimmed goatee. His dark hair was combed back, and his Prada pinstriped suit fit Bruno’s tall stature perfectly as he nodded in agreement. “Riley always did have the best liquor.”

Falcone turned toward the two women that had accompanied him over to Congressman Riley’s get-together. He examined the tight silk that wrapped around each of them, barely covering them enough to be called a dress. The blonde beauties were dressed in just enough to be legal, though he was sure none of the congressmen or senators inside Congressman Riley’s get-together would be complaining about the amount of skin coverage or cleavage the girls were showing.

Falcone took a long puff of his cigar before turning to Mannheim. “You sure Denetto made the switch?”

“Everyone in there should be more than willing to cooperate with anything you or the ladies suggest,” Mannheim reassured.

Carmine turned to the women as he took a long puff from his cigar. “You know what to do, girls.”

\*\*\*

Clark soared through the night sky, scanning the city for a sign of anything out of place that could have caused the ultrasonic attack. He’d planned on doing a patrol around the city tonight but not before continuing what he and Lois had started outside their apartment. He could still hear the ringing in his ears from the intensity of the sound that had blasted over him like a wave. He wasn’t even sure what he was looking for.

“Help!” a cry came from the street below where three hooded figures surrounded a small Volkswagen parked in the corner of a darkened shopping center. By the driver’s side was a woman in uniform that looked to be just leaving the shopping center from her shift. He saw a knife, a pipe, and a baseball bat in each of the attempted assailants’ hands as they cornered her.

In a flash, he quickly swooped down to fly the would-be-victim away from the assailants to ensure they wouldn’t harm her. After setting her down he turned to the disoriented assailants, taking a protective step in front of the victim. “I believe shopping hours are over, gentlemen.”

“What’s he doing here?” one of the assailants asked.

“I thought you said it was safe,” another remarked under their breath.

Before the third could respond, he quickly grabbed an empty pipe from the back alley of the shopping center and used it to hold the assailants in a tight bind until the authorities could arrive. He turned to the victim. “They won’t be giving you any more...”

He stopped, feeling the blinding wave of sound fill his head once more. He let out a groan as he hit the ground, lifting his head up as he gritted his teeth trying to grin and bear it as he searched for the source of the deafening sound.

It was like a wave.

The sound felt closer.

His eyes flickered open as he used his enhanced vision to search around him for a sign of where the sound could be coming from. The tall skyscrapers that filled the Metropolis skyline towered over him as he looked up, searching for a sign. His eardrums continued to vibrate under the high decibels hitting his super-hearing again and again. He held his hand up, feeling the invisible waves hit him again and again as he attempted to locate the source. He closed his eyes, trying to focus his hearing in order to determine the source. Then just as quickly as the sound came, it disappeared. He focused his hearing on following the source of the sound, thrusting himself into the night sky and following the remnants of the sound wave that had hit him twice now in the last hour.

Just outside the newly renovated WayneTech building he heard the faint remnants from the ultrasonic attack. He watched as two men hovered over a computer, staring at the screen. The first man kept checking the monitors, and the other man was looking out the windows.

"That was a hundred decibels," the man at the computer said.

"Has it been five minutes yet?" the other man asked.

"I am really not comfortable with this..."

"Noted. Lucius, push it to a hundred and ten decibels," the other man ordered.

Before Clark could give Lucius a chance to tap the keys, he crashed through the glass windows, simultaneously shooting a beam of heat vision toward the monitor and grabbing the man that had ordered another ten decibels by the throat and slamming him against the wall.

"Who are you?!"

\*\*\*

Rollie Vale made his way down the long and narrow hallway, following the guard that had shown up at his cell in the middle of the night with an order to move him. He wasn't one to argue. The red-haired guard was quiet as he walked behind Rollie, ordering turn by turn until he reached the visitor's room.

"Isn't it a bit late for my conjugal visit?" Rollie snorted sarcastically.

The guard tapped on the door, and it opened, revealing two individuals sitting behind a table. One was a bald man he'd never seen before wearing spectacles and a lab coat. The other was a blonde-haired beauty that had a look about her that told him there was a darkness hidden behind her dark eyes. He took a few steps inside the room uncertain what to expect with this surprise visit. He turned behind him and saw the guard had followed him inside.

Curious, Rollie looked back at the guard. "Last I checked you were supposed to wait outside."

"Last I checked you weren't even supposed to have visitors," the guard replied in a smooth, sultry voice that he was sure wasn't male. Rollie took a double take when he saw the masculine figure of the guard change to a long-legged, red-haired beauty. Her lips pursed into a heart and she winked at him. "I think it's safe to say we're not following protocol tonight, Mr. Vale."

\*\*\*

"Who are you?!"

Bruce swallowed hard against the vice-like grip that had his throat pinned against the floor-length windows of the penthouse office he and Lucius were in. There was a flicker of red reflecting back at him from the menacing eyes of Superman demanding answers.

"Br...Bruce," he managed to muster enough strength in his vocal cords to respond to the furious Superman's demand for answers.

"Wayne!" Lucius called out. "His name is Bruce Wayne, and we need your help, Superman."

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Superman's eyes before the grip around his throat loosened, and he was thrown to the ground like a piece of garbage being discarded. Bruce took in a deep

breath trying to fill his lungs with the oxygen he'd been deprived of. He heard the shuffle of Superman's boots against the ceramic floor behind him.

"You sure got a funny way of asking for help," Superman growled out angrily.

Lucius helped Bruce to his feet, and Bruce let out a heavy sigh, staring back at the stern features across Superman's face. The red cape hung off his shoulders and rivaled the deep red that flickered in the man of steel's eyes. It had worked. He'd gotten his attention, and thankfully his worst fears weren't true, but now he had a very hostile superhero to tend to and hope that he could reason with the man of steel long enough to be heard out.

"I was trying to get your attention," Bruce explained calmly.

"Well, you certainly got it." Superman's response came across more as a dare than a response.

Bruce stood to his feet and took a moment to collect his thoughts under the stern gaze of the man of steel that almost seemed to be daring him to make a wrong move and risk another attack. "I needed to guarantee a response." He caught the look of distrust on Superman's face and continued, "We weren't sure if Denetto was successful on his raid or not."

"What raid?" Superman asked icily.

"Gotham P.D." Lucius supplied.

"Gotham?" Superman echoed not following where this was headed.

"The last attack on Gotham was made by a group of thugs that associate themselves with a group I'm sure you're familiar with," Bruce explained calmly, pacing nervously under the man of steel's gaze. "Intergang."

Superman's stern features tensed as he processed the news and Bruce continued. "The last attack was led by someone that likes to call himself Stitches. He's one of Bill Church's top lieutenants and capable of double-crossing anyone that gets in his way."

"I'm familiar with the name," Superman responded carefully. "From what I understand, he was supposed to be transferred to Arkham Asylum to carry out his sentence for the murder of Harvey Dent; also known among Gotham City's criminals as Two-Face."

"You've done your homework," Bruce observed, mildly impressed. It appeared Superman kept himself informed on more than just Metropolis' criminal activities. The silent question still remained on Superman's face, and Bruce sighed, continuing to explain what had happened. "Denetto escaped with several members of his gang. I don't know how but he's out there, and he's made himself right at home here in Metropolis."

Superman's features softened from the stern, icy stature to a concerned and dismayed hero upon hearing of Denetto's escape. "When was this?"

"We're not sure," came Lucius' response, handing Superman a copy of the Daily Planet's front page from a few weeks ago. The paper showed the image of the mayor and governor at the podium ordering the mandatory curfew for all citizens after the attack on City Hall and the Metropolis P.D.

"These aren't your average street thugs or organized crime rings," Bruce said carefully. "Most of the criminals in Gotham are certifiable and have no problem crossing every line to get what they want."

Superman's expression grew pensive as he pondered the news. "Earlier you said you weren't sure if Denetto had been successful in his raid. What did you mean by that?"

Bruce looked to Lucius who stood next to him, waiting patiently for the man of steel to respond. He needed to warn him of what Denetto had gotten his hands on, but he wasn't sure how. "Harvey Dent got a hold of something...dangerous. I'm afraid it's what cost him his life."

"What was it?" Superman asked.

"Kryptonite," Bruce said carefully. Immediately he saw the

man of steel's features harden and Bruce continued, "Gotham P.D. had taken it into custody, and it was supposed to be transferred to STAR Labs, but unfortunately that didn't happen in time."

"Unfortunately," Superman echoed in a mocking tone. "You say that as if it was some lost paperwork, Mr. Wayne, instead of the deadly radioactive substance that it is."

"We need your help to stop Denetto and bring him back in," Bruce began cautiously. "That is if you're not too busy doing... whatever it is you've been doing these last two weeks."

Superman was quick to respond in turn, "What I do with my time is not really your concern, Mr. Wayne."

"It is when the city you're supposed to be protecting ends up under siege!" Bruce snapped irritably.

"Well, maybe Gotham should have done a better job of keeping their criminals in custody," Superman jabbed, narrowing his eyes at him. "And what exactly is your part in all of this, Mr. Wayne? Last I checked philanthropists and owners of international corporations didn't call the shots when it comes to the prosecution and capture of criminals."

"Last I checked neither did you," Bruce countered icily.

The hardened features on Superman's face sent a chill down Bruce's spine, but he didn't dare back down. Superman's retort came with a sneer, "Have your commissioner call Metropolis P.D. to make arrangements. I'll see what I can do to help." A blast of heat vision hit the computer Lucius had been using earlier. "Don't ever use that thing to call me again."

\*\*\*

"...mandatory curfew for all Metropolis residents after last week's attack."

"...terrorists. The city is under siege by a group of thugs and the governor is too chicken to do anything about it."

"Where is Superman?"

"Seven escaped convicts are still at large after the attack on Metropolis P.D."

"No one knows who this mysterious shadow is or where he came from."

"I'm telling you I know what I saw!"

Unable to take the news coverage that continued to tell the tale of the city's latest attack, Lois clicked the remote and watched the image disappear from the television before tossing the remote on the couch. Two weeks. They couldn't leave the city for two weeks without everything going to hell.

She let out a heavy sigh turning back to the suitcase she'd been unpacking earlier. Had it really only been a few hours since Clark had flown out that window to find the source of the mysterious attack? Had it really only been a few hours ago that she and Clark had been in blissful ignorance, soaking up the peaceful atmosphere of Nepal before heading home to Metropolis? Had it really only been such a short amount of time since the end of their honeymoon came to a screeching halt?

This felt so surreal. How had so much happened in such a short amount of time? It was organized and methodical. Not at all like the insanity, many of the officers described the assailants to be. Someone was behind this. Someone was pulling the strings. She just wasn't sure who or what they hoped to gain from their attack on Metropolis.

There were a thousand things she wanted to do to start digging into the source of this turmoil, but she knew it was too late. She would have to reach out to her sources in the morning. She glanced toward the window uncertain when to expect Clark back.

'Please be careful,' she silently pleaded.

\*\*\*

<< "Denetto escaped with several members of his gang. I don't know how but he's out there, and he's made himself right at home here in Metropolis." >>

Clark flew over Hobb's Bay, scanning the city as he did a third patrol, looking for any sign of the gang of criminals Bruce Wayne

said had escaped. The city was quiet. Eerily quiet. No one was out. Police patrolled the darkened streets, leaving the static to their radios as the only sound he could pick up.

<< "Harvey Dent got a hold of something...dangerous. I'm afraid it's what cost him his life."

"What was it?"

"Kryptonite." >>

He'd heard the stories about Harvey Dent and his fall from grace as the top district attorney for Gotham. The man had taken on every thug and mob boss and made an attempt to clean up the streets of the now slum-ridden city only to become the very criminal he'd sought to bring to justice. Insanity was bred among Gotham city's criminals and multiplied faster than the police could lock them away.

Now those same criminals were making their presence known in Metropolis. What's worse, they had gotten their hands on kryptonite. A shudder ran through him as he recalled his last encounter with the deadly substance. Thankfully Diana Stride was still locked away in Federal prison for her crimes, but that didn't mean she hadn't told someone about it. Trouble was brewing. Had been for several weeks it seemed.

<< "That is if you're not too busy doing...whatever it is you've been doing these last two weeks."

"What I do with my time is not really your concern, Mr. Wayne."

"It is when the city you're supposed to be protecting ends up under siege!" >>

<< "Last I checked philanthropists and owners of international corporations didn't call the shots when it comes to the prosecution and capture of criminals."

"Last I checked neither did you" >>

His emotions ranged from anger to guilt to anger again at the realization that he would always be torn between his duties as a protector of this city and now as a husband and hopefully one day a father. The doubts that crept inside his mind were quickly squashed back down as he continued his patrol. He refused to feel bad about leaving the city for the last two weeks. He refused to feel guilty about taking his honeymoon with his wife. No matter how badly Bruce Wayne wanted to guilt him about his absence, he knew the decision to leave was the right one. After everything he and Lois had been through they needed that time together.

He was just about to call it a night when the alarm from the Metropolis Men's Penitentiary sounded. The radio frequency of a local patrol car reached his ears, and he heard the distress call come in.

"All units we have a 4532. Suspect, Rollie Vale, is considered armed and dangerous."

Another call came in on the radio.

"Backup is requested. All units respond. Metropolis Penitentiary Tower is in distress."

"Riot on Block C, E, and A. Repeat, backup is requested."

Clark zeroed in on the distress calls, making his way toward the prison as the signal went dead. The roar of smoke and flames from the watchtower at the Metropolis Penitentiary was threatening to spread. The chaos from down below filled his mind as he flew into action, saving the guards from the wrath of angry prisoners looking for revenge.

\*\*\*

A private jet came into land on a private airstrip just outside of New Troy. The pilot announced their arrival to his passenger as the plane came to a stop. He looked around the deserted airstrip, wondering why someone worth billions of dollars would wish to land in the middle of nowhere with no form of transportation out of the deserted airfield they were in.

His question was quickly answered when he heard the sound of a chopper outside. He looked up and spotted a red and white helicopter coming in to land a few feet away. His passenger called

out to him. “I believe that’s my ride.”

“Have a good evening, Mr. Church,” he called out to him.

\*\*\*

Clark quietly climbed beneath the covers next to the sleeping figure of his wife, catching a glimpse of the clock on the nightstand that read, 11:59. He’d scoured the city but found no sign of Rollie Vale or the other escaped inmates. He still wasn’t sure what to make of the mysterious figure the guards said had tied up a few of the inmates or how a smoke bomb had gotten inside the prison. There were plenty of things he and Lois needed to look into. Namely, Bruce Wayne and his appearance in Metropolis. He wasn’t sure how much he could trust the billionaire or what his connection was to Johnny Denetto’s gang. A shudder ran through him as he recalled the news of what Harvey Dent had gotten his hands on before his death.

Kryptonite.

The poisonous meteorite that would always be a thorn in his side and pose a threat to both himself and his family. He looked down at Lois, wrapping an arm around her as he prepared to drift off to sleep. A sleepy sigh escaped her lips, “Clark?”

“Go back to sleep, honey,” Clark whispered, pressing his lips against her forehead. “It’s after midnight,”

“Everything okay?” she asked, still not opening her eyes as her head moved to rest against his chest.

“Fine,” he ran a hand across her cheek. “I’ll update you in the morning,”

“I love you,” she mumbled sleepily against his chest. Her arms looped around him lazily and he could make out the soft breathing as she drifted back to sleep where he was soon to follow.

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Vice President Morgan Johnson made his way through the darkened halls, following his secret service agents through the turns at a rapid pace. A flicker of light came from the flashlight being held by the agent in front of him, and the chirping of the radio came in as they entered the hidden bunker that led to the safe house.

“This way, Mr. Vice President,” one of the agents called out to him.

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Lex took a long puff from his cigar, looking around the dark corner of the club he was in. The lights from the stage flickered as the dancers moved to the music. He reached for his glass of bourbon, tapping his other hand on the polyester fabric of the tablecloth.

“Is it really wise to be seen in public before the announcement,” a voice from behind him spoke up.

Lex looked over and saw his new business partner standing in the corner with a large packet in his hands. He waved the man over and nodded. “Mr. Church, I take it Mr. Falcone’s updated you?”

“You certainly are making a habit out of cheating death, aren’t you, Mr. Luthor?” Bill Church Jr asked as he pulled up a chair, taking in the intoxicating sounds and views coming from the stage.

“They can’t hunt you if you’re dead,” Lex remarked smugly, taking another sip from his bourbon. “...or in a country that doesn’t extradite,” he smiled back at the young man.

“Well you got to hand it to the Russians, Lex.” A smile teased Church’s face. “The communists’ hate for America runs so deep they won’t turn anyone over.”

“I love politics,” Lex smiled. “They’re so simple – and yet easy to sway those in power to do my bidding.”

“Our bidding,” Church corrected, handing over the file. “Don’t forget who’s been bankrolling your operation for the last five years,”

“Lest we forget, who approached who, Mr. Church?” Lex replied coldly, taking the packet from the table and ripping it open.

“You do know when this hits the papers, there will be a super

problem on all of our hands,” Church reminded him. “You still haven’t told us how you plan to deal with that freak in a cape.”

“Superman will be far too busy to worry about anything you or I are doing, Mr. Church,” Lex remarked, pulling out the judgment from the large stack of paperwork. On top, the court order read ‘Void’ on the certificate of death that had been issued during his escape from Metropolis Men’s Penitentiary.

“The boys are ready,” Church responded carefully. “Just be sure your...men are able to hold up your end.”

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Lights flickered through the United States Naval Observatory as agents swarmed the vacant grounds. Each agent looked to one another, hoping the other had news. An alarm sounded in the distance, and the faint call from down the hall could be heard, “The president of the United States...”

Dressed in a crisp black suit and tie was the president of the United States with his White House Chief of Staff. The first secret service agent clicked his heels together to stand at attention as each agent followed suit. He let out a shaky breath as the president stopped in front of him.

“Where is the vice president, Agent Thomas?”

“We don’t know,” came the agent’s stumbled response. “We don’t know, Mr. President.”

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### Chapter 3

The warm rays of sunshine peeked through the corners of the blinds, gently teasing Lois Lane awake from her slumber. She let out a groan, lifting her hand up to cover her eyes and shield them from the white light that had intruded into the master bedroom. Her eyelashes fluttered open, stealing a glimpse at the clock on the nightstand.

Two hours. She had two hours before she had to get up. She rolled on her side, pulling the covers over her head when she felt the cool sheets next to her. She frowned, reaching out for her missing husband and jerked her head up to examine his side of the bed that had been made up. She knew it had to be late when he got back. She briefly recalled him climbing into bed last night just after midnight. The sound of the shower running from the bathroom reached her ears, and she let out a sigh of relief that she would not have to scramble to come up with an excuse for her missing husband on their first day back at work. Two weeks away from everything left her ability to come up with excuses for Clark’s absence lacking.

She stretched her arms up over her head, listening to the soft drumming of water beating against the tile of the shower as she sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed and made her way toward the bathroom. She stole a glance at the clock one last time before tossing her nightgown to the floor. One hour and forty minutes. ‘*Plenty of time*,’ she thought to herself as she turned the knob to the door.

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Clark let out a stiff groan as he watched the dirty residue mixed with the soapy foam circle around the drain. He’d barely had a chance to catch his breath this morning. A four am call for help with the Metropolis Transit Authority had pulled him out of his wife’s arms and kept him busy for nearly two hours. Then his patrol around the bay had caught four attempted escapees trying to swim toward Gotham. He had deposited them back at the Metropolis Penitentiary and finished his patrol. So far he still hadn’t seen any sign of Rollie Vale, but he was sure he would turn up soon along with the rest of the escaped prisoners that had taken advantage of the opportunity the prison riot had given them.

He turned to face the shower’s spray, shaking his head to help rinse the remaining soapy residue off his face. The door to the bathroom creaked open, and he turned his head to where Lois was standing with a towel wrapped around her. A slow smile spread across his face as he watched her walk toward him through the

glass door. “You’re up early.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” she responded with a deep sigh, loosening her grip on the towel hugging her body with a small knot tucked snugly across her chest. “Bad night?” she asked, coming to a stop in front of him, leaning against the glass door.

“Train derailment and an early patrol.” He shrugged, allowing his eyes to wander down to where the knotted terry cloth towel was loosening against her ivory skin. A slow smile crossed his face as he silently willed the heavy material to fall and give him an unobstructed view of his wife’s body. The water continued to beat against his back as he leaned closer, taking the opportunity to prop the door open, reaching behind him to turn the water off.

“You still have shampoo in your hair,” she grinned back at him, pointing to his head.

A blush crossed his face, and he grinned back at her. “Maybe you can help make sure I get it all?”

He let out a low hiss of satisfaction as the towel finally descended to the ground, and she stepped inside the shower stall, looping her arms around his neck as her lips ran across his in slow, insistent kisses. “Oh, Clark.” His hand moved to cup her face, fingering the wet strands of hair as she whispered her incoherent murmurs against his lips.

\*\*\*

Bill Henderson wiped his brow from the sweat pouring down his face. He moved his nose into his sleeve as a cloud of dust moved toward him. He looked to his right where the team of officers were hard at work with the demolition equipment that had been found in the fallout shelter. Budget cuts. That was the only reason the fallout shelters were still around. He’d have to remember that the next time he complained about budget cuts.

Though it had been some years since he’d been down here he knew from his research there was supposed to be an elevator behind that wall leading up to where STAR Labs’ research lab was. If they could just work their way through the brick, he was sure they would finally get out of this hell hole.

“Hey, Bill, I think we got something!” Zymack called over to him.

“What is it?” Bill asked, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Looks like the fuse box,” Zymack replied, pointing to the old silver box next to the silver doors that were slowly being revealed beneath the brick and mortar.

“Crack it open,” Bill instructed with a labored breath.

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“How many escaped?” Lois asked, taking a sip of her coffee as she walked through the lobby of the Daily Planet with Clark. The smell of newsprint from the newsstand and coffee that had been on the burners since five a.m. teased her nostrils. A smile spread across her face as Clark’s hand rested on her lower back, and they made their way through the crowded lobby to the elevators. Though their honeymoon had been heavenly, giving them both the chance to recharge and connect—away from the distractions of Metropolis’ never-ending list of disasters—she missed the Planet and was eager to get back to work. From the sound of it, there was plenty for her and Clark to dig into.

“I know Rollie Vale for sure and at least a dozen more,” Clark said, reaching his arm over to press the call button on the elevator. “Two escapees were returned this morning.”

He let out a heavy sigh, and she placed a hand on his shoulder, gently squeezing it as the elevator doors opened for them. He’d hardly had a moment’s rest since they returned to the city last night. “I’m sure they’ll turn up eventually.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Clark said with a wry expression. The doors closed behind them, and he let out a heavy breath, tightening his arms around her waist. “Spending the last twelve hours chasing down escapees isn’t exactly how I wanted to spend our first night at home.”

“Well, that wasn’t exactly in your control,” she said, recalling

the way he’d been crippled to his knees last night. That coupled with the prison riot and the many disasters Superman had diverted this morning had kept him busy all hours of the night. She quietly wondered how long he could keep up with the high demand for Superman with little to no sleep.

“Yeah, I need to have Jimmy run a search on WayneTech and see if there’s anything else Bruce Wayne might be developing that could...” he stopped mid-sentence when the elevator bell rang, and the doors opened, letting a small crowd onto the elevator. He gave her a defeated look and added, “I’ll update you later.”

She frowned, uncertain what Bruce Wayne had to do with the attack from last night. Most of the morning had been spent in one another’s arms then scrambling to get ready at the last minute before Clark had flown them to the Planet. The elevator doors opened again, and two more people stepped on. She let out a sigh, turning toward Clark to give herself more room. Her eyes shifted toward the panel above the doors, and she sighed again. Two more floors to go before they reached the newsroom.

She stole a glance at Clark who was looking around the crowded elevator with a displeased expression. It was overly crowded, but hopefully, someone would be getting off the elevator car soon. She reached her hand out to playfully toy with her husband’s tie as the hum of the elevator rang through her ears. She caught the amused expression on his face as his arms looped around her, holding her tight against him. The elevator doors opened once more, and this time the crowd that was riding up with them all stepped off, leaving her and Clark alone once more. She let out a sigh of relief as the doors closed behind the crowd, playfully tracing the pattern of Clark’s tie up his chest. “I don’t remember these elevator rides being quite this crowded.”

“We have been very distracted these past few months,” he reminded her, leaning in to capture her lips with his.

She grinned happily against him, and his hands moved to trace the frame of her face, and he deepened the kiss. She let out a long sigh and felt a pang in her abdomen, reminding her all too well of just how accustomed she had become to spending all day and all night in her husband’s arms. She let out a shuddered breath against him, “How are we going to make it through the day?”

“I don’t know,” he chuckled against her as her arms looped around his neck, exploring the back of his neck with her free hand.

He let out a low groan, moving his hands up and down her back from beneath her suit jacket as he ran his lips up and down her jawline. The sound of the elevator doors opening reached her ears, but they didn’t make any attempt to separate just yet. The catcalls and whistling from their co-workers continued for another half-minute before they finally separated and stepped off the elevator.

\*\*\*

Jimmy stared at his phone then to the clock on his computer monitor, wondering briefly if it was too early to call Lucy. Two weeks had changed things between them, but they were still in that *‘uncertain where this was going’* stage. The more time he spent with her, the harder he continued to fall for her.

“Hey Olsen.” Ralph’s loud slurping could be heard across the newsroom as the newest gossip columnist approached, perching himself on Jimmy’s desk.

“Hey, Ralph.” Jimmy cringed when he heard Ralph’s overexaggerated gulping and turned toward him with a tense expression. “Can I help you with something?”

“Hey did you hear the buzz?” Ralph pointed to the television monitors showing amateur footage of Superman rescuing a woman outside a shopping center from would-be carjackers and then dropping to his knees before disappearing into a blur of red and blue.

Jimmy frowned at the footage, seeing the pained expression on Superman—Clark’s face. It still took some getting used to. The newfound realization that his friend that he had worked beside for

nearly two years was also the same man that had rescued him countless times and performed phenomena that defied scientific logic. Clark, Superman, CK—He'd used all of those names for the longest time to address his friend. His friend looked scared and almost in pain. A concerned expression crossed his face as he wondered momentarily, *'What could hurt Superman?'*

"Apparently, Supes is back at it." Ralph took a big bite of an apple as he pointed to the screen, "Carjacking, prison riot... Then this morning he stopped a runaway train, rescued an oil tanker in distress and even had time to walk some old lady across the street before Perry even drank his first cup of coffee."

Jimmy nodded his head with a faint smile, hoping he wasn't being too obvious about not being surprised by Superman's return to Metropolis. He knew Superman would return once Clark and Lois got back from their honeymoon. He was impressed Clark had fit in that many rescues in such a short amount of time. He knew Lucy had mentioned they wouldn't be returning until late last night which meant his friend had been burning the midnight oil last night and had probably spent most of the morning making sure Metropolis' citizens knew he was back.

The elevator doors opened, and he spotted Lois and Clark wrapped in one another's arms oblivious to the jovial catcalls being thrown their way as they separated. Lois actually seemed giddy as she and Clark stepped off the elevator, throwing flirtatious glances at Clark as they made their way down the steps that led to the newsroom.

"Hey, guys!" Jimmy beamed, desperate to separate himself from Ralph as quickly as he could.

"Jimmy." Lois took Clark's hand in hers and not skipping a beat before asking with a bemused smile, "How's my sister?"

Jimmy quickly flushed recalling the way he and Lucy had woken up in Hawaii. "Uh, f-fine." He ran a hand across the back of his neck. "I'm really sorry about..."

"Let's not go there." Clark shook his head, placing a hand on Lois' shoulder.

"Go where?" Ralph asked, walking up behind them.

"Nothing," Jimmy said a little louder than necessary.

"Um, wedding joke," Lois said hurriedly.

Perry exited his office with Mr. Stern and another man Jimmy wasn't familiar with. Perry's face lit up when he saw Lois and Clark. "Well! Look who's back!" He jokingly looked at the time, "Right on time!"

Before Lois or Clark could respond Mr. Stern cut in, "Welcome back, I'm sure Perry will catch you up on the...events that have kept everyone busy these last few weeks." Stern turned to shake the other man's hand. "Mr. Fox, we'll have to catch up another time." He then turned to Lois and Clark. "Glad to have you two back. Congratulations, again!"

Lois and Clark exchanged a look, and Perry cleared his throat. "Lois, Clark, I'm not sure how much time you two have had to read up on what's been going on these past few weeks..."

"Orchestrated criminal activities, raids on the police station, city hall, and the prisons like clockwork," Clark answered with a stern expression as he seemed to be sizing up the mysterious Mr. Fox that stood next to Perry.

Jimmy frowned, unsure what could be making Clark so suspicious of a man he hadn't met yet. 'Unless he's already met him?' Jimmy wondered silently, turning his attention to Lois who was tapping her hand against her chin.

"Are you thinking Intergang?" Lois asked Perry with a frown.

Perry gave a noncommittal shrug, and Mr. Fox spoke up. "We're not sure, but that's what Mr. Wayne would like to find out." Mr. Fox extended his hand to Lois to shake. "Lucius Fox, acting CEO for Wayne Enterprises."

"Wayne?" As if on instinct, Lois and Clark repeated the name in unison.

"Like *Bruce* Wayne?" Jimmy asked, noticing a hard

expression cross Clark's face at the mention of the name.

"The one and the same." Lucius beamed proudly. "Wayne Enterprises merger with STAR Labs was finalized last night." He pulled out a card and handed it to Clark. "Mr. Wayne and I would like to schedule some time with you, Mr. Kent and Misses Ke..." He stopped when he saw a perturbed expression cross Lois' face.

"Ms. Lane," Clark corrected for him, tapping his hand on the card.

"Professionally, anyway," Lois clarified for Lucius Fox. "What do you need to sit down with Clark and I for? I thought the Gotham Gazette handled most of Wayne Enterprises PR pieces?"

"Bruce Wayne, it seems, will be *moving* to Metropolis," Perry interrupted, clearing his throat, "And he's promised an exclusive interview on the merger, move, and more to the *Daily Planet*."

Recognition crossed Lois' face as it finally clicked what Perry was trying to hint at. Clark's expression still remained concerned as he turned his attention to Lucius, studying the man as the conversation continued. It almost seemed like Clark knew something everyone else didn't. *'Maybe Superman knows something about Lucius Fox...or Bruce Wayne?'* Jimmy thought to himself as he watched the exchange.

"With the right journalist," Lucius Fox corrected.

Jimmy grinned as Perry's chest jutted out proudly before slapping Clark on the back, "I assured him I'd make sure my very best reporters would be covering this rare and once in a lifetime opportunity."

Jimmy noticed Clark seemed anything but pleased at the assignment, but Lois was the first one to speak up. "Um, Perry, isn't this something you'd rather have covered by..." Perry gave her a stern expression, and she shook her head. "Nevermind."

"What about Intergang?" Clark asked, pointing to the television coverage of last night's prison riot. "And Rollie Vale's escape from prison?"

Perry placed a hand over his chest and responded with a grin. "I have the utmost confidence that you two can juggle more than one story. You've done it before, right?"

"Right," Clark responded with a heavy sigh.

"Good," Perry patted Clark's shoulder before moving off. "Mr. Fox, I leave you in the capable hands of *my top* reporters." With that Perry left and Jimmy caught the annoyed expression on Clark's face as he watched Perry walk away.

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The sound of motors whirling and keyboards tapping echoed inside the Metropolis University's Engineering lab. Lucy tapped furiously at the computer, stealing glances over at the robotic arm stationed at her lab. She watched in amazement as the arm moved from her keystrokes and smiled as the silver hand grasp the plastic red ball. A satisfied grin crossed Lucy's face as she checked off the exercise in her notebook.

"Nice work!" She turned to see her lab partner, Scott standing behind her.

Scott had been her lab partner on most of the robotic labs this quarter. He had big dreams of building the first robot to travel to outer space and explore the galaxy. It was helpful having a partner that knew more about robotics than she did. Her decision to change majors to robotic engineering had been a drastic one, but the questions and uncertainty that continued to plague her mind over Johnny's death were enough to motivate her to find a way to do something good with her interest rather than allow it to eat away at her.

Lucy ran a hand through her hair, forcing a smile. "Easy once you get the hang of it."

"You've got a natural advantage," Scott pointed out with a grin. "World famous surgeon—the first to attempt mainstream robotic limb replacements—as your dad. I'm sure that helps."

"Not as much as you'd think," Lucy mumbled under her breath.

“Still, he must be proud.” Scott grinned back at her. “Having his daughter follow in his footsteps.” He gave a grimace. “I’m apparently playing with toys instead of having a real career.”

“He doesn’t know,” Lucy said with a sympathetic look. She caught Scott’s surprised expression and turned her attention back to the monitor. “What’s the next routine?”

“Rotate the wrist,” Scott read aloud, clearing his throat.

“Right.” Lucy squinted at the monitor as she pulled up the screen to enter the commands in.

\*\*\*

The soft hum of the tall glass cylinder elevator quietly drummed in the background. Clark glanced over at Lois who was checking her watch as she tapped her pen on her notepad. The crowd of offices and engineering labs disappeared below them with a soft zip. He smirked to himself, admiring the state-of-the-art technology and design that was inside WayneTech. He hadn’t had the time to appreciate any of it last night when he’d crashed into the penthouse and attacked Bruce Wayne for using that excruciating ultrasonic device on him.

He wasn’t sure what to expect out of this meeting, and he certainly didn’t have a lot of faith in a man that would resort to extremes in order to lure him in with the same means Lenny Stoke had used to nearly destroy Metropolis. Perry had insisted he and Lois cover the exclusive with Bruce Wayne though, so here they were.

“We should be looking into whoever broke Rollie Vale out of prison right now,” Clark said with a defeated sigh.

Lois glanced over at him with a sympathetic smile. “Jimmy’s running a search.” She gave him a sideways glance and reminded him, “You heard Perry.”

“I know. I know.” Clark rolled his eyes. “The price we pay for being too good at our jobs.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t trust him.”

“Isn’t that my line?” Lois asked with an amused expression as the elevator came to a stop and the curved glass doors slid open to let them out onto the executive floor where they were supposed to be meeting with Bruce Wayne for their first interview. “I guess that’s us.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Clark said, placing his hand on her lower back as they stepped out onto the floor.

An older gentleman stood by the elevators, ready to greet them. “Mr. Kent and *Ms. Lane*, I presume?”

“Yes,” Lois said giving the man a critical look.

“Mr. Wayne and Mr. Fox are expecting you,” the man said, gesturing for them to follow him.

Clark slipped his hand inside Lois’, folding his fingers between hers as they followed the unnamed guide down the long corridor that brought them to a familiar large room. He frowned when he spotted the window he had shattered had already been replaced and all the equipment that had once been there hours ago was now gone. “He works quick,” Clark muttered under his breath.

“Shh,” Lois tightened her hand on his as Bruce Wayne approached with Lucius Fox a few steps behind him.

“Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane, I trust you found the place all right?” Bruce Wayne asked.

“Well, the big steel sign that says *WayneTech* on the building was helpful,” Lois joked.

Clark didn’t crack a smile but instead turned his attention to Bruce Wayne. “Mr. Fox said you were moving to Metropolis, Mr. Wayne?”

“I guess we’re going to skip the introductions?” Bruce Wayne’s face crinkled and offered a good-natured smile. “Well, I suppose that’s what I get for demanding to only be interviewed by the best, right?” He gestured to the sofa and leather seats in the corner. “Shall we?”

\*\*\*

Ralph took a loud bite into the sandwich he was eating, swiping his arm against his mouth to wipe the mayonnaise and mustard from his chin. He had been trying to drum up some gossip on the chaos that had hit the street over the last few weeks. So far, he hadn’t found any new leads, and the spinning of the same story was getting old fast.

“Simms?”

Ralph looked up and saw one of the mail clerks with the cart in front of his desk, envelope in his hands. “What’s up?”

“Package,” the clerk dropped the package on the desk and moved past him.

Ralph picked up the large envelope and ripped it open. A large sheet of paper with cut out letters from magazine articles pasted on it was on the paper. He frowned, reading the letters aloud, “You’re welcome?”

He set the paper aside and looked down at the rest of the contents in the package. There was a large stack of glossy 4x6 photos. Two girls dressed in clothing --if you could call it that-- that barely covered anything were hanging all over the very conservative senators and congressmen at what appeared to be a wild party.

“Cha-ching!” Ralph shouted out loud.

\*\*\*

Lois glanced next to her eyeing the stiff composure her husband kept as the questions they directed at Bruce Wayne continued to be deflected back onto them. To look at Bruce, you wouldn’t think he was anything but your typical philandering playboy. Though, given what she knew of Clark’s confrontation with him last night, she knew there was much more going on beneath the surface.

Clark leaned forward, folding his hands on his knees and narrowed his eyes at Bruce Wayne. She could tell his annoyance with their subject’s tendency to deflect the question with one of his own was wearing on Clark’s nerves. She took a deep breath and repeated the question once more, “Mr. Wayne, I’m sure we could find some other time to discuss the Daily Planet’s history, but you still haven’t answered any of our questions.”

“I just find it fascinating how one paper could have such great luck in landing scoop after scoop on someone that by all rights should try to avoid the media, don’t you?” Bruce asked with a smile.

Lois closed her eyes, counting to ten under her breath as she attempted yet again to steer the conversation back to Bruce Wayne’s move to Metropolis. “The Daily Planet has had a lot of luck in that department, but back to your move from Gotham...”

“The Gotham Gazette would never have landed that kind of luck.” Bruce shook his head and added, “I guess the Daily Planet’s reporters have a close relationship with Superman?”

“No more than any other paper,” Clark said and attempted to steer the conversation back on track. “You seem to be asking a lot of questions about Superman. I thought this interview was supposed to be a promotional piece for WayneTech.”

“Call me curious,” Bruce remarked calmly.

“Uh-huh.” Clark let out a mild snort and shook his head.

“Well, I’m a little curious as to why someone that’s spent his entire life in Gotham makes a decision to move to Metropolis.”

“I’m testing the waters,” Bruce commented, looking to Lucius. “If things go well we’ll expand Wayne Enterprise to Metropolis.”

“And take over where LexCorp left off?” Lois asked with a frown.

“Someone has to provide those jobs,” Bruce remarked.

“What makes you think they aren’t already there?” Clark asked, shaking his head. “Small businesses have popped up all over the city and taken over.”

“But Wayne Enterprises is more stable and can...”

“Stomp all over the little guy?” Clark cut him off.

“No.” Bruce let out a deep sigh. “That’s not my intent.”

“And what is your intent?” Clark asked leaning forward, his

features hard as he stared back at Bruce.

"You seem awfully hostile, Mr. Kent," Bruce observed, leaning forward.

"I'm just asking a question, Mr. Wayne," Clark countered. "A question you spent the last twenty minutes avoiding. Why are you moving to Metropolis?"

"I..." Bruce stopped, glancing down at his watch at the same time Lois noticed Clark get a faraway expression on his face. "I apologize," Bruce cleared his throat. "I'm going to have to reschedule this. I forgot about a..."

"Inspection?" Lucius prompted.

"Yes, inspection," Bruce snapped his fingers and quickly disappeared down a narrow hallway. Lois watched the billionaire's retreating figure and then turned to her husband who was already stammering for an excuse.

"We should..."

"I can show you..." Lucius offered, pointing to the corridor they had come through earlier.

"No!" Clark practically shouted at the same time Lois managed a quick, "That won't be necessary."

Clark quickly guided her back toward the elevator where the door to the stairwell was across from the glass elevators. Lois checked to make sure Lucius wasn't behind her when she asked, "What is it?"

"Hostage situation at City Hall." He glanced around the office. "Are you going to be...?"

"I'm fine," she said, tugging at his tie to loosen it. "Just be careful." With that, she reached for the call button on the elevator, and before she could turn back to him, he had disappeared in a blur of pigments, slamming the door closed behind him. "Oy..." she muttered aloud, stepping into the open elevator.

\*\*\*

The television monitor flickered as the crowd gathered around them in the Daily Planet newsroom watched the press secretary give her statement. "Vice President Morgan Johnson's body was found outside the grounds of the United States Naval Observatory at approximately four a.m. Arrangements are being made to hold the service. Vice President Morgan Johnson's family is asking for time to mourn, and the president has asked that everyone respect their wishes. Any questions regarding the investigation can be directed to my office." With that, she stepped away from the podium as the camera panned out and changed to the newscaster.

"Unbelievable," Jimmy gaped at the television set as he tightened his grip on the newspaper in his hand. The shock of the events that had unfolded that morning left him feeling numb.

"Yeah, no kidding," Ralph said, reaching for his coffee and taking a loud slurp.

Jimmy glanced behind him with a mild cringe as he heard Ralph's messy gulp. He spotted Lois by the elevator and quickly excused himself. The newest hire had helped fill the void in the gossip section, but he would have preferred anyone but Ralph.

"Hey, Lois." Jimmy stopped when he saw Lois descending the stairs into the newsroom.

"What's going on?" Lois asked, pointing to the crowd around the monitors.

"Vice President Johnson was found *dead*," Jimmy said numbly, looking around her for a sign of Clark. He silently reminded himself that his friend probably was tending to the bombshell that had just been dropped by the press secretary. He was still reeling from the news. He couldn't understand how with all the security inside the white house something like this had happened.

"What?!" Lois gasped in disbelief as they approached her desk.

A single rose was laid across it with a white envelope. Recalling the issues Lois had had prior to the wedding with unwanted gifts, Jimmy decided it best to bring her attention to the

new accessory on her desk with a joke. "I guess CK's staking out a floral shop?"

Lois frowned looking back at her desk. "No, he had a..." She stopped mid-sentence, staring apprehensively at the rose. "How long has this been here?"

"I don't know. I just noticed it," Jimmy apologized.

Lois let out a deep sigh and picked up the envelope. "Please, not another one."

"Do you want me to call Henderson?" Jimmy offered.

Lois handed him the envelope. "Here, you open it."

Jimmy nodded his head, tearing the envelope open and tugging the cardstock out. He grimaced when he saw the note's contents. "My dear Lois, I'm very disappointed. Don't worry. We'll be reunited soon." He caught the troubled expression on her face as she bit her lower lip. "Um, Lois, this is..."

"Creepy?" Lois offered, throwing him an expression full of anxiety and fear that he wasn't used to seeing from her.

"Yeah." Jimmy nodded, placing a tentative hand on her shoulder. "I'm gonna call Henderson."

"Thanks," she gave him a watery smile.

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*'Shadow'*

*'Mysterious fog.'*

*'No one knows where he comes from.'*

Clark let out a deep breath as he scanned the steps of City Hall where he'd found three of the escaped prisoners tied up in a long lead-lined cord with, of all things, a bat-shaped disc at the end. When asked what had happened the escapees were rambling about a bat-shaped demon and a shadow. Nothing Clark could make any sense out of.

He shook his head, looking to where Bill Henderson was standing by his patrol car, surveying the scene. Maybe he could provide some insight into this shadow creature. Henderson had his back to him as he began shouting out orders. "Setup a perimeter and get me a list of witnesses..."

"Inspector?" Clark called out, placing a hand on Henderson's shoulder.

"Can I help you?" Henderson stared back at him skeptically.

"This is a crime scene. Halloween isn't for another month."

"Hallo...?" Clark stopped, staring back at Henderson suspiciously. "Bill? It's me. Superman?" he prompted.

"Whatever," Henderson shrugged. "Call yourself Mighty Mouse for all I care. Just get out of my crime scene."

"Right," Clark frowned, shaking his head. There was something seriously wrong here. "I'll see you around then." Henderson didn't react, and Clark shook his head. Bill Henderson had been an ally to him both as a reporter and a superhero. Something was going on here, and he was going to find out what.

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#### Chapter 4

Bruce grimaced as he heard the sonic boom above. He stared up at the red streak as he held his hand to his side and looked around the abandoned alley.

"Cutting it close there, aren't you, Master Wayne?" Alfred's voice came over the radio.

"He's faster than I thought," Bruce remarked, pressing the button on his hands-free radio that was embedded inside the cowl of his uniform. He'd barely made it out of the area before Superman had shown up. After his confrontation last night, he didn't want to risk another misunderstanding. Especially when he still had so many unanswered questions.

"Alfred, what do we have on an Inspector William Henderson?" Bruce asked, curiously.

"Decorated officer that's moved up in ranks," Alfred responded. "He's actually a close friend of your source at Gotham P.D."

"James Gordon?" Bruce asked, not waiting for Alfred to

provide the name.

"I'm sending you what I'm able to find now," Alfred responded, and Bruce heard the tapping of the keyboard over the line.

"Thanks, Alfred," Bruce said, walking toward the back of the alley and reaching his arm up to extend the grappling hook toward the roof of the towering building above him. He smiled to himself as he flew up through the air and made his way to the roof. Flying across buildings wasn't as unusual in Metropolis as it had been in Gotham. Hopefully, he wouldn't draw too much attention to himself.

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"L-A-N-E," Lois spat out irritably as she stared back at the disinterested officer that was doing the intake report on her harassment complaint. She threw an annoyed look at the officer as he yet again frowned at his computer. "What is so hard about this?"

"I'm looking..." the officer frowned as he tapped a few more keys.

"It can't be this hard," Jimmy gave the officer a pleading look. "I mean, with how many complaints that were already filed by Henderson."

"I'm not seeing anything here," the officer frowned.

"That can't be right," Lois shook her head adamantly. "There were at least a dozen reports."

The officer pulled the screen around for her to see it and pointed at it. "See for yourself. Nothing."

"What?!" Lois shouted, standing to her feet.

"Lois, calm down," Jimmy jumped to his feet after her.

"Calm down?" Lois hissed out angrily. "Some sicko is ... ." She stopped herself, taking a deep breath. There was nothing she could do here. If they didn't have the reports on file, then someone had to have done something to them. She glanced around the crowded precinct, suddenly feeling uneasy in the presence of all the officers that could be responsible for the sudden glitch. "Let's go, Jimmy."

"But don't you want to file a report?" the officer asked confused.

"Why, so you can lose it again?" Lois scoffed irritably. "No thanks."

\*\*\*

Bill Henderson didn't know who Superman was. That thought continued to roll through Clark Kent's mind as he rode the rest of the way up the elevator, on his way to the newsroom. He wasn't sure what had happened, but something had happened to his friend. The elevator pinged, announcing his arrival onto the newsroom floor. The doors barely got all the way opened before he stepped out of the elevator, searching for Lois.

"Hey, I'm telling you it just showed up!" Ralph's voice could be heard from his desk where Perry was standing over the new gossip columnist.

Curious, Clark approached, unsure what Ralph was referring to. "What just showed up?"

"The biggest scandal of the year!" Ralph boasted smugly, dumping out the contents of a large manila envelope on top of his desk.

"We still have to authenticate this before we can run with it," Perry cautioned.

"I've seen a doctored photo before and this ain't it." Ralph snorted, dismissing Perry's caution as he sunk down into his seat with a thud.

Clark glanced at the photos on the top stack of polaroids and tapes on Ralph's desk. Congressmen- conservative, family values and currently running for re-election - congressmen were passed out with what looked to be hookers hanging all over them. At first glance, it looked to be another group of politicians not living up to what they promised, but there was something that felt off with the

glossy image. "Can I see that?"

Ralph seemed hesitant but handed the photo over. Clark nodded his thanks and lowered his glasses to take a closer look. Every Congressman was unconscious. On the table was a syringe next to a glass of whatever expensive liquor had been served. The Congressman with the blonde on his lap had his right sleeve pulled up further than his left.

"Weren't both Carter and Morris checked into the hospital a few nights ago?" Perry asked, peering over Clark's shoulder to look at the photo more closely.

"Yeah, from partying too hard," Ralph said with the wiggle of his eyebrows.

"They're unconscious," Clark pointed out, tapping his hand on the photo. "From the looks of it, these guys were completely out of it."

"But who knows when they actually passed out?" Ralph scoffed.

"Ralph, you're new here, so I'm going to let that one slide," Perry drawled, placing a hand on the young man's shoulder. "This is the Daily Planet. We don't print anything without concrete evidence. Irrefutable hard facts. You got it?"

"But Perry..."

"Chief," Perry corrected.

Clark turned to the tapes on Ralph's desk, "Where did all these come from?"

"A source," Perry responded with a grunt.

Clark looked at Ralph who sighed. "I don't know. It showed up this afternoon. No return address."

"So, someone drops this big scandal in the Daily Planet's lap but doesn't want any credit." Perry shook his head. "This whole thing stinks."

"Maybe they work there and don't want to lose their job?" Ralph offered up.

"Maybe," Perry drawled tapping his index finger on his chin, "but until we know for sure, we're not printing one drop of ink on this."

"What if someone else gets a lead on this?" Ralph asked.

"What if this is a frame job and because we didn't investigate we opened the Planet up to a liability suit?" Perry countered. "The answer is no." He pointed to the photos and videos on Ralph's desk. "Look into it and keep me updated on what you find out."

"Got it," Ralph grumbled letting out a sigh of defeat.

Perry turned his attention to Clark, motioning for Clark to follow him to Perry's office. "Lois mentioned you had a lead you were following up on?"

Clark nodded, searching the newsroom for his wife in hopes she would be able to save him from digging himself in a hole with his editor. He frowned when he saw Lois' desk empty but responded to Perry's question the best way he knew how. "Uh, yeah, I heard about another sighting of this shadow."

Perry groaned. "Not you too."

"Me too?" Clark asked, not following what his editor was referring to.

"Ever since that raid at the Metropolis P.D. Jimmy's been going on and on about this mysterious shadow showing up everywhere." Perry explained, running a hand through his thinning hair, "It's someone's idea of an elaborate prank."

"I'm not so sure about that, Chief," Clark said, shaking his head. "According to Superman, the witnesses that saw this shadow were also tied up by the time he arrived on the scene."

Perry's face grew contemplative, and a concerned expression crossed his face. "Has Superman actually *seen* this shadow?"

"No," Clark admitted with a shrug, "but there was enough evidence to suggest someone had been there."

"Uh-huh." Perry shook his head. "Well, until you *do* know something stick to the stories we can actually print." Clark thought about arguing his point with Perry once more, but from the look

on his editor's face, he thought that might be poking the bear too much. Perry cleared his throat and asked, "How did the interview with Bruce Wayne go?"

"I'm not sure it can be classified as an interview if the subject is asking more questions than answering them." Clark sighed, shaking his head. At Perry's look, he amended, "It got cut short. We'll need to reschedule."

Perry frowned, shaking his head. "While I've got you here, there's someone I want you to meet. A new political analyst from DC." He opened the door to his office and ushered Clark inside.

A tall African American man with square-rimmed glasses stood to his feet as Perry entered the office. Perry gestured between the two men and introduced them. "Clark Kent, this is Ron Troupe."

Clark's eyebrows rose in recognition, recalling the name as one of the freelance reporters that had covered the presidential race last year. "Pleased to meet you." He extended his hand to shake Ron's. "I've read your work on the collusion scandal you followed last year with the Taylor administration. You were one of the few journalists actually covering both sides of the campaign."

"For a long time, I was the *only* one covering both sides." Ron's eyes twinkled as he looked back at Clark. "Good to meet you, Clark." He looked toward Perry. "From what Mr. White tells me, you and Ms. Lane will be working with me on the Vice President's funeral piece?"

Clark gave Perry a surprised expression but quickly recovered, recalling the story he'd picked up on the wire when he'd been tending to rescues earlier. Perry cleared his throat and cut in, "Given how connected both you and Lois are I figured you two could help show Ron the ropes and make him feel right at home. This piece is both a city beat and political so you all can bring something to the table."

"And you've told Lois this already?" Clark asked, knowing the answer already was 'no.'

Perry patted Clark on the shoulder. "Well, not exactly." Clark shook his head, knowing full well where his editor was headed.

"Not exactly what?" Lois' voice came from the doorway where she was standing with Jimmy. The distressed look on her face caught his attention and Clark moved to her side as she stepped inside the office. Lois looked at Perry. "Perry?" Lois prompted.

"Lois, Jimmy, this is Ron Troupe," Perry introduced the new reporter to her, "the Planet's newest political analyst."

"James Olsen," Jimmy introduced himself, extending his hand to shake Ron's. Ron nodded, shaking Jimmy's hand and then turned back toward Lois.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Troupe." Lois glanced between Perry and Ron. "Impeccable timing to start at the Planet given the Vice President's murder."

"Yes, well I didn't plan it but what better way to learn than from the best?" Ron smiled back at her. "I look forward to working with both you and Mr. Kent on this one."

"Well, I..." Lois looked back at Perry in surprise. "*How* many stories are we juggling now?"

"Three," Perry supplied with an innocent grin.

"Four," Clark corrected with a frown.

"Four?" Lois asked, looking back at Clark with a raised eyebrow. Before he could elaborate on the number of stories one of the interns tapped on Perry's open door.

"Chief, you better come take a look at this!"

\*\*\*

"Anything?" came Zymack's voice as Bill Henderson fiddled with the wires inside the fuse box. Nothing seemed to be working in his attempts to get the power running through the fuses.

Bill let out a disgusted snort. "Nothing."

"There's got to be something around here we can use to juice this bad boy up," Zymack said, looking around the room they were

standing in.

"No, there's nothing to juice it with. I don't think we're on the power grid." Bill looked toward the brick debris around the elevator. "The only way we're getting out of here is to climb out."

\*\*\*

The twig below Johnny Denetto's foot crackled as he moved through the dry grass-covered field, looking back at his map through the light of the lantern in his hands. "Are you sure this is the place?"

"Positive," the soil engineer said with his hand pointed ahead. "Bureau 39 had this entire area combed through, but our team found some unusual radiation in the soil here in Schuster's field."

"Radiation of the meteorite kind?" Denetto asked with a glint in his eye.

"You better believe it," came the soil engineer's response.

\*\*\*

Jimmy stared at the monitor watching in shock as hundreds of names ran across the screen. Two-hundred and twelve. That was the latest count of congressmen that had resigned in the last hour. Photos and video footage of the congressmen that ran their campaigns on family values surfaced along with many alleged victims claiming assault, misconduct, and numerous other allegations against over two-hundred congressmen. It seemed unreal. Surely the congressmen would try to fight the allegations, right? Resigning seemed like an extreme reaction to some of the charges, but it wasn't.

Name after name scrolled across the list and the number changed from two-hundred and twelve to two-hundred and thirteen. It didn't make sense, yet here it was unfolding time and time again with the newsroom full of journalists scrambling everywhere in order to cover all the resignations.

Something more had to be at work here, but what it was he couldn't be sure. Jimmy finally pulled his attention away from the screen and turned to the conference room where Lois and Clark were behind closed doors with Perry's newest hire, Ron Troupe.

"Jimmy?" Perry called him over, and Jimmy nodded, turning to his editor.

"What's up, Chief?" Jimmy asked, forcing himself not to look at the monitors any longer.

"I want you to run a data search and let's put together a report of all the congressmen that have resigned and compare that with everything we have from the election polls from last year," Perry said, tapping his hand on his chin. "Just for good measure let's keep a running tally on what the reasons for resignation were for each one too."

Jimmy nodded, hearing the hidden meaning behind his editor's instructions. Perry knew something was up as well. "You got it, Chief."

\*\*\*

Lois shook her head as she looked at the list in her hands. Clark opened the conference room door for her and Ron to exit. "How in the world does someone orchestrate this massive of a political scandal?" Lois wondered aloud. Clark placed a supportive hand on her shoulder as they walked through the newsroom and her attention moved toward the list in her hand once more. It wasn't isolated to just the congressmen at this party that had taken place a few nights ago. The synchronized methods of photos, videos, eye-witness accounts, and supposed victims coming forward at exactly the same time were astounding and set off every red flag as her journalistic instincts screamed scandal.

"Obviously this is a power play of some sort," Ron Troupe said as they walked back to their desks. "Who is behind this seems to be the big question."

"This was thought out. Methodically planned and setup so everything would come crashing down all at once." Clark said, shaking his head with a grimace on his face.

Lois glanced back at the list in her hand. "Speaker of the

house has resigned.”

“Yeah, and once we hit over a hundred congressmen resigning, the public’s right to vote for their representative became a null point. The replacements have to be appointed.” Ron pointed out. “Whoever is behind this knew exactly what they were doing. They want certain people in those seats.”

“But that would mean they have control over whoever is naming the replacements.” Clark reasoned aloud as they walked toward Lois’ desk.

“No one knows who that is though,” Ron explained, pointing to the monitor with the LNN anchor continuing the same mantra she had for the last hour. “No one knows who is in charge.” As they approached Lois’ desk, he stopped and asked. “You expecting a package?”

Lois turned her attention to the courier standing by her desk with a white envelope in his hand and a clipboard tucked under his arm. “Lois Lane?”

“Who wants to know?” Lois asked suspiciously, eyeing the unmarked envelope in the courier’s hands. Recalling the mysterious rose and accompanying letter filled with menacing threats.

Clark caught her uneasy expression and quickly cut in, “Who is it from?”

The courier looked at his clipboard and read off the name, “Bruce Wayne.”

“The billionaire?” Ron asked, looking back at Lois for confirmation.

“We’re doing a story on him,” Lois explained, letting out a sigh of relief as she nodded to Clark who took the clipboard to sign for her. Not another creepy gift. Just something from their latest assignment. She let out a sigh of relief and watched the courier hand Clark the envelope before leaving.

“Reclusive billionaire playboy?” Ron chuckled, shaking his head. “I do not envy that assignment for a second.” He pointed toward the elevator. “I’ve got to check in with the upstairs and make sure all my I’s are dotted and T’s crossed. We’ll catch up later.”

Lois waved goodbye and then turned to Clark. “He seems nice enough. Knowledgeable and well rounded.”

“Yeah, we’ll definitely need someone with his experience to help crack this scandal going on in Washington, that’s for sure.” Clark let out a heavy sigh as he ripped open the envelope. “Maybe Bruce Wayne has finally decided to answer some questions instead of skirting around them?”

Lois cracked a smile and peered over his shoulder. “What is it?”

Clark held up two tickets and handed them to her before pulling out a white cardstock embellished with a ‘W’ monogram. He rolled his eyes as he began to read aloud, “My apologies for running out on our previously scheduled interview this afternoon. Please accept these tickets to the Russian Ballet for this weekend’s evening show as compensation for my rudeness. Lucius and I would love to pick up where we left things during the intermission.” A bite came out of Clark’s tone as he read the last line, “Bruce.”

Lois made a face, scrunching her nose up. “The Russian Ballet?”

Perry approached with a broad grin on his face, pointing to the tickets in Clark’s hand. “Mr. Fox just called. I assume you two will be attending the ballet this weekend with Mr. Wayne?”

Lois forced a smile. “Can’t wait.”

“Great!” Perry cheered, turning his attention to the newsroom behind him. “I’ll let Mr. Fox know. I hear it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity to see this show.”

Lois and Clark both forced smiles on their faces, and she waited for Perry to walk off then turned to Clark. “Have I mentioned how much I *hate* ballets, operas, and anything that

requires people singing in languages I don’t know?”

Clark chuckled, running his hand across her face. “Once or twice.”

Lois relented for a moment and smiled back at him. “At least it was just from Bruce Wayne and not another creepy gift from our mysterious sender.”

“Honey,” Clark moved his hand to her shoulder. “It’s been two weeks since...”

“Not exactly,” Lois said, pointing to her trash can that was next to her desk. Inside it was the rose she’d subsequently tossed earlier.

“What do you mean *not exactly*?” Clark asked her with a concerned expression.

She sighed, pulling away from him and opening the drawer to her desk where she had stashed the note from earlier. When she hadn’t been able to file the complaint with the Metropolis P.D., she’d dumped it in her drawer until she could find Henderson and sort through the mess of where her complaints had gone.

“I tried to take this down to the Metropolis P.D. after I got another gift this afternoon,” Lois explained, handing the note to him. “Turns out there is no record of any of the complaints we made about this. I have no idea what Bill Henderson has done or where the records are, but I wasn’t going to leave this with some half-wit that couldn’t type his way out of a paper bag either.”

“When did you get this?” Clark asked, frowning as he read the threatening note.

“It wasn’t here when we left to interview Bruce Wayne, but it was here when I got back,” Lois said with a sigh as Clark placed an arm around her shoulders. “We need to find Bill and...”

“I don’t think that’s going to do anything,” Clark said with a defeated expression.

“Why not?” Lois asked, looking up at him.

“Because I don’t know that Bill Henderson is exactly himself lately,” Clark explained with a cautious tone. His forehead creased with concern as he continued to explain, “He had no recognition of Superman or any mention of anything he should know when he was on the scene of that hostage situation earlier.”

“What?” Lois looked at him in surprise.

“He looks just like him. Sounds just like him even, but ....” Clark trailed off, shaking his head, “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“What?” Lois asked cautiously.

“I don’t know.” Clark shook his head, “Something just doesn’t feel right. He seemed...different. Like a completely different person.” A sudden moment of awareness crossed Clark’s face, and he whispered, “He’s a different person.”

“A different person?” Lois frowned, not following. “If he’s not Bill then who is he?”

“I don’t know,” Clark frowned, “but I think I know where to start.”

\*\*\*

The creak of the metal against metal rang through the room as the team of officers worked together to pry the elevator doors open. The metal against metal sound screeched in their ears before someone finally yelled out, “Stop!”

Mike Rogers, the SWAT leader turned to see Detective Zymack holding the crowbar that had successfully bent elevator door partially open. He motioned to the officers behind him to stop. “We got another foot to go!”

\*\*\*

Gretchen Kelly patted the unconscious face of Vice President Morgan Johnson. She checked that the binds were still secure and then turned her attention to the next prisoner. A sinister smile washed across her face as she hovered over Will Garner, the President of the United States. His eyes fluttered open, and she grinned back at him as he struggled against his binds.

“We can’t have you making too much of a fuss, Mr.

President,” she whispered, pulling out a syringe from the drawer with a long needle. His eyes widened as she injected the contents of the syringe into his neck, paralyzing his vocal cords for another twelve hours.

\*\*\*

“My cloning research?” Professor Emil Hamilton fidgeted nervously with his glasses as Lois and Clark walked with him to his laboratory at STAR Labs.

Clark cleared his throat, “The research you did that resulted in the resurrection and successful cloning of Al Capone, John Dillinger, and Bonnie and Clyde might be the key to a lead we’re following, Professor.”

“I’m not even sure if I can help you, Mr. Kent,” Professor Hamilton explained as he scanned his badge against the digital card reader on his door. The door slid open, and they stepped inside. “Most of my research was stolen around the same time STAR Labs had that break-in.”

“When Johnny Corbin was taken from STAR Labs’ custody?” Lois asked, answering the question she knew Clark would ask next. “So, anyone could have it.”

“Anyone might have it, but not just anyone could use it.” Professor Hamilton corrected. “It took many years of failures to get where I was a few months ago. If the person with the research does know something about gene manipulation but not enough about biology, the clones they are able to create will be...less than satisfactory.”

“What does that mean?” Lois asked.

“Memories could be lost. Lifespan could be non-existent. The clones would not last long.” Professor Hamilton explained.

“Maybe they’d have trouble remembering someone they knew very well?” Clark ventured.

“It’s possible,” Professor Hamilton acknowledged.

\*\*\*

Johnny Denetto stood over the small hill with the rolled up map in one hand and the high-tech radiation detector he had stolen from STAR Labs. The detector was blinking red as a loud, insistent beeping went off. Denetto looked to the soil engineer and pointed to the ground. “Get the shovels.”

\*\*\*

The television flickered on the screen, and Bill Church Jr. looked up at the image of President William Garner—His President Garner—as he stood at the podium and addressed the press. “Ladies and Gentlemen, our nation has come under attack in a ruthless and calculated way.” A scowl crossed Garner’s face as he addressed the press in the briefing room. “I lost a dear friend last night. This nation and this white house mourn our Vice President. It angers me that I cannot mourn.” His eyes flickered, and then he cleared his throat. “Chaos has taken over this nation as criminals roam the streets and innocent people are put at risk every day.”

“As of this moment we have only one-hundred and twenty-five seats occupied in the House and twenty-six seats in the Senate.” A frown crossed Garner’s face as he continued, “We cannot as a nation hold law and order in such conditions. I, as your elected President of the United States, am invoking martial law.” A hush fell over the room, and Garner continued, “I will be naming the replacements for each vacated seat, and once our Congress and Senate are fully restored we will have a vote on the replacement for Vice President’s newly vacated position.”

The President stepped away from the podium, and Bill Church turned to Rollie Vale who was hard at work at his computer. “Smooth sailing from here, boys!” He tapped Rollie on the shoulder. “Are we ready for phase two?”

“I’m almost done.” Rollie Vale grinned back up at him.

\*\*\*

After finishing up their interview with Professor Hamilton, Lois and Clark headed through the narrow hallways of STAR

Labs, deep in conversation as they passed through the various checkpoints. Clones. Someone had taken Professor Hamilton’s research on clones and could very well be working on cloning anyone she and Clark knew. The friends and co-workers they interacted with every day could be nothing but stale carbon copies of those people she’d come to know, trust and confide in. A sense of dread washed over her as Lois looked over at Clark, seeing the troubled expression on his face. “So, we have a theory, but no way to prove it.”

“A theory is better than nothing,” Clark let out a deep sigh as he flashed his press pass to the security guard at the last checkpoint. The guard nodded to both of them and pressed the button to open the doors, leading outside STAR Labs.

“So, has anyone else seemed...different?” Lois asked, unsure how to ask the question weighing on her mind.

“Jimmy and Perry seemed fine.” Clark said with a shrug as he listed off everyone. “The only person I’ve come across that seemed different was Bill.”

“I wonder how many others are out there,” Lois whispered uneasily as she looked around the crowded street they were on.

“Others?” Clark frowned looking at her with a perplexed expression.

“You really think if someone figured out how to clone anyone they would stop at a detective?” Lois said, taking a step toward Clark as they reached the crosswalk. He leaned over to press the button on the crosswalk. “If they could do that to Bill they could do that to anyone.”

“Lois, we don’t even know for sure that someone has done anything to Bill,” Clark reminded her, placing a hand on her cheek.

“Don’t we?” Lois looked up at him uneasily.

A loud screeching noise from around the corner reached her ears, and before she could react, she felt her body slammed against her husband’s chest before a burst of wind ruffled through her hair. The sound of screeching tires and glass shattering everywhere rang through her ears as she peeled her eyes open to assess what had just happened.

“What?” she finally breathed out, looking up at Clark who was hovering over her from where she was flattened against the sidewalk.

His gaze shifted to the corner where they’d been standing a few minutes ago, and he turned back to her. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” she stammered out, reaching her hand up to cup his face and reassure him she was indeed all right, although understandably shaken up. Clark sat back and stood to his feet, turning his attention to the street they had been standing a few seconds ago. The sound of sirens approaching rang in the air, and the flash of red and blue could be seen from several feet away. She sat up, taking Clark’s hand as he helped her to her feet.

“Looks like help’s on its way at least,” he pointed to the officers that were approaching on foot. The squad cars were parked a few feet away behind where the truck had collided with the street lantern. Clark frowned as he looked around. “All the lights on this block seemed to have gone out at exactly the same time.” He pointed to the traffic lights that were dark and the darkened windows of the office building next to the parking garage.

“That sounds familiar,” Lois breathed, looking around the entire street that had darkened windows, indicating the power inside each building was out inside as well.

“I think it’s probably best if we fly back,” Clark said, pointing to the traffic jam that had already begun to form at the intersection where the truck that had nearly collided with them a few moments before and several other cars behind it.

Lois grimaced seeing the jam-packed intersection and wondered momentarily how bad the congestion would get and when she’d be able to rescue her Jeep from STAR Labs’ parking

garage. She followed Clark into the alley behind STAR Labs, and a few seconds later they were in the air, headed back to the Planet.

\*\*\*

“What is it?” Denetto asked his soil engineer as he hovered over the red glowing rock they had uncovered in Schuster’s field. “Is it Kryptonite?”

The soil engineer carefully lifted the rock up with his glove covered hand and held it up to his face, “We’ll have to run some tests and find out, Mr. Denetto.”

\*\*\*

## Chapter 5

“Come again?” Clark paced inside the dimly lit control room for New Troy Power. Unsurprisingly, their power was out as well, and so far there were no answers as to what was causing it. He tightened his arms across his chest as he looked around the semi-crowded room filled with technicians and board members all working on figuring out what had caused the massive power outage that not only was affecting Metropolis but most of the state. He’d also been picking up on outages outside of New Troy and trickling into Washington.

“Polymorphic virus,” the technician typing away at his laptop and, reading the long list of text on the black screen in front of him, spoke up. “This is more sophisticated than anything I’ve ever seen before.”

“Can you stop it?” the technician’s supervisor asked, wiping his brow with his already sweat ridden sleeve.

“I can try.” The technician shook his head uncertainly. “But this is way more sophisticated than your average hacker.”

“What do you mean?” Clark asked.

“We had safeguards put up after the fiasco with that Ides of Metropolis super virus of Henry Harrison’s that infected everyone’s systems last year,” the technician’s supervisor spoke up. “We isolated our systems with segmented barriers to prevent a total wipe-out, but somehow this virus has crept its way past every barrier and is now controlling...”

“What?” Clark frowned, noticing the concern on the supervisor’s face.

“Everything,” he breathed out shakily. “Every power company in the entire country has been infected.”

\*\*\*

Ron Troupe looked around the dimly lit room that was crowded with journalists waiting to hear something from the president. The air was stifling, and the heat from all the bodies in the room made the conditions unbearable. He swiped his hand against his brow, brushing away the beads of sweat as he glanced at his watch, seeing the pale green light flicker the late hour back at him. He had barely made the flight to Washington before he’d found himself racing to make the impromptu press conference in the briefing room.

“How long has the power been out now?” John Radford with WGBS fanned himself with the pamphlets that had been handed out earlier as he turned to Ron.

“Two hours,” Ron frowned, letting out a heavy sigh.

Lisa Hoyle with LNN cut in with an exaggerated, “You’ve got to be kidding me. What’s taking them so long?”

Press Secretary Michelle Grayson cleared his throat at the front of the room. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the President of the United States.”

\*\*\*

Clark soared through the sky, searching for the familiar face in the building below. Just when he was about to give up hope, he scanned the computer lab one last time and found the man he was looking for. Eugene Ladderman had helped stop the Ides of Metropolis virus last year. He wasn’t even sure if Eugene still worked at Metropolis University or not, but it was worth a try.

He landed outside the university and quickly spun into his suit and tie from earlier, climbing the steps to enter the university. The

security desk was empty, and the darkened hallways were abandoned. He turned the corner and found the computer lab he had seen Eugene in moments ago. He tried the door and much to his surprise the door opened without any trouble.

In the corner of the room was the familiar figure of Eugene Ladderman, attempting to turn on each computer with no luck. “The entire city’s been wiped out,” Clark spoke up, letting his presence be known.

“Kent?” Eugene looked up, shaking his head as he looked around the room. “This is a surprise.” He walked toward Clark. “At least this time I’m not on the run.”

Clark cracked a half-smile, recalling the way he and Eugene had met last year. “You’re still teaching?”

“When I can,” Eugene looked around the room. “Kinda hard to teach a class about computer networks when you can’t turn the computer on.”

“Yeah, about that...” Clark patted the notepad in his hands. “I need your help.”

\*\*\*

Rollie Vale tapped at his keyboard, his fingers flew across the keys as sweat beads dripped from his forehead. He didn’t dare look up for fear that he would lose his place. He could feel the breath against his neck as Bill Church Jr. leaned over his shoulder, reading the text on his screen. “Who is this FoxTrotUniform39?”

“I don’t know, but he’s making keeping the power off in every city a chore,” Rollie muttered, wiping his forehead with a nervous hand.

“How long can you keep the power off in Metropolis?”

Church asked.

“Just Metropolis?” Rollie looked back at Church curiously.

“We need to keep them in the dark a little longer.” Church explained.

\*\*\*

Lois stole a glance toward the window of the Planet she knew Clark used on occasion to re-enter when returning from a rescue. It had just been a few hours since Clark had gotten the onset of numerous calls for help at once. He’d barely made it to the Planet before he had to turn around and tend to the city in need.

“How’s this one, Chief?” Jimmy asked, handing Perry a copy of the printed paper. He was covered in ink from helping run the old linotype machine the young photographer had gotten a crash course in a few months ago.

Perry’s brow furrowed as he looked the paper over and shook his head, “You’re still a little uneven on the edge here.”

Jimmy nodded, backing away, “I’ll check the starting belt and make sure it’s secure.”

“Andy still hasn’t shown up?” Perry asked, turning to Madison who was fiddling with the fuse box by the elevator.

“Haven’t heard from him,” Madison sighed.

“Okay, people, this isn’t our first rodeo. You know the drill!” Perry turned his attention to the rest of the newsroom, “I need everyone’s stories on my desk in half an hour!”

Lois let out a low breath, turning to the typewriter on her desk where she had written up what she could of today’s fiasco. She still wasn’t sure how to tie up the article other than stating the obvious. What she really wanted to do was to start looking into who or what was behind this massive power outage, but she couldn’t get any information with the phone lines down and her super husband with his photographic memory still inaccessible.

The addition of Fort Truman’s National Guard in the city gave her a sense of déjà vu. The city felt like it was under siege with the sun beginning to set and everyone working from flashlights and lanterns. After the recent experience with the blackout a few months back most of the Planet staff had adapted well, but the lingering question on everyone’s minds remained.

Who was behind the power outage?

Ryan was locked away in a secure military prison at Camp

Garrison-Humphreys. She knew Molly wouldn't have done something like this, but her knowledge of computer engineering sure would come in handy right now. Unfortunately, she had moved overseas last month.

The creak of the door to the stairs caught her attention, and she turned to see Eugene Ladderman and Clark entering the newsroom. Curious she crossed the room before anyone could notice Clark's sudden return to the newsroom. She had used everything from 'running errands' or 'oh, you just missed him' to explain his absence for the last two hours, and she was running out of plausible excuses quickly.

"Those stairs are brutal," Eugene said as Lois approached. "Ms. Lane, you're looking well. I do hope you've been changing your passwords like I recommended. Under a minute to crack a password isn't exactly secure and..."

"Oh, believe me, the password has been changed. *Repeatedly.*" Lois looked to Clark, silently asking, 'What is he doing here?'

Clark thankfully was able to pick up on her silent question and explained, "Superman told me the power company had traced this outage to a computer virus."

Lois' brow furrowed, and she repeated back to him, "Computer virus? So, someone did this on purpose?"

"It's not just Metropolis either," Clark gestured to the dark newsroom. "Everywhere across the country has been affected. New Troy. Washington. Parts of Gotham. The entire Midwest..."

"Most of the data centers that house the controls for the entire country are in the midwest." Eugene piped in. "You take those out you can control...everything."

"Looks like they've done it," Lois replied numbly, looking around the darkened newsroom.

"That's why I brought Eugene here." Clark explained, "I figured since he was able to stop Henry Harrison's virus last year, he might be able to help."

"We're not exactly up and running either," Lois pointed out. "Jimmy's trying to run the linotype machine, and Perry can't get ahold of Andy."

"But you're running on more than just desktops." Eugene pointed out.

Lois nodded, acknowledging that they at least had laptops to work from if they could get a connection to get online. "Eugene, nothing is online. How are you going to fix anything if you can't get a connection?"

"Let me worry about that," Eugene said with a grin.

"Let who worry about what?" Perry's voice came from behind them, and they all turned to see the editor standing behind them.

\*\*\*

Lucy Lane made her way through the darkened hallway of her apartment building. It had been hours since the power had gone out leaving her stranded in the middle of the engineering lab until security had overridden the computer locks. The entire city felt like it was under siege with soldiers and officers on every corner. The cars that had been on the road before were finally cleared and now that Fort Truman had called up the National Guard to help they had more than enough officers to help direct traffic and keep the streets safe.

She reached the door to her apartment and pulled out her keys to unlock the door. "So much for catching up on homework tonight."

A cold breeze filled the doorway, and she groaned when she noticed the open window in the corner of her apartment. She wrapped her arms around herself, letting out a muttered curse as she walked across the room to close the window. "I know I didn't leave the window open," she sighed to herself, looking around the dark apartment.

\*\*\*

On the ledge, outside Lucy Lane's apartment, Johnny Corbin stood still, flattening himself against the brick as he heard the

window slam shut a few feet away. He let out a sigh, looking up at the darkened window. There was something so captivating about this place...this woman that he couldn't put his finger on.

He felt a flicker of a memory flash through his mind. A white flash of light and a man in blue and red stood in front of him just before everything went dark. The same daydream with the hidden meaning haunted his mind and he'd yet to discover who the mysterious man was.

\*\*\*

Patience. That was the dreaded word that felt like a curse on Clark Kent's lips. The minutes felt like hours as he and Lois tried to wait out Eugene Ladderman to see if any progress had been made on his attempts to track down the hacker and fight this super-virus that had crippled the city. Unfortunately, this time around was different. Eugene couldn't just click a button and fight this virus because he didn't have any inside information to help him.

"The city's spooky looking without power," Lois commented as they reached the front door to their apartment.

Clark nodded his agreement and looped his arm around her shoulders. "I think for the moment the police have everything under control thankfully."

"You think someone might try something?" Lois guessed, looking over at him as he pulled out the key to the apartment and turned the lock to the door through the pitch-black darkness.

"It would surprise me if they didn't try something," Clark responded with a smile as he opened the door for her. He flashed her a smile. "Some first day back, huh?"

Lois twisted her mouth at him as he closed the door behind him. She ran a hand across his chest.

"I know I mentioned I missed the chase of a good story, but not to this extent."

He outlined her jawline with his palm, cupping her cheek and leaned in to kiss her. "I don't think anyone's in danger of being bor—" He pulled back, hearing the distress cries with his super-hearing.

"Nope, not bored at all," Lois whispered, loosening the knot to his tie.

"Keep the doors locked," he cautioned, looking around the dark apartment. "You never know what criminals will try in these circumstances."

"Be careful," Lois whispered, leaning in for one last kiss before he disappeared into a blur of red and blue pigments before her eyes.

\*\*\*

Perry clapped his hand on Jimmy's shoulder, pointing at the bold letters on the front page of the Daily Planet's evening edition. "You did good, kid."

Jimmy let out a yawn, turning back to Perry with a smile. "I'm just glad Andy showed up when he did."

"Yeah, me too," Perry commented, looking around the nearly abandoned newsroom.

Lois and Clark and most of the staff had left a few hours ago on Perry's orders. Eugene Ladderman was set up in Perry's office, trying to decipher the code in the virus that had knocked the Planet off the power grid. So far there had been no change, but hopefully, by morning, some headway would be made.

"Why don't you go on home?" Perry suggested, gesturing to the empty desks around him. "The paper's printed. We've got the copy ready for the morning edition."

"You sure you don't need me?" Jimmy asked, standing to his feet. A part of him wanted to stay and help, but the other part of him wanted to leave. He hadn't seen or heard from Lucy in nearly eighteen hours, and he really wanted to make sure she was okay.

"I'm sure." Perry nodded. "Get on out of here. I'll see you in the morning."

\*\*\*

“Air traffic control do you read me?” the frantic shouting came from the cockpit as Clark took hold of the left wing of the plane that was circling around the dark harbor.

“We’re out of fuel!”

He could feel the rush of cold air against his face as he tried to stop the plane from descending down several hundred feet into the bay below. The pitch-dark pier was only lit by the few lanterns hanging on the two ships sailing toward Gotham. A hard jolt came from the plane, and he looked to the side and saw the gaping hole from where the plane’s left wing had become unhinged from the plane.

“Nooo!” Clark flew after the plane at super-speed, stopping the plane full of passengers from plummeting down into the cold bay below.

\*\*\*

The time on his watch blinked back ‘11:59’ as Ron turned his attention to the crowded room he was in. There had been little change to the circumstances he’d found himself in other than the calmer tone many of the journalists were taking with their co-habitants. Spending most of the night hours crouched together in a cramped room had made many of the other journalists go from agitated to bored to restless and desperate to hear one another’s voice. Some began sharing the best of stories while others opened up about their families. All the while the podium the press secretary had vacated hours ago remained empty.

Ron turned to John Radford. “How are we still sitting here, waiting for news?”

As if on cue, a flicker of lights filled the room, and a loud hum could be heard as electricity coursed through the powerlines of the White House, bringing to life once more the majestic briefing room everyone had been huddled inside for nearly six hours. A loud cheer could be heard as everyone looked to the doors that had just opened and a loud booming voice announced, “The President of the United States.”

\*\*\*

The candles flickered on the nightstand as Lois felt the warmth from Clark’s body against hers. She let out a long sigh as her husband’s arm looped around her waist and pulled her to him. A sense of calm washed over her as she felt his hand move over the curve of her hip. The stress from the day and the questions that continued to multiply as the hours went on weighed heavily on her.

Most of the afternoon had been spent balancing between hiding Clark’s absence from most of the newsroom—including Perry—and trying to squeeze out a somewhat ready article with no resources at her disposal and no power. The way she’d spent most of her afternoon was reminiscent of the time she’d spent at the typewriter a few months ago. She had been craned over the rickety machine in the dark trying to make heads or tails of her story on her former best friend’s fiancé attempting to hold the world ransom.

They had left the Planet a few hours ago, but before they had even unlocked the door to their apartment, Clark had picked up a call for help a few blocks away. Surprisingly he hadn’t been gone longer than just two hours. She craned her neck to look back at him, and his lips found hers, caressing them with the smoothness of his tongue. His hand moved through her hair, tracing the frame of her face.

Little by little the stresses of the day began to disappear as she rolled over in bed to face him, running her hand across his jaw. His hand rested against her cheek as he broke off the kiss, resting his forehead against hers. The worry lines were evident on his face. Her eyes fluttered as she stretched her neck to the side to look up at him.

“Clark?”

“Another close call,” he breathed out, tightening his arm around her waist as he buried his face in her hair.

Question after question plagued her mind as she sunk back into the mattress, cradling her husband against her chest. She wanted to ask what happened and if he’d found anything else out, but she also knew the answers would come after Clark had had time to process everything. His hands moved up and down her sides, tracing the soft cotton of the sheet wrapped around her. His breathed teased her outer ear and she felt a shiver run through her.

“You cold?” he murmured in her ear.

“A little,” she admitted sheepishly. Thankfully the temperature hadn’t dropped to the normal cold that often took over the fall weather. How long that would be the case, she wasn’t sure. She felt the warm rays from his heat vision wash over her and let out an involuntary shudder. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” A lazy smile spread across his face, and he leaned in to capture her mouth with his once again with an intensity that made her forget about the questions that had been plaguing her mind for most of the evening. She felt the cotton sheet give away and his bare chest press against hers as she looped her right leg over his hips. “I think I’ve had plenty of practice in keeping you warm these past few weeks.”

“Practice does make perfect,” she agreed with a sultry giggle before she found her lips captured once more with his.

\*\*\*

Eugene looked up from the desk he was huddled at and saw Perry White curled up on the couch, trying to pretend he wasn’t falling asleep trying to redline the papers in his hand by the light of flashlights and battery powered lanterns. He let out a long sigh, looking at the blinking battery light in the bottom of his screen and frowned. He turned to the box of batteries Perry White had furnished him with and grabbed the battery pack on top.

“Infinity300 you’ve met your match.” Eugene grinned as he slapped the replacement battery backup to the back of the laptop he was working from. He saw the red light blink green and the bar change to fully charged in a matter of minutes. “Here we go.”

\*\*\*

The next morning, Metropolis held an eerie calm over its residents. Gone were the sounds of cars humming on the streets and public transportation whirring from one stop to another. The dim light of the sun rising along the horizon reflected off the water of the bay as Clark soared above the clouds, checking the city below him for any sign of trouble.

Most of the evening had been spent with one ear on the outside world as he tried to get what sleep he’d been allowed before morning called. It had been a long and stressful evening with the numerous calls for help that had left him in need of reassurance and comfort by the end of the night that it would be okay. He had nearly lost an entire plane full of passengers. He’d come close to not being fast enough, and that knowledge rocked him to the core, reminding him just how precious his gift of speed was.

“Flight 292 this is Air Traffic Control,” came the chirp of a radio from a distance.

Clark frowned when he picked up the radio frequency looking down at the city that was still dark with no power to light the businesses and homes below. Curious, he followed the source of the frequency he picked up on, trying to determine where the radio was feeding from.

\*\*\*

Governor Wade paced in the hallway of the governor’s mansion, running a hand through his thinning hair. The lobby was filled with his administrative staff. Most of which had been there all night. The city was still without power, and he had no answers to give to the residents of New Troy.

The door opened, and he turned to see General Reynolds standing in the doorway. The stern features on Reynolds’ face told him the visit wasn’t a social call nor was it good news.

“General,” Wade cleared his throat as he looked toward his

Deputy Chief of Staff with a wary expression.

“The president has declared a state of emergency for the entire nation, Governor.” the Colonel spoke up. “I’ll take it from here.”

\*\*\*

Clark landed in the field on the outskirts of Saginaw County Airport just outside Saginaw Bay in Michigan. He looked around the field he was in, watching as the pilot exited the small helicopter with the help of the awaiting EMT’s ready to check him out for injuries. The radio on the helicopter was working. The lights and hum of activity filled the small airport and the city.

“Thank you, Superman,” the Ground Control Attendant said, walking with the gurney that the pilot was being wheeled on.

Clark nodded to the attendant and looked back to the helicopter that had lost its tail rotor just before almost crash landing into the field they were standing in. “I just wish I’d been able to do more.”

He took off, flying through the sky and making his way back to Metropolis. From what he could tell it appeared that power had been restored throughout the country. His super-hearing had picked up on police scanners and radio frequencies while attempting to stop the out of control helicopter from crashing. Hopefully, that meant Metropolis was back online too.

Just as he reached the bridge leading from Gotham to Metropolis, the sound of the electric hum running through the powerlines came to a halting stop. ‘Oh, no,’ he let out a groan, realizing his mental relief over the power outage being over had been short-lived. A frown crossed his face, and he turned his attention to the darkness that covered the city he called home.

He looked behind him, noticing the soft glow coming from Gotham of lights in the clock tower. How was it that one city remained in the dark while the rest of the nation had been restored? The longer the city was without power, the more desperate the city of Metropolis became. He and Lois needed to find who was behind the country-wide blackout and why, but first he needed to make a visit to confirm his suspicions.

\*\*\*

Rollie Vale looked around the room nervously, spotting the enigmatic Bill Church Jr. in the corner, puffing on his cigar. The two women that had helped him make his escape sat across from him, wearing devilish grins that made him question momentarily how certain he was on his decision to team up with Intergang.

“The virus is timed to return Metropolis to full power in one hour,” he answered proudly.

“How deep were you able to penetrate the system?” Church asked, tapping his hand on the table in front of him.

“I got everything,” Rollie Vale grinned proudly.

“I do love a man that knows his way around a hard drive,” the woman he’d come to know as ‘HQ’ lunged across the table to plant her mouth on his, giving him a taste of cinnamon, liquor, and fries all at once.

\*\*\*

Ron Troupe looked down at the list of names he’d written down, still in disbelief at the announcement the press room had been given from the President. Criminals, philanderers, and thieves. Every newly appointed senator and Congressman or congresswoman was someone that had lost to the newly vacated seats or someone that had dropped out of the race for the sake of their campaign. No one on the list screamed ‘trustworthy’ or ‘law-abiding.’ He took a deep breath as he reached for the phone in his pocket, wondering momentarily if he’d be able to get through.

\*\*\*

“Are you sure?” Lois asked, pushing her way through the double doors of STAR Labs. The lobby was dark, and the doors that were normally tightly sealed had been propped open for entry.

“Metropolis is the only city that hasn’t been restored,” Clark said with a grim expression as he followed her through the corridor.

“Lois, Clark, this is a surprise!” they both turned their attention to see Dr. Klein standing in the hallway.

They glanced at one another before jumping into the issue at hand in unison, “Yes, about that...” Clark began at the same time Lois started in with, “Dr. Klein we need your help.”

\*\*\*

Bruce typed frantically at the keyboard of his laptop, searching through database after database to find the source of the virus his computer system had picked up on. The red blinking light in the corner of his keypad caught his attention, and he looked up, “Lucius, where are the battery packs?”

“Catch,” Lucius tossed another battery pack to him, not even looking up from his own laptop as he typed away, continuing with his own search to track down the intruder that was attempting to take control of WayneTech’s infrastructure.

Bruce snapped the pack in place and smiled when he saw the blinking red light go from in distress to fully charged in a matter of minutes.

“How are you coming, Lucius?” Bruce asked. Before Lucius could respond, the screen cleared and a green box with an infinity symbol appeared on his screen before spinning in a counter-clockwise direction and disappearing once more. A loud humming filled the room, and Bruce looked up at the lights that filled the room.

“Strange,” Lucius commented.

“Something’s not right.” Bruce agreed.

\*\*\*

“We did it!”

Cheers filled the crowded room as the technician that had been hard at work debugging New Troy Power’s data structure sat numbly at the screen. There was nothing that explained the sudden appearance of the infinity symbol or the power being restored.

The technician that had been working on fighting the virus with the help of his team stared at this screen, confused at the sudden entry into the cyber barriers that had prevented him from breaking through for hours. Now, all of a sudden, he was in. Why?

\*\*\*

The lights flooded through the newsroom of the Daily Planet and the staff cheered. Perry reached over to hug his desktop monitor just before pressing the power button to boot his computer on. The sound of power humming through the motherboard was music to his ears. “We are back online!”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Eugene’s response came.

“What do you mean?” Perry asked.

Eugene stood up from the couch he’d been camped out on all evening and walked toward him, leaning over his shoulder. “It’s just...too easy.”

“You thinkin’ something else is going on here?” Perry asked, looking behind him.

“You could say that,” Eugene pointed to the screens on the television monitors outside Perry’s office. “Looks like we’re not the only ones with power back.”

“What in the world?” Perry glanced at the screen and saw a sign that read, “Criminals = Law Makers” with Ron Troupe standing in front of the crowd.

\*\*\*

“Where to, Mr. Denetto?” the pilot asked as Johnny Denetto, and his team boarded the private plane.

“Metropolis,” Stitches replied with a broad grin, patting the lead box next to him. “We have some tests to run.”

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## Chapter 6

The loud hum from the electricity pulsing through the power lines and drumming to life STAR Labs’ high-tech facility filled the hallways. Lois Lane let out a sigh of relief as the bright lights surrounded her and Clark in the long corridor they were in with Dr. Klein. Lois let out a soft mumble beneath her breath, grateful

to see the bright white lights and hear the soft ping of computer systems up and running. “That’s one problem solved.”

“But we still don’t know who caused the blackout,” Clark pointed out as the sliding door to Dr. Klein’s lab opened up.

“So, Superman is sure the power was up and running everywhere else?” Dr. Klein inquired.

“Positive,” came Clark’s response as they followed Dr. Klein to his desk where the computer was just logging into STAR Labs’ database.

Lois ran a hand through her hair watching as Dr. Klein typed furiously, scanning the long list of code on the monitors. His brow furrowed as he mumbled, “Everything appears to be online.”

“Now it is,” Clark stressed.

“The entire nation was knocked off the power grid for almost a whole day. That’s not coincidental.” Lois’ brow furrowed as she spoke.

“Metropolis was offline for an extra four hours,” Clark added, shaking his head.

“Well, we know the power grid failure was from a virus,” Dr. Klein mused aloud, tapping at his keyboard. “We’ve tracked it down to a small group of cyber criminals well known on the dark web. Unfortunately, most of their locations are unknown.”

“But you keep files on them?” Lois pointed at the screen.

“The NIA does,” Dr. Klein explained with a shrug, “but a good number of these guys escaped from Metropolis Prison.”

“And the others?” Clark asked with a frown.

“There are maybe a small handful that are still in custody, but the rest of them are still out there. They live on the dark web, but just haven’t been unlucky enough to be caught,” Dr. Klein explained, typing in his browser to pull up a dark blue and green screen where ads for identities being sold, credit card numbers, bank accounts, and more.

“What is this?” Lois asked with a scowl.

“The dark web,” Dr. Klein explained, pointing out the long list of code on the right-hand side of the screen. “STAR Labs is one of the many facilities tasked with monitoring it for the NIA.” Dr. Klein gave a slight shrug. “I’m not as diverse as some of my colleagues, but I can find my way around it.”

“Who might be *more* diverse?” Lois inquired.

\*\*\*

A man with short brown hair and a camera over his shoulder walked out of the brick building Johnny Corbin had been sitting outside of. The dark-haired woman walking with him seemed so familiar. A scowl crossed his face as he watched the young man lean in to kiss her. He couldn’t understand what made him feel such a rush of jealousy from watching the young couple interact with one another, but he knew something felt wrong about it.

His jaw tightened as he watched the couple walk toward the bus station. The young man pointed to the whirring transit moving above them. ‘*Too close*,’ he thought to himself, watching as the young man put an arm around the dark-haired woman again.

“Hey, Luce, we might be able to catch the train,” he heard the man say.

“Jimmy Olsen, I thought you *hated* riding the train,” she grinned back at him.

“I do,” he grinned back at her, “but I love spending time with you.”

“Jimmy Olsen,” Corbin breathed out, watching the couple disappear into the crowd.

\*\*\*

Whisper A’Daire looked around the high-tech laboratory she and Dr. Harleen Quinzel were in. She stopped in front of one of the room-length windows, catching sight of her reflection. The short brown hair was not a look she enjoyed but whatever was necessary for the job. A golden hue flashed from her eyes and in place of the short brown hair was long red locks. A smile crossed her face. “Much better.”

“Having fun?” Dr. Quinzel called out to her as she typed at her keyboard.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Whisper asked as she came up behind Dr. Quinzel and looked at the code on the monitor.

Dr. Quinzel’s light blonde hair flipped as she rolled her eyes and looked back at Whisper’s green and blue eyes. “I’ll have all the NIA Agent’s personal files online before you can say...”

“Dr. Quinzel?” The screen blanked out, and the face of Dr. Bernard Klein with Lois Lane and Clark Kent standing behind him appeared in its place.

Dr. Quinzel shot a warning look at Whisper before responding in a sickly-sweet tone, “Yes, Dr. Klein?”

“This is Lois Lane and Clark Kent from the Daily Planet.” Dr. Klein motioned behind him. “Can we have a moment of your time?”

Dr. Quinzel’s face looked like it very well could break from the tight grin she kept pasted on her face. “Of course,” she reached over to press the red button on her desk and muttered to herself, “Hopefully this will be quick.” She reached over to press the publish button on her screen, and the green arrow blinked ‘*Uploading.*’

\*\*\*

Perry White tapped his pen against his desk as he skimmed over the copy for the next edition. He glanced up and saw the IT Manager leaning over Eugene Ladderman’s shoulder, looking at the screen they had pulled up. He wasn’t sure what they were talking about. Something about ‘Trojan’ and ‘Firewall.’

“Hey, Chief,” Jimmy’s voice intruded on Perry’s thoughts, and he turned his attention to the young man standing in his doorway. “Looks like the Planet’s back online.”

“Yeah,” Perry forced a smile at Jimmy, “but there seems to be a lot of speculation going on as to what caused the blackout in the first place.”

“I’ll bet.” Jimmy shook his head.

“And how easily everything seemed to come back online,” Perry added, glancing over at the IT Manager and Eugene Ladderman.

“Easy?” Jimmy’s brow furrowed.

Eugene Ladderman looked up from the laptop he and the IT Manager were entranced with and approached Jimmy. “All the hours of trying to track down the source of this polymorphic virus and then poof, firewall comes down, and everything magically goes back to normal.”

Jimmy’s brow furrowed. “Viruses don’t just stop. Someone or something has to make it stop...or maybe it was coded to go dormant after a certain amount of time.”

“You know a little something about computer viruses?” Ladderman asked with an impressed look.

“I tinker with computer programming on the side.” Jimmy beamed proudly. “Getting pretty good at it actually.”

“Good enough to lend us a hand?” Eugene asked.

\*\*\*

The blonde-haired woman behind the red-trimmed glasses that Dr. Klein introduced to them as Dr. Quinzel appeared to be forthcoming with Lois’ questions, but Clark still felt like something was off. She had been way too quick to jump up from her computer when they had entered, and as much as Lois tried to press her, they still were nowhere closer to having answers on the cyber attack that had gripped the country.

“I wouldn’t necessarily call myself an expert on the dark web,” Dr. Quinzel replied smoothly, flashing a broad grin across her face as she tapped her fingertips against the desk she was sitting at. “I just help out the NIA with their pet projects.”

“Oh, Dr. Quinzel don’t be modest,” Dr. Klein beamed back at her. Clark caught a scowl on the woman’s face before she covered it with a forced smile. “You’re the NIA expert here at STAR

Labs.”

“Well, Bernie, I don’t like to oversell myself. I’m no expert.” Dr. Quinzel shrugged, and Clark heard her heart rate pick up as she spoke, hinting that she was indeed lying.

Dr. Quinzel’s lab partner placed a hand on Dr. Klein’s shoulder and interrupted, “I think you were mistaken, Dr. Klein. Dr. Quinzel is not the expert on NIA or the dark web.”

Clark caught a look of disbelief from Lois just before Dr. Klein seemed to immediately change his tune, repeating the lab partners words. “I’m sorry, Lois, Clark, I must have been mistaken. I guess Dr. Quinzel isn’t our expert on the dark web.”

Lois arched an eyebrow and gave Dr. Klein a look of disbelief. “Then who is?”

\*\*\*

The picketing lines grew larger and larger as news of the complete change of party and representatives made its way to everyone. Many of the reporters that had been holed up in the briefing room for hours with Ron were now shoulder-to-shoulder with him as they interviewed the protesters for their take on the newest change by the president.

“We elected officials not these criminals!”

“Our voices have to be heard!”

“Re-vote!”

“The president is not speaking for me!”

Ron made his way to the end of the crowd where a small group of girls that couldn’t be older than fourteen held up their picketing signs. Unlike the adults that were surrounding the Capitol Building, the girls weren’t shouting about party lines or who was in control. The message on their picket signs read, ‘Why should I vote?’

Ron approached them and heard the chants. “No voice. No justice. Your vote doesn’t count.”

“Excuse me,” Ron called out to them.

“Yes?” one of the girls stopped and turned toward him.

“I’m Ron Troupe with the Daily Planet.” Ron flashed a smile at the girls. “I was hoping I could talk to you about your protest here today.”

“Us?” one of the other girls looked back at him questionably.

“Yes, you.” He nodded.

“Why us?”

Ron gestured to the group that seemed to be leading the protest with chants about voter oppression and party lines being shouted from the megaphone. Many of the news organizations had cameras centered around them, but Ron’s experience over the years had taught him it was never about who was up front.

“Your message seems more genuine,” Ron explained with a small smile as he pointed to their signs. “You’re not shouting about party control or mudslinging...” He pointed to the first girl that was twirling her blonde hair with her index finger. “You’re not even old enough to vote yet, and you’re here protesting.”

“We just want to know when it gets time for us to vote we’ll have our voices heard,” the young girl responded.

“I think I can help with that,” Ron responded.

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The loud honking of the bus horn turning the corner and the blaring honk from the taxi cab filled the air as Lois and Clark made their way to the parking garage.

Lois silently stewed over the odd behavior of Dr. Klein and Dr. Quinzel. Something was up with his sudden change of attitude, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She glanced over at Clark who seemed just as lost in thought as she was. “That was weird, wasn’t it?”

“Which part?” Clark asked, glancing over his shoulder to look at her. “The part where Dr. Quinzel tried to deny all affiliation with the NIA projects Dr. Klein swore she was an expert on or Dr. Klein’s sudden change of tune the second her assistant started talking?”

“Both,” Lois said with a smirk.

“Did you see how quickly Dr. Klein’s attitude changed the minute that assistant started talking to him?” Clark asked, shaking his head.

“Yeah.” Lois frowned, trying to recall the assistant’s name.

“What was her name?”

“She didn’t give one.” Clark frowned.

“Maybe we start with Dr. Quinzel and see what we can find on her?” Lois suggested, hooking her arm in his with a conspiratorial grin.

“Are you sure taking on another story is the best idea right now?” Clark asked, threading his fingers through her hair as they came to a stop in front of their Jeep.

“They’re hiding *something*.” Lois squeezed his hand with hers.

“Yes, but what happens if what they’re hiding has nothing to do with the other three stories we’re juggling?” Clark reminded her with a sigh.

“We delegate,” Lois said confidently.

“Delegate?” Clark looked at her curiously.

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Bill Henderson took a deep breath, trying not to think about the sweat pouring down his face as he held onto the rickety old ladder the team had found inside the old elevator shaft. It reeked of dust and rust, and he was sure there was mold somewhere, but he couldn’t think about that now. He had to think about getting to freedom. He had to think about getting help.

“How are you doing Bill?” Zymack called out to him from below.

“Still got a ways to go,” Henderson responded as he coughed out some of the dust he’d inhaled.

Mike Rogers called out to him, “How’s the ladder holding up, Bill?”

“For now, it’s holding, Mike, but I wouldn’t trust it holding more than one of us at a time,” Bill responded, eyeing the rusty metal that was holding his weight. They didn’t dare send anyone up after him. It was all on him to make the treacherous trip up to the surface and get help for the rest of the men trapped below.

\*\*\*

The soft music played in the background of the Metro Club as Carmine Falcone stared down any would-be assailants. Metropolis was far different from Gotham City where he could make his presence known anywhere and not fear retribution. He had made many enemies over the years, and many had navigated to Metropolis and its surrounding cities. Thankfully he had one ally in the city to prevent a premature assassination. As far as he could tell anyway.

For the moment, his alliance with Luthor kept him safe during his stint in Metropolis but whether Luthor would remain safe was still to be determined. Carmine’s thoughts drifted briefly to Alberto, his son locked up in Arkham Asylum. It wasn’t enough to just break him out of the prison he was in. He needed to be free. A life on the run was no life at all. He of all people knew that.

“Carmine, good to see you, old man.” Lex Luthor’s smooth voice reached Carmine Falcone’s ears as he reached the back of the club.

Lex offered him a cigar from the silver pack in his hand and Carmine took it with a nod. “Lex, I thought we weren’t meeting in public until your announcement next week.”

Lex took a long puff from his cigar and nodded. “We’re moving up the timeline.” His brow furrowed. “Things escalated with the botched job on the virus.”

“Can you afford to move the timeline up?” Carmine asked, taking his seat at the table. “Tensions don’t exactly seem to be in the president’s favor at the moment.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Lex replied darkly. “Are you sure your men are ready?”

“They’ve been briefed and know what’s coming,” Carmine replied coolly. “Just don’t forget your part of the bargain, Lex.”

“Alberto’s case will be the first matter of business President Garner handles once I’m in office,” Lex promised happily.

“How soon can you have the vote on the Senate floor?” Carmine asked.

“The public is distracted with the massive sweep of the house and senate. The president has already submitted my name for confirmation, and no one has even noticed.” Lex smiled slyly.

“And what happens if they do?” Carmine asked with a concerned expression. “I’ve invested a lot of men and resources into this project.”

“As have I, Carmine,” Lex soothed with a broad grin. “Trust me, everything is going according to plan.”

“It better,” Carmine warned darkly.

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Johnny Denetto held the large lead box in his hands as he made his way through the dark halls of Bill Church Jr’s contact. He wasn’t sure how trustworthy this Doctor was, but he was the only one Church trusted to test the specimen Denetto had retrieved and beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“You must be Denetto.” a voice from behind him spoke up, and he turned to see a bald man with yellow tinted glasses in a lab coat.

“You the doc?” Denetto eyed him warily.

“Dr. Hugo Strange.” He held out a hand to introduce himself.

Denetto nodded recognition. “I’ve heard of you.” He set the box down on the table in front of him and exclaimed, “You’re supposed to be the expert on weird, right?”

“Rare and unique individuals have come my way, yes.”

“How about this?” Denetto popped open the lid, and the red glow covered Hugo’s face as he stared at the contents.

“Fascinating...”

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“Doctor who?”

Clark stood by Jimmy’s desk and let out a deep sigh catching the quizzical expression on Jimmy’s face at the name he had provided. “Harleen Quinzel. She’s a scientist at STAR Labs.”

Jimmy’s face took on a concerned expression at the mention of STAR Labs, and he asked, “Can’t you just ask Dr. Klein?”

“He wasn’t much help,” Clark remarked begrudgingly.

“STAR Labs isn’t exactly the friendliest with providing information to the press,” Jimmy reminded him. He then amended his statement, “Well aside from Dr. Klein.”

“Normally I’d agree, but Dr. Klein seemed...not himself when it came to Dr. Quinzel,” Clark explained carefully, recalling the scientist’s behavior earlier.

Jimmy opened his mouth to respond when Lois interrupted, walking up to them and waving a file in her hand. “I’ve got it.”

“Got what?” Clark asked, turning his attention away from Jimmy.

“Hamilton’s research,” Lois explained, slapping the file in Clark’s hands. He set the file on Jimmy’s desk, watching with amusement as Lois went into full babble mode, sharing her latest piece of information with her arms flailing through the air with excitement. “Jim Burrows, Bill’s friend in the new Special Crimes Unit they created last month?” she prompted excitedly. “Since Bill Henderson isn’t any help for obvious reasons, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask about the investigation the police did at the time of Capone’s arrest.” A huge grin covered Lois’ face as she gloated the news of the obvious break she’d gotten in their investigation.

Clark crossed his arms over his chest, looking back at her with amusement. “No, no, don’t tell me. Only a select few people knew Hamilton’s cloning research was being housed at STAR Labs.”

“And you’ll never guess who the lead contact at STAR Labs was.” Lois finished happily.

Jimmy waved his hand in the air to interrupt, holding up the

file Clark had laid on his desk. “Dr. Harleen Quinzel.”

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Whisper A’Daire smiled gleefully as she peeked over Harleen Quinzel’s shoulder and whispered, “Is the transfer complete?”

“All personnel files have been sent over,” Dr. Quinzel said with a yawn.

Whisper looked around the lab warily. “Good, let’s get out of here before that Klein fellow shows back up.”

“What do you care, Whisper?” Quinzel teased. “A bat of your eyelashes and he’s putty in your hands.”

“Don’t remind me.” Whisper cringed.

A loud bang came from the wall where a square metal panel was. They both jumped and looked toward the panel that was now opening. A man’s hand poked through as the metal folds separated.

“Harley.”

“Whisper”

The man’s head poked through covered in dust and grime. A frown crossed Whisper’s face as he fell through the now open metal entryway and into the lab.

“I believe we have a problem,” Harley said narrowing her eyes at the intruder.

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### ***Power Outage Leaves Country in Ruins!***

*By Ron Troupe*

### ***STAR Labs Scientist on the Run!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

### ***Power Virus Linked to Metallo Theft!***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

### ***Congress to Vote on New VP!***

*By Ralph Simms*

### ***WayneTech Moves to Metropolis***

*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent*

Perry White beamed proudly at the stack of headlines on his desk. The week had been littered with questions and stories that had taken hold of the nation as everyone watched with bated breath for the news of the new Vice President that would be named any day now. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives remained behind closed doors as the President’s nominee was currently being interviewed by Congress. Ron Troupe remained at Capitol Hill ready to report the first glimmer of news as it was announced. Jimmy was leading the research into each new member of Congress, and his best team of reporters was promised the inside scoop on Metropolis’ newest philanthropist, Bruce Wayne. All in all, it had been a successful week for the Daily Planet, and his reporters had proven once again why they were the best of the best.

A large folder dropped on his desk, intruding on his thoughts, and Perry looked at the top page taped to the manila folder on his desk. ‘*DNA Manipulation and Human Cloning?*’

Perry looked up in disbelief, uncertain where or who this folder had come from. His forehead creased as he met the gaze of Jimmy Olsen who was looking at him expectantly. “Jimmy, what in tarnation is this?”

“Chief, just hear me out...” Jimmy began holding his hands up as he took a seat across from Perry. “Hamilton was able to create clones from those gangsters a few months ago with DNA manipulation.”

“Uh-huh.” Perry looked at Jimmy uncertainly.

“It sounds unbelievable, but it is a proven scientific...”

Perry sighed, shaking his head. “Jimmy, we have enough stories to juggle right now without completely killing our reputation with stories like this.”

“But Chief...”

“I don’t want to hear another word about it.” Perry shook his head. “There was a reason we didn’t print everything we knew about Hamilton’s experiments.” He picked up the latest edition of the Planet and pointed at the headlines. “Political unrest.

Billionaires moving to Metropolis. Computer Viruses wiping out a nation.” Perry waved his arms in the air. “These are the stories people want to read about and expect from the Daily Planet.”

“If I can prove it...” Jimmy pleaded half-heartedly.

“We need more than just one scientist’s theories on cloning,” Perry explained with a heavy sigh. “Hard facts. Capone, Dillinger, and the rest of those goons are gone. All you have left on this is scientific theory and nothing concrete to back it up with.”

“What if I have more?” Jimmy asked.

“What do you mean?” Perry asked.

“I think some of the Metropolis P.D. has been cloned,” Jimmy stated bluntly.

Perry saw a familiar spark of determination in the young man’s eyes and did his best to coax him in the right direction, “Prove it, and we’ll talk.”

\*\*\*

Lois patted her wrist with a drop of perfume as she examined her reflection in the mirror. The curled locks and elegant gown reminded her briefly of a time not so long ago where she’d been pulled into a world she never felt one with and yet was entranced with for the longest time. Though the invitation from Bruce Wayne was for work and had nothing to do with her past with Lex Luthor she still felt uneasy and out of her depth attending the Russian Ballet on the billionaire’s dime.

“You look gorgeous,” her husband’s voice intruded her thoughts as his hands rested on her bare shoulders before he leaned in to kiss her. “You about ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she murmured aloud, glancing at the reflection of him in his tuxedo. A smile curled across her lips as she stared back at him, admiring how perfectly he seemed to fit into everything. “You sure we absolutely have to go to this thing?”

“Given Perry’s expecting a full report in the morning, I’m not sure bailing is an option if we want to continue reporting news,” Clark reminded her, leaning in to kiss her. “Dog shows aren’t really your forté.”

“It would be hard to explain Superman rescues when we’re supposed to be covering Lulu’s dog show pageant.” Lois giggled, running her hands up and down his chest and teasing his crooked bowtie.

“Who knows we might even enjoy ourselves,” Clark whispered in her ear.

“Says the man who can’t stand the person we’re supposed to be interviewing all evening,” Lois smirked back at him.

“I have a hard time trusting someone that greets me with crippling pain.” Clark shrugged.

“Most people do,” Lois agreed, grabbing her purse from the dresser. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

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## Chapter 7

“Prove it, and we’ll talk.” Jimmy gave his best Perry White impression as he slumped down on the couch next to Lucy. “I don’t get it. I’ve got a real lead here. I know it.”

Lucy placed a hand on Jimmy’s shoulder, giving him a peck on the cheek. “I’m sure Perry is just being cautious. Cloning experiments are right up there with alien abductions and Elvis sightings.”

Jimmy cocked his eyebrow up and let out a sigh. “I guess, but Luce, I *know* there’s something here.” He bit his lower lip, trying to find the right words to explain the emotions that were building up inside him. Out of all the reporters the Daily Planet employed, Lois had chosen him to take on this story. He wanted to prove he had what it took to report on the big stories and be taken seriously as a reporter. He couldn’t do any of that if Perry didn’t give him a chance though.

“Jimmy, if you feel there’s something there then prove it.”

Lucy nudged him with her hip.

“How?” Jimmy asked, with a defeated sigh. “I’ve got

Hamilton’s research and no one in the scientific community supporting it. I’ve got a feeling that something isn’t right from Lois and CK, but as far as Perry White’s hard facts I’ve got nothing.”

“Well, you can take a page out of Lois Lane’s playbook when she reaches a dead end,” Lucy offered with a shrug.

“What’s that?” Jimmy asked.

“Dig deeper.” Lucy leaned in to kiss him then reached over to grab the file on the coffee table. “Come on, I’m sure there’s got to be something in Hamilton’s research you can use to prove your theory.”

\*\*\*

Bruce readjusted his tie in the mirror as he stared at the footage of the two women leaving STAR Labs from four days ago. He frowned, craning his neck to get a closer look and he ordered the voice control on his computer, “Zoom in 300%.”

The footage of the two women amplified to the desired ratio, and Bruce frowned, tightening his fist as he stared back at the familiar face. He’d know that face anywhere. He’d come against her time and time again with his many confrontations with the Joker in Gotham. Now it seemed he’d set his sights on Metropolis.

Bruce snorted out in disgust, “Well, well, Joker, sending Harley to do your dirty work?”

\*\*\*

The concert hall was filled with Metropolis’ elite crowd. The women were dressed to the nine with expensive jewelry donning their necks that was worth more than the annual cost of keeping a small town up and running. The men reeked of rich bourbon and cigars and wore tuxedos accented with diamonds and emeralds, flaunting their net worth with every accessory.

Clark Kent’s gaze moved to the woman hanging on his arm. A smile curled on his lips, admiring how perfectly she fit next to him as they stood in line, waiting to have their ticket stamped. The last time he’d actually seen a performance of the Russian ballet had been in Russia where it was a much more casual setting. He shifted uncomfortably from toe to heel, looking around the concert hall that was reminiscent of the parties Lex Luthor used to throw.

“You know when the Russian ballet performed in St. Petersburg, it wasn’t nearly this formal,” Clark commented, looking around the long line of expensive furs and Gucci with raised eyebrows.

“That’s because it’s *in* Russia,” Lois whispered, leaning in to kiss his cheek. “These things tend to attract a certain crowd.”

“I see that,” Clark responded as they moved up in the line. “The last time I went to one of these the dress code was a tunic.” His eyes shifted around the room and shook his head.

“Well, hopefully, that’ll be the only thing different,” Lois said with a sigh. “I think we’ve had enough excitement this week to keep busy for the next few months.”

Clark nodded, and he leaned in to whisper in her ear, “Yeah, I’m sure Perry’s enjoying the headlines, but I think Superman’s getting a little tired of the excitement.”

Lois glanced over at him with a small smile. “It’s been an eventful week, to say the least.” She leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder.

“It’s one thing after another, but I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something bigger behind all this.” Clark wrapped a protective arm around her.

“Like Intergang maybe?” Lois suggested, frowning as she looked up at him.

“Maybe.” Clark shook his head, unable to explain the sense of dread that had been hanging over him for the last few days. “This doesn’t feel like Intergang though. This feels bigger.”

“We’ll figure it out,” she reassured him, leaning up and looping her arms around his neck. “We always do.” A small smile crossed her face, and she leaned in to kiss him before whispering against his lips, “For now, we focus on making the most of an

evening out and no bad guys to chase.”

“There’s still seven criminals on the loose,” he reminded her.

“But Superman is taking the night off,” Lois reminded him, with a whisper against his lips.

He grinned, savoring the feeling of having her soft curves pressed against him. With the insanity of everything that had transpired this past week, he’d promised to let his alter-ego take the night off so they could have one evening without him dashing off in the middle of dinner or a conversation. Their first week back in Metropolis as husband and wife had been anything but smooth but he knew the emotional toll of watching over Metropolis for what felt like days on end was beginning to wear him down. He needed a chance to recharge and reconnect with his wife without the rest of the world demanding his attention. So tonight, barring any major disasters, Superman was off the clock.

“Ticket?”

\*\*\*

The board room of STAR Labs was filled with scientists from around the world. Dr. Klein looked around the room and took his seat next to one of the scientists in town from Central City’s STAR Labs. He glanced over at the young man with a name tag of ‘Ramon’ and nodded to him. “Dr. Ramon is it?”

The young man smiled back at him, “Cisco Ramon,” Cisco introduced himself before looking to his left. “This is Dr. Caitlin Snow.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the young red-headed scientist next to Cisco Ramon reached over to shake Dr. Klein’s hand.

Dr. Klein nodded to them and whispered, “Anyone know what this is about?”

“I’m guessing it’s the data breach from that virus,” Cisco whispered back.

“Or the scandal with that Dr. Quinzel going missing with a whole lot of classified information.” Dr. Snow added.

“Or all of the above,” a voice spoke up behind them. They turned to see the mysterious Harrison Wells standing behind them.

“Professor Wells,” Dr. Klein beamed back at him, uncertain how to react to the scientist’s sudden appearance behind him.

“Dr. Klein,” Wells nodded knowingly in his direction before turning his attention to the rest of the room, pacing around the front of the table.

“You’re Dr. Klein?” Caitlin Snow looked at him in surprise.

“The Dr. Klein?” Cisco Ramon asked, looking at him in astonishment and whispered back, “Superman’s guy?”

“Cisco!” Wells shouted, and the young man jumped.

“Sorry Harrison.” Cisco quickly turned his attention back to the front of the room, and Caitlin Snow mouthed, ‘Sorry’ to Dr. Klein.

Harrison Wells cleared his throat and spoke up, “You are all here to discuss one thing. STAR Labs and the liability we’ve incurred over the last few months of hiccups. More recently, the virus that wiped out the entire nation.”

“STAR Labs can’t possibly be held accountable for something like that,” Burton Thompson, the director of the Metropolis location of STAR Labs, spoke up.

“One would hope not but like it or not there is blame being shifted back to STAR Labs,” Wells said with a sigh.

“Metropolis’ recent break-ins haven’t helped either,” Dr. Rivera spoke up.

“Nor Gotham’s,” Dr. Alisa Adams chimed in with the shake of her head. “We’ve lost some of the samples of Kryptonite to criminals like Two-Face and Joker.”

Dr. Klein tensed at the mention of the meteorite that had been sent to Gotham for safe keeping. Wells paced in the front of the room and turned to the group of scientists. “In the past four months, we’ve lost the trust of the nation. Evidence is no longer secure. Information is no longer private. Criminal weapons are no longer safely locked away but rather at risk.” Wells stopped a few

feet away from Dr. Klein. “And to find out one among us was working against us this entire time?” A fist came down on the table, and everyone jumped. “I want to know how, with all the security we have, STAR Labs ended up hiring the Joker’s right-hand woman without knowing it!”

\*\*\*

The lights lit up the stage, and the dancers came to the edge taking their bows and pliés as the audience applauded the performance. Lois noticed the reserved expression that remained on her husband’s features as he helped her to her feet. Bruce Wayne had remained cordial throughout the performance but still never provided them with any information beyond the standard line he gave everyone else.

Still, she had to wonder what the reasoning was behind Bruce Wayne’s insistence with Perry on being interviewed for a fluff piece by the top investigative reporters. He had to know they would keep digging, right? Was this a test?

They made their way through the narrow hallway leading out to the lobby where the elevators were. Bruce turned to them and beamed. “I always enjoy it when the Russian Ballet comes to the U.S.” He turned to press the call button on the elevator. “It’s not something I always have time to enjoy unless I’m doing business in St. Petersburg.”

Clark looked like he was about to make a remark at that comment and Lois quickly cut in, “Well, it was certainly a *nice* performance.”

“Though it’s too bad it isn’t November yet,” Bruce said wistfully. “They do an amazing Nutcracker you’ve got to see if you ever get the chance.”

“Hmm.” Lois bit her lower-lip trying to force a smile as the billionaire continued to go on about the dancers and Swan Lake. Clark’s expression remained annoyed, but he didn’t say anything as they stepped on the elevator car that had just arrived. The bellhop stood back to allow them to enter the car and before anyone else could get on, he reached over to press the close button.

Bruce frowned, looking over at the young man in surprise. “I’m sure we can fit more people on.”

The bellhop turned around with an annoyed expression and pulled out a gun aiming it at Bruce. “We most definitely could, Mr. Wayne, but I don’t like witnesses.” He then shouted, “Jewelry and wallets now!”

“You don’t want to do this,” Bruce warned, staring the man down reaching in his jacket to pull out his wallet.

“I think I do,” the bellhop snorted, waving his gun in the air. Lois caught a glance from Clark who was shifting himself in position to catch any bullets that might be fired in the small elevator. “Hey! You two! Hand over the money and jewelry! Now!”

Before Lois could react, Bruce dropped the wallet on the floor, and the lights went out. A hard screech could be heard, and the humming of the elevator filled the air just before the ping of the elevator rang, and the doors opened. The lights flickered back on, and Lois looked around to see the bellhop in a crumpled pile on the floor and Bruce leaning over to pick up his wallet from the ground.

“Better luck next time,” Bruce said, nudging the man’s shoulder as he reached up to pull the emergency stop. Without a word he stepped onto the floor they were on as security rushed toward them.

Lois glanced at Clark in surprise and gave him a questioning gaze as she whispered, “Did you have to knock him out?”

“That wasn’t me,” Clark whispered back before turning to the security guard that was now asking them what had happened. “He had a gun and...”

Lois didn’t catch the rest of the conversation as her attention moved to where Bruce Wayne was walking with his hand in his

pocket. He looked around to see if anyone was watching and then dropped something in the waste bin. Once she and Clark had been released from the security officer's questioning, she tugged on her husband's arm, pulling him with her to the wastebasket to retrieve whatever it was Bruce had disposed of.

"What is it?" Clark asked as she pulled out a small metal disc.

She looked over at Clark, holding it up to study. "I'm not sure but whatever it is looks to be burnt out."

"Maybe we can drop it by STAR Labs in the morning and have Dr. Klein take a look?" Clark suggested.

Lois glanced toward the exit with a frown. "Yeah."

\*\*\*

Mayson Drake wrapped her jacket tightly around her as the cold wind blew across her face sending her hair flying. She tilted her head down as she stalked down the City Hall steps heading toward her car. She pulled her keys out of her pocket and heard a familiar voice from the side of the steps speak up, "I wouldn't do that."

Mayson turned to see a man in a torn jacket and large brimmed hat. His hands were worn, and his face was dirty. She looked over at him, peering closer trying to get a better look at him, "What did you say?"

"Remote," he said, pointing at the hotel across the street. "Boom!"

Before the words escaped his lips, a loud clicking noise came from her car. She turned around just as the fire erupted from the hood of her car. She looked back in shock, pushing the man in front of her back to protect them both from the imminent explosion. After what felt like just a few short seconds she was sure had to be longer, she opened her eyes and looked down at the man that had inadvertently saved her life. A frown crossed her face as she stared at the familiar detective clothed in rags.

"Bill?"

\*\*\*

"Are we really suggesting the billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne pulled a 007 move and took out the lights and the crooked bellhop?" Clark asked as he walked up the steps to his and Lois' apartment.

"Well, it wasn't the Easter Bunny, and you said it wasn't you." Lois reasoned aloud before adding, "I know I didn't do it." Clark smirked at her, and she added a playful, "This time."

"Still, Bruce Wayne?" Clark cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Stranger things have happened," she shrugged her shoulders, leaning over to tease the knot on his bow tie. "Red and blue tights ring a bell."

"That's different," he said with a sigh.

"How?" Lois prompted, teasing the front of his shirt with her index finger.

He looped his arms around her waist, opening his mouth to respond when his foot hit a cardboard box on the doorstep. He looked down and frowned at the blue envelope taped to the package. "Oh, no."

Lois' face scrunched up into a wince as she looked down at the package by his foot. "Not another one."

"It could be a..." he stopped mid-sentence when he saw the look on her face. "I know, I know..." He reached down to pick up the package as Lois fished out the keys from her pocket to unlock the door. He lowered his glasses to check the contents only to find the inside of the cardboard box had been painted in lead paint. "Lead-lined. Great."

"You'd think whoever's behind these creepy gifts would get bored eventually," Lois muttered jerking the door open.

Clark followed her inside, setting the package on the foyer table. "One would think." He glanced at the package uncertainly. "You want me to open it?"

Lois frowned, reaching for the package. "No, knowing our luck it'll have Kryptonite in it."

Clark tensed at the mention of the poisonous meteorite as she looped her arms around his neck, pulling him to her. As curious as he was as to the contents of the package that had arrived he had an inkling that whatever was inside would only serve as something guaranteed to upset Lois. Whatever the contents were, they could deal with it in the morning. For now, he wanted to take advantage of the rare quiet evening and forget the rest of the world for a few hours.

His hand moved up and down the frame of her face, capturing her lips with his. She let out a low moan, and he murmured his plea to her. "Whatever it is can wait."

She opened her mouth to respond and let out a low moan as his head dipped down, grazing his upper lip against her throat in just the right spot to make her body go limp in his arms. He smiled against her throat as her fingers teased the hair on the back of his head and tightened his arms around her waist, slipping his hands down the back of her thighs before lifting her up.

She let out a short gasp in surprise, and he leaned in to capture her lips with his. Her hands roamed up and down the front of his shirt, exploring the soft cotton as each kiss they shared became more insistent. She looped her index finger through the knot of his tie, loosening it as he pulled her closer, deepening their embrace.

"Bedroom..."

The single word was all that escaped her lips before she pulled his head back down, capturing his mouth with hers in a whole consuming kiss that set his insides on fire.

\*\*\*

Jim Burrows stepped into the interrogation room, holding the file on the inmate he was interviewing in his hand. He frowned, looking at the man at the table. The face didn't seem to match the intake picture. "So, Mister..."

"Doe."

"Right, John Doe." Burrows rolled his eyes. "You want to tell me your real name?"

"Who's to say it isn't my real name?" the response came.

A flicker of something came from the man's eyes, and Jim shook his head, tearing his gaze away. Something felt off about this guy. He just couldn't put his finger on it. "Fine, I'll play along. John Doe, you were carrying some pretty heavy firepower for a simple hold up." He sifted through the file in his hand. "The staff at the Concert Hall says they've never heard of you."

"Well, I keep a low profile."

"No fingerprints. No background information. No nothing." Burrows continued just as the man lifted his hand to grab Burrows. At the last second, Jim ducked out of the man's grasp and saw the flicker of yellow in the man's eyes.

Burrows stared the man down. "What the hell are you?"

Before his eyes, the man changed form into a beautiful red-haired woman with long wavy hair. A slow smile spread across her face as she laughed. "You're not going to make this easy, are you, detective?"

\*\*\*

The soft pitter-patter of the raindrops falling on the window sill teased Lois' eardrums as her gaze drifted toward the doorway leading into the living room. Sleep had come easily at first, but the problem was staying asleep. She turned her head, looking back at her husband's sleeping figure. What she wouldn't give to be able to drift back to sleep and stay here in his arms without the fears and questions racing through her mind.

It wouldn't happen though. She knew herself well enough to know she wouldn't be able to rest until she knew what was in that box. Clark had said it was lead-lined. Why would someone send something lead-lined to her? She could feel her heart hammering in her chest, recalling the painful cries that rang through her ears when Clark had collapsed from the Kryptonite that had been planted in her lipstick. He'd probably insist on opening it himself even if it did put himself at risk.

She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that whatever was in that box was bad news, but still, she couldn't shake the curiosity that plagued her. Deciding she wouldn't be able to get to sleep without finding out what had been sent to them, she rolled over and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She stood up, stretching her arms over her head, feeling a chill in the air from the late fall cold that had made its way to New Troy. She grabbed her robe off the back of the bathroom door and slipped it on then made her way into the living room.

There on the corner table was the small box with a royal blue envelope taped to the top. She ran her hand over the envelope then tore the envelope off the box. The box had drops of black paint on the top of it. She ran a hand over the top of the box, wondering what could be inside.

She shifted her gaze to the envelope and then to the box again before taking a deep breath and running her hand against the edge of the box, poking a hole into the packaging tape and ripping it open. She steadied herself, mentally preparing herself for what contents might be inside.

"What in the world?" Lois wondered aloud as she peeled back the painted cardboard, revealing a golden card with an eagle symbol on it.

She then turned her attention to the envelope and ripped it open. Inside was a folded card. She pulled it out and read it aloud. "Be the first to land the scoop on President Garner's newest vice president. The security badge enclosed will get you access to Air Force One when it arrives tomorrow at noon. Don't be late."

A chill ran down her spine as she stared back at the golden access badge on the table. Any other time she would have jumped at this kind of opportunity, but the invitation didn't come directly from the White House it came from a mysterious sender and resembled the creepy gifts she'd been receiving over the past few months. Still, with everything going on in Washington she had to wonder if this might be worth taking the risk and following the lead.

"When did you sneak out of bed?" Clark's whisper against her ear teased her eardrum, and she turned to see him standing behind her.

"I couldn't sleep," she said softly, waving the card in her hand. "Creepy gift is an invitation to Air Force One."

"What?" his face scrunched up, taking the card from her and reading it. It took him all of two seconds to toss the card on the table and shake his head. "No way."

"It's Air Force One," Lois said, waving the badge in her hand.

"Wouldn't you think an invitation to Air Force One would come from the White House and not an unmarked box?" Clark asked, shaking his head. "I don't know, Lois."

"It's a lead," Lois said with a sigh, "And the closest thing we've got to answers about what's been going on in Washington this week."

"Or a trap," Clark said, shaking his head. "Lois, you and I both know there's something off about this."

Lois sighed, running a hand through her hair. "True, but this could give us our first big lead to stop whoever's behind what's going on in Washington." Clark's tense features eased, and she sighed. "I'm not an idiot. The timing of this feels convenient but if this will get us some answers..."

"Answers at a cost." Clark gave her a pleading look before letting out a long sigh. "This reeks, Lois."

"I know," she said softly, "But what if it's not from the creepy gift giver?" Lois pursed her lips as she looked back at him. "Then we would have lost a fresh lead because what? We're running scared from the mail?"

Clark let out a long sigh, leaning in to kiss her. "The Lois Lane I know doesn't run scared from anything." A smile crossed her face, and he sighed. "It's late. We'll figure this out in the morning." His hand moved up and down the frame of her face,

recapturing her lips with his once more. She let out a low moan and murmured her agreement against his lips.

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President Garner's face appeared on the television sets all around the country. All stations showed the same message as the president began to speak.

"Our nation fell under attack. An attack unlike any other. Life as we knew it ceased and the government of this great nation banded together to stop the cyber-attack from wreaking havoc, but this is not the end. We must come together and fight these terrorists with their own weaponry."

There was a long pause as the president gathered his thoughts and then looked directly at the camera. "That is why the United States is now focusing all its energy on not only fighting terrorists overseas with weapons of mass destruction but with cyber weapons capable of rendering countries as powerless as they made us. We will not bow down to these terrorists, and this will *not* stand."

\*\*\*

"We will not bow down to these terrorists, and this will *not* stand."

Jimmy stared up at the television monitors as the president's speech came to a close. He turned his attention to the semi-crowded newsroom wondering briefly what the president's promise would mean in the new digital age.

He then turned his attention to the research Lucy had helped him with last night. So far, he had one suspected incident of cloning, but he still didn't have a good lead on the 'why'. More and more information was coming out about this Dr. Harleen Quinzel. Planting the doctor at STAR Labs just to get the professor's research to clone a detective didn't make sense. Something more was at work here. He just wasn't sure what.

The elevator pinged and he looked up, surprised to see Lois and Clark enter the newsroom in the midst of a debate.

"I don't like this," Clark said as he followed Lois down the steps into the newsroom.

"I don't either, but it's the closest thing we've got to an actual lead on..." Lois stopped when they reached Jimmy's desk. "Hey, Jimmy."

"You two are in early for a Saturday," Jimmy commented.

"Normally you'd be right," Clark said with a sigh.

"We've got to turn in the story on Bruce Wayne," Lois explained, setting her things down at her desk. "And look into a lead on..."

"No, we don't," Clark cut in, shaking his head.

"Do you have a better idea?" Lois argued, crossing her arms over her chest.

Jimmy did his best not to laugh, watching the duo argue about whatever lead Lois was trying to follow. Despite all of Clark's abilities and the knowledge that he could enforce his way anytime he wanted to, it was comical to watch Lois go toe to toe with Superman. He could keep her out of danger anytime he wanted but instead of forcing his way he tried to reason with her like anyone else. Though the reasoning usually fell on deaf ears and had Clark rescuing Lois from a disaster that could have been avoided, he still did it.

"Not walking into a trap," Clark said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"It's an invitation to get the scoop on the biggest story of the year," Lois said with a shrug.

"Yet it didn't come from the White House," Clark reminded her.

"We don't know that it didn't," Lois said, taking a seat at her desk.

"We know..." Clark began but stopped mid-sentence when one of the Daily Planet couriers approached with a large red box in his hands. "Oh, no..."

“Sorry to interrupt.” The courier handed the package to Lois. “Package for you, Ms. Lane.”

Lois frowned, looking at the clipboard she’d been handed along with the package. “The sender is anonymous again?”

“Yes, Ms. Lane,” the courier replied with a shrug. “It just showed up in the mailroom like that.”

Lois’ face remained brooding as she handed the clipboard back to the courier. Both Lois and Clark shared a look as the courier left. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what they were thinking. Everyone close to the couple knew Lois had been receiving unwanted gifts leading up to her and Clark’s wedding and now recently the sender seemed to be picking up where he left off.

Lois glanced at the package apprehensively, and Clark stared at the box with a frown and then leaned over to whisper something in Lois’ ear. Whatever it was was enough to make Lois’ face go pale as the couple excused themselves and headed toward the conference room with the box in hand.

\*\*\*

Dr. Hugo Strange held up the red radioactive meteorite examining it carefully. Eight hours of tests on his subjects and so far there had been no change. A frown crossed his face, and he wondered briefly if there would be any effect given the normal reaction time had already passed.

He picked up his tape recorder and pressed the record button, “Subjects eighteen through twenty-three were exposed to the red meteorite with the same properties as Kryptonite yesterday at 1900 and have shown no signs of impairment or enhancement. It is now 0900, and the test subjects remain the same. Hypothesis: the red variation of Kryptonite has no effect on Human subjects. Testing will continue to confirm theory in forty-eight hours.”

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Lois took a sip of her coffee, savoring the sweet flavor uncertain what to do or think at this point. She glanced over at the open box with white tissue paper, and the red letters printed on white cardstock ‘*Wear Me*’ staring back at her. She sighed, glancing once more at the black cocktail dress with a cringe. Any thought she’d had of taking the interview request died when she opened that box. Thankfully she hadn’t opened it in the middle of the newsroom and given the gossip queens something to run their mouths about.

She turned to the other side of the conference room where Clark was pacing in the corner, trying to get through to anyone at Metropolis P.D. “No, I don’t want to leave a message. I’ve already left a message. Several actually. We’ve done nothing but leave messages, and you and your department seem to have no problem with the fact that some psychopath keeps sending harassing notes and packages to my wife!” Lois bit her lip when she heard him mutter what almost sounded like a profanity under his breath before Clark responded to the captain on the phone, “What do I want you to do? I want you to send one of your detectives down here and figure out who is behind this. I want you to do your job!”

Clark pulled the phone away from his ear and shook his head in disgust as he looked at the phone in his hand. “I guess that’s asking too much.” He then turned his attention to Lois. “I don’t think the Metropolis P.D. is going to be much help.”

“Not without Bill Henderson helping,” Lois said with a defeated sigh. “Most of the department is overworked and short staffed thanks to the escapees.”

Clark gave her a sympathetic smile and placed a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll figure this out.”

“How?” she asked, looking back at the box. “Our only lead is *that*...”

“I know,” Clark said with a scowl. He grew thoughtful. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, but you’re right, that invitation is the only solid lead we’ve got to find out who’s behind everything going on in Washington and maybe even the Metropolis P.D.’s

sudden apathetic attitude toward fighting crime.”

“That was before *that* arrived.” Lois pointed to the package on the table. “I’m not...”

“I’ll go,” Clark interrupted.

“What?” Lois looked at him in surprise.

“Whoever’s behind this isn’t going to stop until they’re confronted,” Clark said with a determined expression. “The invitation didn’t specify who had to go on Air Force One.”

“What if it’s a trap?” Lois asked, placing a hand on his. “We know there’s Kryptonite out there. If it’s a trap to lure you ...”

“It’s a risk, but it’s better than doing nothing,” Clark said, leaning in to kiss her. “And I don’t want you anywhere near whoever’s behind those.” He gestured to the open box sitting on the conference room table and pulled her to him. “This is the safer of the options.”

Lois nodded, leaning in to kiss him, “Please be careful.”

“If I feel any effect of Kryptonite around, I’ll leave,” he said solemnly.

“Promise?” she looped her arm around his neck.

“Promise,” he echoed, leaning in to kiss her again.

\*\*\*

Lucius brought two cups of coffee on a silver tray with cream and sugar on the side and set it down on Bruce Wayne’s desk. He frowned when he noticed the young man slumped over in his executive chair and photos of a woman and a man spread across his desk. There were red circles around the faces on each photo.

“You’re going to end up a hunchback if you keep sleeping like that,” Lucius said when he noticed Bruce Wayne’s eyes flutter open.

“Coffee,” Bruce took a deep breath, inhaling the aroma of the coffee Lucius had set down.

“Your mysterious inmate received an interesting transfer this morning,” Lucius said, reaching for his own cup of coffee.

“Oh?” Bruce asked, stirring the sugar and cream in to fix his coffee to his liking.

“Seems your shape-shifting friend has a transfer request to Shady Brooke,” Lucius explained with a frown.

“Isn’t that a mental hospital?” Bruce asked.

“‘Clinic’ I believe is the term they like to use,” Lucius corrected.

Bruce’s face tensed, seemingly unconcerned with Lucius’ comment as he stood up and traipsed across the room toward the television set.

“Sir?” Lucius followed him, trying to follow his train of thought.

Bruce reached for the remote and jabbed at the volume button until it was loud enough to his liking. The newscaster’s voice was solemn as the logo for the NIA was blasted across the screen.

“Sources say they don’t know where the information came from, but location and family information for active NIA officers from field agents to desk clerks have been posted on a site known for leaking classified information.” The newscaster’s face grew tense as she continued. “Officials are working around the clock to ensure the safety of these individuals and their families.”

Bruce turned back to Lucius, “I’ll need the Batcopter.”

\*\*\*

The long corridor was guarded with the president’s secret service agents, checking each turn before allowing Clark and the agents that were escorting him to enter. He had gone through three security checkpoints before entering the airport and then gone through another two checkpoints before he could even be taken to the terminal to board Air Force One.

There appeared to be some confusion when he had shown up instead of Lois, but once he had flashed the security badge, the secret service agents had ushered him through. He looked around the corridor leading to the president’s secure terminal where the president and hopefully the new vice president would be joining

him and the secret service agents. The agent in front of him typed in a code to open the door, and they entered. Clark looked around and saw the royal blue carpet with an eagle crest on it.

“Presidential boarding bridge,” one of the agents explained as they reached the end of the walkway where a blue curtain hung in the doorway. “Mr. Kent, the president and vice president are ready for you.”

“Thank you,” Clark nodded, following the agent through the blue curtains and stepping inside the president’s aircraft. When he entered, he saw the president seated in the front seat, looking over a file in his hand. There was a man seated behind him with his head turned away.

“Mr. President,” the secret service agent called out. “Mr. Vice President,” The agent, motioned to Clark, “Mr. Clark Kent is here for your interview.”

President Garner looked up somewhat confused. “Mr. Kent, I thought Ms. Lane was joining us this afternoon.”

Clark kept his face deadpanned as he responded, “Lois had a previous engagement. She sends her regrets, Mr. President.”

“Oh, what a shame,” President Garner gave what felt like a forced smile and stood up from his seat, turning to the man seated behind him. “I suppose we’ll have to make do.”

“The interview was promised to Ms. *Lane*,” the familiar voice sent a chill down Clark’s spine, and the memories of his many run-ins with the man seated behind President Garner raced through his mind. “But I suppose we don’t have much of a choice now do we, *Kent*?”

Clark narrowed his eyes as the man stood up, taking his place next to the president. Out of pure instinct, Clark found himself spitting out the man’s name with venom and malice as he stared his old rival down. “Luthor.”

\*\*\*

## Chapter 8

Mayson Drake hung her phone up with an eerie calm as she turned her attention to the man sitting in her office. He looked exactly like Bill Henderson. He spoke like him. Acted like him. But according to the captain at the Metropolis P.D., he wasn’t Bill. She’d heard of doppelgangers before, but this felt like something different.

“So, Mister...?”

He gave her a shrug. “I don’t know.”

“Right.” She flashed him a weak smile. “No memory.”

“You said you know me,” he said with interest, leaning forward in his chair.

“I do,” she said softly. “Did. I think...” her face fell as she contemplated how to help him.

‘*How can there be two of him?*’ she wondered to herself.

“You called me Bill earlier,” he reminded her.

“I did,” she said cautiously uncertain how much to divulge with his memory fragmented. “I think.” She offered him a half-smile that he didn’t return.

‘*Who’s the real Bill Henderson?*’ she thought to herself, all of a sudden unsure who she was staring at.

“You think?” his brow furrowed.

“I think the first thing we need to do is get you to a doctor,” Mayson said cautiously. “I’ve left a message with one of the caseworkers in our Family Services department to find the best place for you to get help with your memory loss.”

“So, you’re pawning me off?” he asked, confused.

“No, of course not!” she insisted, squashing the guilt in the pit of her stomach. “I just... I don’t know how to help you, but these guys do.” Bill looked down, and Mayson reached across the table. “We’ll figure this out. I promise.”

\*\*\*

Lois looked toward the elevator for the umpteenth time, searching for Clark’s return. It had been two hours since he left and so far, no word on the interview he had taken from the yet to

be revealed newly appointed vice president. She looked back at her computer monitor, glancing once more at the blank screen staring back at her. She was supposed to be working on a follow up to the cyber attack story, but all she could think about was the hundreds of questions running through her mind.

“Lois?” Jimmy waved a hand in front of her face, pulling her back to the present.

“Hey, Jimmy, what’s up?” Lois asked, turning to her young friend, grateful for the distraction. Jimmy held a manila envelope in his hands and stood beside her desk with a concerned expression on his face.

Jimmy’s voice cracked as he spoke, “I, um... here’s the list on that NIA breach.” He handed her the manila folder with a shaky hand.

“Thanks.” She took the list from him. She frowned, looking over at Jimmy with a quizzical gaze. Normally Jimmy would have given her a short synopsis of what he found but this time he didn’t. His face was pale as he turned to walk back to his desk. She spoke up, deciding to ask the question she already knew the answer to in hopes he would let her help him with whatever it was that was bothering him. “Jimmy, are you okay?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t I be?” Jimmy shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly, but his expression told a different story.

Lois stood up from her desk and followed him, silently giving him her best ‘*You’re not fooling me*’ look.

Jimmy met her gaze and let out a long sigh. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“When have you ever known me to let *anything* go?” Lois challenged, arching an eyebrow at him.

Jimmy let out a long sigh, tightening his jaw as he looked down at his feet. Lois wondered for a moment if he would open up to her or just continue to hold in whatever was obviously bothering him. She crossed her arms over her chest, looking at him expectantly and he relented with a sigh of defeat. “Page three, six down.”

The look of shame on Jimmy’s face kept her from returning to her desk to investigate what he was trying to tell her. “Jimmy?”

“Just look, Lois,” Jimmy gave her a pleading look. “I don’t know how. I don’t know why... just look.”

Seeing that she wasn’t going to get anything more from him, she turned to the file on her desk and sifted through the pages until she found the page she was looking for. With her finger, she scrolled through the names. ‘*Oakland. Obrien. Odling. Oates. Oliver. Olsen.*’ She stopped, looking up at Jimmy for confirmation before turning back to the name she whispered aloud, “Jack Olsen?”

“Apparently my dad’s NIA and I didn’t even know it,” Jimmy said with a grunt of disgust, shaking his head.

“Your dad?” Lois choked out in a soft whisper. “The soil engineer?” Her mind began to race, recalling the vague stories of an absent father Jimmy had told her about over the years they had worked side by side with one another. The bond they’d shared over having a father that didn’t want to stick around had been one of the many things that had endeared Jimmy to her in his earlier days at the Planet.

Before she could respond, he walked away. “Please, don’t,” Jimmy croaked out, waving any attempt of consolation off.

She let out a long sigh, watching her young friend sink into his desk chair, mildly wondering if she should push him or give him the space he obviously needed at the moment to process the earth-shattering news he’d discovered. The NIA? She’d heard of agents leading double lives before but to have someone so close to her actually live through it made those stories and theories seem so surreal.

“Harleen Quinzel also known as the notorious Harley Quinn—the criminal mastermind, Joker’s right-hand woman remains at large with no leads....”

Lois looked up at the news coverage that played in the background covering the news of one of the scientists from STAR Labs that had been connected to the NIA breach. The very scientist that she and Clark had been questioning a few days ago. Her gaze shifted to the list again, and to the small box, she and Clark were planning to take to Dr. Klein when Clark returned.

"Jimmy?" Lois called out to her young friend, grabbing the box from her desk and gathering her things. She walked over to his desk, noting the defeated expression on his face.

"I don't want to talk about it, Lois," Jimmy said, not looking up from his computer.

"You don't have to talk," Lois said pointing to his camera bag. "Clark probably won't be back for a few hours, and you obviously need a distraction. Get your camera and let's go."

Jimmy looked back at her in surprise. "Where are we going?" "STAR Labs."

\*\*\*

The insistent tapping of fingernails against the iron door and maniacal laughter echoing from all around created an intimidating atmosphere that not many could stomach. The grueling personality tests and endurance testing threatened to be too much for many. Mitch Weston had heard the stories. Inmates of a different breed filled Arkham Asylum. A doctor spurred by love and infatuation for one of her patients, committed unfathomable acts of terrorism all in the name of true love.

Since then security had tightened, and all doctors had to have a security guard with them any time they were treating a patient to ensure no one else fell under their patient's spell. Two new recruits had just completed the psychiatry evaluation and were now starting in the rotation. Time would tell if they would last.

The high shrieks of laughter filled the halls along with the scratching of metal and the shaking of chains. A chill filled the air as the maniacal laughter echoed through the steel prison walls. Mitch tapped his baton against the steel doors and puffed out his chest, watching the patrol of guards moving toward the infirmary.

"This way Falcone," Roberts called out, dragging the unhinged son of notorious mob boss, Carmine Falcone in shackles. "The doctor is ready for you."

"That's Holiday to you, you ungrateful halfwit!"

A swift strike along the shoulder blades sent Alberto Falcone to his knees. "Roberts!" Mitch called out to him.

A look passed between them and then Roberts nodded helping the inmate to his feet. Weston waited a long moment watching Falcone slink away. How he had turned out so different would forever remain a mystery.

"Officer, it's almost Halloween!"

"Can it, Holiday!"

\*\*\*

Clark held his composure as he went through the pleasantries with the president on auto-pilot, feigning interest in the president's recent golf outing and his daughter's recital. It took everything in him not to rip Luthor up from his seat and fly him to the nearest deserted island. He wanted to banish him to a life of destitution and isolation and keep him from hurting anyone ever again.

<< "I love Lois, but she's much too independent, don't you think? Well, I'll take care of that..."

"Clark Kent knows where I am."

"That's right. I'll have to kill him, too.">>

<< "It's the idea of Superman. Someone to believe in. Someone to build a few hopes around. Whatever he can do; that's enough.">>

As much as he wanted to sentence Luthor to a life of isolation far away from civilization, he knew he couldn't do that. Luthor knew it too. Lex Luthor hadn't just escaped prison, he had guaranteed his freedom by somehow convincing President Garner to pardon him for his numerous crimes. Clark sat there numbly, recalling the news of the pardons that had been issued right before

he and Lois had left for their honeymoon. *'That had been the start of it,'* he mused to himself.

Clark stole a glance out of the corner of his eye as the President looked back at him expectantly. He turned his head, eyeing the arrogant posture Luthor held himself with. The president smiled back at Clark, "Shall we?"

Clark held his tongue, taking a moment to contemplate his first question before he spoke up. His eyes narrowed as he met the cocky expression on Luthor's face. He had a hundred questions but none of them for the president. "Mr. President." He moved his focus to the President, not daring to give Luthor the satisfaction of holding his attention a second longer. "You appointed a known, convicted criminal as your Vice President."

"He's been pardoned." President Garner shrugged his shoulders. "His criminal record holds no bearing in the appointment, and I've been assured that the crimes Mr. Luthor was accused of were a consequence of him trusting the wrong individuals. A lesson I'm sure he's learned from."

Clark bit the inside of his mouth, holding back the contempt he felt toward Luthor as he spoke up, "*You* pardoned Mr. Luthor." It took everything in him not to spit the name out as he stared back at President Garner. "Two weeks before you were put in the position of having to name a new Vice President."

"I was presented with evidence that Mr. Luthor never committed these crimes, Mr. Kent," President Garner responded, looking back at Luthor. "We wouldn't want to punish a man for a crime he didn't commit, would we?"

\*\*\*

Jimmy glanced over at the driver's seat where Lois was shouting at the SUV that just pulled out in front of them. He tapped his hand against the windowsill nervously looking around the street they were on, wondering if they would make it the four blocks they had to go to get to STAR Labs.

"Oh, come on!" Lois shouted, slamming her hand against the steering wheel and blaring the horn at the driver in front of them. The SUV turned on their blinker, and Lois grumbled, "You've got to be kidding me."

"Lois, calm down. We'll get there when we get there." Jimmy shrugged his shoulders, looking back at her with a curious expression. "What's the rush?"

Lois let out a long sigh, meeting his gaze with a scowl. "I'm impatient."

"Nah, really?" Jimmy joked letting out a chuckle. Traffic began to clear, and Lois let out a sigh as she pulled out onto Main Street. He tapped his fingers against the windowsill trying not to focus on the mutterings coming from Lois. Something was obviously bothering her.

He'd seen Lois and Clark disappear into the conference room earlier after that package had arrived and then shortly after Clark had left, heading toward the stairwell. He could only assume it was Superman related, but he couldn't be sure. Whatever it was that had called him away and left Lois anxious and irritable since.

Lois let out a sigh, and her tone softened slightly, "Sorry, I guess I'm a little on edge."

"Everything okay?" Jimmy asked, looking at her in concern, hoping she'd give him some insight into what was going on.

"I don't know," Lois said with a groan.

"So, what are we taking to STAR Labs?" Jimmy asked, hoping the change in conversation would diffuse the temper simmering in Lois.

"Something I found last night after we were held up in the elevator," Lois said with a shrug.

"Held up?" Jimmy choked out in surprise.

"It was nothing. The guy got knocked out, and the gun never went off." Lois said as if she were talking about the weather.

Jimmy bit his lower-lip amazed at how used to the dangerous situations Lois had become that she could get held up and not

blink an eye.

She shook her head letting out a long sigh, turning to him.  
 “So, what’s the deal with you and my sister?”

\*\*\*

Ron Troupe looked around the crowd on Capitol Hill. They had just received word that the newly appointed Vice President would be introduced by the President at any moment. The crowd was packed with journalists from around the country, hoping to get the first glimpse of the Vice President that had been confirmed by Congress.

One face stuck out in the crowd of reporters. Ron looked over on the edge of the crowd, spotting a tall woman with dark hair pinned back, staring at the building in awe rather than anticipation. Curious, Ron moved through the crowd toward her.

He stopped when he found himself standing in front of her. Her dark hair glistened in the sunlight, and her dark eyes shone with wonder as she stared up at the golden roof of the capitol building.

She noticed his presence and smiled back at him in wonderment. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“What is?” Ron asked.

“All the generations of man have their own sense of justice, but it wasn’t until this country built a justice system founded for the people by the people that the people found their voice.”

The way she spoke gave Ron a chill down his spine. She didn’t look at capitol hill and see corruption and collusion but rather hope and inspiration for true justice. He looked at her in wonderment and turned, “Not many people would share that sentiment.”

“Man will always have its faults, but the love beneath will help guide him.” She smiled back at him. “Everyone.”

“What makes you so sure?” Ron asked.

“Because I’ve seen it all before,” she replied with a long sigh. “Love always wins. Trust me, but not without its casualties.”

“Casualties?” Ron crinkled his nose as he saw the President approach with his army of secret service agents behind him.

The woman stared back at the President and frowned, “That’s not your President.”

“Excuse me?” Ron choked out.

She turned to him and whispered, “You must tell Kal-El that a war is coming and we are all here to fight.”

“Who is Kal-El?” Ron asked.

“It isn’t important,” she said with a long breath.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the press, thank you for your patience,” the President called out to the crowd.

\*\*\*

The plane had landed, and the President was preparing to address the crowd of reporters outside. Clark had more than enough to give the Planet the exclusive. Every fiber of Clark Kent’s being was on edge as he stared back at Lex Luthor’s smug expression. Images of the Kryptonite cage and the mocking tone he used to gloat of his winning the battle between them. Luthor had always struck him as someone not to be trusted. The smooth words and insincere smile didn’t fool him for a moment.

He had lived through some of his worst moments at the hands of this man and found himself relieved at the news of his ‘death’ twice. Yet here he was again. Another resurrection and another chance to cause pain to those that Clark cared about most.

<< “I love Lois, but she’s much too independent, don’t you think? Well, I’ll take care of that...”

“Clark Kent knows where I am.”

“That’s right. I’ll have to kill him, too.”>>

“I believe you’ve got everything you need, Kent,” Luthor remarked with a bite in his tone, clearly perturbed at his presence.

“Something wrong?” Clark challenged, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared back at the newly appointed Vice President with disdain on his face. Luthor could put on whatever show he

wanted for the rest of the world, but he knew the darkness that lived inside him.

“No, of course not,” Luthor growled out with a forced smile. “I’m just...”

“Disappointed?” Clark cocked an eyebrow as he leaned forward, careful not to break the invisible barrier between them that would make the secret service agent uncomfortable. “You keep looking at that phone. Expecting a call?”

“No,” Luthor frowned, looking back at him with a scowl. He was quiet for a split-second before turning to challenge him. “This interview was supposed to be for...”

“Oh, I get it.” Clark chuckled to himself. “This wasn’t just an interview, was it?” The stern gaze of Luthor’s features told him all he needed to know. “Sorry to disappoint you, but Lois doesn’t respond well to unsolicited gifts from someone she doesn’t know.” His tone grew dark as he added, “I know you’re the one that’s been sending those threats to Lois.”

“Threats? Really, Kent, are you that paranoid and disillusioned that you blame me for every inconvenience that comes your way?” Luthor shrugged his shoulders as he leaned back in his seat.

“You may have fooled President Garner, and you may very well fool Congress and some of the reporters out there, but you’re not fooling me for a second,” Clark hissed out in an eerily calm tone. His anger simmered inside him as he stared Luthor down, letting out one last warning. “You and I both know this act will slip away eventually and when it does, you will be caught, tried and prosecuted for your crimes. Until then, I’ll be watching and waiting.”

“It will be a long wait, Kent,” Luthor winced as he stood to his feet. “I hear condolences are in order.” Luthor let out a snicker as he sized Clark up with a bitter expression. “How did you weasel your way between me and Lois Lane?”

<< “Luthor...”

“How strange. Strange to hear you say my name and know it might be the last words you speak.

But am I making a mistake? Will the pain of losing the challenge you represent be worse than the pain of constantly losing to you?”>>

“You stay away from her.” With that, Clark allowed himself to be escorted out to where the crowd of reporters waited for the face of the new Vice President to be revealed. He spotted Ron Troupe in the background, talking with a woman who didn’t seem to fit in with the rest of the crowd.

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Lois looked around the laboratory the scientist was in, noting the presence of two others she didn’t recognize. A young woman with red wavy hair was at Dr. Klein’s desk, examining the monitor she and another young man were huddled around, examining its contents. Dr. Klein was standing behind the two of them, looking over their shoulders, intrigued by whatever was pulled up on the screen.

“It appears to be all intact.” The young woman said, turning in her chair to face Lois..

Lois shifted her footing as she stood in the middle of the lab, unsure if now was the right time to have Dr. Klein examine the device Bruce Wayne had discarded last night. She was sure Dr. Klein would be able to provide an answer for her, but she wasn’t sure if the co-workers in Dr. Klein’s usually empty lab could be trusted to overhear this conversation.

“Dr. Klein?” Lois cleared her throat, hoping to get his attention and make her presence known.

Dr. Klein looked up and gave her an apologetic sigh. “I don’t have any more information on Dr. Quinzel than what was given to the police.”

“You mean Harley Quinn,” Jimmy corrected, naming the doctor with the criminal alias she was known by.

“Yes, Harley Quinn.” Dr. Klein shook his head. “I’m sorry. I

wish I could help, but she fooled me and every scientist in this building.”

“Except for us,” the young man sat up.

“We weren’t in this building at the time,” the red-haired woman interjected, giving a playful swat in the young man’s direction.

“She still didn’t fool us,” the young man grumbled once more.

Lois gave the young man a puzzled look but chose not to push for an introduction in hopes that she could keep the already disoriented scientist focused long enough to get the answers she needed. “Um, Dr. Klein, I was hoping you could take a look at this for me.”

“Wait a minute, don’t I know you?” an excited voice came from Jimmy as he looked over at the young man.

The man gave Jimmy a slow smile. “I don’t know.”

“No, I’ve seen your face before.” Jimmy insisted trying to recall where he had seen the young man.

Dr. Klein seemed to be contemplating something as he pulled the small disc out of the box to examine it more closely.

“Fascinating.” He pointed between Jimmy and the young man. “Cisco Ramon, this is James Olsen. He’s a photographer for the Daily Planet and works with both Lois Lane and Clark Kent.”

“And Superman,” Cisco said with a broad grin, looking between Jimmy and Lois in awe.

Jimmy shared a look with Lois before responding carefully, “Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“What’s he like?” Cisco asked, his eyes filled with curiosity and interest as he spoke.

“Like?” Lois asked, unsure of how to respond.

“You know, the usual stuff. Is he really all powerful or does he have weaknesses?” Cisco rambled on with a hint of humor. “I mean, I get it. You’re friends and have to protect the truth and justice image but come on. What’s he like under the cape?”

Lois felt her throat go dry as she wracked her brain for a response. Thankfully the young woman sitting at Dr. Klein’s desk decided to come to her rescue at that point. “Cisco, really, can’t you at least pretend to play it cool?” She turned to Lois and extended her hand to shake. “Please ignore him. He’s an overgrown child sometimes.”

“Caitlin,” Cisco chastised with a groan.

“Cisco,” Caitlin arched her eyebrow at him before turning her attention to Lois. “Sorry, I’m Dr. Caitlin Snow. This is Cisco Ramon. We both work at the Central City STAR Labs with Professor Wells.”

Jimmy snapped his fingers. “That’s where I remember you from.” He pointed at Cisco. “You were there when the particle accelerator went live and...”

Lois noticed a concerned look cross between Cisco and Caitlin and cut in, “Jimmy, I think everyone knows what happened that night.”

“Oh, right.” Jimmy grinned. “So, Central City. I hear there’s a lot of cra...”

“Metahumans,” Cisco corrected. “The Flash has things under control.”

“There’s microcircuitry on almost every level,” Dr. Klein mentioned in awe as he turned the wheel of the microscope, oblivious to their conversation.

“The Flash?” Lois echoed in surprise. She’d heard the stories but had chalked it up to a myth like the Batman stories that came from Gotham.

“I heard Superman’s pretty tight with you guys.” Cisco’s interest seemed to be peaked on their connection to Superman while Dr. Klein held the device under a microscope. “How fast is he, *really*?” Cisco looked at the two of them with piercing eyes.

Lois opened her mouth to respond but found Jimmy already answering for her. “Fastest guy in the world.” Jimmy shrugged. “He *is* Superman.”

“I don’t know about that. I mean, I know he’s fast, but he can’t possibly be as fast as the Flash,” Cisco said and then jumped back when Caitlin jabbed him in the ribs. “Hey, easy!”

“You were being rude.” Caitlin and Cisco shared a look, seeming to silently be saying something.

Lois caught the look and wondered what was going on before Cisco nodded and turned back to them. “I apologize. Sometimes I get a little ahead of myself.” He looked to Dr. Klein over his shoulder. “Mind if I take a look?”

“Be my guest,” Dr. Klein motioned for him to look behind the lenses.

Cisco leaned forward and adjusted the microscope, zooming in as he let out a low whistle, “Caitlin, come take a look at this.”

“What is it?” Lois asked.

Dr. Klein answered with an impressed expression, “You have micro-circuitry down to the atomic-level.”

“Whoever built this is a genius,” Cisco added.

“Can you tell what it does?” Lois asked.

Caitlin Snow looked up in surprise. “Where did you get a kill switch?”

“What’s a kill switch?” Lois asked, confused.

“You press a button and the power around you goes *bzzzz*,” Cisco explained with his hands in the air trembling to illustrate the effect.

“Where did you get this?” Dr. Klein asked.

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“Clark!”

Ron waved at him when he saw Clark approach through the back of the crowd. The throng of reporters were focused on the President addressing questions about the lack of faith in the new Congress that had been appointed. The woman Ron had been talking to had vanished, and Ron’s worried expression told him the conversation hadn’t been about directions.

“Surprised to see you in DC,” Ron commented. “I thought you were still in Metropolis covering the aftermath of the power outage.”

Clark gave a non-committal shrug, “I had an interview and decided to stick around.” He pointed to the crowd. “Who was that woman you were talking to?”

“I don’t know,” Ron said with a frown. “She never gave a name.” He shook his head, seeming to recall something. “There was something so strange about her. She kept talking about some war coming and a guy named Kal-El.”

“Kal-El?” Clark echoed, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up. “What exactly did she say?”

“She said ‘*a war is coming and we are all here to fight.*’” Ron shrugged his shoulders. “I have no idea what that means.”

“Anything else?” Clark asked, trying not to sound too eager for an answer. He held his breath, trying to present himself as casual as he could, but he couldn’t help but feel a panic rising inside him.

“Yeah,” Ron said with a frown. “Something really strange.”

“What?”

“She pointed at the President and said he wasn’t the President.” Ron frowned, glancing over at Clark with a bewildered expression. “Weird, huh?”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, backing away from Ron and looking for the nearest exit. He needed to get back to Lois. Staying for the press conference seemed like a moot point since Ron was already covering it. Besides he already knew what the big announcement was.

“Where are you going?” Ron asked, grabbing his arm. “Don’t you want to stay for the announcement?”

“I think you’ve got it covered,” Clark said with a half-smile. “I need to get back to Metropolis,” Clark said, motioning with his hand to the exit.

“But...”

“Good luck with the story,” Clark called after him. “We’ll catch up when you get back to Metropolis.”

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Bruce rushed through the doors of Wayne Enterprises with Alfred on his heels, updating him on what he’d discovered over the last few hours on the data breach. “How long was she in Metropolis without us knowing it, Alfred?” He hung his head, opening the door to his spacious office.

“I’m not entirely sure, Sir.” Alfred pointed to the monitor on Bruce’s desk. “When you called I pulled up Arkham Asylum’s records. It appears as if our Harley Quinn has been tucked safe and sound in her cell this entire time.”

“Then how do you explain her showing up in Metropolis?” Bruce asked, cocking his eyebrow at Alfred.

“I’m not sure,” Alfred said, pointing to the monitor where the image of the empty cell was pulled up. “The records have Ms. Quinn in her cell, but she is missing.” The screen showed a guard opening the door seeming to motion for an invisible inmate to exit. Bruce frowned, staring at the screen as the guard seemed to act like there was indeed an inmate in the cell.

“What in the world?”

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Lois fidgeted with her keys as she walked toward the Daily Planet with Jimmy a few steps behind her. Her mind was reeling from the information they had learned from Dr. Klein and Dr. Snow.

What would Bruce Wayne be doing with a kill switch of all things? A chill ran through her veins as she reasons the billionaire might have for having such a device in his possession. Let alone at the ballet last night. Between that and the bombshell of Jimmy’s dad being NIA and not knowing how or if she should even bring it up with him she wasn’t sure what to think. She’d skirted around the topic with Jimmy most of the afternoon and found anything and everything to focus on instead of the fact that Clark had possibly flown right into a trap and she still hadn’t heard from him.

“Lois, wait up!” Jimmy panted behind her as he raced to keep up with her.

“Sorry,” Lois came to a stop at the crosswalk, recognizing her angry stride wasn’t as easy for her friend to keep up with.

Jimmy reached over to press the button to cross and looked over at her in confusion, “You okay?”

She wanted to ask him the same thing, but she found herself frozen, not wanting to push for more information than was necessary. This wasn’t like his date of the week or even Lucy’s gossip of the week. This was a scary, terrifying bombshell of news that tilted Jimmy’s world on its axis and she was trying to be a good friend and let him open up when he was ready, but the silence on the topic was driving her crazy.

“Fine,” Lois said harsher than she intended. She noticed the surprised expression on his face and quickly backtracked. “Sorry, I…” she let out a long breath, gathering her thoughts. “The truth is I’m not fine. I’m the furthest from fine as you can get but I know you’ve dealt with a lot and I’m trying not to bring it up unless you do… want to talk about it, I mean. Not that I’m pressuring you, but I can only imagine what you’re thinking right now because I…”

Jimmy let out a chuckle. “Lois take a breath.”

“Sorry,” Lois winced, looking back at him with a sigh. “Too much?”

“Just a little.” He held up his index finger and thumb with a half inch space between the two fingers.

“I’m not trying to pry.”

“I’m not ready to talk about it,” Jimmy said with a firm expression.

“Okay.” Lois nodded her head as the light for them to cross lit up. Jimmy followed a few steps behind her. She let out a long sigh, stealing a glance up above and wondering momentarily how

much longer Clark would be or when she should start to worry.

“What do you think that kill switch was used for?” Jimmy asked, changing the subject as they approached the glass doors leading to the lobby of the Daily Planet.

“I, uh, don’t know,” Lois lied, squashing the guilt in the pit of her stomach. She knew exactly what it was used for but sharing that with Jimmy without having all the facts felt wrong for some reason.

She turned the corner to approach the elevators and stopped when she spotted her husband in front of the elevator panel.

“Clark?” she heard a hitch in her voice as she said his name and hoped Jimmy didn’t pick up on it.

A million thoughts ran through her mind. How long had he been back? Why hadn’t he called? What was going on? So many questions she wanted to ask but couldn’t. Not in the middle of the Daily Planet lobby with Jimmy two feet away and the newsstand clerk, Mike, five feet away.

Jimmy seemed to pick up on the tension and excused himself, stepping into the open elevator car that had just arrived on the lobby floor. “I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

Lois glanced toward the closing elevator doors and then turned back to Clark. The silent question was written on her face. Clark placed a hand on her cheek, outlining the frame of her face with his palm before leaning in to capture her lips with his in a tender kiss. For a moment her questions and fears stopped, and she leaned closer, savoring the feeling of Clark’s arms around her. But it was only for a moment. Then the questions that had been plaguing her mind pushed their way to the forefront, forcing her to break away.

“How long have you been back?” she asked, placing her hand over his as he held her cheek in his palm.

“Just a few minutes.” He frowned, tightening his jaw as he spoke. He let out a deep sigh and tightened his arm around her waist, pulling her to him in a protective cocoon as he buried his face in the nook of her shoulder and neck.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” Lois asked.

He nodded silently, tightening his arms around her. “I’m going to stop him. I don’t know how yet, but I’m going to stop him.”

“Stop who?” Lois asked, tilting his chin to make him look at her.

“The Vice President,” his voice cracked as he shook his head in disgust.

“What?” Lois pressed, trying to figure out what he was talking about.

“It’s Luthor.”

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## Chapter 9

Dr. Hugo Strange held up the red radioactive meteorite examining it carefully. No change had been found in his test subjects. The longer they went without any adverse effects to the radioactive substance the more he was convinced that this meteorite much like its counterpart of the green variation had no effect on human subjects.

He picked up his tape recorder and pressed the record button, “Testing on subjects eighteen through twenty-three was ceased at 1700. No adverse effects or sign of changes have been detected in the subjects. Human subject testing will cease, and Kryptonian testing will begin at 0900 next week.”

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The sign to WayneTech glimmered a pristine white at the top of the towering building. Most of the employees had already left for the evening, leaving Bruce in peace as he worked on hacking into the security footage for Arkham Asylum with hopes in finding some answers. He let out a sigh of defeat as he came across the footage of the day Harley Queen disappeared from the asylum.

“Four months, Lucius,” Bruce muttered bitterly. “She’s been out there for four months without anyone realizing it.”

"Yet, the officers guarding her seem none the wiser," Lucius observed, looking over Bruce's shoulder to view the screen.

A determined expression crossed Bruce's face as he inserted a small disc into the drive of the computer. "I'm going out. If Alfred calls, transfer it to the secure line on the scrambler."

"Are you sure you want to risk Batman being seen in Metropolis, sir?" Lucius asked with a concerned expression.

"I have to do something, Lucius," Bruce said, standing to his feet. "I've got to figure out what he's up to."

"Who?" Lucius asked.

"You know who," Bruce gave Lucius a solemn expression. "I can't do this alone."

"What makes you think Superman will be more receptive to your plea for help as Batman than Bruce Wayne's?" Lucius asked.

"Well, I don't plan on sending hypersonic soundwaves out to draw him out." Bruce rubbed his chin, recalling the confrontation a week ago with the man of steel. "Hopefully he'll hear me out this time."

"And if he doesn't?" Lucius asked.

"I'll handle it," Bruce said with a determined expression.

\*\*\*

The news of Lex Luthor's appointment as Vice President filled the news circuits. Clark did everything he could to push the news coverage out of his mind, so he didn't have to think about it any longer than he had to. Unfortunately, avoiding the news of Luthor's latest political triumph was an impossible feat. Every channel. Every station. Every journalist and talk show host had something to say about the recent appointment.

"If the President says this guy didn't commit the crimes then I want to know what he's doing about making the real criminals pay." Gordon Godfrey, the late-night personality that operated more as a mouthpiece for Top Copy rather than a political analyst, announced to the viewers. "Who was responsible for the crimes laid at Lex Luthor's feet if it wasn't him?"

Clark jerked his wrist, clicking the remote to go to the next channel. Lois placed a hand on his shoulder, silently offering support when the television changed to WGBS news where John Radford sat at a round table of respected political analysts going back and forth over the news of Luthor's appointment as Vice President.

"The President that the people of this country elected reviewed Lex Luthor's case and pardoned him. Congress' acceptance of the appointment is secondary. There's been no change to the President." One of the analysts said, pounding his fist on the table. "He was elected by the people, and we've got to trust he knows what he's doing."

"Are you kidding me? This is a guy that was convicted of racketeering, murder, aggravated assault and numerous other crimes." Another analyst shot back. "Is this really the best we can do? Replacing Vice President Johnson with a murderer and thug?"

"Alleged criminal," John Radford clarified. "He's no longer a convicted felon. Congress interviewed him and reviewed his file as well."

"Alleged?" Clark scoffed in disgust.

"He faked his death to escape from prison. Not exactly the actions of an *innocent* man," Lois muttered under her breath.

"Yes, you mean the congress that was appointed with dirty politicians," the second analyst argued with a grunt.

"They were appointed by the President," the first analyst argued.

"Over half of the congressmen and congresswomen that the people voted for resigned. Don't try to tell me Congress represents the voice of the people. The men and women sitting in office represent President Garner's agenda. End of story," the second analyst shot back just as Clark turned the television off in disgust.

"Enough of that," Clark muttered, combing his fingers through his hair. Lois turned her head to look up at him. He recognized the

look of worry on her face and let out a sigh, squeezing her shoulder with his hand. "He's not going to get away with this. He's going to slip up. When he does, he's back behind bars."

"If he slips up you mean," Lois said with a raised eyebrow.

"It's not a question of 'if' but 'when,'" Clark said, running his hand across her cheek.

"And what damage will he have done already when that time does come?" Lois asked, leaning her head against his chest.

"He still has to go through the proper channels." Clark sighed. "Thank God for that at least."

"We're still under martial law though," Lois reminded him.

"The President can create new laws, change laws..." She tapped her hand against his chest. "Heck, he can go to war without even checking with Congress."

"I know," Clark sighed, running a hand across her cheek.

"Speaking of war..."

"What?" Lois looked back at him expectantly, the wheels already spinning possible scenarios. "He's already planning his first foreign takeover, isn't he? Power-hungry maniac..."

"No, no, no, nothing like that." He shook his head, then stopped himself and clarified, "At least, not that I know of." Lois arched her eyebrow at him, and he sighed. "No, I saw Ron at the press conference earlier. He was talking to someone that...knew me."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but you're not exactly a drifter anymore, Clark," Lois teased, looking up at him with a half-smile.

"No, not 'Clark Kent,'" Clark clarified, his voice trembled as he whispered his birth name aloud, "Kal-El."

"Kal-El. But..." Lois looked at him in surprise. "The only people that know that name are..."

"You and my parents," Clark responded with a sigh.

"I don't understand," Lois said softly, shaking her head.

"I don't either," Clark responded with a shrug. "Whoever this woman was spoke of a war that was coming."

"War?" Lois echoed.

"According to Ron, the woman said, '*a war is coming, and we are all here to fight.*'" Clark shook his head. "I'm not sure what exactly that meant."

"Who do you think this woman was?" Lois asked, frowning back at him.

"I don't know. Whoever she was, I..." Clark stopped mid-sentence as his super-hearing picked up the sound of a security alarm across town.

"What is it?" Lois asked, recognizing the expression on his face.

"Alarm across town." he gave her an apologetic look. "I won't be long." He leaned in to kiss her before spinning into a blur of pigments and flying out the window.

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Bruce stood in the shadows of the top step leading to the Metropolis Federal Building. The sound of the sonic boom overhead filled the air over the light ringing of the security alarm. He heard the light thud of boots hitting the pavement a few feet away.

His hand tightened around the small disc in his palm, steadying himself for the conversation that was about to take place. He couldn't make the same mistakes he had before. Putting Superman on the defensive had resulted in a lack of trust. He prayed his alias would have better luck.

Superman turned toward where Bruce was standing, and his eyes narrowed, "I know you're there. I can hear your heartbeat."

Bruce clicked a button on his utility belt, and the alarm's blaring came to a halt. Superman whirred up the steps at super-speed. Bruce checked that the voice amplifier was on and spoke up, "I'm sorry, it was the only way I knew you'd show up."

Superman's face tensed as Bruce stepped out of the shadows. After the weeks of hiding behind fog and mist and the alias of a

shadow around Metropolis, he was finally exposed. “You’re him,” Superman said with a frown.

“Batman,” Bruce supplied, stepping out of the shadows. “I couldn’t afford to be seen in Metropolis or risk making things worse in Gotham.”

Clark frowned, narrowing his eyes at him. “And just what are you doing in Metropolis?”

“Stopping a common enemy,” Batman responded with a scowl.

“Common enemy?” Superman asked.

“Intergang I suspect,” Bruce said evenly.

“Intergang’s out of commission,” Superman pointed out.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Bruce shrugged, handing the small disc to Superman. “Arkham Asylum’s security tapes. Despite the overwhelming evidence that Harley Quinn is on the run the security at Arkham still has a record of her in custody.”

“How?” Superman asked.

“Watch the footage,” Bruce instructed.

\*\*\*

The red wine swirled around in the glass in Lois Lane’s hand. She leaned back against the couch, trying to ignore the non-stop 24-hour circuit of news that was covering the announcement of the country’s newest Vice President. How a man that had once been considered one of Metropolis’ most dangerous criminals had gone from prisoner to taking office in the second most powerful position in the country she would never know. The shock of the bombshell that had been announced left her numb. She couldn’t understand how she was living through the shock of this once again.

Just before Clark’s proposal, Lex had risen from the dead, putting both her and Clark into a state of shock, forced to relive the painful memories of her almost wedding and Clark’s near-death experience in Lex’s Kryptonite cage. So many unanswered questions remained even after Lex’s arrest. She eventually worked through the demons she’d kept locked deep inside and found the strength to open herself up to the idea of forever.

A smile crossed her face as she recalled her and Clark’s whirlwind engagement. Leading up to their wedding she’d been privy to threatening notes warning her not to marry Clark. The notes and threats that magically disappeared upon the news of Lex’s second death. Discovered alone in his cell by a guard. She actually felt relieved when the news of Lex’s death had made the news. Despite him being locked away she still couldn’t shake the fears of what he could do with his knowledge of Kryptonite and what it could do to Superman.

The news of his death had been a relief to her. No more looking over her shoulder. No more worrying about Lex passing along what he knew to the criminals he came in contact with. Now here he was again. Another miracle resurrection of the career criminal that would love nothing more than to inflict mayhem and chaos on the nation he was now appointed to help lead.

A cool breeze brushed against her cheek and she turned to see Clark closing the balcony door behind him. “Hey,” she propped her head up with her hand, looking at him with a lazy smile as he sunk down on the couch next to her. “How’d it go?”

“Strange,” Clark smirked at her, wrapping an arm around her and leaning in to kiss her.

“Strange how?” she asked, running her hand across his cheek.

“It wasn’t an emergency,” Clark said with a deep sigh.

“What was it?” Lois asked, frowning.

“It was...” He let his head hang down, shaking it back and forth as he let out a low chuckle, “Believe it or not... *Batman*.”

“*Batman*?” Lois choked out in surprise, holding back laughter. The rumors of the caped crusader that lurked in the shadows of Gotham were shared among criminals, snitches, and even department heads at the Metropolis P.D. They’d heard the stories, but all those were just that. Stories. No one had actually seen the

hooded vigilante to confirm his existence.

Clark motioned above his head to illustrate the scene for her. “Dark hood, pointy ears, and bat symbol on his chest.” Clark shook his head as he looked up at her. “I never would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it myself.”

“Still,” Lois smirked at him, “*Batman*? Here in Metropolis?” She leaned her head on his shoulder and sighed, turning to look at him with a raised eyebrow. “Why?”

Clark leaned back and pulled out a small disc and waved it in front of her. “Apparently there’s something going on in Gotham that might be connected to Intergang.”

Lois let out a long sigh at the mention of the criminal organization that she and Clark had come up against time and time again over the past year. “What happened to Intergang being out of commission?” She shook her head. “The supposed leader *was* arrested.”

“A fall guy probably,” Clark said with a groan, setting the disc on the table. “What are the odds that Luthor and Intergang show back up at the same exact time?”

“In Metropolis?” Lois snorted. “Pretty good.”

There was a long pause, and Clark nudged her shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

“Okay,” she said not so convincingly as her eyes lifted to meet his. He wasn’t any more convinced than she was. She let out a long breath and whispered, “I’ll be okay, really.” She placed a hand on his cheek, turning to look at him, “What about you?”

He shrugged his shoulders non-committal as he responded, “I’m fine.”

“Fine?” Lois ran a hand down the front of the chest. “Former career criminal...”

“We don’t know that he *isn’t* still a career criminal,” Clark jabbed.

“...rises from the dead and is appointed Vice President of the United States,” Lois finished, glancing at him in concern.

“And he’ll be booted out before long,” Clark remarked confidently.

“You’re not concerned?” Lois asked, tapping her fingers against his chest.

“I’m concerned, but what can I do?” Clark asked. “He’s legally pardoned and ...” his voice caught in his throat before he cleared it. “There’s nothing I can do but wait for Luthor to make his move and pray he doesn’t run this country into the ground in the process.”

The words seemed hollow behind the fearful expression on her husband’s face. She fingered the collar of his shirt. “He’s not going to get away with this.”

“I know,” Clark’s voice cracked slightly before he let out a long sigh. “I’m not going to let him.”

“We’re not going to let him,” she corrected, leaning in to seal the promise with a kiss. His hands moved through her hair, and she whispered, “I love you.” One kiss became another and another, melting into a fiery inferno of desire as their hands roamed aimlessly up one another, seeking the feeling of skin beneath their fingertips. The aching need she felt simmering inside her fueled her exploration of his body.

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Lex smiled to himself as he admired the Daily Planet’s front-page photograph with himself and President Garner standing side by side. He felt a thrill run through him knowing that his victory would have to be reported by those that were instrumental in his downfall. He would have preferred to have Lois Lane conduct the interview and write the story of his greatest achievement, but the irony of having Clark Kent’s by-line on the announcement had been delicious. The man had stopped at nothing to tear him down when Lois had accepted his proposal. Now he was instrumental in announcing his resurrection and new appointment to the world.

He had been more than impressed with President Garner’s

performance. He would have to make sure Gretchen received extra compensation for the thorough training. He held the most powerful position in the world. Well, almost. Once the assassination of the President was taken care of, he would then be in full power. For now, he would have to live with being the puppeteer. There wasn't anything or anyone that could stop him. Unbridled power pulsed through every fiber of his being and it thrilled him to no end.

A thought crossed his mind, and he smiled, deciding to test just how far his power extended. He pressed a button on his desk to speak to his executive assistant. "Marci, I need to arrange a visit to Metropolis."

"Yes, Mr. Vice President," his executive assistant responded.

He glanced down at the paperwork on his desk, looking it over to make sure there was nothing missing before he sent it to the President for his signature. "I have a pardon for the President to look over as well," Lex said, skimming it over. "It's on my desk, ready for his approval."

"I'll be right over, Mr. Vice President."

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Dust filled the air as the loud clamoring of metal against rock filled the room. Zymack kept his jacket pulled to his face to protect himself from the dusty air before reaching over to toss another loose rock over his shoulder. He stole a glance toward the abandoned elevator shaft Bill had disappeared into. Two days. It had been two days and still no sign of him. Surely, he wouldn't just leave them down here, would he?

"Zymack!"

The voice of Mike Rogers calling him pulled him back to the present and he turned to the man standing a half a foot away from him. A friendly hand appeared on his shoulder as Rogers reminded him once more, "We can't wait forever. When he can get help, he will."

"Right." Zymack nodded, reaching for another loose rock and tossing it over his shoulder.

\*\*\*

Mayson tapped her finger on the file in her hand, biting her lower lip as she waited for a response from Governor Wade. Amnesia. Personality Disorder. She'd been given diagnosis after diagnosis to explain the existence of Bill Henderson's double. Still, no one could explain why they looked exactly the same. Despite the existence of this double she had yet to convince Michael Clemmons or the police chief to open an investigation. So here she was pleading with the governor to investigate the lead detective of the Metropolis P.D. and the mysterious stranger that looked exactly like Bill Henderson.

"Ms. Drake." Governor Wade winced as he lifted his gaze up to meet hers. "These are just theories."

Mayson shook her head vehemently, leaning forward. "These are more than just theories, Governor, if we can just look into..."

"Ms. Drake, have you looked outside lately?" Governor Wade asked, pointing to the television behind her. "Or turned on the television?"

"I know what the political climate in this city is, Governor, I have been fielding the calls coming into my office," Mayson reminded him.

"And I appreciate that, Ms. Drake," Governor Wade cleared his throat. "New Troy is under a microscope right now. The President and Vice President are supposed to be arriving here within a few hours, and I need every officer and detective I can get concentrating on their safety."

"I understand that Governor, but..."

"But nothing!" Governor Wade interrupted her before she could finish her thought. "You went to the Police Chief. You've spoken with the Mayor. They've all looked into the matter and considered the issue closed." His brow raised as he looked at Mayson with a contemplative expression. "I have faith in their

decisions, Ms. Drake."

"He looks just like him, Governor!" Mayson argued.

"Ever hear of a doppelganger, Ms. Drake?" Governor Wade sighed, running a hand across his face. "We don't have the time or resources to commit to this wild goose chase you are trying to send the department on."

"Just one day?" Mayson pleaded. "Please commit someone to this for one day, and if nothing is found, I'll drop it."

"We don't have anyone to spare. We don't have the time to spare." Governor Wade shook his head and motioned to the television, "The people of the city...the people of this country are living in fear of the army of criminals that are roaming the streets. It is our job to keep them safe, and we can't do that if we're wasting time and resources on something as frivolous as this doppelganger theory of yours."

"It's not just a theory, Governor," Mayson stammered. "If you would just look at the file..."

"Drop it, Ms. Drake," he narrowed his eyes at her. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Mayson bit back angrily.

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Phones insistently rang among the sound of the fax machine humming with new leads pouring into the hands of the Daily Planet's journalists. Ron Troupe wore a tense smile as he made his way through the maze of reporters and copy boys surrounding the television set which also happened to be in front of the coffee station. He let out a long sigh and momentarily made the decision to wait on his afternoon refill of caffeine while he got settled.

His trip from Washington had given him what he needed and more to continue his series on corruption in Congress. He just wished it hadn't been as easy to obtain. The obvious corruption and misdeeds were only the tip of the iceberg.

<< "That's not your President." >>

The mysterious woman's words hung in the air and continued to tease his brain as he tried to make sense of what she was trying to tell him. She seemed to be well spoken and educated, unlike many of the protesters that dismissed a politician for making a choice against his or her wishes. This woman's words seemed different though. He'd searched everywhere he could think, but no one could identify her.

"Vice President Luthor's confirmation has been put on hold as the Senate is now hearing cause for why the vote on the President's nomination could be deemed unconstitutional." The LNN anchor's announcement caught Ron's attention, and he let out a low whistle.

"There might be justice after all," Ron commented as he set his things down at his desk.

A hand clapped on his shoulder, and he turned to see his Editor-in-Chief, Perry White standing beside him. "Troupe, there's a face I haven't seen for a while."

Ron chuckled, turning back to Perry. "Perry, I was beginning to think I'd never get home."

Perry's face fell into an uneasy smile. "It's been busier than we could have anticipated." He patted Ron on the shoulder. "You've done a heck of a job keeping up with the political firestorm in Washington."

"I'll say," a voice from behind him spoke up, and he turned to see a young blonde-haired woman in a tan business suit with a serious expression on her face.

"Mayson, this is a surprise," Perry commented with a furrowed brow.

Mayson's face was tense with worry lines along her forehead. A silent message crossed between her and Perry, and for a moment Ron wondered if the rumors of his editor's ability to read minds held any water.

"They're in the conference room with Jimmy," Perry pointed to the large conference room on the other side of the bullpen.

“Thanks,” Mayson nodded and made her way through the maze of reporters

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“Vice President Luthor’s confirmation has been put on hold as the Senate is now hearing cause for why the vote on the President’s nomination could be deemed unconstitutional.” The LNN anchor’s announcement was like a final stab in an already deflated balloon.

A loud shout came from the Vice President’s suite and the staff outside the hallway tensed, preparing for the worst. Chief of Staff, James McCall walked through the hallway just outside the Vice President’s suite. His squared jaw tightened and his brow furrowed as he stared at the dark wood doors then he spun on his heel and turned in the other direction. “Johnson never would have reacted like that,” he muttered under his breath.

\*\*\*

Reports of mind control and scientific journals detailing how an individual could be programmed to change personalities were spread across the conference room table. Clark set the case study he’d been reading down and let out a long sigh, turning to Lois who wore the same tired expressions on her face. It didn’t make any sense. Nothing he could find explained how an entire prison could be brainwashed into believing the inmates were still there. From what Jimmy had been able to find there were several other inmates that had escaped. The list appeared to keep growing as the week wore on.

The conference room door opened, and Jimmy entered with another thick file in his hand and his expression not any better than Lois’. Still, he had to at least ask, “Anything?”

“I think so,” Jimmy said taking a seat across from Clark and pulling out glossy 8x10 photos as he spoke. “Harley Quinn was the Joker’s right-hand man...err woman,” Jimmy corrected when Lois raised an eyebrow at him. “She used to actually work at Arkham as a psychiatrist.”

“She was a psychiatrist?” Clark echoed in surprise, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up at the implication of just how twisted this individual they were up against was.

“Well, most people that become psychiatrists do so because of issues they have.” Lois shrugged her shoulders, looking up from the file in her hand. “Or so I’ve been told anyway,” she said hurriedly.

“Well, this one definitely had some issues,” Jimmy said, sliding a print out of the Gotham Gazette’s headline portraying a photo of the doctor with a man in a purple suit and white face paint that made the man look like a clown. The smile painted on his face was rugged and scarred, showing the lines from where old wounds had been covered by the face paint.

“She was treating this Joker character and ended up falling in love with him,” Jimmy explained, pushing the article toward Clark. “She helped smuggle artillery weapons into the asylum for him so he could escape and left with him.”

Clark let out a low whistle. “Any idea what the story is with this Joker?”

Jimmy shook his head. “No one knows the guy’s real name or what his story is. He is certifiably insane and enjoys causing mayhem. Murder and corruption appear to be this guy’s MO.”

“Well, just tuck him in over at Metropolis Penitentiary. I’m sure he’ll be right at home,” Lois muttered in disgust.

“These guys are a lot different than the criminals you guys have come up against,” Jimmy said earnestly. “Corruption and power are what motivates a lot of the criminals in Metropolis. These Arkham guys are insane. They have no limits, and they have nothing to pull them back from the edge. A lot of them have been experimented on and have abilities out of this world.”

“What are you talking about?” Lois asked, frowning as she set the file in her hand down.

“Whisper A’Daire.” Jimmy set the file down in front of Clark

with a thud. “Shapeshifting, mind control...the whole shebang.”

“Mind control?” Lois and Clark asked in unison.

“The history’s all in there,” Jimmy said with a sigh. “She’s one bad chick. Murder for hire. Political corruption. Business takeovers. All around bad chick if the price is right and she only has one distinct feature.”

“Her eyes,” Clark said, looking at the 8x10 photo in the file he was flipping through. Immediately he recognized the yellow hue that flashed in the woman’s eyes as something he’d seen in the assistant that had been helping Dr. Quinzel the day Dr. Klein had introduced them. It was almost immediately after that Dr. Klein’s whole demeanor had changed.

“Yeah,” Jimmy nodded, without hesitation. A look crossed Jimmy’s face before he quickly jumped into his explanation. “She’s one of the ones that was experimented on by Ra’s al Ghul. Some sort of serum that makes her immortal and change shape. The only distinct feature about her is the yellow glowing eyes.”

“Any idea how to stop her?” Lois asked.

“According to Gotham P.D you’d have to ask the Batman,” Jimmy rolled his eyes at that statement, and Lois glanced in Clark’s direction.

“Batman?” Clark asked, doing his best to keep his poker face on. Before last night he would have sworn the man was just a myth but after meeting the mysterious hooded figure, he knew there was more to the myth.

“That’s what they said,” Jimmy said.

The conference room door opened, and Clark looked up to see Mayson Drake standing in the doorway. Her shoulders were tense and her face filled with worry. Her lower lip tucked beneath her upper lip as she bit down on it and the shimmer of tears could be seen in the corner of her eyes. “I, um...I know you’re probably busy with a million other things, but...”

“Mayson, what is it?” Lois asked gently, pulling a chair out for the ADA to sit down.

“I guess it’s easier if I just show you,” Mayson said, pulling out a file in her hand. She set a manila envelope on the table, and Lois reached over to grab it. “I found a man that looks exactly like Bill Henderson outside City Hall a few days ago.” She let out a snort. “He actually saved me from a car bombing if you can believe it. The only problem is Bill Henderson was supposedly on duty downtown.” Mayson let out a deep sigh as Lois and Clark exchanged a look. Mayson let out a choked sob. “He has no memory of who he is.”

\*\*\*

McCall straightened his tie as he prepared himself for the conversation he was about to have. His arm tightened around the clipboard in his hands. He knew it needed to be done but confronting President Garner with his suspicions would not sit well. He lifted his hand up to knock on the doors to the Oval office.

The secret service agent opened the door and ushered him inside. McCall frowned when he noticed the President packing up his briefcase. “Will?” President Garner turned to him, giving him a dubious expression and McCall quickly recovered, “Sorry, Mr. President, do you have a minute?”

“Only a few,” President Garner replied firmly. The friendly tone he normally saw in his old friend was missing. In its place was the shell of the man he grew up with as a child. “I have to get this pardon to Marie.”

“Another pardon, Mr. President?” Joshua McCall asked with a sigh.

“Alberto Falcone. Medication and therapy have helped ensure he’s turned a new leaf,” President Garner replied with a smile. “Everyone deserves a second chance, don’t you think?”

“Alberto Falcone,” McCall let out a long breath, feeling like the wind had been knocked out of him. “The Holiday killer?”

“That was a part of the disease,” President Garner replied.

“He’s not that man anymore.”

Joshua McCall bit his lower lip as he steadied himself, deciding to call his old friend out once and for all. “Mr. President, you’re making a mistake.”

“Excuse me?” President Garner responded, looking at him in surprise. “Need I remind you, Mr. McCall, you are speaking to the leader of the free world and...”

“And you, sir, haven’t acted like the leader of anything since Morgan Johnson’s death,” McCall responded with a harsh blow. The President opened his mouth to respond, and McCall shook his head. “You aren’t the same, Will.”

“I buried my friend and had to appoint a new Congress and his replacement in less than a week’s time, Joshua,” President Garner shouted, raising his fist in the air.

“Your judgment is flawed!” Joshua McCall shouted out, as he jabbed his finger in the air. “You pardoned a known criminal and then appointed him as your Vice President before Morgan Johnson’s body had time to start decomposing!”

“I beg your pardon?” President Garner glared back at him with a cold expression.

“Half the appointments you’ve made since your Vice President’s death have been linked to criminal organizations,” McCall continued, ignoring the expression on his friend. “Please, Will, as your friend, listen to me.”

“Listen to you?” President Garner scoffed in disgust. “Listen to the man that comes in here and questions my judgment?” He let out a low breath. “You have no right...”

“I have every right,” McCall snapped back. “You are *supposed* to be my President. My President who pardons criminals. My President who surrounds himself with said criminals and puts shame on the white house. My President who doesn’t represent me or the people who voted him into office.”

A cold expression crossed President Garner’s face, and then he hissed out, “I have a plane to catch. Last minute meeting with Governor Wade and Congressman Lawrence.” He narrowed his eyes at Joshua. “See yourself out.”

\*\*\*

Clark sat in the conference room, listening to what Mayson had uncovered. A man that looked like Bill Henderson but had no memory. From what he could tell the man working at Metropolis P.D. appeared to be a shell of the Henderson they knew but he still couldn’t be sure if this other one was the real Henderson either.

“No one will talk to me. No one will investigate,” Mayson said with a deep sigh. “Not really anyway.” She looked over at Lois. “You said you had a theory?”

Lois glanced over at Clark. He nodded his head, silently instructing her to tell Mayson their theory. She tapped her fingertips on the table and then cleared her throat before saying, “As out there as it sounds, our theory seems to be the only one that makes sense at the moment.”

“Which is?” Mayson prompted.

“Clones,” Clark supplied, getting to the point.

“Clones?” Mayson echoed. “Like the frogs?”

“More like Dillinger and Capone,” Lois said with a grimace. “We think someone got a hold of Hamilton’s research and used it to make their own witch’s brew of clones. Including Bill Henderson.”

Mayson took a deep breath, leaning back in her chair. “Okay, I’m listening.”

The door opened, and they turned to see Jimmy in the doorway with a file in his hand. Clark nodded in Jimmy’s direction. Jimmy had been looking for different ways someone could have obtained Hamilton’s research during the transfer to STAR Labs. “Anything, Jimmy?”

Jimmy shook his head, running a weary hand across his face. “STAR Labs officials had everything on lockdown. The police files on Capone and Dillinger were escorted by STAR Labs

security not Metropolis P.D.” Jimmy shrugged his shoulders. “The only transfer to STAR Labs that wasn’t performed by their security was the Johnny Corbin transfer.” He raised an eyebrow and looked at Clark with a snort. “And we all know how well that turned out.”

“So, if it is cloning, the only ones with real access to Hamilton’s research were STAR Labs security and the officers that secured the scene,” Clark said with a defeated groan.

“And Hamilton himself,” Mayson added.

“Hamilton?” Clark’s brow furrowed.

“It makes sense. He may have passed information along without knowing it.” Lois tapped her hand on the table.

“We can’t rule it out is all I’m saying,” Mayson said. A silence fell between them and then she spoke up, “So, what do we do?”

“First, we take a look at STAR Labs security.” Lois turned to Jimmy. “Jimmy, can you find out who was on the team that picked up the files from the Metropolis P.D.?”

“Already on it,” Jimmy nodded, backing out of the door to run the search.

Clark glanced at Lois with a sigh. “That leaves us with STAR Labs security and Professor Hamilton.”

“Those would probably be synonymous,” Lois said with a sigh.

“Right,” Mayson nodded. “Hamilton’s working at STAR Labs now...”

The sound of a shrieking woman reached Clark’s ears cutting off the rest of the conversation. He caught Lois’ gaze, silently motioning to her his need to leave.

“Help! Someone! My baby!”

“I, uh.” Clark stood up, bumping the table a little too hard and catching it before it could hit anything and leave him explaining his super powered abilities to the Assistant District Attorney.

“Mayson.” Lois grabbed her hand, pulling her attention away from him as he made his way out the door. “Why don’t we head out and see what we can find at STAR Labs. Clark can follow up on that research with Jimmy.”

He didn’t make out Mayson’s response. The cries for help from the crying mother rung in his ears as he moved at super-speed through the stairwell.

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The abandoned train tracks had a certain charm about them. The old train station used to bus in train car after train car to and from the cities outside Metropolis. The abandoned location made it perfect for performing his first test on the alien known as Superman. Hugo Strange looked to the woman in front of him and pressed the button on the forklift, “I don’t believe Superman heard you. Let’s give it another try, shall we?”

\*\*\*

Lois drove down Main Street, shaking her head as she glanced to the passenger seat where Mayson was seated. She hadn’t heard from Clark yet, and after spending most of the morning interviewing STAR Labs security, she was stuck, uncertain where to go next. “Well, that’s twenty guards that have all checked out.”

“And Hamilton only spoke with the officers on the scene about his experiments on Capone and Dillinger,” Mayson groaned, shaking her head.

“So, the next stop is Metropolis P.D.,” Lois said turning down Clinton Street, spotting a dark sedan in her reserved parking spot. “Some people.”

“This doesn’t look like Metropolis P.D.,” Mayson said with a smirk.

Lois gave Mayson a half-smile. “I need to get something before we head over there.” She looked toward the steps leading to her and Clark’s apartment building. Two men in dark suits stood outside her apartment complex. She looked over at her reserved parking spot occupied by the black sedan and scowled.

“New neighbors?” Mayson asked, glancing at the men as she

opened her door and stepped out.

A chill ran down Lois' spine as she watched one of the men touch the side of his head and mumble something as he looked around. Something was wrong. She could feel it in her bones. She let out a shuddered breath as she whispered, "Not likely." She eyed the two men as she walked up the steps to her apartment building. Mayson was a few steps behind her. The men stared at her as she passed, sending a shudder of apprehension through her. She tightened her grip on her keys, reaching out for the door handle only to find the door already unlocked.

"Lois, careful," Mayson's voice echoed behind her as the door opened and she found herself face to face with the new Vice President of the United States.

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## Chapter 10

Carmine Falcone looked up at the man standing in front of him, nodding as he handed over the folded envelope. "I'm told this one is connected with those reporters Intergang wanted handled before." His tone went dark. "Don't mess this up."

The velvety smooth response was dry and unconcerned as he took the envelope from Carmine. "Mr. Luthor hired me for my precision, Mr. Falcone." He blinked back at Falcone with a blank stare. "Anything else?"

"I still haven't heard anything from Arkham." Carmine's eyes narrowed as he looked back at the man in black.

"Patience," the man responded. "Anyone else you want moved to the top of the list?"

"No." Carmine shook his head. "I've leaked the others to my men. We should have the leverage we need to make our demands by the end of the month." He let out a sinister laugh and added, "It's time everyone learned who is in charge, wouldn't you agree?"

\*\*\*

Metropolis Neuroscience Center was abuzz with activity. The turnover on the office staff came about regularly every few months, so it came as no surprise when a new face appeared among the familiar crowd of office assistants and receptionists helping families suffering from everything from a loved one with dementia to a family member enduring a traumatic event which resulted in amnesia. Circumstances brought families far and wide to be treated by Dr. Elias Mendenhall and Dr. Maxwell Deter. Unfortunately for one patient, treatment would not be something he received today.

A young blonde-haired nurse blended in with the crowd as she pushed the cart of linens through the hallway with her head ducked down. Just as she rounded the corner and assured herself she was out of sight, she set the cart to the side and ducked into a supply closet.

"Harley, what are you doing? You're going the wrong way!" Rollie Vale's irritated growl echoed through the earpiece sitting snugly inside Harley Quinn's inner ear.

"Keep your shirt on, Rollie Poly, I'm just making a pit stop," she grumbled under her breath.

"Harley? What are you doing?" Rollie shouted over the earpiece. "Harley!"

"What? You know, is this how you talk to your girlfriend, Rollie?" She snickered to herself as she pulled the shelf away from the wall to reveal a hidden door. The sign read, 'Do Not Enter,' and Harley reached up from behind her ear to grab a pin, twiddling with the lock as she snorted, "Most girls don't like being shouted at, Rollie Poly. You should take some notes from that boss of yours."

"What *are* you doing?" Rollie asked between gritted teeth.

"Not getting caught," she snapped irritably as she entered the secured medicine cabinet that was normally under lock and key. After careful review of the plans, Church had given her she'd discovered a quick way around the cameras. She reached up to

grab an IV bag from the shelf with the label, *Aconite*. A slow smile crossed her face, and she responded, "What room is this Henderson in?"

"204," came the response over the radio waves.

She glanced toward the window leading out into the hallway, checking the coast was clear. Once she was sure no one was paying attention, she made a dash out the door and down the hallway toward the stairs. She reached the end of the hallway where two doctors were walking by. She noted the camera moving in their direction and then took that moment to sneak past the camera and enter the stairwell. "I'm in," she whispered as she climbed the stairs, careful to remain out of the line of vision on the out of date camera.

"The next camera is offline," Rollie responded begrudgingly.

"Got it," Harley responded reaching the top of the stairs. She spotted the '204' number on the room outside the stairwell window and smiled to herself.

"Ready?" Rollie asked.

"Read..." She frowned when she spotted an older man wheeling out an empty hospital bed from the room. "Oh, no."

"Oh, no what?" Rollie snipped. "What did you do?"

"Shut up, Rollie," Harley snapped. "Henderson's not in the room."

"What are you talking about?" Rollie asked. "His information is right here. I'm staring at..." He grew quiet. "Oh."

"Oh, what?" Harley whispered back at him irritably.

"He was released as an outpatient this afternoon," Rollie responded with a grimace.

"To who?" Harley hissed.

"Bruce Wayne."

\*\*\*

The sonic boom echoed inside the small crate as the young woman struggled inside, trying to free herself from the binds around her wrists. Sweat poured down her face as she struggled in the small confines, letting out a muffled cry from beneath the gag over her mouth. It was hopeless. How could she have been so stupid? Never stop in the middle of the warehouse district. That was the rule her father had given her. Never go near the warehouse district. Yet when she saw a man in distress, she had stopped to help. Now here she was trapped and wondering how to escape imminent doom she was sure would befall her when the man returned.

A loud thud shook the wooden planks of the crate around her. She let out a blood-curdling scream just as a flood of light filled the darkness that had been surrounding her. A hand reached in, brushing against her cheek in a tender manner that caused her to still her motions. A feminine voice whispered, "You're safe now."

\*\*\*

The panoramic view that covered the windows was breathtaking. The equipment and expansive laboratory that had been setup was state of the art. Still, something felt off as Caitlin Snow looked around the room, turning to Bruce Wayne, "Mind telling me why we're not in STAR Labs, Mr. Wayne?"

"We are in STAR Labs," Bruce responded with a smile.

"WayneTech and STAR Labs' merger went through yesterday."

"You know what I mean," she responded carefully, looking toward the door behind Bruce.

Bruce's smile fell and, in its place, a serious expression washed over him. His demeanor was reserved as he cleared his throat and spoke up, "Dr. Snow, you're one of the best scientists we have employed at STAR Labs. Your knowledge of neuroscience surpasses most of the nation's leading neurologists."

"Thank you," Caitlin responded uncertain how to respond.

"While true, none of that answers my question, Mr. Wayne."

"I have a patient whom I think might be in danger," Bruce explained carefully.

"Why don't you go to the police?" Caitlin asked.

"It's the police I'm protecting him from," Bruce said cautiously. He shook his head, "Professor Wells speaks highly of you and Mr. Ramon. Discretion is a part of the job after what happened with the particle accelerator."

"We're not talking about metahumans, Mr. Wayne, we're talking about hiding a man from the *police*." Caitlin looked back at him in confusion. "I don't break the law."

"It's probably better if I just show you," he said, pulling a small device from his pocket as he turned away from her, pointing the device toward the door and pressing it. The door slid open to reveal a man in his late thirties with disheveled salt and pepper hair and large spectacle glasses. His face appeared lost yet familiar at the same time. "Caitlin Snow, I'd like to introduce you to William Henderson—the *real* Inspector Henderson of the Metropolis P.D."

\*\*\*

Panic. That was the only way to explain it. Lois felt the walls around her close in as her heart hammered in her chest. She could feel anger and rage simmering inside her coupled with the adrenaline that coursed through her veins. The sound of the door shutting behind her reminded her of Mayson's presence.

*'How long had she been standing here?'*

She looked to the opening leading into the kitchen where two secret service agents were standing guard. Lex appeared unaffected by her panicked state as he continued to stare back at her with his piercing gaze. She felt her stomach tighten as she found her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Now, is that anyway to greet an old friend?" Lex scolded, ignoring her comment as he stood up.

She wanted to scream, yell, throw something. She should probably call the police, but at this point, she doubted any complaints she made would be taken seriously. After all, he'd been pardoned for his crimes. He was free as a bird. Even worse, he was the Vice President of the United States and the second most powerful person in the world. What was she supposed to say, *'Help, the Vice President broke into my apartment?'*

"Friend?" Lois spat the word like it was acid on her tongue. There would never be a time that she could ever look at this man as anything but the monstrous murderer he was. A hard lump sat in her throat, burning her insides as she fought back tears, trying to hide how affected she was by his unwelcome presence. "You may want to look up the definition on that one, Lex. Clark and I don't keep company with murderers."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Lex scolded, clucking his tongue. "You see, Lois, that's your problem. Always living in the past. You make one mistake..."

Mayson chose that moment to speak up, "You *were* convicted of mass murder and racketeering, Mr. Luthor. I'd hardly call that one mistake."

"You set off a bomb in the middle of the Daily Planet and tried to kill everyone I care about!" Lois accused angrily, feeling her blood boil with fury at the dismissive tone Lex took with his crimes.

"No one was *killed*," Lex waved her off as if it somehow justified his actions.

"Right," Lois snorted in disbelief at his brazen behavior. "You just attempted to frame an innocent kid for your crimes after you set off a bomb to level the Planet with everyone inside."

"Water under the bridge," Lex shrugged it off. "It was one mistake. One I made out of love."

"Mass murder equals love?" Mayson scoffed. "I must have missed that lesson in finishing school."

She felt bile begin to rise in her throat. "And Superman?" Recognition crossed his face coupled with a flicker of darkness and hatred that cut her to the core. Before he could respond she spat out in anger, "I know what you did, you depraved psycho."

"Crimes I have been pardoned from, Lois." Lex smoothed a

smile across his face before adding a dig, "Or didn't Kent pass that tidbit along?" She could feel her blood boil as he continued to pace around her living room. His face grew dismal as he turned to her. "I was very disappointed you didn't accept the offer on the exclusive I set up for you. So much hard work was put into making everything perfect." A flicker of jealousy crossed his eyes. "I suppose I could understand Kent's compulsive need to keep you under lock and key though. You really have let your standards go down, Lois. I mean, really, Kent?" A dismal expression crossed his face. "Surely, your desperation for companionship could have been met somewhere else."

"Imagine the horror of it," Lois replied sarcastically. "Marrying the man that I love who isn't crippled with a compulsive need to commit a class A felony." Unable to tolerate his presence any longer she pointed to the door and snarled, "Get out!" She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as the hard lump burned in her throat.

"I think I'll stay," Lex remarked with a cocky grin, motioning to the two men standing in the corner of the room watching her with their hands tucked in their jackets, ready to pull out their weapons should she make a wrong move. "After all, it has been so long since I've had the luxury of just...dropping by."

"Mr. Luthor, you've been asked to leave this property," Mayson advised, placing a hand on Lois' shoulder. Lois felt a pulse of adrenaline run through her, pushing her to continue her stance from Mayson's supportive words.

Lex appeared unfazed by Mayson's words as a dark tone covered his face. A chill ran down her spine, and a feeling of dread began to slowly rise within her. She noticed Lex's focus seemed to be on her left hand as he hissed out nonchalantly, "We do have *so much* to catch up on."

"I don't believe your presence here is welcome," Mayson remarked coolly, looking uneasily at Lex as he stood in the middle of her living room taunting her with his newfound freedom with his mere presence.

"Being welcomed has never stopped me before," Lex remarked boldly as he narrowed his eyes at Mayson. "It certainly isn't going to stop me now."

"This is trespassing," Mayson said, pulling out her phone. "I'm calling the police."

"Waste of time, but knock yourself out," Lex remarked confidently. "Given that the property owner is the one that let me in I doubt your stance holds any water, Ms. Drake." Mayson stopped dialing, and Lex motioned to his secret service agents and nodded. "Hal can update you on trespassing laws of New Troy."

"I *know* the laws," Mayson replied between gritted teeth. "Perhaps we should call the Police Chief down here and have him educate you on renter's rights?" She held her mobile phone up, prompting a response from Lex.

Anger and rage coupled with the pulsing adrenaline coursing through her finally became too much for Lois. Enough with the games. Continuing to toy with Lex was only amplifying the situation. She pulled out her phone to dial the Metropolis P.D. "I will not be bullied into anything by you! You think I don't know you're the one behind those threats? Did you really think you could scare me into not marrying Clark? Take your circus of black sedans and get the hell out of my apartment!" The ringing stopped, and she heard the operator greet her. "Yes, I'd like to report a break-in. 344 Clinton Street."

"It would be wise to remember who it is you're dealing with, Lois," Lex warned with a sinister tone. "I could destroy everything you hold dear with the swipe of a pen."

"Really, so could I," Lois bit back angrily before turning her attention back to the operator. "Yes, he's still here. You're sending someone now? Great!"

"You think I won't think twice about snuffing you out for crossing me?" Lex warned, taking a step toward her and grabbing

her wrist. “Every law you enjoy today can be changed with the flick of a wrist. Every freedom you enjoy taken in the blink of an eye. Do you have any idea what kind of power I have?” A maniacal laugh escaped his lips. “All of this could have been yours, but you chose a hack to spend your life with. Not the caped hero. Not a leader of a multi-billion-dollar company. No, you chose the gilet that could never be worthy of you.”

“I know exactly who I’m dealing with,” Lois snapped, her tone full of venom. “Just because you’ve had your criminal history erased and have a new title doesn’t change anything. You’re still the broken, corrupt sociopath that hurt everyone I care about.”

“So certain of this, are you?” Lex hissed out, jerking her arm.

“Positive,” Lois hissed out angrily, feeling the fire inside her continue to build up. “Let go of me and get out!”

The sound of glass shattering filled the room. They turned to see a dark hooded figure appear in the corner and knock both agents out with a flying disc that moved across the room like a boomerang.

“What the...?” She gasped when she saw the hooded figure stand up straight for the first time.

“I believe the lady made it clear you’re not welcome here, Mr. Vice President,” The dark, booming voice came through what appeared to be a voice scrambler of some sort.

Lex seemed too shocked to respond at first, then quickly recovered, turning to Lois. “This isn’t over.”

“Yes, it is,” Lois corrected, tugging her arm back out of Lex’s grip.

Lex backed away from the hooded figure as he moved toward him. “Clearly the company you keep is questionable.”

“Funny, I was just about to say the same thing,” the booming voice came from the caped man standing in her living room. He stepped between her and Lex, preventing him from moving any closer. “Perhaps you need an escort, Mr. Vice President? That can be arranged.”

Without a word, Lex quickly backed out of the room, heading toward the door with the secret service agents that had stumbled to their feet. “You’ll regret this,” Lex warned.

The door slammed behind him, and Lois let out a heavy sigh. The yellow and black emblem on the hooded man’s chest caught her eye. She struggled to find the right words as her mind continued to race.

“Who are you?” Mayson asked, breaking the silence.

“A friend,” he said with a small smile, looking at Lois as if the two-word answer was some sort of inside joke.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” Lois asked, finding her voice.

“Who?” A smirk curled across his lips from beneath the cowl.

“You know who,” Lois arched an eyebrow at him.

His face tensed as he looked toward the window and heard the sound of sirens approaching. He turned to Lois and asked, “Where can I find him?”

“Find who?” Mayson asked.

“Help, Superman’ tends to work,” Lois replied carefully, keeping note of the fact that the conversation was being overheard by Mayson.

“I’ll remember that.” He strode through the apartment, heading toward the open window. “You’ll want to get this fixed. Send the bill to the White House.”

“I plan on it,” Lois folded her arms across her chest.

“Keep your doors and windows locked.” With that, he disappeared as quickly as he appeared. The pounding on the front door reminded her of the complaint she still had to file.

\*\*\*

The crackle of Clark’s boots hitting the dusty wood made a loud creak when he walked through the old train depot, searching for the source of the blood-curdling screams he’d heard earlier. The lead paint prevented him from being able to scan the building, forced instead to rely on his super-hearing to follow the screams

for help.

He reached the terminal where a rusted forklift was parked in the corner. He heard a whimper and followed the sound to the cries to a stack of crates surrounding the rundown forklift.

“Hello?” he called out.

A loud hum filled the air, and a bright red light caught his eyes. Forgetting his initial reasoning for being at the train station in the first place he let out a sigh and then rocketed himself into the air. He heard a quiet cry in the back of his mind but couldn’t bring himself to respond to it. His mind raced as he flew toward Washington preparing to take care of a problem that was long overdue.

\*\*\*

Dr. Hugo Strange smiled to himself as he pulled out his tape recorder and pressed record, “Testing of the red meteorite appears to have made the Kryptonian become distracted. Arriving at a rescue in search of the victim in peril at 1100 and after an exposure to the red meteorite of less than a minute the subject showed signs of disorientation and confusion.”

He turned to the crate he had in the air and threw his hand in the air in a dismissive wave as he turned to leave. He made his way through the train station, walking back toward the parking lot leaving his victims to their fate.

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Lucy glanced across the table at Jimmy with a smile and passed him the takeout container from Luigi’s. “Meatball marinara, extra sauce.”

Jimmy set the three file folders in front of him to the side and took the container from her with a relieved sigh. “You’re a lifesaver. Thanks, Luce.”

Lucy gave him a quick grin. “Lucky for you my morning class ended early.” She looked at the folders he’d moved to the side. “Whatcha working on?”

“Lois and CK think someone leaked Professor Hamilton’s cloning research.” Jimmy prodded her memory, reminding her of the story from a few months ago. “Remember those Dillinger and Capone clones that were shooting up the city a few months back?”

Lucy twirled the angel hair pasta in front of her with her fork. “I remember my sister almost getting shot in the middle of their capture.” Lucy grinned back at him, letting out a sigh. “Mom was not happy.”

“Yeah, Perry put her on dog show duty for a week after that stunt,” Jimmy recalled with a chuckle. “Anyway, we’ve ruled out all STAR Labs employees as the source of the leak. All that’s left is going through the officers that had access to the scene,” Jimmy said with a groan, pointing toward the files on the table. “Hence the working lunch.” He flashed her an apologetic smile. “Sorry I had to cancel tonight.”

Lucy brushed him off. “Please, it’s fine. I’m a big girl. I know how the news business works.” She motioned to the files next to him. “Hand me those while you eat.”

“Do you know what to look for?” Jimmy asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Suspicious bank activity, personal issues, connections to known criminals or organizations suspected of criminal activity either by friend, family or acquaintances.” At Jimmy’s surprised expression she shrugged. “Who do you think used to help Lois when she pulled all-nighters?”

“You are full of surprises, Lucy Lane,” Jimmy said as his smile spread up his face to meet his eyes. She smiled back at him and reached over to brush a drop of marinara sauce off his chin before leaning in to kiss him.

\*\*\*

The doors to the White House swung open as staff scurried from one end to another. Bullets ricocheted off the figure in blue and red as he stormed through the halls in an almost trance-like state.

“Superman, this is your last warning, stand down!” Agent Rogers called out.

Superman stopped outside the Vice President’s suite and frowned, turning back to Agent Rogers. “Where is he?”

“Superman, stand down!”

“Where is Luthor?!” the growl escaped the superhero’s throat with an intensity that made everyone shudder with fear. No one moved. No one spoke. Superman stared hard at the door leading to the Vice President’s suite before turning to leave. Just before he flew out the doors the faint murmur of “Stay out of my city” could be made out.

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The room seemed to shrink in size as Congressman Joseph Lawrence found himself surrounded by Secret Service and White House staff. He looked to his left where Governor Wade was sitting calmly in his seat, unfazed by the commotion that had taken over the office. He looked to the right where President Garner was tapping the edge of his notepad with his hand. It had been twelve hours since he had called for a review of the Senate vote to confirm Vice President Luthor and now here he was face to face with the commander-in-chief, defending his decision.

Governor Wade was the first to speak up. “Congressman Lawrence, thank you for making time to see us on such short notice.”

“I didn’t think I had a choice.” Congressman Lawrence snorted, looking around the room of armed Secret Service agents.

A look exchanged between President Garner and Governor Wade. Lawrence watched the exchange with a curious expression, and then the President cleared his throat to speak. “Joe, you and I’ve known each other a long time, haven’t we?”

“Yes, Mr. President.” Lawrence nodded.

“I’d like to think that we’re friends, colleagues,” Garner continued softly.

“Yes, Mr. President.” Lawrence nodded once again in agreement.

“So, what I can’t understand is why you would bring a concern like this to the Senate floor instead of coming to me directly?” Garner’s face went cold as he dropped the accusation at Lawrence.

Lawrence tightened his fist as he looked up at Garner. “It is my right as the new Minority Leader…”

Governor Wade stepped in attempting to calm the tension in the air. “I know what your right is, Congressman Lawrence, but this hearing is not the answer.”

Lawrence did his best to remain calm as he responded through gritted teeth, “I have constituents that are demanding to know why their President named replacements for the other party.”

“Your constituents voted for corrupt congressmen,” President Garner pointed out as he pounded his fist on the table. “The party alliance wasn’t a factor when appointing their replacements.”

“Since when?” Lawrence scoffed in disbelief.

“Congressman, you’re out of line,” Governor Wade cut in. “Now the President is being more than fair.”

“No, Governor,” Lawrence snorted out. “Don’t. You are not going to come in here and bully me around. I have a responsibility to the people I represent.”

“And I have a responsibility to this country,” Garner responded coolly.

“And how’s that going? Having your career criminal by your side as you pass laws with everyone wondering whose idea it was, the corrupt President or his equally corrupt second in command?” Lawrence felt the heat from his anger flooding his face as he shouted the accusations out.

“Now that is enough!” Garner bellowed.

“No, I don’t think it is enough, Mr. President!” Lawrence challenged angrily.

An uneasy tension filled the air and Garner’s face fell as he

seemed to be contemplating something. He looked up and calmly responded, “The hearings need to be shut down now, Joe.”

“Or what, Mr. President?”

An eerie calm washed over President Garner’s face as he leaned back in his seat. “The kids grow up fast, don’t they, Joe? I mean before you know it, they’re off to college.” Garner let out a long sigh. “Time certainly flies doesn’t it?”

“What’s your point?”

“You’re going to shut the hearings down, Joe.” Garner’s eyes narrowed at him, and he felt his insides tense. “You’re going to do this because as much as your constituents hate their new Vice President, they hate a hypocrite even more.”

“What are you…?”

“Minors aren’t allowed to have abortions in the state of New Troy without parental consent.” Governor Wade cut in, setting a copy of the consent form Congressman Lawrence had signed a year ago.

“You’re going to shut the hearings down, Congressman or this will get leaked to the press, and you’ll spend the rest of your short-lived political career being known as the hypocritical baby killer by the time I’m done with you.” A calming quiet filled the air and Lawrence looked up, meeting the President’s gaze. “Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

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The caravan moved at a painstakingly slow pace as Lex waited for them to arrive at City Hall. The President was supposed to be addressing the nation with the full backing of Congressman Lawrence to set aside this nonsense of a Senate Review. He had underestimated the Congressman’s ability to complicate his plans, but now that he had the leverage needed he knew it was only a matter of time before the whole matter would be laid to rest.

Lex ran a hand across his face, weary from the day. He couldn’t understand it. Here he was legally pardoned of his crimes and sitting next to one of the most powerful seats in the world, yet Lois remained distant and cold toward him. It was evident that persuading her into reclaiming her place with him would not work. Then again, it shouldn’t come to him as a surprise given every stage in his relationship with Lois had been brought about by forcing her hand. Why should he expect anything different now?

Married.

She had *married* Kent. Superman, he could have at least understood, but Kent? He was barely worthy of being called a nemesis. He was more like an annoying dog nipping at his heels no matter how many times he kicked it away there it remained. Much like the unwelcome stranger that had intruded this afternoon. Who this lunatic was that spent his spare time crashing into apartments and interfering in personal matters he wasn’t sure, but he would certainly find out. His next visit with Lois would have to be planned to account for this vigilante and any unwelcome guests.

A deep sigh escaped his throat as he ran his hands up and down his face. He had done everything in his power to dissuade her from the relationship. As soon as rumors began to fly around that the two had become serious, he’d put together a plan with Gretchen and Nigel to barrage Lois and Kent with warnings. Subtle reminders to keep her from making a grave mistake. A sour expression crossed Lex’s face as he recalled the news Nigel had shared with him of not only a wedding being planned but an elopement with a location unknown and a timeline that proved impossible to intervene with.

He had worked far too hard and invested far too much time and effort to just give up now. The demise of Superman while reclaiming Lois as his would make the sweet revenge he was about to embark on all the more satisfying. Though she may resist now, he knew it was only temporary. Much like her marriage to Kent.

The news of this setback had been troubling, but he refused to let himself be deterred. It was just another stumbling block in the road. He knew once it became evident how powerless Lois was without him, she would come running back. He just had to remind her of just how influential he was and how easily her everyday life could come crashing down with the snap of his fingers.

“Mr. Vice President?” his aide called out to him.

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“The White House has issued a statement regarding the recent attack from Superman,” the announcer’s voice echoed inside Lois’ Jeep as she drove down Main Street. “Sources say the man of steel was searching for the Vice President. Superman was instrumental in Lex Luthor’s capture last...”

“Enough of that,” Lois snapped, reaching over to turn the radio off.

“Sounds like Superman might have the right idea,” Mayson commented looking over at Lois. Lois bit her lip, trying to hold her tongue for fear that she might say too much. She didn’t dare comment and dig herself into a hole she couldn’t get out of. She had no idea why Clark had gone to the White House looking for Lex. All she had to go on was the word of the White House’s press secretary who was biased at best.

“Lois, you want to talk about what happened back there?” Mayson prompted.

“I think I forgot something at the Planet,” Lois said, cutting her off. “We should probably stop by there before going to the Metropolis P.D.”

Mayson gave her an odd look and then nodded. “Let’s go then.”

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The crowd around City Hall was immense. Lex sat in the corner office with the mass of secret service agents and Metropolis P.D. officers surrounding the room. He turned to his left where the President was adding his signature to the letter from Congressman Lawrence. A smile spread across Lex’s face as he saw the letter pass from Garner to Lawrence. The look of defeat on Lawrence’s face sent a thrill of satisfaction through him. He recalled not too long ago when he had petitioned Lawrence for leniency on his case and been shut down. Now the shoe was on the other foot, and he was basking in the sweet revenge that had been bestowed upon him.

“That’s everything,” Garner remarked as Lawrence left the room.

“Just about,” Lex commented, careful to remain evasive so as not to seem too eager with his proposal to the President. He had to let the President drag the suggestion from him. After all, he was surrounded by witnesses at every moment. It wouldn’t do any good to give the media something to talk about before he had a chance to muffle the news outlet.

“Just about?”

“Well, it’s a start, Mr. President, but there are still many out there that wish us harm. That wish to damage the hard work you’ve done to turn this country around in its time of need.” Lex kept his tone somber as he did his best to appeal to the underlying fears he knew resided deep inside President Garner.

“The country will come around,” Garner responded with a wavering tone that told Lex he wasn’t so certain.

“Perhaps, but as long as there are whispers, it is hard to get your message across.” Lex grew contemplative and then let a slip of the tongue escaped his lips with a purposeful, “If only...” then just as quickly, he shook his head. “Never mind.”

“No, what is it?”

“This country is in crisis, Mr. President,” Lex replied coldly. “The people need someone to give them a guiding hand. Remind them of the values they were once founded on.”

“We can’t turn back time, Lex,” Garner replied simply.

“No, we can’t, but we can restore wrongs,” Lex pointed out.

“Wrongs?”

“Do you realize most of the resistance you receive comes from sympathy toward terrorists and threats to this nation?” Lex asked, noting the apprehensive expression on Garner’s face. He was taking the bait.

“People are uninformed,” Garner replied uneasily.

“You allow uninformed people to have a voice heard and the terrorists win, Mr. President,” Lex stated with a firm certainty that made Garner’s face grow tense.

“And what would you suggest I do, Lex, change the laws?”

The tremble in Garner’s voice sent chills through him. This was too easy.

“I’m not suggesting anything, Mr. President. It’s just something to consider.” Lex smiled, standing to his feet when he saw the press secretary enter from the corner of the room. It was almost time for the press conference. He felt a thrill run through him as he noted the contemplative expression on the President’s face. The seed had been planted.

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The elevators pinged, and Lois stepped off the elevator with Mayson in tow. The ride to the Planet had been uncomfortable at best. The reports from the White House scared her. Why would Clark risk such a bold move and put himself in danger like that? Didn’t he know something like this would put a target on his back? The apprehension building inside her threatened to be too much for her. She knew whatever the reason for his going after Lex she had to keep it together. The only way to do that was to keep the dread and anxiety at bay until she found Clark.

The surprise rescue from Batman and Lex’s unwelcome visit left a bitter taste in her mouth. Her mind was still reeling from the fact that she had Batman standing in the middle of her living room. Clark had told her about meeting him the other night, but it was completely different to hear about the dark knight—as he was commonly referred to—than to be standing in front of him.

He hinted that he knew she could get ahold of Superman. She recalled the inquisitive look on Mayson’s face after Batman had left. Explaining what had transpired to Mayson would open a can of worms she wasn’t ready to deal with. Her relationship with Mayson had come a long way in the last year, and to her credit, the ADA had become more open to looking beyond the black and white of the law when it came to Superman. Still, explaining what another vigilante was doing in Metropolis and why he was looking for Superman would only dredge up old wounds that had been long and buried.

<<“No one was killed.”>>

More than anything she wanted to see Lex removed from office and locked away in prison where he belonged for the rest of his days, but as long as he was protected by the President’s pardon that wouldn’t happen. He claimed he was a changed man, but he still had no remorse for his actions. He actually boasted of his crimes as if they were something to be proud of and dismissed the hurt and pain he’d put those she cared about most through.

<<“I think I’ll stay.... After all, it has been so long since I’ve had the luxury of just...dropping by.”>>

A shudder ran through her as she recalled the arrogant way Lex had traipsed around, practically shoving in her face just how powerless she was to stop him. She had gone against powerful organizations before, brought down multi-billion-dollar companies and helped put away some of the most notorious criminals. This was different though. She was in foreign territory now. How was she supposed to take on the leader of the free world and his newest second in command?

‘Vice President.’ The title left a sour taste in her mouth as she scanned the newsroom, hoping to find Clark there. She hadn’t seen or heard any reports of rescues on the drive over, but she knew from experience that didn’t necessarily mean anything. Many times, the rescues he performed as Superman didn’t make

the news unless a disaster had occurred.

“Lois?” Mayson placed a hand on her shoulder, pulling Lois’ attention to the present. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Lois said, shrugging her shoulders as she crossed the room to where her desk was. Nothing was out of place. No notes or messages. Clark hadn’t returned yet. Where was he?

“I’m not an idiot, Lois,” Mayson said gently, lowering her voice as she spoke. “What happened earlier...”

“It’s not the first time I’ve dealt with unwanted guests, and it won’t be the last.” Lois felt her throat tighten as she looked down avoiding Mayson’s piercing gaze. She was right. Mayson knew there was more going on.

<<“It would be wise to remember who it is you’re dealing, Lois...I could destroy everything you hold dear with the swipe of a pen.”>>

*‘He thinks he’s above the law.’*

“Lois?” Mayson waved a hand in front of her, arching an eyebrow as she looked back at her with a sympathetic expression. “You want to talk about what happened back there?”

“I’m *fine*,” Lois shrugged her off, looking around the newsroom for anything to help distract the ADA from the conversation she was trying to have. It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate Mayson reaching out. She did. The problem was talking about what was really bothering her would only dredge up the things she couldn’t talk to Mayson about. The only person she could talk to about what had just happened was still missing from the looks of things. How long should she wait before she started to panic?

“Lois, where in tarnation have you been?” Perry called out from his office, giving her the distraction, she so desperately needed. “I had to send Ralph with Troupe to cover the Presidential address downtown.”

Her face crinkled at the mention of the Presidential address. Did she dare tell her editor that she wouldn’t be found within a hundred-mile radius of President Garner and his new Vice President? Judging by the irritated expression on his face she opted to keep that opinion to herself.

Before she could respond Mayson cut in. “That’s my fault, Perry. I’ve kept her pretty busy this afternoon, helping out with a case of mine.”

“What kind of case?” Perry asked, curiously.

“Still piecing the evidence together,” Lois said hurriedly, grateful for the save Mayson was offering.

“Hey, turn that up!” a voice came from across the newsroom where a crowd had begun to form around the television set. Lex Luthor stood next to President Garner with Congressman Lawrence by his side at a podium in front of City Hall.

“Well, he certainly gets around, doesn’t he?” Mayson commented, crossing her arms over her chest.

Lois felt a wave of apprehension wash over her as she stared at the television monitor. Congressman Lawrence kept eyeing the security detail behind him while President Garner addressed the press. Lawrence had been one of the more vocal voices speaking out against the political corruption with the change of leadership in Congress and with the Vice President appointment. He held his own against some of the less savory politicians, but he seemed different here.

“I’m pleased to announce the Senate Review has been retracted. Confirmation of Vice President Luthor will be scheduled promptly. We appreciate Congressman Lawrence’s support as we take a step into the bright future of this country,” Garner said, addressing the crowd.

“Congressman, what about your reservations about Mr. Luthor? Do you feel he’s fit for office?” Ron Troupe’s voice could be heard from the crowd.

“We won’t be taking questions at this time,” Lex cut in, waving the question off. “President Garner and I are pleased with

Congressman Lawrence’s decision, and we look forward to making this nation the great prosperous country it once was again.”

“*Again?*” Lois scoffed in disbelief.

“With that, Congress is currently reviewing new laws that will help ensure due process is afforded to everyone,” Lex continued, smiling at the cameras like a vulture that had just caught its prey.

“You’ve all been briefed with the information regarding the recent Presidential pardons,” Garner continued. “We owe it to ourselves and this country to ensure everyone is treated equally. Allowing the likes of Superman to act as judge and jury hinders our justice system and ...”

Before Garner could finish his statement, a blur of red and blue filled the monitors before focus returned to the cameras. A shout from the audience could be heard as someone shouted, “The Vice President’s been kidnapped!”

\*\*\*

Gretchen Kelly looked over the monitors, checking the vitals on the screen. The face of her patient was that of the President of the United States, but his heart and mind were that of the program she had written. A perfect synchronization between cloning technology and robotic programming. She tapped the chest plate to reveal the small round vial she’d inserted inside him. A light red glow reflected on her face just as a shadow towered over her.

Without looking up, she called out, “What is it, Nigel? You know Lex has a deadline on his army of clones.”

“A bit more pressing matter,” Nigel interrupted, handing her an envelope. “And a perfect opportunity to test your handiwork.” He glanced around the laboratory filled with life-size test tubes of her recent clones.

“I’m in the middle of an experiment,” Gretchen responded coldly.

“And your experiment is worth nothing if the buyer backs out,” Nigel reminded her. With that, he shoved the envelope back in her hands. “Tonight.”

Gretchen let out a long sigh, pulling her focus away from the cyborg on her table and turning to the envelope Nigel had dropped on her table. She ripped the seal open and looked over the information he’d passed along. “James Olsen?” She glanced back at her cyborg. “Well, I suppose a test run is overdue.”

\*\*\*

Chaos. That was the only way to describe the last hour. The Metropolis Penitentiary had been up in arms ever since the riot that had resulted in the escape of some of Metropolis’ most notorious criminals. Schedules had changed. The predictability of a shift had disappeared.

It shouldn’t have surprised him to see Superman appear in the middle of the general population with a prisoner in tow. He had done it time and time again to the point that Warden Nichols didn’t even blink an eye when Superman dropped off prisoners for intake. This time had been different though.

“Oh, just you wait! When I get my hands on you, you will be sorry you miserable freak!” the unmistakable voice of Lex Luthor reached Nichols’ ears, and he swung his head around to take a second look.

“Superman?” Nichols choked out in surprise, staring at the stern look on the Man of Steel’s face.

“I trust you can take it from here, Warden?” Superman asked before disappearing out the same way he’d entered.

Lex Luthor narrowed his eyes at Nichols, his forehead vein protruding out half an inch and his face flush red with anger. “Don’t...even think about it, Warden!”

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“President Garner has issued a Presidential decree, declaring Superman, an enemy of the United States. Sources say the once beloved superhero kidnapped the Vice President and delivered him to the prison the Vice President was once serving time at....”

Bruce reached over to turn the television off, tugging the cowl over his face. He turned behind him to where Lucius was standing, manning the computer that was running a program searching for answers to the strange behavior from Superman. “As soon as the search is done send it to the Batmobile.”

“Are you sure this is wise, sir?” Lucius asked, looking around the executive suite nervously. “The last time you went against him...”

“Something’s not right here, Lucius,” Bruce cut him off. “If anything happens, turn on the ultrasonic wave.”

“But sir...”

“Just do it, Lucius,” Bruce ordered, turning to the long corridor leading out to the back exit of WayneTech. “I’ve got a bad feeling.”

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“I’m telling you, Chief, there’s a story here,” Ralph Simms pleaded as he followed Perry White out of his office. “Woman was kidnapped by some Dr. Frankenstein and told she’d be used to test Superman. Only thing is the guy never showed up.” He pointed to the television. “I guess now we know why, but this woman...”

Perry let out a long sigh. “I don’t know. You don’t have anything other than this woman’s word of what happened.” He let out a deep breath. “What about that pardon on Alberto Falcone and Rollie Vale?”

“Every journalist is going to be chasing after that story, Chief.” Ralph shook his head. “Psycho serial killer walks with egghead tech genius that just happens to have a new cushy job at the NIA thanks to the President.” Ralph pointed around the room. “Anyone can write that Chief. This could be bigger than that. Another superhero sneaking around Metropolis and saving people? That’s big news!”

“I agree, but...” Perry tapped his hand against his chin and responded, “I’m just not sure you’ve got enough to print yet.”

Ralph’s face fell, and Perry placed a hand on his shoulder. “Validate her story *with a witness*, and we’ll run it.”

“Really?” Ralph beamed back at Perry.

“Get me that witness,” Perry repeated, walking past him to where Jimmy was sitting at his desk, pouring over red and blue file folders, his nose buried in the paperwork. “Jimmy, how you coming, son?”

“Huh?” Jimmy looked up, surprised to hear his name.

Perry sighed, patting him on the shoulder. “That bad, huh?”

Jimmy tightened his jaw as he looked up at Perry and motioned to the conference room where Lois was holed up, trying to track down answers for Superman’s behavior. “You tell me.”

“How long has she been in there?” Perry asked, tapping his chin contemplative.

“Four hours.” Jimmy grimaced, standing up from his desk and stretching his arms over his head.

“Our job is to report the news,” Perry reminded him.

“I can’t write it, Chief.” Jimmy shook his head. “I won’t.”

“I can’t ask Lois to write it, Jimmy, but our job is to report the facts as we see it.”

“The facts are Superman returned a criminal to prison,” Jimmy said with a scowl. “There’s your facts.” He pushed the file in his hand back at Perry. “Not this.”

Perry sighed, taking the thin blue file Jimmy had handed him. He opened it up to read the notes he’d given Jimmy to write the op-ed piece for the headline the suits upstairs had coined, ‘*Super Traitor?*’ He let out a deep sigh and followed Jimmy toward the conference room.

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A loud clap of thunder echoed through the sky as Bruce flew through the air, searching for the source of the unnatural change in the atmosphere. The sonar detector picked up on a distortion just outside of town. He looked down and saw a long field covered in ice and snow. In the center was a dark brown impression from

where the ground appeared to have been burnt. A loud clap of thunder filled the sky again, and a sonic boom filled the atmosphere as a streaking red, and blue blur sped around him.

“Gotcha,” Bruce muttered to himself as he brought the jet in for a landing. Before he could turn the ignition off, he saw the blur of red and blue running back and forth on the field, creating friction against the ice-covered grass below. White smoke began to rise from the ground just as the blur came to a stop in front of him.

“What do you want?” the bark came from Superman as he crossed his arms over his chest and approached.

His stance was uneven as he walked around the side of the jet Bruce was seated on. Anticipating a confrontation between himself and the man of steel Bruce pressed the release button to propel himself out of the jet and through the air. He was just about to initiate the automatic landing gear when a hard jolt ran through his entire body.

“I can’t go anywhere these days without you showing up,” Superman continued, ranting as he flew Bruce through the air at super-speed.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Bruce asked, trying to get his attention. “You made yourself a wanted fugitive for what? Revenge!”

“I delivered justice as I saw fit.” Superman let out a snort. “I don’t have to answer to you.” A smirk crossed his face. “You seem to have a lot of opinions for someone that’s relying on *me* not dropping him from five-hundred-feet in the air.”

“You won’t do it,” Bruce said firmly, staring back at the steely eyes of the superhero that held him in a vice grip.

“How sure are you about that...?” A flash of something crossed his face as he let out a chuckle. “Bruce Wayne?” Before Bruce could react, the grip Superman used to hold him with loosened and he plummeted down toward the ground.

\*\*\*

Lois sat in the middle of the conference room table with the phone cradled between her neck and shoulder, listening to her in-laws sage advice. She could hear her mother-in-law’s voice tremble as she spoke and feel the hard lump in her own throat threaten to let loose of the tears that she was holding back.

“I don’t know, Martha.” Lois let out a shaky breath, doing her best to hold her composure for the conversation. “He was here one minute then disappeared to tend to a rescue, and I haven’t heard anything until the news of what happened at the White House. I’ve tried calling around, and no one’s seen or heard anything. I’m out of options.”

“This isn’t like Clark,” Jonathan’s voice trembled as he spoke. “There’s got to be something else going on that we’re not seeing.”

“Like what?” Lois asked in disbelief. “You saw the footage just like I did. He wasn’t weak. He wasn’t...”

A tap at the door caught her attention and Lois looked up to see Jimmy and Perry standing in the doorway. She let out a sigh, “Martha, Jonathan, I’ve got to go. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear something.”

“Take care of yourself,” Martha called out over the line.

“I will,” Lois said with a weak sigh, though she wasn’t so sure she could fulfill the promise she’d made to her mother-in-law. The door opened, and Jimmy’s frustrated face caught her by surprise. “Jimmy, what’s up?”

“I, uh, got the information on those officers you wanted.”

Jimmy cast an irritated expression toward Perry but pushed forward with his conversation with Lois. “Three officers were on the scene along with two firefighters. The lead detective was Jim Burrows.”

“Henderson’s partner?” Lois frowned, recognizing the name.

“One and the same,” Jimmy said with a frown.

“Maybe he’ll have a lead for us,” Lois said cautiously. She didn’t for a minute think Burrows was capable of slipping information to whoever was behind the cloning of Henderson. But

he might be able to point them in the direction of the person that could help them.

"I still don't know what to think about this cloning business," Perry remarked with a frown, looking around the room.

"It's not any more crazy than some of the other stories we've brought in this year," Lois responded with a sigh.

"Uh-huh," Perry remarked seeming to think a little longer about his response before continuing his train of thought, "Well, just run it by me before you get ready to write it up. I want to make sure you have everything."

"Okay." Lois nodded, watching Perry's face grow more and more tense with worry. "Something wrong?"

Perry cocked an eyebrow up at her. "I was hoping you could tell me." He looked around the newsroom behind him, then to her. "Any idea where that husband of yours disappeared to?"

"Um..." Lois felt panic run through her mind as she mentally scrambled for an excuse. Any excuse to explain the five-hour block where Clark had been missing. A hard lump burned in the back of her throat at the realization of just how long it had been now. How had she forgotten to provide Perry an excuse for Clark's absence? That was usually the first thing she did, but not this time.

"He called in earlier," Jimmy supplied, cutting her off before she could respond.

'*What?*' Lois' mind screamed as everything around her appeared to move at slow motion. Clark had called in? If that were the case why hadn't he called her?

"He's checking out the other officers and trying to track down Superman," Jimmy continued.

It felt like the wind had just been knocked out of her with the gut-wrenching sucker punch Jimmy had just delivered. '*Clark hadn't called in,*' she realized as she stared back at Jimmy, feeling her entire world tilt on its axis as she tried to process what had just happened.

Perry looked between herself and Jimmy before nodding, seeming to accept the excuse for now.

Jimmy had just supplied Clark an excuse.

Why?

There was only one possible solution. She knew it even before she met her young friend's gaze, confirming her questions with a single expression.

He knew.

\*\*\*

The wind pushed against Bruce's face as panic began to set in. He was falling. Not at a slow pace but plummeting downward as the hard blast of cold air threatened to knock him out. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't speak, all he could do was gasp for his breath as the realization that he'd been discovered threatened to overtake him. Try as he might he couldn't get his arm to reach the panel on his belt buckle to initiate the rocket boosters in order to stop his descent. He was moving too fast to do anything.

Something was seriously wrong. Superman. Everything he'd read, researched and found on the man of steel described him as a compassionate being that upheld justice and the American way.

Yet his actions said otherwise.

Just when he thought he would most certainly meet his doom a hand reached out to grab him at the last second, saving him from a most certain death. He let out a ragged breath as he gasped for air. "Are you *crazy*?!"

"I'm not the one dressed like a *bat*," Superman cocked an eyebrow at him in a taunting manner as they landed.

"Make fun of my outfit all you want. I'm not the one being hunted like a rabid dog by the people I swore I'd protect!" Bruce bit back angrily, feeling his temper rise from his near death experience.

Superman let out a condescending chuckle as he floated a few feet off the ground, "Luthor's been taken care of."

"Yeah, great justice system there," Bruce mocked sarcastically

as the rage from his humiliating fall a few moments ago began to take over. "You'd fit right in with the loonies in Arkham, invoking your own brand of justice on the world." He gave Superman a once over and snorted. "You certainly dress like the Joker's usual crowd of suspects. Is the makeup not in yet, Supes?"

A red glare reflected out of Superman's eyes as he moved closer. "You don't want to cross me."

"Why? You already showed me how big and bad you can be," Bruce growled back at him. "At least this time you didn't do it on live television to solidify the destruction of your reputation."

A dark red glow burned in Superman's eyes as he growled out at him. "I don't answer to you!"

"What's wrong with you? Since when do you break the law or put innocent people in danger?" Bruce growled back at him, noting the uneven sway as Superman kept moving. His eyes were glazed over in an almost drug-induced state. His behavior was erratic. If he didn't know any better, he'd say he was....

'*Innocent?*' Superman glared back at him with a stern expression.

Bruce felt an uneasy feeling wash over him as he came to realize something he didn't think was even possible. "Are you *high*?"

The statement didn't even phase him as Superman sauntered away, walking toward the jet Bruce had propelled himself out of earlier. "I'm invulnerable, remember, Brucey?"

Superman's saunter said otherwise as the wheels began to turn in Bruce's mind, trying to figure out how in the world Superman could have been affected by anything. '*Kryptonite,*' he recalled the poisonous rock Intergang had gotten its hands on earlier. He knew it affected him physically but could it have an effect on him mentally?

"Invulnerable except when Kryptonite is involved, remember?" Bruce reminded him.

A flash of red flickered in Superman's eyes, and he swallowed hard, reaching in his utility belt to grab the remote to the ultrasonic device hidden in his jet. "Whatever it is that's going on with you has affected your mind, Superman..."

A snort escaped the superhero's throat as he snickered in disbelief. "So what, now you want to be buddies and pals and commiserate about crime fighting together?" His eyes burned red, and Bruce ducked, the beam just barely missing Bruce's shoulder as he rolled out of the way. "I already have a partner, Bruce, and it isn't you."

"Don't say I didn't ask nicely," Bruce said, hitting the button in his hand. An invisible wall knocked Superman to his knees and Bruce tapped the headset on to reach out to Lucius.

"You're certainly playing it close to the vest, aren't you Mr. Wayne?" Lucius commented over the line. "Should I call the police?"

Bruce looked down at the slumped over body of the man of steel. "No, they won't know what to do with him..." Before he could finish his statement, a hard blow came across the back of his head, and he fell to the ground in a gut-twisting pain like no other.

"Sir? Master Wayne? ...Sir?" The voice echoed from the other end as Bruce cradled his body in a fetal position. He thought for sure another blow was coming but just as his impending doom appeared imminent something stopped the man of steel in his tracks. A mumble under his breath of something he couldn't quite make out and a sonic boom later, he was gone.

"Get me, Dr. Bernard Klein, now."

\*\*\*

Lois held a tiny watch with an ultrasonic sound only Clark could hear insistently beeping. She had tried to be patient. She had tried to wait him out and get to the bottom of what was going on, but she couldn't be patient any longer. She had to get answers, and only Clark could provide them. She looked around the living room, a shudder running down her spine as she recalled the

confrontation from earlier. Something was wrong. She could feel it in her bones.

She heard the familiar sonic boom and sighed in relief when she saw Clark standing in the doorway of the entrance leading out to the balcony. He was okay. He wasn't hurt. All the fears that had been running through her mind since this morning pushed their way to the forefront of her mind as she swallowed down the boulder-sized tension that had built up inside of her over the past eight hours.

"Hi," she finally said, staring at him as he walked toward her with a saunter that almost mirrored someone that was intoxicated.

"Hi," he responded.

\*\*\*

Dust flew through the air in powdery white residue, covering the faces of the detectives and officers hard at work dismantling the concrete barrier that prevented anyone from traveling any further in the underground lair they had been trapped in for who knew how long. Mike Rogers looked to Detective Zymack who continued to work studiously at breaking down the wall he was certain would be their way to freedom. He still wasn't so sure tearing this wall down would bring them any closer to freedom than the abandoned elevator shaft Henderson had disappeared into, but he was willing to try anything.

A loud rumble filled the tunnel as shards of concrete filled the room. A loud crash came from his left side where Zymack was standing.

"Zymack, get down!" Mike Rogers called out, reaching over to pull his friend back.

"Not yet," Zymack answered, standing his ground as he pushed against the unstable slab with the chisel in his hand.

A loud crack echoed in Mike's ears, and he called out, "Zymack!"

Zymack jumped back just as an avalanche of pebbled concrete covered the spot he'd been standing. "Are you crazy?" Rogers jumped all over him, feeling his anger and anxiety threaten to take over.

Zymack cut him off, pointing to the cracked concrete. "Look!" Mike Rogers followed the direction Zymack had been pointing and gasped in surprise when he saw a bright light coming from the other side. "Guys, get over here! We've got something."

\*\*\*

Jimmy ducked his head down as he walked with Lucy back to his apartment. He had done it. He had let it slip, and now there was no going back. He was sure Lois knew. It was only a matter of time before she told Clark. If she was ever able to find him. He had so many questions. Mostly concerns he supposed.

His friend was acting erratically. Out of control. Lois seemed to be barely holding it together. He just hoped whatever was going on they could get to the bottom of it soon. While he could relate to Clark's urge to drop Luthor in the middle of the Metropolis Penitentiary where he belonged the actions seemed so irrational and polar opposite of how Superman acted.

"Jimmy?" Lucy tapped his shoulder as they turned the corner to his apartment building. "Is that your apartment?" Jimmy let out a short gasp as he stared at the building in flames. A firefighting crew surrounded it with a fire hose and water aimed at the hot burning orange flames.

\*\*\*

<< "Angel... where'd you go? I gotta get to a hospital."  
"Don't worry John. I called a couple of doctors I heard about." >>

<< "I thought I was helping you!" >>

<< "You're hurting me!" >>

<< "You should have kicked it the first time, John!" >>

<< "What am I?!"

"Well, actually you're a... robot..."

"Cyborg!" >>

The images flashed through Johnny Corbin's mind as he stared at the orange flames dancing against the brick and mortar, melting and consuming everything in its path. A hand touched his shoulder, and he jerked back, looking at the woman—the doctor—who was standing beside him.

"Metallo?" she frowned looking at him in concern.

Recalling the name he'd been dubbed with, he nodded and forced a smile. "The building's set to explode if anyone enters."

"And Superman?" she prompted.

"No sign of him, but you're covered," he responded.

"Excellent work, Metallo."

'Corbin,' he reminded himself, clinging to the memories that had flooded his mind. 'My name is Johnny Corbin.'

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## Chapter 11

The long black town car pulled up to the corner where a young woman with short blonde hair stood, clutching her black trenchcoat around herself. The window in the backseat of the town car lowered and Bill Church Jr. leaned out the window to speak to the woman. "Dr. Kelly, I take it the program was a success?"

Gretchen Kelly smiled, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Metallo is the perfect weapon completely under Intergang's control."

The door opened, and she climbed into the back of the town car. She checked her reflection in the mirror as the apartment building disappeared behind her. A loud blast could be heard behind them, and she smiled back at Bill Church Jr. "Metallo's target has been annihilated."

A smile crossed Bill Church Jr's face, and he took a puff from his cigar. "I'll be sure to keep Carmine updated on the progress."

"Once we determine how to replicate the Kryptonite ring with the red meteorite, we should be able to replicate the process on demand."

Bill Church Jr took another puff from his cigar. "Replicating an army of cyborgs to do Intergang's bidding and permanently stomp Superman out of commission." He let out a low whistle. "Best billion I've ever spent."

\*\*\*

'James Olsen must be eliminated.' The words ran through his mind on a repetitive track as Johnny Corbin struggled to wrestle through the images and memories that haunted him. A fight with Superman. A car chase. A metal table. They all conjoined together to create memories that made no sense.

"Jimmy!"

Johnny Corbin turned to see Lucy Lane in tears as she watched his target—her boyfriend—James Olsen cross the barrier. It would be so easy to take care of all of his problems and let him be terminated with the orders he'd been given. It would be so easy to continue down the path he'd been on. But something stopped him.

"Jimmy!"

His heart lurched as he heard the cries from Lucy Lane. At the last second, he changed the frequency and attempted to disable the bomb from the remote in his hand that was programmed to communicate with his internal system.

A loud blast erupted from the apartment building, and he swallowed hard, staring at the spot where James Olsen had been standing. He was too late...or was he?

\*\*\*

"Jimmy!"

A soft cry from the top stairs. The shouts from the police. A loud crash. It all melded into one as Lucy stared at the agonizing image of Jimmy falling from the top step with flames Lucy Lane was sure would consume him in seconds behind him. Then just when she thought all hope was lost the world around her slowed down and within a blink of an eye, Jimmy was standing beside her.

Before he could say a word, she flung her arms around him, tearfully scolding him, “Don’t you ever scare me like that again, James Olsen!”

“I’m okay, Luce,” Jimmy reassured her, running a hand across her cheek.

She should be relieved right now, but all she could feel was the panic still running through her. She glanced back toward the building that was in ruins and turned back to him. “You were...” she felt her voice waver as she swallowed hard. “Now you’re...”

“I don’t know,” Jimmy said glancing toward the burning steps leading up to his apartment building.

\*\*\*

“Hi,” Clark responded as he moved through the living room with an uneven saunter toward Lois. A million thoughts ran through her mind as she watched him struggle to remain upright, catching himself on the couch and straightening up to finish crossing the room.

Unable to hold back on the emotions that were flooding through her any longer, Lois crossed her arms over her chest and demanded, “Where have you been? Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been?”

He seemed surprised, crinkling his forehead as he shrugged his shoulders. “There’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine.”

“Fine?” She scoffed in disbelief, reaching over to grab a copy of the Daily Planet’s evening edition as she slapped it across his chest. “Superman Declared Enemy of The United States,” she read the headline, arching an eyebrow at him. “That’s fine?”

“Luthor belongs behind bars,” he shrugged his shoulders as if it was the most normal thing in the world for him to bypass the judicial system and kidnap the current Vice President.

“You can’t just drop him in prison because you feel like it, Clark,” she countered, taking a step toward him. “You know this! What is going on with you?”

“Nothing.” He let out a deep sigh. “I just got tired of waiting for more people to get hurt. I took things into my own hands. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal,” she argued, shaking her head. “It’s a very big deal. You’re Superman...or supposed to be rather.”

“Maybe Superman doesn’t want to wait for the inevitable to happen,” he said with a defeated sigh.

“Superman upholds the judicial system,” Lois reminded him, feeling her voice tremble as she spoke. Something was definitely amiss with him. He wasn’t talking like himself or acting like himself. If she didn’t know any better, she’d swear he was drunk.

“Not when a known criminal is behind the crooked laws of the judicial system.” Clark snorted, sinking himself down onto the couch.

Lois bit her lip, feeling a wave of apprehension hit her as she stared back at him. Talking about his kidnapping of Lex Luthor seemed to only bring out aggravation and annoyance. She needed to get to the bottom of what was going on with him. Though she wouldn’t let the issue drop completely she supposed a change of subject wouldn’t hurt. Maybe find out where Clark had been for the last five hours.

“Fine.” Lois shrugged her shoulders. “How did the rescue go?”

His face crinkled and confusion filled his eyes as he echoed, “Rescue?”

Lois did her best to control her reaction at the confused expression on her husband’s face. “The rescue you left for this morning.” She held her breath, watching the uneasiness wash over him. It was clear he was trying to process everything. Did he sense something was wrong?

She took a seat next to him, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder, explaining calmly the events leading up to his departure this morning. “This morning we were talking to Mayson about the double of Bill Henderson and who had access to Professor

Hamilton’s cloning research. You got a call for help...”

“I don’t remember,” he frowned.

“He doesn’t remember?” her mind screamed as she did her best to control the panic that was rising within her. ‘Five hours...’

His face tensed and he ran a hand across it as he leaned his head toward her. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”

She felt her shoulders relax against him, sensing the remorse behind his words as he looked back at her. ‘Five hours.’

“I’m sorry.” Clark ran a hand across her cheek.

“It’s okay,” she responded, knowing deep inside her that it definitely wasn’t okay. Something was seriously wrong here but figuring out what that was remained a mystery. All she had to go on was what he remembered and what was reported by the news. With his memory faulty at best the only thing she could think to do was try and keep him here home with her to prevent any further incidents.

She reached her hand over and patted his knee just as he tilted his head, capturing her lips with his. A flutter palpitated inside her abdomen and she let out a soft moan, a mixture of relief and anguish filling her mind as she leaned back against the couch, enjoying the solace of her husband’s arms.

\*\*\*

Bruce gripped the side of his head as he hobbled his way through the long corridor of WayneTech with the help of Lucius Fox. He gritted his teeth as he made his way around the corner. “I never knew I had so many bones and tendons that could feel pain...”

“Well, when you try to take on a god...” Lucius gave him a disapproving look as they inched toward the executive chair at Bruce’s desk. “Are you sure you won’t be more comfortable in the penthouse?”

“No,” Bruce remarked, sinking into the chair cautiously. “I’ll be...fine.” He glanced toward the double doors leading to Dr. Snow’s laboratory. “Any progress?”

“I’ve been preoccupied, sir,” Lucius responded with a raised eyebrow.

Bruce held his hand to his side, cradling the ribcage he was sure was cracked as he let out a muffled groan, acknowledging just what Lucius had been preoccupied with. The behavior exhibited by Superman had been bizarre and entirely out of character. He prided himself on being an accurate judge of character. Risky behavior that went against the judicial system Superman claimed to uphold, and aggressive actions were not attributes anyone would associate with Superman.

“Something’s wrong here, Lucius,” Bruce commented carefully.

“How many cracked ribs did it take for you to figure that one out, Master Wayne?” Lucius responded with a frown, handing him an ice pack.

Bruce cracked a smile at Lucius, ready to retort. Lucius was never one to talk around an issue. He had warned Bruce of the risk he was taking in engaging the Man of Steel, but Bruce had been convinced he knew who and what he was dealing with. Now he wasn’t so sure.

“Mr. Wayne?” The loud crackle from the speaker on Bruce’s desk echoed in the large office, and his secretary’s voice came over the speaker, “I have a Mr. Wells here to see you.”

“Professor Wells,” Bruce heard Harrington Wells’ voice through the speaker.

He let out a light chuckle and turned back to Lucius, “We’ll finish this later.”

\*\*\*

It would be so easy to forget about the last twenty-four hours. The chaos that had ensued from the impromptu visit from Lex. The bizarre behavior of Clark. His disappearing act. It would be so easy to forget all of it and focus on the overwhelming emotions that threatened to overtake Lois.

It was easy to forget how out of character he'd been acting moments ago.

It was easy to forget the last twenty-four hours.

But she couldn't, could she?

<< "This isn't like Clark. There's got to be something else going on that we're not seeing." >>

'He's not himself,' her mind screamed at her as Lois fought the rampant desires that were coursing through her. She wanted nothing more than to lose herself in her husband's arms and forget everything.

<< "It would be wise to remember who it is you're dealing with, Lois... I could destroy everything you hold dear with the swipe of a pen." >>

How could she do that?

"Clark..." Lois called out, pulling away from him and readjusting the front of her dress from where he'd begun loosening the buttons. It took him a moment to register the lack of contact. His head turned to look at her with a lazy expression and an unspoken question in his eyes.

"How are you feeling?" She asked tentatively, toying with the hem of his cotton t-shirt. She could feel the warmth of his breath against the nape of her neck as he leaned closer.

"Content," he whispered as he nibbled on her ear, tugging on her earlobe with his teeth.

Lois chuckled, uncertain how to react to his chosen word. He was now public enemy number one, yet he felt content. She ran her hands up and down his chest. "Clark, there's something... going on here." She let out a deep sigh as his breath teased the nape of her neck. "The memory loss and... Oh, God, that's not fair."

"Nuh-uh," he shook his head and insisted. "I'm fine." Before she could argue any further, he captured her mouth with his, allowing her to taste the remnants of coffee on his tongue. He stroked her cheek with his palm and traced the frame of her face.

She slowly broke off the kiss, leaning back as she eyed him appreciatively. It was quite entertaining to see him like this.

The sloppy grin on his face remained as he let out a long breath. "I'm hot." He jerked at the hem of his shirt in an effort to pull it off and ended up tangled in the mess of cotton. She laughed, taking pity on him as she helped him shed the garment from his limbs, tossing it to the floor. He sighed, leaning back against her, slipping his hands up her back.

"Uhm, hmm," She breathed against his lips, eying his perfectly chiseled six-pack and hardened muscular chest smooth as a baby's bottom. She fingered his chest, brushing her hand against the velvety smooth skin as she took his glasses off, folding them in one hand, leaning behind her to place them on the table next to her just before he recaptured her lips.

<< "Any idea where that husband of yours disappeared to?" >>

<< "This isn't like Clark. There's got to be something else going on that we're not seeing." >>

"Like what? You saw the footage just like I did. He wasn't weak. He wasn't..." >>

She felt her body involuntarily stiffen against him. His hand moved up and down the side of her face as he moved his attention to her jawline, feathering light kisses along its path. "Cla..." She attempted to make her voice heard. "You're not yourself." Her hand wrapped around his shoulders, feeling the hardened muscles beneath his velvety smooth skin.

"So what if I'm not?" he challenged with an arched eyebrow.

She felt his hand slip below the hem of her dress and whispered, "We should stop."

"Why?"

She laughed, leaning closer to him. "You're not yourself, Clark."

"So?" he whispered, huskily, stroking her cheek. "You're

beautiful you know that..."

"Smooth talker," she observed, fingering the tip of his nose with her forefinger. "I don't..." His mouth found its way to her throat, creating a heated trail downward as she struggled to string her thoughts together. "Cla..."

"You feel so good," he whispered, holding her close.

"So do you." She sighed, running her hands through his dark locks.

"I love you," he whispered, stroking her jawline.

"I love you too, but right now... you need to get some rest..." she whispered.

"I don't want to rest," he argued, stroking her cheek as he leaned in to press his lips against hers, tracing the outline of her lips with the tip of his tongue. She moaned against him, allowing him to pull her into his arms. "This is so much better than resting..."

"Clark..." She gasped as he moved his attention to her right ear, tugging on the lobe with his lips. "We need to stop..."

"Do you want to stop?" he asked, slipping his hand up the hem of her dress, brushing his palm against her upper thigh.

She could lie and say she did, but she knew that was a moot point. He could tell when she was lying. She let out a short gasp. "No, but I don't want to take advantage of you... wouldn't be..." She sighed against him as his hand moved to cup her breast through her bra.

"Maybe I want to be taken advantage of," he whispered huskily. To prove his point, he pressed his hips against hers. "I am in my... very right mind..." he reassured her.

The last of her resolve gave away, and the room began to spin as she felt his hands move up her thighs, tracing a circular pattern against her. She could continue to try and argue her point with him but what good would that do? She knew he wasn't in his right mind, but he knew it too. It wasn't like he was behaving any differently than he would. At least this way she knew where he was and could ensure he wasn't doing anything to further damage Superman's reputation.

\*\*\*

Yellow and red. That's all Zymack could see as he stared at the wall of bodies linking the concrete slabbed walls. An ominous glow of pale yellow emitted from the life-size incubators that appeared to be housing men and women of different sizes and shapes.

Mike jabbed Zymack in the ribs as he looked around the room. "What in the name of Christ...?"

"You're asking the wrong detective," Zymack muttered under his breath.

"Hey, guys, there's a stairwell!" one of the officers called out from across the room, pointing to the cement steps and metal door.

Zymack looked to Mike, wondering if he should get his hopes up or just go. Mike patted his shoulder. "Come on, let's check it out."

\*\*\*

Dr. Caitlin Snow looked up from her notepad, then glanced at the time. It had been twelve hours since she had begun reviewing Bill Henderson's file. Over the last few hours, she had run blood tests and cognitive tests to determine her patient's cause of amnesia. Using the lab and tools that had been given to her with free reign from Bruce Wayne she began trying to stimulate the missing memories with an interactive game coupled with putting her patient in a hypnotic state.

"Dark," Bill Henderson mumbled with a croak in his tone as he let out a short gasp.

"What's dark?" Caitlin asked curiously, setting her pen down.

"Tunnels are so dark," he whispered in a monotone voice. "It's so tight." He reached his hand up to grab his throat.

"What's tight, Bill?" Caitlin asked.

"The elevator shaft," he whispered out before uttering, "Our

escape.”

“Our?” Caitlin pressed.

“Zymack. Me. The SWAT Team.” His response came before his face scrunched up. “So tight.”

Deciding he’d been under long enough, Caitlin nodded, “Bill, you’re not in the tunnel anymore. Now, listen to me. When I snap my fingers, you’re going to be back here in the present and remember everything,” she instructed, holding her hand up to snap her fingers.

A soft snap came, and his eyes changed from the glossed-over expression to active as he stared back at her. “Zymack,” he whispered aloud. He looked up at her with a smirk, “I’m telling you you’re wasting your time. I can’t be hypnotized.” A faraway expression crossed his face, and she smiled to herself.

“You remember something?” Caitlin asked, waiting for him to respond.

“Yeah,” he ran a hand across his face. “I gotta get out of here.”

\*\*\*

“Oh, God!” Zymack let out a loud gag as soon as the door opened. The putrid smells from the sewer took over his senses as he lifted his arm to protect his face from the foul scents.

“After you!” Mike let out a muffled grunt.

“How desperate do we got to be to walk through this?”

Zymack muttered from behind his sleeve.

“If it gets us back to the land of the living, I’m all for it,” Mike responded, following him through the dark sewer tunnels that would hopefully lead them above ground.

\*\*\*

<<“Congress is currently reviewing new laws that will help ensure due process is afforded to everyone.”>>

<<“It would be wise to remember who it is you’re dealing with, Lois...I could destroy everything you hold dear with the swipe of a pen.”>>

<<“President Garner has issued a Presidential decree, declaring Superman, an enemy of the United States.”>>

Five hours.

That number ran through Lois Lane’s mind as the last of her defenses gave away. Her body relaxed against his. The cool sheets brushed against her back, and she let out an inaudible moan as her lips vibrated against his. The wandering of his hands up and down the back of her thighs sent a shiver of exhilaration through her.

<<“Any idea where that husband of yours disappeared to?”>>

<<“This isn’t like Clark. There’s got to be something else going on that we’re not seeing.”

“Like what? You saw the footage just like I did. He wasn’t weak. He wasn’t ...”>>

Her mouth moved up and down the curve of his neck as he leaned her over the bed. She ran her hands up and down his chest, feeling the powerful muscles beneath her fingertips. He let out a low groan at her ministrations. He lowered his head, leaning in to capture her lips with his own.

<<“I just got tired of waiting for more people to get hurt. I took things into my own hands. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal. It’s a very big deal. You’re Superman...or supposed to be rather.”

“Maybe Superman doesn’t want to wait for the inevitable to happen.”>>

<<“I don’t remember.”>>

“You’re gorgeous,” he murmured, running his palm up and down the smoothness of her legs as he nibbled at the sensitive skin of her throat. She let out a low moan as she felt his solid form press her against the mattress. “I need you,” he whimpered out in a plea of helplessness as he held her in his arms.

Hearing the emotional plea from him, she reached up to run her hand across his face, watching as his eyes moved to meet her gaze. A moment of silence fell between them, and she whispered

her reassurance to him.

“I’m right here,” She smiled back at him, running a hand through his hair. Relief washed over his face, and he leaned in to kiss her. It wasn’t demanding, but rather a soft, sensual caress that reminded her just how tender and fragile each moment she shared with him was.

“I love you.”

\*\*\*

<<“Angel... where’d you go? I gotta get to a hospital.”

“Don’t worry John. I called a couple of doctors I heard about.”>>

The sliding glass doors slid open, and Johnny Corbin stepped inside, on instinct moving through the corridors, recalling the turns inside the rundown laboratory he had been holed up in with Dr. Gretchen Kelly.

<<“Metallo.”>>

<<“Cyborg!”>>

<<“...robot...”>>

The memories clouded his mind as he recalled the names that had been used to describe him. Everything but his name. Johnny Corbin. It was a simple thing. Being known as the man, he was. A sour expression crossed his face as he swallowed the bitter bile.

Man. Was he even a man? A machine powered being that couldn’t feel warmth. A super-powered robot, programmed to do the bidding of someone he couldn’t say he trusted. Still, he didn’t dare cross her for fear he would lose the semblance of reality he had regained. So, here he was, roaming the corridors and making his way into the lion’s den.

<<“Metallo?”

“I guess I got lost,”

“Come now, there are some people we want you to meet. We have a lot to talk about.”>>

The door at the end of the corridor was ajar, dimly lit with a lamp in the corner. Corbin mentally prepared himself as he entered the room, ready to report his mission to Dr. Kelly with the prayer she wouldn’t push for details.

“The experiment on Superman has proven successful. Better results than we could have hoped for.” The man standing behind the desk remarked, holding a glowing crystal up for closer examination.

Dr. Kelly leaned in, entranced by the illuminating stone as a red hue emitted from it and danced across her face. “I’ve passed your findings off to our team.”

<<“I thought I was helping you!”>>

<<“You’re hurting me!”>>

“With this new weapon against Superman, Intergang will be unstoppable.” The other man standing to the left of her spoke up, tapping his hand on the desk.

“Superman controlled by a rock that doesn’t cripple him.” Dr. Kelly mused. “Who would have thought?”

<<“You should have kicked it the first time, John!”>>

The first man looked up, catching sight of Corbin. “Metallo, I trust your mission was successful?”

Before he could think too hard about what he was saying, Corbin found himself offering up a confirmation, “The mission has been completed.”

“Excellent,” Dr. Kelly responded before turning back to the two gentlemen. “And you two were worried. See, I knew he wouldn’t let us down.”

“I’ll pass along the word,” the first man said with a nod.

<<“What am I?!”

“Well, actually you’re a... robot...”

“Cyborg!”>>

\*\*\*

Ralph walked through the abandoned train station just on the outskirts of town. It had a whimsical charm about it that made him think of stories like the Great Gatsby or Catcher in the Rye.

Nostalgia filled tales that transported you to a time and place where things were a little less complicated and enough years had passed to color the past with rose-tinted glasses.

Great stories came out of places like this, and that was what he was here for. The story. More and more reports had come in with sightings of this mysterious savior that remained nameless and faceless. He was going to be the one to report on this story.

While the others were distracted with the story of Superman's reckless behavior and the politics of Lex Luthor he would find this new hero that had quietly begun protecting Metropolis and make his mark at the Daily Planet.

He walked through the terminal where he found a rusted forklift with an open crate hanging from the fork. Ralph moved closer, recalling the woman's tale of being rescued from a crate by the savior. As he inched closer, a chill ran through him, feeling a sense of dread wash over him.

He stopped, taking note of the crate waving in the wind. He felt an uneasy feeling wash over him as he stared at it. The nostalgic beauty of the place began to fade as he noted the sinister scene in front of him.

He looked away, uneasiness washing over him as he stood a few feet away from the rusted forklift. He moved his gaze to the wooden planks of the terminal he was standing on. Dust covered the plank boards. Much of it hadn't been disturbed in years it seemed—with the exception of the area around the forklift where it appeared a small group of people had walked across one another's footprints. There he expected to see the dust shuffled around.

He didn't expect to see it shuffled up on the edge of the terminal steps. He frowned, approaching the spot where the dust had been moved, hoping for some clue that would point him to the savior that he was searching for. His frown fell as he approached, seeing obvious boot prints in the dust and a frayed fiber sticking out from the aged wood. As carefully as he could, he reached down to grab it, uncertain just what it was he'd discovered. As he held it up in the moonlit sky the reality of what he'd found began to set in. There in his hands was a bright red fiber he was certain belonged to a certain superhero.

"Bingo."

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### ***Superman Declared Enemy of The United States***

The headline across the Daily Planet's front page was the thing of dreams. Lex wore a broad smile as he traipsed around his hotel suite. Not only had he grabbed the gauntlet of unbridled power and assured his placement as Vice President would stay long enough for him to arrange for the President's devastating death. He had also been granted a window of chance by using Falcone's testing on Superman to his advantage and had the once celebrated hero deemed a traitor.

He swirled the bourbon inside his glass, taking a sip of it and savoring the taste. Though it was the finest bourbon money could buy it wasn't nearly as sweet as the revenge he had finally been awarded. Unbridled power was finally at his fingertips, and the once-beloved superhero was now public enemy number one. Even in his first musings of forming the plans to reclaim his power with Falcone he'd never dreamed of such an incredible twist of fate. To have the once adored hero reduced to a criminal, destined to a life behind bars that Lex himself found himself in just a few short months ago.

"A twist of fate indeed," he mused aloud to himself.

Superman would soon be forced to reap what he sowed and face the justice system he had defended so righteously. A smile spread across his face as he imagined the superhero forced to live among the criminals he helped put away. The timing of everything had been perfect. The inconvenience of being thrust among lowly criminals by Superman while Falcone's Dr. Strange tested this new form of Kryptonite had been worth it. More so, given that the

fates at work had solidified his position as Vice President and given the world a glimpse of just how corrupt their hero was.

Soon he would reclaim everything Superman had taken from him. Some things, however, would require more persuasion and finesse than others. His mind drifted to the current predicament with Lois Lane. Stubbornness and willfulness had been traits that had drawn him to her in the first place. That and the soft spot he recognized Superman to have for her made it impossible for him to turn his back on what had been offered up to him. The opportunity to take what the hero obviously so desperately sought but for whatever reason couldn't have was too tempting.

Reclaiming Lois Lane would serve as retribution and a satisfying win on his part. The thrill of taking her as his from both Clark Kent—the gilet that had been a thorn in his side for too long—and Superman would solidify the last step in his revenge. His life had been in ruins thanks to those two. He would ensure a victory for himself and go down in history as the most powerful being this world had ever seen. Nothing would stop him. Especially not some God in a cape or a pesky thing like the rights of the people.

A light chuckle escaped his lips. It would be only a matter of time until the latest change would take place and the independent Lois Lane would be reminded of just how powerless she truly was without him, she would come running back.

"Just a setback," he reminded himself. "A minor setback."

\*\*\*

"Harrison," Bruce remarked looking at his colleague uneasily. "This is a surprise."

"Is it?" Harrison mused, looking at Bruce with a thoughtful expression. "Dr. Klein mentioned your request for a patient's files."

Bruce immediately began wracking his brain for a plausible reason for his request for Superman's medical files. He had hoped the conversation regarding Dr. Klein's records on Superman could have been kept private, but it was too late to worry about that now. All that was left was damage control.

Harrison thankfully didn't seem too interested in pressing him for more information at the moment as he paced in front of him with a saunter. "I told him I would evaluate the situation for him."

"I see," Bruce responded carefully.

Harrison's expression grew concerned as he stopped in front of Bruce, squaring his shoulders as he added, "And assess your involvement with my lead neuroscience researcher. Dr. Caitlin Snow?"

Harrison Wells was one of the most well-known names in the scientific community. He had established STAR Labs in Central City and brought together the brightest minds to build the particle accelerator that in one night made him the most well-known man in the world. The double edge sword that came with that new standing soon followed when the accelerator exploded and riddled the city with what was now being called metahumans.

"You have to understand my concern, Mr. Wayne," Wells remarked calmly, looking up at him. "Dr. Caitlin Snow is an important part of my team and when you whisk her off to do God knows what without cluing me in I..."

"God knows what?" Bruce chuckled back. "What exactly do you think it is I'm doing, Harrison?"

The calm demeanor fell from Harrison's face, and he narrowed his gaze at Bruce. "You do have a reputation, Mr. Wayne."

"And it's your job to what? Babysit your staff to make sure what?" Bruce argued, uncertain he wanted the answer.

Quick to deflect, Harrison cut in, "STAR Labs' reputation is under fire, and I can't afford another scandal."

"And whose fault is that, Harrison?" Bruce argued, shaking his head. "You and your stubborn dreams of going big or going home cost millions in litigations for STAR Labs. Ten years down

the drain. You make the data breach Harley Quinn pulled off look like child's play."

"You and I both know that data breach wasn't just in Metropolis," Harrison responded with a narrowed gaze.

"Gotham is being investigated along with Metropolis and Central City," Bruce replied calmly.

"And the cloning project?" Wells pressed.

"What about it?" Bruce asked uneasily. "Hamilton's research was securely transferred through the proper channels."

"That's not what my sources say, Mr. Wayne," Wells retorted with an arrogant boasting. "From what I hear your security detail in Metropolis could have been funneling the information to someone outside STAR Labs. Now, why would they do that?"

Wells sized Bruce's lack of response up and added, "Perhaps you should find out, hmm?"

\*\*\*

<<"Superman, stand down!"

"Where is Luthor?!">>

<<"I can't go anywhere these days without you showing up."

"What the hell is wrong with you? You made yourself a wanted fugitive for what? Revenge!">>

<<"Luthor's been taken care of."

"Yeah, great justice system there...You'd fit right in with the loonies in Arkham, invoking your own brand of justice on the world...You certainly dress like the Joker's usual crowd of suspects. Is the makeup not in yet, Supes?"

"You don't want to cross me."

"Why? You already showed me how big and bad you can be."

>>

Jagged memories folded through Clark's mind as he began to slowly drift to consciousness. The memories pushed their way to the forefront of his mind as he let out a low groan, running a hand across his face. The soft strands of his wife's hair in his face teased his hand. His eyes flew open, and he looked around the room, trying to assess his surroundings as his mind flooded with memories from the night before.

<<"Superman Declared Enemy Of The United States. That's fine?"

"Luthor belongs behind bars."

"You can't just drop him in prison because you feel like it, Clark. You know this! What is going on with you?">>

Clark let out a low groan, feeling panic course through him as the reality of what he'd done in the last twenty-four hours hit him. Rarely did he feel the effects of the temperature change but at this moment he would guess this is what a drastic temperature change felt like. Goosebumps washed across his body, and a shiver ran down his spine.

Enemy. Those were the words used to describe his alter-ego. His years of working hard to develop a relationship of trust among the city of Metropolis and the entire country were lost. In twenty-four hours, all the work he'd done had been obliterated with a single action.

Enemy.

Nemesis.

Foe.

Adversary.

He took a heavy breath, trying to squash the prickling within his dry throat. Images from the day before continued to flood through his mind. Impulses he had buried deep inside had made their way to the surface, and now he was forced to face the fallout from those decisions.

<<"I just got tired of waiting for more people to get hurt. I took things into my own hands. It's not a big deal."

"It is a big deal. It's a very big deal. You're Superman...or supposed to be rather."

"Maybe Superman doesn't want to wait for the inevitable to happen.">>

Clark swallowed the hard lump in his throat. His fears that had simmered below the surface since the news of Luthor's return appeared to have bubbled to the surface. What could have caused him to lose control like that?

<<"I'm invulnerable, remember, Brucey?"

"Invulnerable except when Kryptonite is involved, remember?"

"Whatever it is that's going on with you has affected your mind, Superman...">>

Bruce Wayne was the Batman.

Clark's eyes fluttered open, recalling the revelation he had uncovered. A pang of guilt washed over him, recalling how he'd discovered the truth. He of all people should have understood the need for privacy, and yet he had been the one to cross the line, revealing his knowledge of Bruce's secret identity as a trump card.

He ran a tired hand across his face, wondering momentarily if things could get any worse.

"Clark?" a hand ran across his chest, and he let out a heavy sigh.

"What happened?" his voice croaked as the burning question escaped his lips.

\*\*\*

Step by step brought Zymack and his team closer and closer to freedom. The anguishing over when and where disappeared in one moment. Light. It filled the dark tunnel, and in one instant the despair that seized them all was replaced with hope.

"Great works are performed not by strength but by perseverance." Mike Rogers quoted as he held out a hand for Zymack to help him up the last step on the ladder, leading to the surface where Mike had helped the handful of other officers through.

"I think we've persevered enough to last all of us a lifetime, Mike," Zymack commented as he climbed past him.

"We made it, Zymack," Mike commented.

Zymack let out a shaky breath and forced a smile. "I know." A determined expression crossed his face, and he added, "Now I've got to get some answers."

"Zymack, you don't even know where Bill is," Mike called after him.

"I've got to try!"

\*\*\*

The Pentagon was one of the most secure locations in the United States. The headquarters of the United States Department of Defense was the heart of the country's defense. The most advanced technology and confidential information were located here. Still, it wasn't without its flaws. The changes in security policies and the turnover on staff were a perfect opportunity for someone to squeeze through if he or she knew what they were doing.

A young red-haired officer blended in with the crowd as she walked through the sterile hallway, keeping herself in cadence with the officers patrolling. Finally, she reached the corridor she was looking for and stopped, turning to address the security desk where a guard was standing at his post.

"Hey, what are you doing, soldier?"

Before the officer could finish his question, his eyes flashed yellow. A smile crossed her face as she reached up to grab the card from his breast pocket, "I believe you have access to something I need."

"Yes."

\*\*\*

Lois combed her fingers through her hair for the umpteenth time, glancing over at Clark who had his head buried in his hands as he rocked the heels of his feet back and forth from the chair he was sitting in.

"It's been all over the news," she finally spoke up, referring to Superman's reckless behavior. The media sound byte of the

President declaring Superman an enemy of the United States had been on the twenty-four-hour news circuit for the last twenty-four hours much to her and Clark's chagrin.

"I still don't understand how something like this could happen," Clark let out a long sigh of defeat, raking his hands up and down his face. "I don't remember any of this." He pointed toward the television as the image of him grabbing Lex Luthor from behind the podium and flying off with him played once more.

Lois bit her lip, unsure how to respond. "What's the last thing you do remember?"

"A train station," Clark replied with a solemn expression.

"A train station?" She pursed her lips as she reached over to grab a notebook. This could be the first lead they had to find out what had happened to Clark yesterday. "Do you remember where it was?"

Clark snapped his fingers, seeming to recall the detail they were searching for. "O'Neill Automotive."

Lois frowned. "Since when did O'Neill Automotive expand their business into rail transportation?"

"No, no, no." Clark shook his head. "It was a few blocks away from the train station." He grew quiet for a moment. "There was someone...something just outside the terminal."

"Who was it?" Lois asked.

"I don't know," Clark responded.

"Well, then I guess our first move is to find this train station."

\*\*\*

Jimmy took a look in the mirror, combing his fingers through his damp hair. He lifted his hand and wiped it across the mirror, removing the film of steam that had been built up across it. He glanced around the bathroom, taking in the unfamiliar lavender and dainty decorations. His night had been spent tossing and turning in Lucy's spare bedroom, recalling how close to death he had come.

The memory of the night before and his near miss with the bomb that nearly took him out rang through his mind. One second, he was standing close enough to the fire he could feel the embers against his skin and the next he was at a safe distance, safe with Lucy in his arms.

It obviously wasn't Superman.

So, who was it?

\*\*\*

Chaos.

That was how everything felt as Clark sat in the passenger seat of the Jeep while Lois drove them to the old train station just outside the city limits. The exit of their apartment had been met with an ambush of fellow journalists, pressing for details on the whereabouts of Superman. He'd been too shocked to respond. Thankfully, Lois had taken charge of the situation and pushed them through the crowd, warning them to back off with her usual sarcastic comebacks.

*Fugitive.*

The word rolled around in his mind for the umpteenth time as the car jostled them over the rough roads that were in dire need of repair. He was a fugitive. Superman was a fugitive. The idea seemed preposterous, yet here he was. Wanted for questioning by the President of the United States. A wave of apprehension washed over him as the reminder of the news headline ran through his mind.

<< "President Garner has issued a Presidential decree, declaring Superman, an enemy of the United States." >>

What was he going to do?

The soft hum of the wind blowing against the Jeep made a dull rustle as Lois drove over the train tracks. Clark glanced to the right where he spotted the O'Neill Automotive factory. To the left was a worn down red and white building with an old sign barely hanging on to the rusty old chains. You could make out the 'M' and 'R' just

before the word 'Train' on the faded old sign. Lois pulled into the dust-covered parking lot – if you could even call it that. She put the Jeep in park and turned off the ignition.

"Look familiar?" Lois asked, unbuckling her seatbelt.

Clark nodded, reaching over to open the door after unbuckling his seatbelt. He stepped out of the Jeep, taking a look around the familiar surroundings. The structure of the train station was worn down, covered in dust and eroded wood. His gaze shifted to the terminal he recalled landing on.

"This is it," he finally spoke, pointing to the terminal a few feet away from a rundown forklift.

Lois placed a hand on his shoulder. "Anything coming back to you?"

Clark frowned, shaking his head as he walked down the terminal with Lois a few steps behind him. He pointed to the spot that appeared to have been walked across recently. "I remember landing ...somewhere. I guess here?"

Lois looked down at the spot they were standing in. "And everything else is...blank?"

"Yeah." Clark sighed, looking around the rundown terminal they were standing in. He lowered his glasses, looking around the abandoned train station.

"There's got to be something here," Lois whispered, taking a few steps forward. "Something to tell us what happened."

Clark sighed, glancing down at his feet when something caught his eye. He pushed the rim of his glasses down the bridge of his nose and focused his vision on the small eroded hole in the wood plank they were standing on.

"What is it?" Lois asked.

Clark knelt down and carefully moved the board back and forth until it was loose enough to remove from its place. "Answers." He held up a small camera with a red blinking light.

\*\*\*

Perry's office was unbearably crowded with Ron Troupe, Ralph, and Jimmy huddled over the photographs Ralph was trying to peddle as evidence. Perry tapped his hand on his chin as he contemplated his next move, listening to each of his journalists argue their points for and against the headline Ralph wanted to run with.

Ron Troupe tapped his finger on the blurry photo in Ralph's hand. "Do you have any idea how many size-eleven boots are sold in Metropolis?"

"And how do you explain the ...?"

Ralph found himself cut off when Jimmy jumped in, "A piece of red thread doesn't equal Superman being there, Ralph. The guy was busy dealing with real criminals!"

"Like himself?" Ralph snorted.

Jimmy moved toward Ralph and Ron reached his arm out to stop him as Jimmy shouted, "You little...!"

"Okay, that's enough!" Perry barked, putting a stop to the arguing before it could escalate into a full-fledged argument. He turned to his journalists. "Now, you've all made your case..." He looked at Ron. "I'm not one to discourage my journalists from chasing a lead."

"But ..." Jimmy began to cut in.

"Within reason," Perry added, looking at Ralph. "The Superman angle isn't being printed, but if you can find something to corroborate your lead on this savior besides a hysterical victim, then we'll print it."

"But Chief!" Ralph argued.

"That's it!" Perry ordered, pointing toward the door. Ralph nodded and headed out the door, taking the hint.

Jimmy moved toward the door to follow only to be stopped by Perry's gruff question. "Any sign of Lane and Kent?"

"Uh, no." Jimmy cleared his throat. "They called in earlier. A pitstop."

"Pitstop?" Perry asked.

"They didn't say," Jimmy shrugged.

"Oh," Perry nodded. "Well, let me know when they get in."

"Will do, Chief," Jimmy nodded.

"And Troupe?" Perry called out to Ron before he could make it out of his office. "Why don't you go with Ralph to talk to that witness. See what you make of it."

An uncertain expression crossed Ron's face, but he nodded his agreement and left through Perry's door to leave.

\*\*\*

Lois readjusted her suit jacket, drumming her fingertips against the middle button for the umpteenth time. She stole a glance at Clark who looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. The drive back from the train station had been quiet. Most of the morning had been spent trying to retrace Clark's steps yesterday. Now that they had found the video camera the next step was to review the footage and determine who or what they were dealing with.

She felt a pang in her chest as the elevator doors opened up to the newsroom and she saw Jimmy standing a few feet away from the doors. The strange conversation she'd had with him yesterday came back to her.

<< "Any idea where that husband of yours disappeared to?"  
"Um..."

"He called in earlier...He's checking out the other officers and trying to track down Superman." >>

She still wasn't a hundred percent sure, but instinct told her Jimmy knew Clark was Superman. Why else would he try to cover up Clark's disappearance yesterday? She still hadn't brought it up with Clark yet. Though she knew at some point, she'd have to drop the bombshell right now was not the moment though.

"Hey, guys," Jimmy chirped as they stepped off the elevator.

"Morning, Jimmy," Lois replied, avoiding eye contact with him.

"You're in late," Jimmy commented, following them down the steps. "The, uh, Chief wanted to see you."

"What about?" Clark asked, looking back at Jimmy.

"I'm not sure," Jimmy said with a shrug.

Clark's jaw tightened as he mulled something over before heading to Perry's office. Lois followed quietly, wondering momentarily what was on his mind – other than the obvious.

\*\*\*

"President Garner has issued a Presidential decree, declaring Superman, an enemy of the United States."

The newscaster's voice filled the office, and Alberto Falcone reached over to click the remote to turn the television off. He ran a hand through his thinning hair and turned to the man sitting across from him. "I see you've been busy, Hugo."

"Experiments have to be performed to know what it is we're dealing with," Hugo remarked calmly.

Alberto tightened his jaw as he looked to Hugo. "Your experiment could cost us everything, Hugo."

"Aren't you supposed to be checking in with Denetto on that list of NIA agents I had Whisper steal for you?" Hugo straightened up and readjusted his jacket. "I'll let you know if my hypothesis is correct."

\*\*\*

Clark quietly led Lois into the conference room after the intense stare-down with Perry. He owed his editor a story on Superman's rogue behavior by noon which had apparently been promised to him by Lois. He let out a deep sigh, trying to control the anxiety that was slowly beginning to build. What else had he dropped the ball on yesterday?

Once the door was closed behind them, he turned to Lois. "So, I was tracking down Superman yesterday. Anything else?"

She shook her head. "No, I forgot about that excuse."

"It's been a stressful twenty-four hours," he reasoned, reaching over to squeeze her shoulder.

"Yeah," she replied weakly, looking up at him, "but that wasn't my excuse."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, when you were ...when Superman was missing yesterday...and Clark...Perry began to notice, and Jimmy covered for you."

"He did what?" Clark asked in surprise. His eyebrows rose as he quickly picked up on the hidden meaning behind Lois' statement.

Before he could ask she quickly added, "I don't know anything for sure and honestly right now is not the right time to even ask."

"I know," he said softly. "But..."

The door cracked open, and the subject of their conversation poked his head inside with a handful of folders in his hands.

"Guys? This a bad time?"

"Uh, no," Lois said hurriedly, turning toward Jimmy. "What is it?"

"Those officers that delivered Hamilton's research to STAR Labs?" Jimmy prompted. "You wanted me to track them down and find anything that sticks out."

"Yeah, what'd you find out?" Lois asked.

"A money trail," Jimmy said, setting the file down on the table. "Officer Malik Sahid." He opened the file to reveal the officer's photo and a printout of a financial statement. "A month before Johnny Corbin disappeared from STAR Labs Officer Sahid received a huge deposit in his account. Then a month later regular purchases started changing. Different coffee shops. Different regular lunch spots."

Lois and Clark exchanged a look and Clark responded with a nod, "Definitely suspicious."

"So Officer Sahid was a part of Corbin's kidnapping, but what about Hamilton's research?" Lois asked.

"It's all connected," Jimmy explained, turning the page.

"Sahid is partners with one other officer. "Officer Daniel White. He received a similar deposit the day Hamilton's research was supposed to transfer over to STAR Labs."

Clark smiled broadly. "Great job, Jimmy."

"Sounds like we owe Officers Sahid and White a visit," Lois said with a grin.

Clark nodded, holding up his hand. "Any idea where this money was coming from Jimmy?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No, I keep hitting a wall on tracing it."

"Just keep trying," Lois said with an encouraging smile.

He nodded. "You bet." With that, he headed for the door and left. Clark pulled out the videotape from his jacket and put it into the VCR to play it. Lois reached over to press the play button with the remote, tapping at the fast-forward button until they saw what looked like the woman who had been rescued yesterday evening by Ralph's Savior being escorted toward the forklift with a gun to her back.

Clark pointed to the frame. "Freeze it there."

"What is it?" Lois asked as she watched Clark jot down the frame number.

"The guy does a good job of staying off the screen," Clark said, pressing fast forward on the remote again. He stopped again when he saw himself land on the terminal. There was a moment of hesitation, and then he disappeared.

He frowned. "That's it?"

Lois shook her head. "There's got to be something else here."

She reached over to fast forward the tape and stopped when an image of gold and red filled the screen. It stopped and in its place was a woman with dark raven hair and a golden lasso in her hand.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Lois asked.

"The woman that just appeared out of nowhere and rescued the victim from the crate?" Clark asked numbly.

“Yeah,” Lois nodded.

“We need to have STAR Labs go over this,” Clark said, standing to his feet. “There’s got to be something to explain...all of this.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Lois asked, looking at him in concern.

“We don’t have a choice,” he responded.

\*\*\*

Carmine Falcone tapped his hand impatiently on the table as he listened to his son’s ramblings from his recent visit with Hugo Strange. In his heart, he knew his son was deeply troubled and responsible for mayhem and destruction throughout Gotham. He also knew that prison was no place for his misunderstood son.

“It was my plan!” Alberto fumed angrily, pacing around the room as his arms flailed around him.

“I know,” Carmine remarked calmly. “Hugo Strange overstepped.”

“What does he think he’s going to accomplish by testing that ridiculous rock?!” Alberto shouted out in a fit of anger. “The whole point of getting the kryptonite from Two-Face was so we could kill Superman!”

“True, but look at the impact the testing has had,” Carmine pointed out, hoping to coax his son to a more rational train of thought. “Superman is now considered a fugitive. That’s a win for us.”

“No, it’s not,” Alberto shook his head vehemently, seething over the doctor’s overstep. “It’s not a win.”

“Alberto,” Carmine remarked carefully.

“It’s not a win,” he repeated.

Carmine sighed, relenting “Whatever you say, son.”

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Lois held in her frustration as she watched Dr. Klein move across his lab. He had basically told them zilch since their arrival at STAR Labs. She let out a frustrated groan, pinching the bridge of her nose as she spoke up. “There has to be something on here to explain Superman’s behavior.”

“You mean other than his public declaration that Vice President Luthor belonged behind bars?” Dr. Klein asked.

“I’m sure there’s something on this tape we can use to prove he wasn’t himself,” Clark insisted.

“There isn’t a lot here,” Dr. Klein insisted. “He arrives and he lands and then he disappears.”

“But if we could blow up the image, maybe we could see what made him leave,” Clark said pointing to the corner of the screen.

“Maybe.” Dr. Klein shrugged with a heavy sigh. “I’m just not sure there’s anything there.”

“Superman wouldn’t leave people in danger like that,” Lois said, placing a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “There has to be something to explain his behavior.”

“Well, his behavior yesterday was out of character,” Dr. Klein reasoned. “Anything is possible.” Dr. Klein shifted his gaze away from them as he spoke.

Lois picked up on the avoidance and pressed the scientist, “Dr. Klein, is something wrong?”

“No, of course not. Everything’s fine,” Dr. Klein responded too quickly.

“Uh-huh,” Lois glanced to Clark who nodded for her to press for more. “Did Superman contact you yesterday?”

“No,” Dr. Klein shook his head, avoiding eye contact as he fiddled with his mouse.

“Has anyone contacted you regarding Superman?” Lois pressed, taking a step closer as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Well, I...” Dr. Klein began evasively.

“Dr. Klein?” Clark prompted, picking up on the scientist’s odd behavior as well.

Dr. Klein shook his head, turning away. “It’s confidential.”

“What’s confidential?” Lois inquired.

“I’m sure it was just curiosity.” Dr. Klein brushed it off.

“What was?” Clark pressed.

“Who was it, Dr. Klein?” Lois asked.

“Bruce Wayne,” Dr. Klein finally answered.

“What did he want?” Clark asked.

“Superman’s medical files,” Dr. Klein blurted out.

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Lex Luthor took a sip from the expensive brandy, allowing the taste to linger on his tongue. Everything was falling into place. Soon Superman would find himself behind bars, facing the life of imprisonment Superman had once infringed on Lex and many others. Not only would he ensure that Superman could not show his face when the second part of his plan came to fruition.

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Bruce Wayne tapped at the screen Professor Hamilton had pulled up, looking over at his shoulder to where Bill Henderson was standing. Since Henderson had regained his memories, Bruce had hired a team to inspect the underground tunnels Henderson had been trapped in. Unfortunately, his team had been unable to find the officers Henderson so desperately sought to find.

STAR Labs had access to all the city’s data infrastructure and was easily able to pull up the files he sought out. For the last several hours they had been camped out in Professor Hamilton’s lab, going through the records of missing persons and John Does at hospitals, in hopes of finding the team of officers that had been left underground during his escape. However, so far there had been no match for the men he was searching for.

“Are you sure none of these guys look familiar?” Bruce asked, pointing at the screen.

“It’s not them,” Henderson said sharply, turning to Hamilton.

“Keep scrolling.”

“Bill, we’ve been going at this for a few hours,” Professor Hamilton said. “Maybe take a break?”

“I can’t!” Bill said gruffly, shaking his head. “I’ve already lost too much time already. I’ve gotta...”

“Bill, we’ve searched the tunnels,” Bruce spoke up. “There’s no one there.”

“I know.” Henderson sighed. “I know.”

The crackle of the speaker reached their ears, and the sound of the security dispatcher’s voice came through, “Professor Hamilton? I’ve got a Detective Zymack here to see you.”

Henderson’s eyes widened. “Zymack?”

“I take it that’s someone you know?” Professor Hamilton asked.

Bruce took Henderson’s sigh of relief as confirmation and nodded to Hamilton, “Let him in.”

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Dr. Klein tapped insistently at his mouse, zooming further and further in on the video footage, trying to find someone or something to explain the bizarre behavior from Superman in the last twenty-four hours. Lois looked over at Clark, unsure if now was the right time to bring up the bombshell Dr. Klein had dropped on them. Bruce Wayne had been after Superman’s medical records.

Why?

She stole a glance in Clark’s direction noting the concerned expression on his face. She reached her hand over to hold his, giving it a gentle squeeze. Clark glanced toward her, offering her a half-smile but she could tell his mind was troubled still.

“Well, this might be something,” Dr. Klein spoke up, motioning them over.

“What is it?” Lois asked.

“There’s a reflection of a face here.” Dr. Klein pointed to his screen. “After the security breach, each branch of STAR Labs sent a group of scientists over to consult with the team on how to fight data breaches moving forward. Dr. Hugo Strange from Gotham

was sent over to represent Gotham.”

“So, what’s a respected scientist doing at an abandoned train station at the same time this kidnapping occurred?” Clark asked.

“I’m not sure,” Dr. Klein responded. “Dr. Hugo Strange has always been a little unconventional with his experiments.”

“Unconventional?” Clark pressed with a raised eyebrow.

“There were rumors that he was testing on residents of Arkham but nothing that could be proven,” Dr. Klein explained.

“So, it wouldn’t be a wild leap to think he might have lured Superman to the train station with an emergency if he was trying to test something on him,” Lois reasoned aloud.

Dr. Klein shrugged his shoulders. “I’d like to think he wouldn’t be capable of such things, but I honestly don’t know.”

“You mentioned he was in Metropolis to help with the security breach here at STAR Labs. How long is he supposed to be in town?” Clark asked.

“I’m not sure,” Dr. Klein shrugged. “I think he’s in town for at least a few more weeks. I believe he’s staying at the Metro…”

Lois’ eyes lit up at this information. “Thanks, Dr. Klein. Do you think you could send us a copy of that image?”

“Absolutely.” Dr. Klein nodded as Lois tugged on Clark’s arm to pull him with her outside the lab.

Once the doors were closed she began rambling. “We’ll have Jimmy run a search on this Hugo Strange and see who he might be involved with. There’s no way this is a one-man job…”

“Lois, Lois, slow down,” Clark interjected, reading her train of thought.

“We could probably arrange for a stakeout. Maybe find out STAR Labs’ itinerary for Hugo Strange and search his place…”

“No, absolutely not.” Clark shook his head adamantly. “We still don’t know what it is we’re dealing with.”

“Hence why we need to get some answers.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Staking out the Metro for Dr. Hugo Strange is asking for trouble.”

“And you suggest what? Waiting for him to strike again?” Lois growled irritably. “Maybe Superman will actually end up in prison this time.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Clark relented, letting out a deep sigh. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea to go barreling in there without a plan.”

“I have a plan.” Lois smiled back at him.

“Which is?” Clark asked.

“Search his hotel room and stake it out until we get answers. Then confront him.” Lois responded.

“This is a *bad* idea,” Clark warned.

\*\*\*

President Garner beamed happily as he held up the newest bill with his signature for the camera. He looked to his left where the Press Secretary was standing and then to his right where his Vice President stood behind him. This was a moment for the history books. No longer would he leave his legacy and the safety of the nation up to chance. Though he knew there would be some resistance, in the end, he knew his Vice President’s reassurances were correct. The people sought to go back to a simpler time and him being the one to lead them there would make him go down in history as one of the greatest Presidents this country had ever known.

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Lois waited outside Hugo Strange’s hotel room in a gray and white maid’s uniform, checking to make sure no one was looking as she fished for the keycard she had swiped from the locker room. Two hands clamped over her shoulders, and she jumped in surprise.

“It’s just me,” Clark whispered in her ear. “For the record, I still think this is a bad idea.”

Lois gave him a half-smile. “We’re running out of options,”

she reminded him, swiping the keycard in the door.

A soft click opened the door, and Clark turned the knob. “After you.”

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Johnny Denetto slammed the door behind him, pointing at the trio that had entered the room with him. “You have to be out of your ever-loving mind!”

Alberto Falcone raised his fist in Denetto’s face. “You dare challenge me? You have no idea what kind of hell you’ve unleashed by crossing me!”

“At least my plan didn’t call for ruining the entire team’s plans!” Denetto shouted back. “Exactly when were you preparing to clue in everyone on your plan to not only assassinate our asset but to take out the entire executive branch of the country?”

Hugo Strange chose that moment to speak up. “Gentlemen, you’ve both said your peace. I think it’s time we had a discussion on what we’re trying to achieve.” He pulled out a briefcase and opened the locks, lifting the case lid to reveal a red glowing rock from within. “We’ve certainly come a long way from a prison in Arkham…with this weapon, we can change the way all interactions with Superman take place.”

“Superman displayed a perfect example of what can happen to him under the influence of this…red kryptonite,” Hugo Strange explained. “Loss of control and apathetic behavior to his laws and justice.”

A calm crossed through the room as they stared at the contents of the red glowing stone within Strange’s case. “I still don’t understand why you insist on your mind games, Hugo,” Denetto argued with a snarl. “Especially when we already have a weapon that has been proven to be lethal against Superman.”

As he spoke Denetto set his own case on the table and unlatched it, allowing a pale green light to spread across the room. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw something move but before he could investigate, he found himself staring at the barrel of a .45 with Alberto Falcone’s hand on the trigger.

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“…with this weapon we can change the way all interactions with Superman take place.”

Lois looked to her left from behind the closet door with built-in wooden blinds, positioned so she could see out into the living space of the hotel room. As soon as they had heard Strange and his comrades in the hallway she and Clark had ducked into the closet with the camera, in hopes of capturing something on video.

“Superman displayed a perfect example of what can happen to him under the influence of this…red kryptonite,” Hugo Strange continued. “Loss of control and apathetic behavior to his laws and justice.”

Lois nudged Clark, trying to get his attention, “Clark, did you hear what he just said?”

“Something something… laws and justice,” Clark grunted out in a nonchalant tone. He seemed to care less about Hugo Strange’s revelation, and she noted the distinct change in her husband’s demeanor the moment the case lifted up.

“I still don’t understand why you insist on your mind games, Hugo,” came Denetto’s response. “Especially when we already have a weapon that has been proven to be lethal against Superman.” As he spoke Denetto set his own case on the table and unlatched it.

Lois stared at the case, feeling as if the world had slowed down as she stared at it. She tightened her jaw and whispered, “We need to get out of here.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed. “We could probably catch a movie if we make good… time.” He let out a low moan of pain as the case opened and a glowing green light came from it.

Unable to think of anything else, Lois reached over to silence him with her lips in the hopes of keeping her husband’s painful cries from reaching the trio of crime lords’ ears.

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“...we already have a weapon that has been proven to be lethal against Superman,” Denetto spoke up, lifting the case and revealing the green kryptonite. “What we need is a plan on how to use it.”

“No, forget the plans,” Falcone’s response came sharply, and the sound of the barrel of a shotgun being loaded reached his ears.

Denetto looked up and saw the barrel of a shotgun aimed at him. “That’s the way you want to play this, Falcone?” He let out a chuckle. “You really think I’d come to a meeting of minds unarmed?”

“Your days running Intergang are through, Denetto. It’s time the Falcone name took the reigns once more.” Alberto Falcone cocked the trigger as Denetto pulled out his semi-automatic.

“Is that so?” Denetto asked.

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The sounds of gunfire erupting in the next room filled Lois’ eardrums as she flattened herself against the corner of the closet, doing her best to make sure her husband who was already showing signs of weakness from the Kryptonite exposure was protected as well. The haunting screams echoed through her mind for what felt like an eternity as she waited for the moment when she and Clark could make their escape. Unfortunately, that moment couldn’t come soon enough.

After what felt like hours but was probably only a few minutes, Lois heard the loud resonating shots come to an end. The rustling from the other room and a panicked call for help reached her ears as she looked helplessly back at Clark who continued to look worse and worse.

If they would just close that case.

That’s all they needed.

She placed her hand on Clark’s check, feeling the clammy skin against her palm. She stole a glance toward the wooden doors that separated them from the room of mobsters.

“Hey Boss? Yeah we got problems and you’re not going to like it.” Denetto spoke over the phone as the door slammed behind him.

Lois let out a sigh of relief, turning to Clark who seemed to be having an internal battle both emotionally and physically with the presence of not one but *two* different types of Kryptonite only a few feet away. “It’s okay,” she reassured him, patting his chest as she turned to the wooden doors behind her to check for any further sign of the mobsters that had once occupied the room.

She felt a lump in her throat as she stared at the gruesome scene through the blinds. Just a few feet to the left and she or Clark could have been struck by stray bullets. She tightened her hand, covered with her shirt sleeve, on the silver doorknob, turning it as her heart hammered in her chest.

She had to close the case.

She turned back, stealing a glance at Clark who was huddled in the corner, struggling to remain standing. “Just close the case and everything will be fine,” she told herself, stepping out of the closet on her tip-toes, careful not to get too close to the two bodies that were slumped over the other side of the table with blood spatter everywhere.

Careful not to touch anything with her hand she leaned closer, nudging the first case with the Kryptonite closed with her elbow. She then turned to do the same with the other, letting out a sigh of relief when she saw the toxic radiating light disappear.

Everything was going to be okay.

She turned behind her, sighing in relief when she saw Clark straighten up in the corner. She backed away from the gruesome scene, rushing to his side to help him. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“He killed them,” Clark murmured, nodding his head in the direction of the two bodies.

“I know,” Lois whispered, placing a reassuring hand on his

chest. “We’ve got to get you out of here. I don’t know when that Denetto will be back.”

A turbulence of emotions ran across his face. She knew the loss of life was something he would carry with him for years to come. She also knew he’d blame himself even more heavily for not being able to stop it—despite being in a weakened state that would prevent him from doing anything.

“We have to get out of here.” She repeated, tightening her grip on him.

He nodded in acknowledgement, allowing her to help him out of the room. A thousand thoughts raced through her mind but one remained prominent.

They had to get out of here.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Perry White approached the doors to the Daily Planet, preparing for his usual early start when he was met with the First Sargent and his troops at the door. He stared at the small army standing guard and let out a short scoff in disbelief. “You boys lost?”

“Perry White?” the First Sargent asked as he approached.

“That’s right,” Perry acknowledged.

“We’re here to ensure adherence to the new law passed by Presidential decree,” The First Sargent responded.

“New law?” Perry asked, taking the paper that had just been handed to him. He felt his heart stop as he read the official, executive order with President Garner’s signature at the bottom. “There has to be some mistake.”

“No mistake, sir,” the First Sargent responded. “All violators will be charged with treason.” The message was clear. “Do you understand, Mr. White?”

\*\*\*

Lois stole a glance toward Clark as they reached the coffee cart just outside the Daily Planet. The events from last night still tumbled through her mind as she took her place in line with Clark to order her much needed coffee. The blood-curdling screams and maniacal laughter haunted her for most of the night. It had taken nearly a half hour for Johnny Denetto to leave the room so she and Clark could make their escape. By that time, Clark was barely able to walk out of there let alone sneak out of the hotel.

Thankfully Clark’s powers seemed to slowly be returning, but the memory of what he couldn’t do...the lives he couldn’t save because of that deadly rock would haunt him forever. She knew that all too well. Clark had a tendency to obsess about what he couldn’t do.

They approached the counter, and she frowned when she noticed an unfamiliar man standing in the usual barista’s place. Taken aback she stammered, “Um, where’s Jill?”

He didn’t answer, looking to Clark who was standing behind her. “What’ll it be?”

Lois felt a fire in her abdomen at the blatant rude behavior from the new barista and cut in, “Short non-fat mocha, decaf, no foam, no sugar, no whip.”

The barista frowned, not making a move to fill her order and instead turned to Clark once more, “What’ll it be, sir?”

Clark frowned, placing a hand on Lois’ shoulder. “I believe my wife placed her order already. Would you mind filling it?” Though his words were polite enough, his tone was stern and forceful.

The man pasted on a smile and nodded. “Sure, and for you, sir?”

“Grande latte, whole milk, three sugars,” Lois answered for him, crossing her arms over her chest with a bite in her tone.

The barista looked to Clark, and he nodded. “Coming right up.” He rang the order up and read off the total. “That’ll be \$13.50.”

“I’ve got it.” Lois pulled out her credit card and handed it to the man that seemed insistent on ignoring her presence.

He frowned, taking the card from her and ran it through the scanner. Three short beeps escaped the machine, and the barista handed it back to her with a smug expression. “Denied.”

“What?!” Lois shouted. “That’s impossible!”

“Banks don’t lie,” was the smart-aleck response.

Before Lois could argue, Clark cut in, “Just try mine.”

The barista grunted and took the card from Clark to run it. A single beep sounded signaling the approval of the card. Lois gave a look of disgust and grumbled, “It’s the same account.”

A few minutes later the two drinks were pushed toward them, sloshing their contents on the counter of the coffee cart. Clark muttered under his breath, taking the two cups. “Where did they find that guy, an alley in Hobb’s Bay?”

“Somewhere,” Lois muttered, taking a sip of her coffee as they turned the corner to the Planet. As they reached the corner, she noted the line of unmarked vehicles parked outside the front of the Planet and the small group of reporters yelling at what appeared to be a small crowd of New Troy’s National Guard.

“What in the world?” Lois muttered as they reached the edge of the crowd. She spotted Karen in the small group standing in front of the soldiers that were guarding the entrance of the Planet.

“Any guesses on why the National Guard is creating a human blockade in front of the Planet?” Clark wondered aloud.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Lois said, turning to Karen, waving her over. “Karen, what’s going on?”

“They won’t let us in,” Karen responded.

“What?” Lois choked out.

“Go ahead and try,” she pointed to the guards. “They won’t let anyone through.”

Clark shook his head, approaching the guards with Lois beside him and pulled out his press badge. “Excuse me?”

The soldiers remained unmoved as Clark approached and Lois called out, “Would you mind telling us why you’re blocking the entrance to one of the world’s most well-known news outlets?”

“Ma’am, your presence here is illegal,” one of the soldiers remarked, refusing to move. “No women are allowed on the property.”

“Excuse me?” Lois scoffed in disbelief, pulling out her phone to dial Perry. “I don’t know who you think you are or what you think you’re doing, but this is illegal and...” she stopped when she heard Perry’s voice on the other end of the phone, “Perry? You’ve got a small army keeping us from entering the Planet.”

“I know,” came Perry’s response. “A law got passed by the President last night. It’s illegal to employ you, darlin’.”

“What?” Lois breathed out in disbelief.

“Voting, employment, everything. It’s all gone.” Perry let out a disgusted snort. “All of it.”

Lois hung up the phone in disbelief and turned to Clark, in shock from what Perry had just told her.

Clark nudged her arm. “Lois?”

“President Garner signed a law that took away the Nineteenth Amendment,” Lois replied numbly. “Women’s rights are gone.”

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## Chapter 12

Signs reading, ‘*Women’s Rights!*’ along with ‘*Eviction Time*’ and ‘*Impeach*’ filled the screen as the camera panned the crowd of protesters outside the White House. Images of women, young and old, banded together arm in arm as they circled the gates of the capital.

“The country is at a standstill as news of the President’s latest executive order has hit everyone like a firestorm. Never in our nation’s history has an amendment been removed from the Constitution. Every business, home, and family found themselves struggling to adapt to this new world.”

The screen filled with images from local colleges now mostly empty and restaurants, offices, and more understaffed. The news anchor spoke as the images told the story, “No longer do we see

any women in schools, places of business, or even behind the wheel of an automobile. The laws that our ancestors fought diligently for have now been reversed, forcing our country back into a time where equal rights were not considered an inherited part of life that just was but rather something everyone sought to fight for.” The anchor’s face grew grim. “The reasoning behind President Garner’s latest actions remains unknown as the Press Secretary and many of the White House staff have been replaced in light of this new law.”

Unable to take any more, Bruce clicked the remote, turning the television off and ran his other hand across his face to wipe the weariness from it. He glanced down at the blueprints on his desk, reminded of the task at hand. Someone had trapped Metropolis’ Finest underground; for what purpose, he still wasn’t sure. He had sent a small team to the location where Henderson and Zymack were trapped at, hoping to find some clue as to what was to be gained by trapping the officers underground. He had left messages for the Chief of Police, but so far no calls had been returned. His next call was going to be to the DA.

He stood up, walking across the spacious office to where Caitlin Snow was sitting with Henderson and Zymack. He wasn’t sure how long he could keep Caitlin here without raising questions from authorities, but given his investment in security, he hoped by the time anyone with the means to do something about it figured him out he’d have more answers.

“It’s everywhere,” Caitlin remarked solemnly.

“It’s illegal,” Bruce shot back, shaking his head defiantly. “It’s a violation of...”

“Civil rights that were granted with the Nineteenth Amendment,” Henderson cut him off with a look of disgust. “It’s despicable and disgusting and a gross misuse of power, but it is legal.”

Zymack shrugged his shoulders. “We’re in a state of emergency. The President could overturn every single law on the books without Congress’ approval, and it would be legal.”

“So, how do we stop him?” Bruce wondered aloud, more to himself than anyone in the room. “How do we stop this?”

“I don’t know that we can, Bruce,” Caitlin spoke up.

“If this is the President acting on his own, then no there’s no way to stop this.” Henderson cleared his throat. “But he has a career criminal as his second in command and I’ll bet you money that sociopath is up to his neck in all of this.”

“If Luthor was involved, he covered his tracks well,” Bruce remarked bitterly.

“Maybe,” Henderson shrugged, “but the great thing about the White House is there’s always a trail.”

Zymack’s eyebrows rose as he nodded, following Henderson’s train of thought. “All meetings have to be recorded. All conversations. All communication exchanges.”

“Those can be doctored,” Bruce reminded them.

“Still, you have to start somewhere, Bruce,” Caitlin reminded him.

\*\*\*

Numb.

That was the only way to describe the feeling that coursed through Clark Kent’s veins as he set the keys down on the counter. He stole a glance at Lois who had been rendered speechless after the news had broke of what the President had just done.

He wanted more than anything to give into his impulses and fly to the White House to demand answers, but he couldn’t. A grimace crossed his face as he wondered momentarily if he’d ever have the luxury to fly anywhere without landing in prison thanks to the stunt he’d pulled with Luthor. There were so many unanswered questions that remained amidst the turmoil that continued to build throughout the nation.

“So, uh, just keep me posted,” Lois said, crossing her arms over her chest as she turned toward him.

He looked back at her in concern. “Lois, I don’t have to...”

He wanted more than anything to dig into the story here and find out what or who was behind this law change, but he also wanted to be there for Lois. He stood in place, uncertain how to react to her sudden break in silence.

“I’ve got to find out how much damage has been done,” Lois continued, seeming to read his mind. “Just because I can’t *legally* work doesn’t mean I’m going to drop this.”

“I know.” He reached over to cup her cheek.

She gave him a forced smile. “Besides one of us needs to be out there getting some answers. Right now, you’re a little more equipped than I am.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?” he offered. “Perry would understand.”

Lois shook her head. “I know he would, but I don’t think we can afford to wait.”

He nodded, taking in the wavering of her tone as she spoke and leaned in to kiss her. His fingers intertwined themselves in her hair, taking a moment to savor her taste against his lips. The tension and troubles that continued to haunt them both swarmed in the back of his mind as he slowly broke away. Though he hated to leave, he knew she was right. “I’ll let you know as soon as I find out something.”

She nodded, waving him off. “And be careful with...” she gave a flying motion with her hand. “We still haven’t figured that out yet.”

“I know,” he let out a sigh, turning to leave.

The door closed behind him, and he headed toward the Jeep, keys in hand. How so many freedoms could be stripped within less than twenty-four hours still astounded him. Still, he was also baffled at the news that Superman was a wanted fugitive.

He let out a sigh, recalling the memory of Superman’s last conversation with Bruce Wayne—Batman. Lois was right. He did need to get some answers and given the current state of things the best way to find those answers would be someone with connections that were beyond his and Lois’ rolodex. Maybe he could figure out a way to apologize for violating the Dark Knight’s privacy without getting himself arrested in the process.

“What a mess,” he muttered under his breath as he climbed into the driver’s side of the Jeep.

\*\*\*

Lex spun in his chair, gleefully, as he listened to the news of the latest move he had manipulated his President Garner into passing. Now that he had created enough of a rift between Garner’s followers and the President, he could move on to phase two of his plan. Lex Luthor never was one to take second place when first was so much more desirable.

With the new law passed stripping Lois Lane of her independence and forcing her into a miserable life of playing second to, of all people... Kent, he was sure it wouldn’t take long for her to come knocking on his door to ask for his help. When that time came, he would make sure he was the one to restore order and win favor of the people as the one to save them from the wretched President that had robbed them of their freedoms. That and the nuclear war would solidify his place as the true leader of the free world.

No one would be able to stop him once he took the Oval Office.

A light beep reached his ears, and he turned to see the private line on his phone blinking. He reached over to answer, “Yes?”

“Mr. Luthor, I tried to get a name, but he said you would know who it was...” Came Marci’s, his executive assistant, hushed whisper over the line.

“I’ll take the call,” Lex replied smoothly, waiting for her to transfer him through.

A moment later he heard the thick Italian accent on the other line. “I think it’s time you took a tour of the Library of Congress,

Mr. Vice President.”

A chill ran down Lex’s spine when he heard the cold tone from Carmine Falcone. The rules they had set in place had explicitly forbade him from contacting Lex directly... unless something went wrong. Indeed, something had gone wrong for Falcone last night. His son and Dr. Hugo Strange were both found dead, and no one had provided an answer to the mob king as of yet.

“Well, yes, it’s certainly been some time since I’ve had the pleasure,” Lex remarked carefully, aware that his call was being recorded by the White House Secret Service. “When does the next tour start?”

“Half an hour.”

“I’ll see you then.”

\*\*\*

Lucy stared at the eviction notice in her hands, dumbfounded by the bombshell her landlord had dropped in her lap. “I don’t understand. I’ve paid rent on time every month.”

“Look, I like you, kid and if I had my way you’d stay here forever, but this goes way above all of our heads.” Her landlord let out a low sigh as he handed her a check. “It is illegal for me to rent to you. I’m sorry. I wish there were something I could do.”

“Where am I supposed to go?” Lucy asked tearfully.

“I don’t know.” The man’s face fell, revealing how torn he truly felt about his actions. “Look, I’ve included the whole month’s rent you paid along with the deposit. That should help you get setup... somewhere.”

“But I...” she began to argue.

“I’m sorry, kid.” He sighed, and offered a solemn, “really,” as he walked away.

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Lois hung up the phone for what felt like the umpteenth time, reaching yet another automated voicemail from another source that seemed to be displaced from the new law. She set the phone down and stared numbly at the leftover signs from their rush out the door from the morning — coffee mugs by the sink, files by the desk spread out haphazardly. It definitely didn’t look anything like the perfect presentation you saw from June Cleaver. A sick twisting in the pit of her stomach began to churn as she realized that world and her present were no longer so far apart.

She still wasn’t sure what all had been lost in the last twelve-hours since the President had stripped the country of equal rights for women and reduced them to second class citizens.

She couldn’t hold her own bank account. Every cent from her accounts had been removed and all accounts closed. Some sources — the ones she had left anyway — rumored that the money would be given to the closest male relative or spouse. That didn’t help those single with no male relatives.

She couldn’t even drive her own Jeep home. She couldn’t work the job she had sought after and become the best in. She felt like her entire identity had been stripped from her with a swipe of a pen.

She looked around the apartment in despair, uncertain what was left to do. Clark had offered to stay with her, but given he was the only one that could find out who or what was behind this she had urged him to return to the Planet. Now she wasn’t so sure of her decision.

A soft knock on the front door pulled her attention away from her swirling thoughts. Running a weary hand across her face, she went to answer the door. Another tap at the door echoed before she finished turning the lock to release the deadbolt. She pulled the door open. A part of her wanted to be surprised to see the ADA on her doorstep, but something told her Mayson Drake’s presence would be the first of many before the day was over.

“Mayson.” She motioned to the apartment behind her. “Come in.”

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"She's not there, Bruce," Henderson said with a deep sigh, pacing around the penthouse of WayneTech. He glanced over at Bruce who was attempting to call the District Attorney's office once more to get in touch with Mayson Drake. "Why would she be? It's *illegal* for anyone to employ her now."

"Bunch of chauvinistic pigs," Zymack muttered under his breath.

"Warren Zymack, I had no idea you had such a soft spot," Caitlin Snow remarked with a small smile as she sipped her glass of water.

A slight blush crossed his cheeks, and Zymack shrugged. "I have my moments."

Bruce hit the end button on the speakerphone he had been attempting to call Mayson Drake on. "I don't suppose anyone here is on a first name basis with the former ADA."

"The people I know that are would, unfortunately, be in the same boat she's in," Bill Henderson spoke up, taking a sip from his glass.

"Master Wayne?" Lucius Fox's voice came from the corridor leading into the office.

"What is it, Lucius?" Bruce asked, turning to greet Lucius Fox.

"I hate to intrude, but there's an urgent matter regarding the overnight delivery you ordered." Lucius' eyes twinkled as he spoke, catching Bruce's eye.

Bruce caught the hint from Lucius and quickly responded, "Oh!" He turned to his guests. "If you'll excuse me a moment?" Without missing a beat, he followed Lucius down the corridor, waiting until the door closed behind him as he approached the secret panel Lucius was standing in front of. "What is it?"

Lucius cleared his throat. "I had a surprise guest when I was repairing the Batcopter from your altercation with Superman earlier."

"A guest?" Bruce scoffed. "The copter and Batmobile are over five-hundred feet underground, how could anyone possibly...?"

He stopped mid-sentence as the doors slid open. Lucius cleared his throat, pointing to the guest who was standing in the hidden doorway. Bruce's eyes widened when he saw who was waiting for him.

"You."

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Mayson looked around the apartment awkwardly. "So what exactly are we supposed to do, sit here and sip tea while the men work or something?" She grimaced when Lois shot her a glare. "Sorry, I have a really inappropriate sense of humor under times of stress."

"It's fine." Lois shrugged her off. "I don't think they have any self-help books on how to adjust to something like this."

"Not yet," Mayson quipped, "but give them a few weeks and they'll be best sellers."

Lois cracked a smile. "Sad but true."

"See?" Mayson gave her a half-smile. "Joke will be on them when we get this law reversed of course."

"Of course." Lois chuckled. "Of course then someone would have to write the self-help on recovering from the law, to begin with."

"There you go." Mayson chuckled. "It's a conspiracy with the book publishers."

"If only it were that simple," Lois said with a deep sigh.

"Yeah," Mayson agreed quietly, finally speaking up about the pink elephant in the room. "From what I understand the laws are reverting back to well before the amendment. Basically, the right to own land, hold any job and have our own money is a thing of the past."

"So the rumors are true," Lois reasoned aloud.

"One of my contacts at the IRS said all funds are to remain in state custody until a male relative can be found," Mayson said

bitterly. "As if we can't be trusted to manage our own money."

"Or drive our own cars," Lois reminded her.

"All accounts and property have to be in a man's name," Mayson remarked with venom dripping from each word as she spoke.

"So, we're what, second-class citizens? A hood ornament?" Lois scoffed, shaking her head bitterly. "This doesn't make any sense."

"Lois, nothing has made sense about anything President Garner has done in the last six weeks," Mayson reminded her.

"Yeah," Lois remarked softly, recalling aloud, "Vice President Johnson's murder." She frowned, turning to Mayson. "No one ever found the killer, did they?"

"No," Mayson shook her head. "The crime scene was investigated by the NIA, FBI, and Secret Service. No one found anything."

"And then out of the blue Congress resigns....Lex gets named Vice President..." Lois listed off the major events over the last few weeks. "One thing after another."

"Superman goes off the rails," Mayson added with a light chuckle. "Though I have to admit after seeing that arrogant jerk waltz in here like the laws didn't apply to him, I agree wholeheartedly with Superman's choice of residence for him."

Lois let out a light laugh. "Yeah, well, a lot of good that did him."

"Still, it seemed out of character for him," Mayson remarked. "I mean, I may not agree with the way he went about it, but he did have a code. Following the rule of law when capturing criminals." She frowned. "I wonder what pushed him over the edge."

"I don't know." Lois sighed. "That's what Clark and I were going to try and find out, but without any sources or Planet resources at my disposal, I'm kinda stuck."

"I guess the whole not being able to legally work puts a wrench in things for you and your investigations too, huh?" Mayson said, running a hand through her hair.

"Yeah, you could say that." Lois sighed, turning to the former ADA. "So, what brings you here? I mean, besides commiserating in our common debacle with being unemployed."

"Well, before I got to my office and discovered the National Guard parked outside City Hall preventing me from entering the building, I had taken these files home last night." She patted her briefcase. "There's been so much going on. The politics. The criminals escaping. The cyber attacks. Then last night's fire and bombing...They hit Jimmy's apartment complex last night."

"What?" Lois gasped in surprise.

"Thankfully this mysterious red blur or savior or whatever you want to call it was around." Mayson continued, letting out an exasperated sigh. "Everything is just too..."

"Orchestrated?" Lois guessed.

"Convenient," Mayson added. "It's like it's been planned out to the minute detail."

"So you thought...what?" Lois edged carefully.

"I thought I'd check with you and see if maybe we can put our heads together and figure this out."

"But Mayson you're not supposed to be working," Lois reminded her with mock indignation.

"I know, but letting criminals run this city into the ground isn't an option either," Mayson responded with a sigh. "There's no way I'm going to take this indignation lying down, and I doubt you will either."

"The Assistant District Attorney, breaking the law," Lois teased with a mock. "Tsk, tsk, tsk, I just wish I had this on camera." She flashed a quick smile at Mayson. "For posterity of course."

"Former Assistant District Attorney," Mayson reminded her and then quoted Edmund Burke, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Mayson's jaw

tightened. “I refused for evil to triumph. How about you?”

Lois smiled in agreement. “Where do we start?”

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Lucy sat in the back of the taxicab, gazing out the window as they reached the edge of the crowd where the entrance to her school was. Thankfully she had enough cash on her to pay for a storage locker until she could figure out her next move. She had left a message for Jimmy and both her parents but gotten both their answering machines.

The pang in the pit of her abdomen churned as the cab moved closer, seeing the mob of fellow students – female students— outside the university, holding picket signs. Soldiers surrounded the gate with their weapons drawn.

In the back of her mind, she knew it was probably a long shot. If she could not hold onto her job, her apartment—what chance did she have at being able to gain entry to the school she was attending. The taxi cab driver looked back at Lucy sympathetically. “I think we probably need to get out of here, Miss.”

“Yeah,” Lucy agreed, holding back tears.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

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“You,” Bruce breathed out before Clark could say anything.

Clark had gone over and over this plan for the last several hours, uncertain what he would say or how he would explain his actions when he found himself face to face with Bruce Wayne. Given his knowledge of the billionaire’s night hobby, it wasn’t very hard to find the hidden entrance beneath WayneTech that led into a secret warehouse where many of the gadgets Clark had seen around Metropolis were stored. The ultrasonic device that had been used to lure him to WayneTech several weeks ago. The super-powered car dubbed the Batmobile by most media outlets. And in the middle of it, all was Bruce Wayne’s trusted advisor, Lucius Fox.

Bruce frowned, staring up and down, sizing Clark up in the red and blue suit. “Shouldn’t you be avoiding public appearances?”

“I didn’t come in through the front door,” Clark responded carefully, watching as Lucius took a few steps back to move toward the steps leading further into the warehouse. “I wanted to talk...about the other day.”

“Not sure there’s much to talk about,” Bruce said bitterly. “You made your position abundantly clear.”

“I wasn’t myself,” Clark continued, ignoring the billionaire’s hostile attitude. “I never should have...”

“Never should have *what*?” Bruce asked.

“I made a lot of choices I shouldn’t have.” Clark let out a deep sigh. “Worst of all, violating your privacy like that.” His face fell as he finished with a solemn, “I’m sorry.”

Bruce seemed to mull over the apology for a moment and grunted. “I take it you’re no longer embracing your rage with full aggression?”

“No.” Clark clenched his jaw, slumping his shoulders as he frowned solemnly. His actions had been inexcusable. He knew that. Facing up to the actions leading up to his discovery of Bruce’s alter-ego wasn’t easy, but it was necessary. He owed it to Bruce to own up for his actions—regardless of what had caused them.

A silent lull fell between the two of them and Clark looked up, waiting for Bruce to respond. The billionaire’s square jaw shifted, and Bruce then asked, “And Luthor?”

“Luthor landing himself behind bars again wouldn’t make me lose any sleep, but I was out of line.” Clark’s gaze fell, mulling over his actions in kidnapping Luthor and delivering him to the prison Luthor had once occupied. Though he knew he probably should make amends for his actions the idea of apologizing to Luthor of all people made him want to crawl even further beneath the imaginary rock he wanted to hide under. He still wasn’t sure

how to fix things with the President—or if he could.

“I wouldn’t necessarily go that far, Kent.” Bruce’s eyes twinkled and his mouth twitched as the name escaped his lips.

Clark froze, unable to move or respond at the name drop Bruce Wayne had carefully made. Did he deny it? Confirm it? His heart pounded in his chest as he stood there, frozen in place, unsure how to respond.

Bruce thankfully took pity on him and let out a sigh. “Admission is the first step...or so I’m told.” Bruce cracked a half-smile at Clark and then continued, “I get it. You don’t want anyone knowing there’s a real person under the cape and ‘S’ just like I don’t want anyone knowing there’s a billionaire under the cowl.”

Clark frowned, feeling his defenses slowly begin to waver as Bruce’s words hit him. He wanted so badly to deny it and run away but he knew that wasn’t something he could do. After what he’d done –invading the man’s privacy and spying beneath Bruce’s cowl to find his identity –he couldn’t justify the denial or any attempt to leave. If Bruce *did* know who he was then that meant everyone he cared about could be at risk.

Lois’ suspicions about Jimmy knowing his secret weren’t something that would keep him up at night, but this man he still knew so little about? That knowledge dredged up every fear and insecurity from his youth. Jimmy he could trust. He knew without a doubt his young friend wouldn’t betray him. But Bruce? He wasn’t sure where his loyalties lied or if push came to shove he wouldn’t find himself at the billionaire’s mercy. After all, what did he really know about him? Though the billionaire and he shared similar extracurricular activities –fighting criminals with an alter-ego—he still wasn’t convinced he could trust him with what Bruce was searching for.

An admission.

“I pride myself in being a very thorough investigator — especially when it comes to business relationships. I never would have trusted you or Ms. Lane without doing my research first.” Bruce continued his narrative, seeming to enjoy the upper hand he had at his fingertips. “It’s really a genius disguise. No mask. No one looks to try and find the man under the cape.” Bruce stopped and turned to him. “I’d like to think we’re even. You know my secret and I know yours.” The corners of Bruce’s mouth twitched, and a triumphant smirk spread across the billionaire’s face. Did he have to look so cocky?

It was true. He did know Bruce’s secret, but did that mean he had to admit to his own? It wasn’t just himself at risk here. It was Lois. It was his parents. It was everyone he cared about. It was his entire life and their lives too. Yet, even with this knowledge, he couldn’t help but notice the lack of anxiety from the billionaire. Bruce surely had to hold onto the same fears and uncertainties, but he didn’t seem to be bothered by the fact that Clark knew his secret identity. It couldn’t be easy. He had heard the stories and read the headlines like anyone else. There were plenty of people within his inner circle that could be used as leverage.

“You seem pretty sure of yourself there, Mr. Wayne,” Clark responded in an even, measured tone, careful not to give an admission just yet.

“Are you actually going to try to deny it?” Bruce scoffed with a light chuckle. The billionaire wasn’t backing down as he held up his hand, ticking off the points for Clark that had given him away. “Clark Kent arrives in Metropolis and one week later, Superman makes his debut.” Bruce’s eyebrow raised slightly and he asked, “Coincidence?”

“So?” Clark recrossed his arms over his chest, feeling the prickle of uncertainty tingle on the back of his neck.

“Phenomenal and supernatural occurrences were reported all around the world—all linking to the same location and same time when *you*, Kent, were present.” Bruce arched his eyebrow at Clark.

Clark looked away, unsure how to respond as Bruce continued, “Not to mention that a good seventy percent of Superman exclusives were covered by the Daily Planet...until about nine months ago. I’m guessing that’s around the same time you clued your wife in on the secret.”

Bruce paused for dramatic effect as Clark wracked his brain, trying to come up with some plausible explanation that didn’t reek of desperation. He was caught. He knew it, but admitting the truth wasn’t something he was ready to do.

“She seems to be a bit sharper than you, no offense.” Bruce flashed a teasing grin at him. He was quiet for a moment and then added, “Look, I get it,” Bruce said gently. “You have family, friends, a life you don’t want tainted by this...other life you lead.” Bruce let his words hang in the air before he continued, “But you don’t need to worry. I’m not going to tell anyone. I have my own secrets that I’d prefer to remain hidden. I have people I care about that would be used as leverage if it ever got out I was Batman.”

Maybe it was the tone of Bruce’s voice. Maybe it was the pressure of literally being a man on the run while the entire world seemed up in flames. Maybe it was the slight humor Bruce sprinkled his speech with. Or maybe it was the aching need he felt to connect with someone that knew the struggles and pitfalls of carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders and leading a double life. Whatever it was that finally broke the barrier, Clark found himself unable to deny the revelation any longer as he finally responded with a single head nod, not making any attempt to vocalize the confirmation he gave.

“You really should have left a bigger time gap between your move to Metropolis and Superman’s debut,” Bruce said nonchalantly, leaning his back against the wall behind him as he crossed his arms over his chest. His face remained stoic as he commented, “That was the biggest clue.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” Clark responded carefully, finding his voice at last.

“Right, Prometheus.” Bruce frowned, glancing downward before letting out a long breath and adding, “Luthor again.”

“Yeah,” Clark nodded in agreement, still reeling from the fact that he was actually having this conversation with Bruce Wayne.

“He’s not going to stop,” Bruce remarked bitterly. “You know that, right? First the prison break, then the White House, and after the stunt he pulled the other day with your wife, it’s only a matter of time...”

Clark’s head jerked up sharply as he barked out, “What *stunt*?” A thousand thoughts ran through his mind as he racked his brain trying to connect the onslaught of events that had taken place, wondering which one Bruce could be referring to. But Bruce had mentioned a stunt with ‘his wife...’

Bruce ran a hand through his dark locks and quickly interjected, “I’m sorry. I thought you knew... but to be fair she probably didn’t have much of a chance to tell you.”

“Tell me *what*?” Clark pressed, growing exasperated by the second as he took a step forward. His mind continued to jump from one scenario to another as he waited impatiently for Bruce to tell him what Luthor had done to Lois. She hadn’t mentioned anything. Was that because it was too awful for her to talk about?

“What did Luthor *do*?” Clark demanded, hearing the edge in his voice as he spoke.

Bruce let out a heavy sigh and dug his hands in his pockets as he paced in front of Clark. “It’s not what happened. It’s what *could* have happened,” Bruce explained, stopping mid-pace in front of Clark. He lifted his hands out of his pockets and gave air quotes as he mentioned the White House’s Secret Service agents. “‘*Secret Service*’ made a pit stop during the President and Vice President’s visit to Metropolis.”

“What kind of pitstop?” Clark growled out, growing more and more impatient with Bruce’s need to draw out his explanation.

Bruce let out a heavy sigh, beginning to pace once more as he

shook his head. “You’ve got to give Luthor credit for one thing. He’s certainly consistent.” A grunt escaped Bruce’s throat as he added, “Somethings never change, right? Stalking your wife and threatening your wife seem right up there with him drawing a line in the sand with...” Bruce’s eyes did a little dance as he looked across Clark’s chest where the Superman emblem was printed. “... Superman.”

“I can handle Luthor,” Clark countered, readjusting his arms across his chest. “What did he do to Lois?”

“Same old, same old I suppose,” Bruce explained with a grimace, before adding a quick, “Sort of. This newfound power has definitely gone to his head. He and his Secret Service were refusing to leave—gloating about being untouchable and some other nonsense.”

Clark felt his fists clench and unclench as Bruce spoke. He wanted more than anything to fly into the White House and give Luthor a piece of his mind, but he knew he couldn’t. Not with the current state things were in. He couldn’t get within the same block as Luthor without having the President release the entire Army on him. He *was* a fugitive after all.

A smirk crossed Bruce’s face as he continued, “She wasn’t backing down though.”

“She wouldn’t.” Clark chuckled softly.

“Anyway, I moved in when I overheard the request for backup on the police frequency.” A half-smile crossed Bruce’s face and he winked. “I don’t think Luthor knew how to handle the fictitious Batman standing in front of him and threatening him. It scared him enough to back off and leave.”

Clark couldn’t help but let out a chuckle at that comment. The image of Luthor being stared down by Bruce in the cowl and cape and trying to rationalize the presence of Batman was hilarious. Every second Luthor spent withering beneath the billionaire’s gaze was well earned. Clark looked up, meeting Bruce’s gaze.

He held Bruce’s gaze, tightening his jaw as he cleared his throat to ask, “*When* was this?”

“Right before you dropped Luthor off at the prison,” Bruce responded with a frown.

“Of course it was,” Clark muttered, running his hand over his face, burying his face in his hands. He could feel the heat that had flooded through his veins at the mention of Lois being threatened begin to fade. A thousand scenarios ran through his mind of what might have happened had Bruce not stepped in when he did. Could he have been waking up from his rage state with Lois kidnapped...or worse? He shook his head, forcing the worst of the scenarios out of his mind, attempting to clear his mind of the anger and panic that had been filling it moments ago. He looked up, meeting Bruce’s tentative gaze.

It was strange how quickly the mistrust and anxiety seemed to fade the more they talked. Though he wouldn’t go so far as to call them friends yet, Bruce’s willingness to step in and help Lois went a long way to bridging the gap from strangers to a possible comradery. After all, they both shared the desire to help those in need.

There was something to be said about comradery among soldiers who fought together in war. Though this was remarkably different he couldn’t help but feel the iron gates he’d put up due to his distrust of Bruce in his first meeting begin to waver.

“Thank you,” Clark said softly, unable to find the right words, “for helping Lois when I *couldn’t*.” The words felt lame as they escaped his lips but then again, no words seemed to fit the gratitude he felt at that moment. A pang hit his chest as the reality of just how deadly his war with Luthor could have gotten hit him.

“It’s what I do,” Bruce said with a shrug.

“Thank you,” Clark repeated, unable to think of anything else to say.

A long silence fell between them. Clark had a thousand questions he wanted to ask but he still wasn’t sure how much he

really wanted to know...or should know. It felt strange standing here, knowing that Bruce Wayne – a man he barely knew—held the power to destroy his life, and he his.

“Does this mean you’ll quit holding a grudge against me for the ultrasonic sound wave stunt?” Bruce asked, clearing his throat as he looked back at Clark.

“Depends,” Clark raised an eyebrow at him in a mock-challenge before adding, “Are you planning on using that device again?”

“Not unless you make me,” Bruce cocked an eyebrow at Clark, broadening his smirk into a grin.

Clark chuckled, feeling the last of the mega-ton weight he’d been carrying for the last hour disappear. He still wasn’t completely sure about the billionaire, but he had to start somewhere. For now, he was going to choose to trust him. He held out his hand to shake Bruce’s. “Consider it forgotten.”

Bruce took his hand to shake. “So...friends?”

Clark cracked a smile. “We’ll see.”

Bruce chuckled with an amused shake of the head. “I’ll take that, I guess.” He let out a deep sigh. “So, what do you think about maybe putting our heads together to stop this sociopath from running the country into the toilet? I could use the help.”

“So could I,” Clark responded with a worried expression.

Bruce motioned for him to follow him toward the stairs Lucius had disappeared down and he followed.

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Governor Wade slammed the door behind him, hearing the shouts coming from outside his office and from the streets that were filled with protestors. “I’m gonna run Garner up the flagpole when I get my hands on him,” he muttered under his breath.

“Careful, Governor, that is the acting President,” came a voice in the corner.

Wade turned to see none other than Ron Troupe in his office with a scowl on his face and tape recorder in his hand.

“No comment, Troupe,” Wade spat out on instinct.

“Really? The governor has no comment on why the President – a close and personal friend of the governor’s—would do a complete one-eighty on his policies and stances?” Troupe pressed. “You vouched for him—”

“I have nothing to—”

“You told the American people that this man would have their backs—”

“This isn’t the man I voted for!”

“He’s done nothing but undermine the Constitution and the values with which this country was founded on—”

“He is the President!”

“The President that stripped half its citizens of their rights and locked them in by closing all the borders!”

“I had nothing to do with that!”

“He’s a traitor!” Ron shouted out at the governor at the same time Wade spat back, “I know!”

Ron frowned back at Wade as the governor let out a shaky breath. “I know. Don’t you think I know?” He met Ron’s eyes. “This isn’t the man I know.”

Ron Troupe’s shoulders slumped as he stared back at Governor Wade, seeming to finally hear him over the arguments. “Then who is he?”

“I don’t know,” Wade muttered out in disgust. “I don’t know.”

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Strewn across the dining room table was a large stack of files. Propped up on the kitchen counter was a large board. Images from both Mayson’s and Lois’ files were tacked up showing the connection from one case to another. Post-its were pinned between the images with theories on the connections. On the other side of the room was a large dry erase board where Lois had listed out every case she and Clark had worked on connected to Intergang and Lex Luthor—including the ones from before his arrest. Those

were connected only from conversations Lex had had with Clark.

“Okay, so what do we got here?” Lois said, taking a step back from the board to take it all in.

“Lex Luthor, criminal master-mind gets President Garner to pardon him for all his crimes.” Mayson read off.

“The big question is how?” Lois reminded her.

“We know Luthor was responsible for organizing crime in Metropolis. One of the former Metros came forward this year and admitted the Toasters was a ploy to get the land for cheap and push the Metros out.”

“Waterfront property for pennies,” Lois remarked bitterly.

“Everything he does comes down to ego,” Mayson observed.

“His name. His power. The guy’s an egomaniac.”

“Tell me about it,” Lois muttered to herself. “Okay, so Lex ‘dies’ and the Vale brothers build Metallo.”

“Someone steals Metallo,” Mayson continued for her.

“Right under STAR Labs’ nose.” Lois pointed to the picture of Officer Sahid. “And somehow we know Officer Sahid was connected to either the stealing of confidential STAR Labs files or the kidnapping of Metallo.”

“Or both,” Mayson countered.

“What about Metallo could be so valuable to Lex Luthor?”

Mayson wondered aloud, pacing in front of the board.

Lois knew the answer, but despite the growing comradery between her and Mayson, she couldn’t divulge the missing piece of the puzzle to her. Not without talking to Clark first. “Maybe it has something to do with it being a part of LexLabs technology? Emmet Vale did use to work for him.”

“Maybe Vale reported directly to Luthor off the books, you think?” Mayson toyed with the idea and nodded. “Could be. The guy’s got a control issue that’s for sure.” Mayson jotted another note down and pinned it on the board with a question mark ‘Stolen idea?’ then smoothed it on the board with her palm.

“So, this Dr. Gretchen Kelly resurrected Lex,” Lois said with a heavy sigh.

“Bill mentioned her name when he was being treated at Shady Brooke.” Mayson’s eyes lit up.

“Yes, Bill Henderson’s amnesia,” Lois frowned, shaking her head. “And double.”

“Clone,” Mayson corrected. “Let’s just call it what it is.”

“Fine, clone.” Lois corrected. “Bill gets cloned...by Lex or Intergang?”

“My money’s on Lex Luthor, but I wouldn’t put anything past Intergang either,” Mayson said with a heavy sigh.

“So, we’ve got a decorated officer that’s been cloned...acting on behalf of one of these criminals.”

“Prison riot that let Intergang members and one person connected to Lex Luthor out.” Mayson drew a line from Rollie Vale’s mug shot to Lex Luthor.

“All at the same time as this virus that wiped out the nation,” Lois nodded.

“Cyber attack on STAR Labs gives the names of all NIA agents and their families to the Dark Web.” Mayson drew a line from Harley Quinn to a big question mark on the board.

“Then there’s the politics.” Lois drew a line from the question mark to a picture of all the Congressmen and Congresswomen that had resigned. “How does almost an entire sitting group of Congress resign all in the same day?” She twisted her mouth. “I’m voting Intergang on that one.”

“I don’t know,” Mayson argued. “When has Intergang been interested in anything but control and mayhem. I think it might be Lex Luthor. Look at all that had to fall in place for him to be confirmed. He had to know that Congress would confirm him.”

“What better way to do that than to replace them all?” Lois wondered aloud. “But we’re talking a lot of reach. Do we really think his reach is that far outside of Metropolis?”

“I don’t know,” Mayson said with a heavy sigh. “We still can’t

answer the burning question here though.”

“What’s that?” Lois asked.

“How did he get his claws on Garner?” Mayson asked. “How is he controlling him?”

Lois let out a long sigh. “He’s got something, the question is what?”

Mayson jotted down the last note and pinned it on the board, drawing it back to the NIA leak. “Mysterious savior saving agents and their families.”

“Who is she?” Lois agreed, not realizing she’d said ‘she’ aloud until it was too late.

“She?” Mayson asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lois tapped her hand on the file in her hand, recalling the footage she and Clark had found at the train station. Just before the mysterious woman—or savior as she was being called—appeared there was a red blur. Much like Mayson had mentioned was seen outside Jimmy’s apartment before it exploded.

She let out a long sigh. “Clark and I have something that might help identify this savior—but I’m not sure if I want it to go public.”

“Since when does Lois Lane hesitate on front page headlines?” Mayson teased in a surprised tone.

“This is bigger than a story, Mayson,” Lois said softly.

Mayson nodded. “I understand.” She was quiet for a moment and then asked, “Who do you think she is?”

“I don’t know, but I hope she’s on our side,” Lois responded solemnly.

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### Chapter 13

The newsroom Clark was used to entering seemed duller and quieter without Lois there. Maybe it was just the knowledge that he knew she couldn’t be there. He felt a hard lump in his throat as he spotted the brown box that had been placed on her and several other female staffer’s desks. He spotted Perry in his office arguing with two large men in suits. He didn’t dare try to overhear the conversation for fear that it would only fuel his anger.

His visit with Bruce had given him an idea of where to go next. Knowing what had been done without his knowledge to the Metropolis SWAT Team and Bill Henderson further solidified his anger at Luthor. Bruce was putting together a team to explore the tunnels and hopefully find something they could use to connect Luthor to their kidnapping.

He still wasn’t sure, though, what good that would do given the hold Luthor appeared to have over the President. It just didn’t make sense. Nothing in Garner’s past would even hint at him being capable of such atrocities yet here they were living in a world where his wife and every other female within the country’s borders had been downgraded to second-class citizens. It took everything in him not to react. He wanted to throttle them and demand answers just like the protesters that were now marching in the streets.

“Clark, where’ve you been?” Ron Troupe called out, walking up behind him.

Clark turned to the political analyst, unsure how to respond to him as Ron reached over to pat him on the shoulder. He caught the sympathetic expression on the young man’s face and momentarily wondered how much trouble he’d be in if he just bolted and worked the rest of the day from home. He cast a glance over the newsroom, and responded to Ron with a defeated sigh,

“Anywhere but here.”

He wanted to be anywhere but here at the moment.

Surrounded by his co-workers that offered sympathetic stares while walking on eggshells around their editor. He needed to get some answers from Perry and hopefully have some semblance of a lead to fill in the gaping holes in his theory of how or why this was happening. He could speculate all day long, but he still lacked the missing pieces to tie everything back to where he was sure

everything stemmed from.

Luthor was up to his neck in this mess. He was sure of it, but he couldn’t prove it. That seemed to be the underlying theme with everything. He had his theories, but he couldn’t prove anything.

He spotted Jimmy walking near the elevators with his mobile phone tucked in between his shoulder and ear as he continued his conversation. The worry on the young man’s face told him something was wrong. Without realizing it, his super-hearing tuned into the conversation, picking up his sister-in-law’s voice as she cried over the phone.

“I just don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to go…”

“I know,” Jimmy said with a deep sigh. “It’s fine. We’ll put my name on the lease and figure everything else out after that.”

“We shouldn’t have to,” Lucy’s response came.

“No, but we can’t have you being homeless either.” Jimmy’s voice was quiet as he added, “Listen, Luce; I’ve got to go. I’ll catch up with you tonight. I sent a courier to the café with the key.”

“Thanks, Jimmy.”

Clark ran a hand through his hair, turning to excuse himself from Ron. He caught Jimmy as he stepped into the bullpen, placing a hand on Jimmy’s shoulder. “Hey, Jimmy.”

“Hey, CK,” Jimmy barely looked up from the papers in his hand as he walked to his desk. “Where you been?”

“Uh…” Clark was caught off guard by the question. He could answer, or he could test Lois’ theory that his young friend knew more than he was letting on. The choice was up to him.

“I had a… Cheese of the Month delivery,” Clark responded, waiting for any reaction that would tell him his friend didn’t know he masqueraded in a red cape and ‘S’ in his spare time.

He didn’t even blink.

Jimmy just nodded and smiled, patting him on the shoulder. “Well, good to have you back.” He pointed toward the television where coverage of the protests outside the White House was beginning to grow. “We certainly need you.”

Clark bit his lower lip, closing his eyes as the truth hit him for the second time that day. For the second time, he was confronted with someone outside of his immediate family knowing the truth he had kept hidden for so long. Unlike before where he was tempted to deny or divert Bruce from the truth—this time he was prepared. He calmly placed a hand on Jimmy’s shoulder. “We need to talk.”

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Jimmy stared at the table in front of him, uncertain why Clark had ushered him inside the conference room. He looked around the room, waiting for his friend to speak up. Maybe it was about the new law that had been passed. Maybe it was about the several stories he and Lois were juggling and trying to do research on. Maybe it was about Lucy.

He wasn’t sure.

He watched as Clark paced around the room, closing the blinds one by one. His jaw tightened as he contemplated what Clark could have to talk to him about that made him so nervous. A sideways glance at his friend gave him his answer.

“How long have you known?” Clark finally asked.

“Known?” Jimmy stared blankly at him, unsure if he should respond.

It took him a moment to connect the dots to the truth he’d unearthed inadvertently. He watched in rapt attention as Clark let out a long breath and removed his glasses, setting them on the table in front of him. It felt strange to stare at the mixed image of the superhero everyone adored and his friend and co-worker.

Jimmy let out a soft sigh. “That obvious, huh?” He didn’t wait for a response and instead reassured his friend, “I would never tell anyone.”

“I know that, Jimmy,” Clark said carefully. “I would have probably told you eventually.” There was a silence between them,

and then Clark asked, “You remembered what happened when you were under the Wilder’s control, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy nodded, feeling the weight of the world come off his shoulders as he stared back at Clark. “At first I thought I was going crazy and then it started to make sense...and then the pieces just sorta fit.”

“Any reason why you never brought it up?” Clark asked.

“I figured you’d bring it up if you wanted me to know.”

Jimmy cracked a smile. His face fell slightly as he looked out toward the newsroom where the remaining reporters stood around the television set, watching the chaos unfold. “We could really use Superman right now.”

“But thanks to that stunt the other day he can’t help, Jimmy.”

Clark let out a long breath. “I don’t think he could—even without the fugitive status.”

“What happened?” Jimmy asked, curious to finally have a chance to ask the burning question that had been weighing on his mind since the incident of Superman being declared an enemy of the United States.

“I honestly don’t know.” Clark explained carefully, “One minute I was tending to a rescue, the next minute I was waking up at home with jagged memories of everything I’d done the previous day.”

A silent lull fell between them, and Jimmy broke the silence adding, “I covered for you. That’s how Lois figured it out.”

“Yeah,” Clark nodded.

“How’s she doing?” Jimmy asked curiously.

Clark shook his head. “How would you be?”

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The lock turned on the deadbolt and Clark turned the knob to the front door, pushing it open as he juggled the three boxes of files he’d brought home from the Planet. His other arm held Chinese Takeout from Lois’ favorite place in Bangkok.

“Lois?” he called out to her, setting the boxes down in the foyer as he shut the door behind him. He turned to the living room where he found Lois in the corner, staring at a large board propped against the wall and post it notes that were surrounding the board with questions. “I’d ask how your day was, but I guess I don’t have to,” he observed, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey,” she flashed him a weak smile and leaned up to kiss him. “I tried to order dinner, but all the usual places are closed due to them having to let go of most of their staff.”

Clark squeezed her arm and held up the bag in his other hand. “I had a feeling that might be an issue, so I went international.”

A defeated sigh escaped her lips, and she rested her head against his chest. “So, Superman’s been reduced to food delivery?”

“Well, given his current status is persona non grata in the United States I didn’t want to risk flying in the suit,” Clark explained, pointing to his dark attire.

“Lex Luthor, Vice President and Superman, a fugitive,” Lois muttered aloud with a look of disdain as she turned her attention to the board. “How did everything get so screwed up?”

“How are you holding up?” Clark asked, uncertain if he wanted the answer.

“I’ve gone from uncontrollable rage to furious and frustrated,” she said with a bitter expression. “Every time I think about it...”

“I know,” Clark murmured leaning over to kiss her forehead.

She looked down, contemplating her words for a moment before meeting his gaze. “That lo-mein smells amazing.”

“I got some dumplings and wontons too,” he said, holding up the bag for her inspection.

“My hero,” Lois tugged his arm with her to the kitchen. “I’m starving, and that food is getting cold.”

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Lex looked around the narrow walkways with his Secret Service a few feet away taking in the majestic columns and earthy

scents of worn pages from the books that filled the handcrafted bookshelves. Finally, he reached the sign he was looking for. The visitor’s tour of the library of Congress. There at the edge of the crowd was the man he’d been searching for. Though you couldn’t recognize him from his appearance. Carmine Falcone was dressed in a blue polo shirt and tan dress slacks, appearing to be just any other visitor.

Lex looked back at his Secret Service agents, nodding to them. “I appreciate the spirit, but given where we are I think a little distance would be wise, don’t you?”

“Of course, Mr. Vice President.” The agent nodded.

After ensuring the agent had indeed hung back, Lex took his place at the end of the tour next to Carmine. “A bit public for a last-minute meeting.”

“That’ll be the least of your worries if you don’t take care of things,” Carmine shot back bitterly, slapping a copy of the STAR across Lex’s chest.

Lex looked down to see the article on the front page under the coverage of Garner’s new law. He let out a sigh when he saw the picture of Alberto Falcone and the headline, ‘Falcone Family Bloodline Ends!’

“I’m not sure what this has to do with me, Carmine,” Lex responded slowly.

“The support you gained is only because of me, Lex,” Carmine threatened. “Intergang needs to be shut down. There’s only room for one criminal organization in this country.”

“I can’t just shut Church down, Carmine, it doesn’t work like that,” Lex hissed. “He knows too much.”

“You’ll figure something out, or the next headline will be reading your obituary,” Carmine threatened.

“Is that a threat?” Lex challenged.

“Take it however you like. I put you here, and I can take you down,” Carmine snarled. “Clear enough for you?”

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Clark set the last stack of dishes in the cabinet as Lois wiped the counter down. He closed the cabinet and turned his attention to Lois as she tossed the last of the soiled paper towels in the garbage. “I think that’s the last of it,” he said.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed, running her hands up and down her arms. Her gaze shifted once more to the living room where her wall of questions stood on display.

Clark walked up behind her, placing both hands on her shoulders. “We’ll figure this out, Lois. we always do.”

“When?” Lois asked, turning to face him. “He’s out of control. What’s next? World War Three? Another Holocaust?” Tears trickled down her cheeks as the frustrations from the day made their way out. “I have gone from being a respected professional to a second-class citizen demoted to being a helpless invalid that can’t be trusted to drive, or manage money without my husband’s okay.”

“Lois, you are a lot of things, but helpless is not one of them,” Clark reassured her, pulling her close to him.

“I’m *furious*,” she fumed against his chest.

“I know. I am too, but unfortunately, thanks to Superman’s stunt a few days ago, I’m limited on my options for how to handle this. I can’t just go storming into the White House and demand answers without leaving you high and dry.”

“As tempting as that idea is, it’s probably not a good idea to storm into the lion’s den without a plan.” A small smile crossed her face. “Metropolis is running low on heroes at the moment.”

“They’ve still got the tenacious Lois Lane.” He smiled back at her. “I wouldn’t be able to do any of this without you, Lois.”

“I just don’t know how much more I can take.” Her voice caught slightly as she spoke. “It’s not easy...being forced on the sidelines like this.”

“You’re not on the sidelines, Lois,” Clark whispered, cupping her cheek. “We’re a team. No matter what. I don’t care what that

law says. It will always be Lane and Kent.”

She cracked a smile at him, wiping the tear from the corner of her eyes. “I know you think that, and it’s sweet, but Clark look around. I can’t even drive my own Jeep. Every cent I worked for is gone. It’s like my voice has been snuffed out with a swipe of a pen and…”

She stopped, freezing mid-sentence as the words escaped her lips. He ran a hand across her cheek, gently trying to coax out of her whatever had clicked in her mind.

“Like a swipe of a pen,” she repeated the words once more, running her hands across her face and stepping away from him as she mumbled, “God, this is all my fault. I never should have…”

“What?” Clark asked, not following her train of thought.

“That afternoon…when you were…whatever it was that had taken over and made you act so crazy…” she trailed off and then quickly routed herself back to her train of thought. “Anyway, Lex and his Secret Service goons were here when Mayson and I stopped by to pick up some files,” Lois muttered bitterly.

“Here?” Clark asked, careful not to overreact as he waited for Lois to finish retelling the events he’d been updated on by Bruce.

“I’m sorry, I know I should have mentioned it earlier. There’s just been so much going on, and…it slipped my mind,” Lois said hurriedly, beginning to pace in a small circle as she spoke.

“It’s fine, really,” Clark reassured, placing a hand on her shoulder. “How did he get in?”

Lois continued to ramble as she paced. “He paid the landlord a visit and got him to let him in.”

“He did *what*?” Clark could feel his anger fester further at the knowledge that not only had Luthor been here in their home – waiting for Lois to arrive—but he’d been given entry by someone they had trusted. “I swear if Luthor laid one hand…”

“I’m fine, really,” she reassured him. “He just wanted to gloat, really, and I think to test what he could get away with. He was spewing threats about being able to change any law he wanted with the swipe of a pen…” Lois ran a hand across her face. “I might have thrown a retort back saying I could basically do the same thing.”

Clark chuckled, unable to help himself as he stared back at Lois. Though she was probably petrified, facing down Luthor, she never would show it. Leave it to Lois to threaten Luthor right back. “We can stop him, Lois,” he reassured. “You got him to back down.”

“Sorta,” Lois shrugged. “Your friend…that Bat guy showed up and scared him off.”

“Batman,” Clark corrected.

“Yeah,” Lois shrugged her shoulders. “I think he spooked Lex.”

“Good,” Clark wrapped a protective arm around her.

“Good?” Lois looked back at him in amusement. “I thought you weren’t sure about him.”

“I’m not,” he said evasively, lowering his head and burying his face in her hair. He needed to tell her everything. Bruce had given him the okay to share his secret with the condition it was only with Lois, and it didn’t make it into the papers. They needed all the help they could get if they were going to stop Luthor.

Lois, being Lois, quickly picked up on his hesitancy. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“So…remember when Superman went a little haywire…”

Clark grew quiet for a moment, trying to formulate the words he wanted to convey without alarming Lois any further than she was.

“How could I forget?” She gave him a teasing grin, tracing an invisible ‘S’ across his chest. “It’s the greatest hits for the week on the 24-hour news circuit.”

“I know,” Clark said shamefully, raking a hand through his hair. “Superman may have crossed a line he shouldn’t have.”

“May have?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Definitely,” he corrected, leaning back on the edge of the

couch. “I never should have done it.

He was just trying to knock some sense into me,” Clark admitted sheepishly, “but I couldn’t or *wouldn’t* listen.”

“Who?”

“Bruce…well, Batman.”

“I’m sorry. *What*?” Lois’ eyes widened in surprise.

“Bruce Wayne *is* Batman. I x-rayed his cowl,” Clark admitted, and before Lois could respond, he quickly berated himself for her. “I know. I know. It was a *huge* mistake. I still can’t believe I did that, but then again there’s a lot of things I did that day I can’t believe.”

“You…*what*?” Lois’ jaw dropped in surprise, frozen in place as the shock seemed to hit her like a ton of bricks.

He quickly took advantage of the shock and continued, “I talked to him this afternoon. He agreed that considering everything it was important I let you know.”

“Things?” Lois asked, struggling to find the words she was searching for.

Clark glanced down then, back at her face. “Things like…he knows I’m Superman.” Before she could react, he quickly added, “And no I didn’t tell him. He figured it out…I wasn’t the best with the excuses in the beginning if you remember. He’s known for a few years apparently.”

“Bruce…as in Bruce Wayne—the billionaire that runs Wayne Enterprises is really—Batman?” Lois asked, finally finding the words she’d been searching for.

“Yeah,” Clark nodded, looping his arm around her waist and taking comfort in the closeness.

“This just keeps getting better and better,” she muttered in disbelief. “Well, that explains his insistence on us covering those puff pieces on him.”

“I don’t think he’ll do anything with the information. I know his secret, and he knows mine,” Clark explained. “but for the moment I’m okay I guess.”

“You guess?” Lois asked with a half-smile.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “It’s just a lot to take in. Jimmy knowing—I can handle that. I know Jimmy. I trust him.”

“But you don’t trust Bruce,” Lois guessed.

“I don’t know,” Clark admitted honestly. “I want to. I just don’t know.”

Lois smiled back at him, leaning in to kiss him. “Well, then I guess we fake it until you do. It is in your best interest to trust him.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, running his hand through her hair. “Oh, one more thing.”

“I don’t think I can take any more big surprises,” Lois muttered, resting her head in her hands.

“It’s not a big surprise,” he said carefully. “I talked with Jimmy earlier. He and Lucy are moving in together.”

Lois nodded and sighed. “Not because they want to but because they have to. I talked to Lucy earlier. She said Jimmy had to put his name on her lease in order to keep her from being evicted. Thankfully Ron was able to hold her apartment for her until she could figure stuff out.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Clark said with a deep sigh.

Lois turned to look at him, the silent question on her face as she crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for him to continue. “So, did you and Jimmy talk about anything else?”

“And you were right,” Clark said, running a hand across her cheek. “He knows I’m Superman.” Lois bit her lower-lip, opening her mouth to ask her next question and he rested his forehead against hers. “It’s fine, really. He took it a lot better than I ever would have guessed. He figured it out and was ready to remain quiet about it until one of us clued him in.”

Lois gave him a watery smile. “That was really lucky.”

“I know,” Clark let out a shaky breath.

“That’s a relief, I guess,” Lois sighed, running a hand through

her hair. “Still, not exactly planned.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Clark said with a heavy sigh. “I would have preferred to have decided to let Jimmy in on the secret myself—not have him find out by accident.”

“Well, I guess it could be worse,” she murmured, turning to face him. “I think,” her gaze shifted to the board on display.

“They never did find that guy, did they?” Clark pointed at the board to the picture of Vice President Johnson with a sticky note next to it noting, ‘*Assassin at Large?*’

“Yeah, there’s been no mention of any attempt to investigate his murder,” Lois said sadly.

“Well, why would there be?” Clark asked, gesturing to the events Lois had marked right after it. “Cyber attack, prison riot with criminals roaming the city, Congress basically replaced... The entire country has had crisis after crisis.”

“And now everyone’s pretty much forgotten about it,” Lois muttered, shaking her head.

“And you have President Garner basically doing whatever Luthor says.” Clark pointed to the subsequent notes calling out different decisions the President had made over the past few weeks. “Congress has been replaced. The VP has been replaced. Most of the White House staff has been replaced...”

“I heard they let go of Michelle Grayson, The Press Secretary,” Lois added.

“White House can’t be seen breaking their own laws,” Clark retorted in disgust.

“The thing I couldn’t figure out is why,” Lois explained, gesturing to the board. “Lex obviously has something over Garner.”

“Or someone he cares about,” Clark added. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “I can’t believe you did all this in a day.”

“I had a little help,” she admitted, bumping her hip against him. “Mayson came by earlier and caught me up on some of what the DA’s office has been investigating. Helped fill in some holes.”

“How’s she holding up?” Clark asked.

“Okay,” Lois said with a sigh. “She’s got an uncle she’s staying with just outside of town. So, at least she has *somewhere* to go.” Lois shook her head. “She was able to fill in some of the stuff the DA’s office was working on, and I filled in what I could find from our files.”

“I’ve got the file boxes you asked for,” Clark pointed to the boxes he dropped off by the door. “You think you can fill in the holes?”

“Maybe,” Lois muttered, running her hands up and down her arms. “I’m not sure if it’ll do much good. The more we push back and find, the worse things get.”

“We’re not the only ones fighting back, Lois,” Clark reassured, watching the turbulent emotions move across her face as she worked her way through her them. “Bruce has got a team looking into this. Perry’s got everyone digging to see what they can find.” He looked at the board. “Of course no one has gotten this much headway...”

“There are still a lot of questions, and my sources are scattered everywhere,” Lois said with a defeated sigh. “I’m out of moves.”

“So, maybe we put our heads together with some other capable minds and see what we can come up with?” Clark suggested, tracing the frame of her face with his palm.

“Such as?” Lois asked.

“Well, a few scientists from STAR Labs are hiding out at WayneTech along with the recovering real Bill Henderson.”

Lois’ eyes lit up. “Bill’s memory is back?”

“Mostly,” Clark shrugged. “There are still some pieces that aren’t there, but Dr. Snow is working with him on it.” At Lois’ surprised expression he gave a nonchalant shrug. “Fake trusting him, right?”

Lois smiled, leaning into him as she reached up to cup his

cheek with her palm. “I love you, you know that?”

“I think you’ve mentioned it once or twice,” he teased, leaning in closer so he could feel her breath against his cheek. “I’d be lost without you, Lois.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she reassured him, brushing her lips against his. Her hand relaxed against him as his other arm circled around her waist, pulling her to him.

He felt the electrical storm of emotions the moment their lips touched. He leaned in closer, hoping to not only reassure her but also himself from the undercurrent fears and turmoil that had been building up. Every moment of uncertainty seemed to wash away as the tidal wave of emotions began to overtake both of them.

He moved closer, stroking the side of her face with his hand. His lips found hers again and again, and lightning crackled between them as the stress and anxiety from the last twenty-four hours made its way to the surface. Her hands roamed up and down the back of his head, fingering the strands of his hair between her fingers.

“Lois,” he could feel the heat between them begin to build as his body sank down, dissolving the distance between them with a loud moan. His lips smoothed over hers in soft caresses as he fell deeper into the euphoria of her embrace. Her long legs curved over his hips and her arms wrapped around him, pressing the softness of her flesh against him.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured against her lips, vibrating the words against her mouth as each kiss became more and more insistent.

She placed a hand over his, gripping his wrist in a tight circle as she met his gaze. “I love you, Clark.”

His body settled against her, running his other hand against the length of her arm, tracing the curve of her elbow and with his palm. “I love you, Lois, so much.”

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Carmine Falcone stormed through the doors of his vacant office, barking orders left and right. He turned to the empty room, realizing no one had followed him. He placed a hand on his head, contemplating his next move.

His son was gone.

His most trusted ally was the culprit.

His alliance with Intergang could not continue, but how could he take his revenge with the Vice President—soon to be President—that he’d paid for turning his back on him? He let out a long breath, contemplating his next move.

Luthor would have to be taught a lesson. As would Denetto. They would have to learn once and for all what the consequences were for crossing a Falcone.

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## Chapter 14

Lex Luthor examined the contents inside the briefcase, looking to the Secret Service Agent to his left. A smile spread across his face as he noted the green digits on the monitor inside the bulletproof case. He caught the agent’s golden yellow eyes and nodded. “I trust your visit to the Pentagon was successful? No loose ends.”

“Depends on if you consider a headache and missing nuclear warhead codes a loose end, Mr. Vice President.”

“Considering there’s no coverage of the break-in I’ll consider your mission a success,” Lex responded with a slow smile. He turned to the Agent. “I trust your other assignment went well?”

The agent dropped a metal case on his desk. “Everything from Dr. Strange’s laboratory involving the red meteorite.”

“Excellent,” Lex crooned, popping the lock on the briefcase to reveal the glowing red meteorite. “Things are about to get dicey. I trust you know which side is the winner.”

“That depends, Mr. Vice President.” The agent said, closing the door to Lex’s office.

“Oh?” Lex asked.

The agent's eyes shifted, and he changed back into the natural form of Whisper A'Daire. "How long do you plan to keep it illegal for me to work?"

"Long enough to stir up enough animosity against the President," Lex said, lighting up a cigar in celebration.

"You know what I'm capable of," Whisper warned.

"All too well," Lex reassured her, smoothing a smile across his face in an attempt to calm any fears the villainess might have of the current state of things. Though the laws that had been passed weren't going to prevent his favorite duo from finding employment amongst the thieves and gangsters, he suspected the principle of the new law would rub them the wrong way.

"You can't keep me in hiding forever," Whisper growled, crossing her arms over her chest.

Given too long to fester the villainess could become a problem for his next phase in the plan. She needed a distraction, and he needed to test the waters. There had been zero word from the Man of Steel since Garner had placed a target on his head. There also hadn't been any major disasters to draw him out. Would the Man of Steel risk his freedom if disaster struck or would he remain under his rock? That was certainly something he wanted to test.

"I've got a job for you..." Lex offered, leaning back in his chair and folding both hands behind his head.

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Caitlin Snow tightened her arms around herself as she paced inside the penthouse of WayneTech. She should have called Cisco earlier. She knew that. She expected he would be upset when he found out he'd been kept out of the loop, but not like this.

"Cisco, come on, would you just talk to me?" Caitlin attempted to persuade her friend with a pleading look.

"What's to talk about?" Cisco grumbled, from behind his crossed arms and disappointed expression. "You disappeared for days—"

"It wasn't something I was given clearance to share." Caitlin cut in.

"—meanwhile leaving me completely in the dark while you and your new *beau* – Bruce Wayne fight to save the world," Cisco grumbled irritably.

"He is not my...!" Caitlin caught herself as the double doors opened and Bruce entered, clamping her mouth closed and turning back to Cisco.

Bruce approached. "Mr. Ramon, I trust Caitlin's brought you up to speed?"

Cisco shot Caitlin a dirty look and then smiled at Bruce. "Oh, yeah, I've been hearing all about how busy she's been these past few days."

"Yes, I do hope you'll forgive the cloak and dagger routine. We couldn't afford to tip off whoever was behind the cloning experiments," Bruce explained, taking a seat across from Cisco.

Cisco shot Caitlin an annoyed expression as realization dawned on him, and he muttered, crossing his arms over his chest. "That's why I got pulled in. The cloning experiments, isn't it?"

"You are the one with the most knowledge on the subject outside of Dr. Hamilton." Caitlin smiled back at him and then added gently, "Yes, you're right to be upset, Cisco, but I'm telling you now, and we *really* need your help. Will you help me, or not?"

Bruce looked between the two of them. "Am I interrupting something here?"

Caitlin looked to Cisco. "I don't know, Cisco, is he?"

Cisco tightened his jaw for a moment, contemplating his decision and then shook his head. "Nothing, Mr. Wayne."

"Great," Bruce cheered happily. "I can't wait for you to..." His facial expression changed, and he tensed, looking down at his watch. "...work with Caitlin on what we've found so far. She says you're the best." He backed away from the duo. "I'll be back when I can."

Cisco stole a glance toward Caitlin after Bruce exited toward

the elevators in the back office. "Is he always this...social?"

"He grows on you." Caitlin shrugged.

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Lois let out a long gasp, fingering her husband's hard chiseled chest beneath her. A slow smile of contentment spread across her face. The numbness that had been running down her legs and spreading to her toes began to fade as she came back to the present.

Despite the chaos and mayhem that erupted in the world around them, the solace she found in Clark's arms always pulled her back from the edge. The turmoil of 'what-ifs' and possible plans in the making faded away, and all that was left was the clarity and peace she needed to bring it all into focus.

"Clark?" she lifted her chin off his chest and gazed up at him.

"Hmm?" Clark's arm remained in its place, tucked securely around her waist.

"Don't you think it's odd that all that time and energy was spent on stealing Hamilton's cloning research, trapping Henderson underground with the SWAT Team...for what?" Lois asked, toying with the cotton sheet that was draped around her body. "It just doesn't seem like something that would be worth the risk that was involved."

"Paying off an officer, cloning even more officers...Where's the endgame?" Clark agreed, turning over to face her.

"See?" Lois thumped him on the arm lightly. "That's just it. There isn't one. Why waste all that time to clone Henderson..."

"Unless he was just a piece of the puzzle," Clark reasoned aloud. "What if we're going about this the wrong way? What was it that tipped us off about Henderson?"

"He wasn't acting like himself," Lois answered, running a hand across his chest. "He didn't recognize you..."

"Strange out of character behavior," Clark added, raising his eyebrows at her. "Sound familiar?"

"You think President Garner was cloned?" Lois asked, following her husband's train of thought.

"Out of character behavior. Passing laws that don't line up with his history of policies," Clark continued, tracing the frame of her face. "It would explain how Luthor's controlling him."

"So, then the question is where is the *real* President?" Lois wondered aloud.

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Jimmy set the last of the boxes in the corner of Lucy's –his and Lucy's—apartment. All of this would take some getting used to. He and Lucy had agreed they wouldn't look at this as a permanent arrangement or an official change in their relationship.

Had they been moving in together of their own volition, it would have been a different story, but given their living arrangement had been out of necessity, they had opted to keep some semblance of normalcy among the chaos that had erupted throughout the country.

"I think that's about everything," Lucy said, approaching from behind.

Jimmy turned to see Lucy in an old t-shirt and jeans with her hair pulled back. A weak smile crossed his face. "Yeah, luckily we don't have a lot of stuff."

"Thank you," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder. She leaned up on her tip-toes, brushing her lips against his for a brief moment before she pulled away. Her gaze shifted around the apartment uneasily. Jimmy could see the turbulent emotions cross her face as she turned back to him.

"It's going to be okay," Jimmy reassured, cupping her cheek. He wasn't sure how it would be okay, but he had to believe it. Deep inside the depths of his soul, he knew one thing to be true. No matter what the danger or enemy, Clark would always come out on top. He was Superman, after all.

"You don't know that, Jimmy." Lucy whimpered with a crack of her voice. A lone tear escaped out of the corner of her eye. "No

one knows anything anymore.”

“No, I don’t,” Jimmy responded softly, trying to formulate his response. “And you’re right. No one knows what will happen. I mean the entire country has been turned upside down.” Jimmy let out a long breath and then continued, “But Luce, this isn’t the first time we’ve had life as we know it threatened. What about Nightfall?”

“This isn’t some space rock plummeting toward Earth, Jimmy,” Lucy said with a defeated sigh. “There’s no soldiers pooling all their resources or a superhero coming to the rescue. Superman is a wanted fugitive! We can’t expect him to get us out of this one, Jimmy.”

“Superman always comes through, Luce,” Jimmy reminded her.

“He’s a little busy right now.” Lucy let out an exasperated sigh. She gestured around the apartment. “Look around! The entire country has been turned upside down. I can’t even live in my own apartment legally... I can’t attend school.” She paced in front of him as her arms moved around her, wildly illustrating the chaos she felt within her. “It’s not fair to Superman to leave this up to him. If we don’t stand up and fight now, it’ll be too late”

“How do you expect to fight any of this, Luce?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t know,” Lucy said softly, “but I’ve got to figure out something.”

Jimmy let out a long breath. Lucy was right. Clark couldn’t do everything. The world had turned upside down in a matter of hours and there just weren’t enough hours in the day to stop the underhanded forces at work here. They needed help. They needed to fight this injustice. But knowing what needed to be done and taking the first step to fight it were two different things.

\*\*\*

The sound of metal clanging against the metal bed frame was like nails on a chalkboard. The drugs were beginning to wear off again. She’d be back again.

The nausea began to build once more, and he turned his head, spotting Morgan Johnson in the bed across from him. At least the location of his prison had improved since his initial capture.

“Mor...” he tried to speak but found his vocal cords dried up.

The door opened, and he felt the panic rise up within him. His eyes widened, and he turned his head and saw her. Her and that machine powered man. If you could call him that. Though he seemed different now.

“Looks, like someone’s waking up,” the sugary sweet voice escaped the woman’s throat as she approached, needle in hand.

“No,” he mumbled, shaking his head, and pulling away, but he knew it was of no use. The sharp piercing of the needle going through his skin stung, and he grunted as his voice gave out.

“Shhh,” a hand brushed against his cheek, and the woman whispered in his ear, “Don’t fight it, Mr. President. You’ll need your strength.”

The woman turned to leave, glancing at the man that had entered with her. “Metallo, be sure he drifts off and then meet me upstairs.”

“Yes, doctor,” the man said.

“He...lp,” came his final plea before all sound from his vocal cords was lost.

\*\*\*

Clark turned over in bed for what felt like the umpteenth time in the wee hours of the morning. His conscience chided him once more with another scenario of how he could easily sneak in and out without being seen.

“Help!”

Clark had grown used to ignoring the occasional cry for help here and there. Thankfully each time the police had responded to the distress call, thus wiping his guilt away. Tonight, however, there was no first responder able to move in.

It was the First Responder.

“Mayday, mayday, Polar Coast is in distress! Repeat Polar Coast is in distress!”

The desperate cry reached his ears, and he felt the Mount Everest sized guilt continue to crush him, threatening to break him right there. He could continue to ignore it, or he could try to do ... something.

“The fire is spreading! We’ve been hit... Please, someone help!”

He let out a sigh of defeat, stealing a glance toward Lois before making the final decision to tend to the plea. It wasn’t like there was a patrol car he could rely on.

At super-speed he rushed through the apartment, donning the red and blue suit that had been packed away the last few days. He felt an adrenaline rush run through him, knowing his decision to answer the call for help could end with prison bars.

He was after all a wanted fugitive.

But he was also *Superman*.

He couldn’t just ignore the cry for help.

\*\*\*

“Mayday, this is Polar Coast, we are in distress!” the captain called out over the radio in a desperate plea. He noted the dangerous water levels that had begun to overtake the ship. Outside of a miracle, they were sunk – literally.

He turned to his crew, uncertain if he should give false hope or allow them the chance to face impending death square in the eye. Just when he opened his mouth to deliver the blow, a hard vibration hit the cabin, knocking him over the steering wheel. As he stood to his feet, spying over the wheel and out into the fiery maze that waited for them, he saw the familiar red and yellow emblem.

“Superman!” he could feel the tears burning his eyes as he stared back at the superhero before he flew overhead. A moment later, the sound of the navigation panel sounding off with the change in altitude and direction filled the cabin. He looked over and saw the water that they had been taking in began to dissipate.

Cheers filled the cabin as the once-grim future in front of them had been replaced with one of hope.

The air smelled cleaner. The water felt clearer.

A smile spread across the captain’s face as Superman floated just outside the cabin, offering a wave and a smile.

As he moved off, an intense green light filled the sky and bright yellow lights followed with the sound of an air horn. The loud chirp of the radio came through the speakers and could be heard from inside the cabin. “Superman, we have you surrounded!”

\*\*\*

Caitlin Snow watched as the large screens Cisco was working at filled with medical reports, arrest records and his own personal research on cloning experiments. His hands flew across the keyboard and more information filled the monitors. Professor Hamilton’s revolutionary experiments on Capone and Dillinger that changed the opinion on cloning in the scientific community covered the right monitor and then Cisco stopped. He turned around in his chair to face them with a pleased expression on his face.

“You found something?” Caitlin asked, watching as Cisco leaned back in his chair like a Cheshire cat.

“Oh, if you want to call tracking the money used to pay off Officer Sahid to a location in the Docklands something. Name on the account is CF Incorporated.”

“Docklands?” Caitlin frowned, tapping her hand against her chin as she tried to place the location.

“Docklands,” Cisco urged, pulling the map up. “Gotham City’s most notorious hideout and meeting place for the Falcone crime family?”

“You got to hand it to Carmine,” Henderson muttered, walking up behind them. “He’s got an ego the size of the Metro Dome and

he makes sure you know he's the one calling the shots."

Cisco snapped his fingers and grinned. "Of course, CF Incorporated is..."

"Carmine Falcone Incorporated," Caitlin finished for him. Could it really be that easy? Could the answer they had been looking for be that simple? The pieces fit but her more logical side—her more cynical side—told her it wasn't that easy. Why go to all this trouble and lead them to their doorstep?

"Carmine Falcone?" Henderson pondered the name aloud, letting it roll off his tongue.

"You sure there's nothing else there, Cisco?" Caitlin asked, crossing her arms over her chest as she walked toward Cisco.

Cisco's face fell. "You think I missed something?"

"I think it just seems..."

"Convenient," Henderson finished for Caitlin.

"Convenient to hack through thousands of layers of encryption and following the finance trail to..."

"And how many layers of dummy accounts did you run across in this encryption before you found yourself here?" Caitlin asked, pointing to the name on the screen. CF Incorporated.

Cisco frowned. "None, but it's not like it was a walk in the park!"

Henderson frowned, shaking his head. "No, she's right. It doesn't add up."

"A crime family being responsible for organized crime doesn't make sense?" Cisco shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, I'll keep looking."

"Carmine Falcone is a thug. What business would he have stealing research that he couldn't use?" Henderson asked.

"Back to the drawing board," Cisco muttered, tapping at his keyboard.

\*\*\*

"Superman, we have you surrounded!"

The words echoed from the speaker of the megaphone as Clark gripped the starboard of the ship, finishing the final application of heat vision on the metal body in hopes that the repair would get the ship to shore given his presence had just been announced by the approaching ship.

"By order of the President of the United States I order you to surrender yourself to ...."

Before the captain could finish his statement, a loud clipping noise filled the air just before the loud clang of metal on metal rang. Clark stole a glance over his shoulder and felt the mixture of relief and worry run through him when he saw the jet-black speed boat with the dark hooded figure of Batman approaching.

"Bruce, what are you doing?" Clark muttered under his breath, then turned back to the ship he was repairing. It wasn't perfect, but it would stay afloat for a few miles and given the newest guests that had arrived he didn't doubt the crew would get home safely.

Another clipping sound rang, and he heard the metal on metal again. He turned around and saw one of the naval officers reach out to grab the cord as Bruce tugged on it to make his way on board. He could barely make out the muttered, "What are you still doing here?" before Bruce flew on board.

"B-Batman?" stammered out one of the officers.

"I believe that ship is in distress."

Before the shock could wear off the officers, Clark flew through the sky, heading back toward the coast to Metropolis. He'd done all he could for the crew. Once Bruce was done with them they could help the crew out.

\*\*\*

Gretchen Kelly turned her head to Nigel who walked a few steps behind her. Lex's plan to escalate things before anticipated had caught her off guard. She still hadn't gotten the information on the nuclear warheads from the president and she feared by pushing the agenda they might be putting the entire endeavor at risk.

"I don't suppose you've had any luck with locating Bender?"

she asked, hoping to make conversation with the otherwise unapproachable Nigel St. John as they turned the final corner.

"I'm narrowing the list down, but given the lack of physical records on the witnesses entered into witness protection, it's not exactly a walk in the park," Nigel commented coolly.

"Lex wants him found," Gretchen reminded him.

"Mr. Luthor wants a lot of things, Gretchen. Patience is a virtue he'll have to practice for this one."

Gretchen frowned, reaching her arm up to turn the lock to the steel door they stood outside. She mumbled a quick retort, "Very..." then stopped when she saw the vacant beds inside the room. Both prisoners were missing along with her laptop and the briefcase she'd been storing the hallucinogens in.

"It seems you have bigger problems on your hand, Gretchen," Nigel scowled, turning to her.

\*\*\*

"Single file," the officers ordered, urging the passengers off one by one. The captain and crew had already been detained. All that was left was to free the stowaways hidden below deck.

"How many have you counted, Daniels?"

"Over three-hundred and more below deck, First Sargent." Officer Daniels responded.

"Our own ship bringing in children from God knows where..." The First Sargent tapped his hand against his chin as the next line of children walked off the ship. One of the young girls caught his eye. There was something mystifying about her dark red hair. There was something mystifying about her. The green eyes spoke to him—almost glowing. He shook his head, pulling himself away from the young girl's gaze.

"Daniels, what's the ETA on that transport?"

\*\*\*

Clark swallowed hard, pushing the enormous sized lump in his throat down as he flew through the night sky. He was careful to remain above the clouds to stay out of sight. Though it wouldn't protect him from being detected by the military's radar system he could stay out of sight. He had barely made it out of there before the ship he'd come to rescue put a target on his back.

The ship's crew were safe.

That was what was important.

Thank God for Bruce.

The cold air blew across his face and he looked down at the ground below him. He had missed this. The last few days of grounding Superman and looking over his shoulder, afraid to show his cape had left him with a gaping hole. As much as the world needed Superman to step in and fight against the evil in this world, he himself needed the hero as well. He never could just stand by and do nothing.

The reminder of that had been solidified tonight.

He had rescued many throughout the night, protecting them from the mob of protesters that had risen up in the wake of the new laws that had been passed. Some protesters had been in support of the new law while others in defiance. No matter the side it was all the same. The threat of violence in order to impose their superior opinion.

Looting.

Assault.

Arson.

He had seen it all tonight.

He feared it would only grow worse if things continued the way they were. Rational thinking seemed to be a thing of the past and in its place was fear and distrust. The animosity was growing among Metropolis' citizens with less than twenty-four hours of the new law being in place. What would it look like after a few weeks?

He prayed he wouldn't have to find out.

\*\*\*

"Still no word on what the Polar Coast was doing this close to

New Troy. The Polar Coast's manifest and captain's log were reported to be inconsistent and the Naval Corp is reporting no knowledge for why the Polar Coast was found so far off course. We're told investigations will begin this week to get to the bottom of such a *huge* oversight."

Bill Church slammed his fist against the nightstand, feeling his blood boil at the news that not only had Superman escaped the embarrassment of being taken into custody but the shipment of labor that had come in on the Polar Coast had been confiscated by authorities. The plan had been flawless. How had such a huge oversight been made?

Falcone?

Luthor?

Who had done it?

He reached for the phone on his nightstand, dialing the number he knew by heart. He heard a mild protest on the other end and snorted. "I don't care what you think you were doing. I've got a job for you and you better pray you don't screw it up."

\*\*\*

*This is a mistake.*

Will Garner looked over his shoulder and spotted his friend, Morgan Johnson limping down the narrow walkway with their rescuer. He stole a glance back to the man of steel that had on impulse freed him and his friend from their captors. He could feel the poison he'd been given earlier slowly fading as strength began to return to his vocal chords.

How long had he been rendered silent in that filthy cell?

Days?

A week?

A month?

"Where are we going?" Will Garner asked as they approached a steel door.

The man helping them stared at the door for a moment and then shoved his hand through the steel, pulling out the hinge that kept the door secure. The door creaked in pain as he peeled the door open for them to enter.

"Somewhere safe."

"I need to get to the White House," Will Garner said through labored breaths. "I need to tell McCall and issue a sta—"

"That won't be possible," the man answered, pointing to the stairs.

"Why not?" Morgan Johnson asked.

"Go ahead, take the risk and out yourself to authorities. You won't last a minute," the man responded coldly.

"What are you talking about?" Will harrumphed. "I am the President of the United States." He gestured to Morgan Johnson, "and this is my Vice President. I demand you..."

"Your days of demanding are over, Mr. President." A smirk crossed the man's face and he answered, "According to the rest of the world, you're dead, Mr. Morgan." He then turned his attention back to Will Garner and added, "And you Mr. President have become the most hated and despised man in the world."

"That's not possible. I..."

"You want your life back? Do what I say." The man pointed ahead. "Stairs are this way."

\*\*\*

"Still no word on what the Polar Coast was doing this close to New Troy. The Polar Coast's manifest and captain's log were reported to be inconsistent and the Naval Corp is reporting no knowledge for why the Polar Coast was found so far off course. We're told investigations will begin this week to get to the bottom of such a *huge* oversight."

Lex threw a vase across the room, crashing the glass into the center of the television, silencing the news anchor's report. How had they been so careless? After all the careful planning of how shipments would come in and out without detection how had such a mistake been made?

Or had it been a mistake?

The oil tanker just off the coast of Stryker's Island had been the target, not the coast guard ship they had been using to smuggle in Church's free child labor. Now, not only would he have to address the opening that had just been handed to his enemies, but he would also have to figure out who had betrayed him.

This didn't seem like something Whisper or Harley would pull on their own, but stranger things had happened. Church wouldn't sabotage his own cargo would he? Then there was Carmine who blamed Church and Denetto for his son's murder.

Someone had planted that bomb on the Polar Coast and he would find out who. When he did, he would unleash the hell that person so rightfully deserved on them and ensure no one ever thought to betray Lex Luthor ever again.

\*\*\*

"Still no word on what the Polar Coast was doing this close to New Troy. The Polar Coast's manifest and captain's log were reported to be inconsistent and the Naval Corp is reporting no knowledge for why the Polar Coast was found so far off course. We're told investigations will begin this week to get to the bottom of such a *huge* oversight."

Carmine Falcone lifted his glass up to the television monitor, taking a sip from his glass as he watched the images of the smuggled immigrant children exit off the ship with an escort from the Naval officers. He let out a soft chuckle and turned to the figure sitting in the corner.

"That was almost too easy."

"It's really only a matter of knowing where to press in order to get the right results," the response in a deep British accent came from Nigel St. John from the corner.

Carmine nodded, tapping his index finger against his glass. "I suppose loyalty is an illusion among Luthor's minions."

"Loyalty is an illusion meant to calm those that don't have what it takes to lead." Nigel sneered, shaking his head. "I take it Harley took the bait?"

"Played her like a fiddle." Carmine chuckled. "Church will be behind bars soon enough along with the rats nipping at his heels." A dark expression crossed his face. "I don't trust you, Nigel, but I do respect your unique skillset." He pushed a small briefcase across the table to him.

Nigel reached over to grab the briefcase, clicking the locks to open it. He smiled at its contents, lifting up one of the many stacks of one hundred-dollar bills to examine it. "Such a pleasure doing business with you, Carmine."

A smile crossed Carmine's face as he watched Nigel drop the bills into the briefcase, letting out a shout. "As I said before, Nigel, I don't trust you. I'm certainly not going to trust you to keep your trap shut if I can buy your betrayal of Luthor and Church for a measly fifty grand." A light chuckle escaped his lips. "The sodium hydroxide should eat through your skin once water touches it."

"Water?"

Carmine stood up, taking his glass with him. As he left the room the sprinkler system came on, spraying around the room as Nigel screamed in agony.

Carmine reached over to grab the golden plated urn off the table, tucking it under his elbow as he walked purposefully toward the exit. "I'd love to stay, Nigel. Oh, who am I kidding? Enjoy every second of agony as the lye melts your skin off and exposes you for the true vermin you are." A dark glare crossed his eyes and he added, "I'm late for my midnight walk with Alberto."

\*\*\*

"Still no word on what the Polar Coast was doing this close to New Troy. The Polar Coast's manifest and captain's log were reported to be inconsistent and the Naval Corp is reporting no knowledge for why the Polar Coast was found so far off course..."

Lois reached for the remote on the side table, flicking her

wrist as she clicked the news coverage off. A thousand thoughts ran through her mind at once as possible scenarios of what could have happened and what almost had happened.

Not only had Clark put everything at risk by coming to the rescue of the Polar Coast but now he had put the spotlight on the Naval Corp which would only amplify their anger at him—and their desire to strengthen the search. She ran a weary hand across her face, trying to still the thoughts that continued to race through her mind.

She stole another glance at the clock, noting the late hour.

The media coverage detailed Clark's rescue of the Polar Coast and the interference of Batman just before the Naval officers arrived on the scene. There had been no word on any other sightings so what was taking Clark so long?

She had half a mind to call WayneTech and threaten some answers out of Bruce Wayne if she thought she would get anywhere. She leaned forward and buried her head in her hands before she let out a frustrated growl.

A hand brushed against her cheek and she jumped up from her seat on the sofa, ready to face the intruder. She let out an exaggerated sigh when she saw her husband standing in front of her with his head bowed down, seeming to take on a look of defeat. The anguish and uncertainty that had been coursing through her veins for the last few hours bubbled to the surface as she snapped a little harsher than necessary, "It's been *two* hours! Where have you been? Do you have any idea what goes through a person's mind in *two* hours?!"

He lifted his head up, shaking it as he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry." The words hung in the air and she looked up at him, unable to fight back the tears that had escaped the corner of her eyes as her throat burned from the tension that had been building. His hand brushed against her, swiping the tears away. "I didn't mean to scare you," he whispered against her brunette hair. "I honestly didn't think you'd be up." He let out a long sigh. "I guess the patrol around the city was ill-advised."

"You can't just go to a rescue and not come back," she whimpered against his chest. "Not after..."

"I know," Clark said firmly. "The rescue itself was a risky move, but I couldn't just..."

She flashed him a half-smile, reaching up to stroke his cheek. "I know." The corners of her mouth twitched, spreading into a full smile. "You can't just sit on the sidelines and do nothing. It's not in your nature."

Relief washed over his face and he leaned in to kiss her, cupping her face in his hands as he held her in his arms, swaying back and forth with her for what felt like an eternity. Her insides did a somersault, calming the anxiety that had been building up inside her with each second that went by. She was just about to suggest they retreat back into the bedroom when he pulled away, his face tense with a steely gaze across his face.

"Clark?"

He held up a hand, motioning for her to wait. The concentration on his face told her he was trying to listen with his super-hearing. She'd learned over the last year not to attempt to talk to him when he was using his super-hearing this close to her. Though he was invulnerable he was still capable of feeling pain. Pain that came in like a lightning bolt if his senses were overloaded—much like Lenny Stokes Wall of Sound had been used against him last year.

She watched in rapt attention as he moved through the apartment at super-speed, zipping from one side to the other in a blur of red and blue. He finally stopped by the front door and opened the door, lifting up a white box with a note hanging from the red ribbon.

"Stay back," he ordered.

Before she could react he disappeared out the door and the distinct sound of an explosion going off reached her ears. She

looked out the open door, seeing the flames light up the night sky.

"Clark!"

\*\*\*

## Chapter 15

Lois buried her face in Clark's chest as they came in for a landing. The bitter cold wind rustled through her hair and her cheeks tingled from the wind's abrupt intrusion on what had been for the most part, comfortable autumn-like days. Winter had definitely made its abrupt entrance. Clark's hand moved across her cheek, reassuring her with a silent gesture as he waited for her to regain her footing after the flight.

"This is as close as I can get us for now," Clark said, pointing to the street ahead, brightly lit by the sun's rays. WayneTech was just a few blocks away.

She allowed Clark to take the lead and waited for him to check for any sign of potential danger. They reached the end of the alley and Lois peeked over Clark's shoulder, noting the bleakness that covered the streets she had once prided herself on knowing better than anyone.

The streets of Metropolis felt unfamiliar. Every corner was littered with armed soldiers, patrolling with the local police. It felt like the city was under siege. The sun was just beginning to rise and the orange and red glinted behind the towering cityscape. The warmth from the sun's rays was a welcome change to the brisk winter wind that had come through overnight.

It was hard to believe it had only been twenty-four hours ago Lois had been walking this same street, focused on writing up the story of the double homicide she and Clark had inadvertently been witness to. The memory of how quickly he had succumbed to the Kryptonite's presence and the hopeless expression on his face had been agonizing.

Lois tightened the belt of her coat around her, hoping that would help protect her from the cold wind that filled the air. She looked to the right, reassuring herself that Clark was right beside her before approaching the crosswalk where two heavily armed soldiers stood.

"Come on," Clark reached over and took her hand in his. Immediately she felt the warmth from his hand resonate through her.

Never in her life would she have envisioned herself being forced to cower down and hide from those enforcing the laws of the land. Yet here she was clutching her husband with a death grip and praying they would make it to WayneTech without being searched. Explaining just what she was doing with the remnants of melted C-4 under her jacket wasn't something she envisioned going well.

\*\*\*

The sliding elevator doors opened, and Bill Henderson exited with Cisco Ramon a few steps behind him. Caitlin Snow flashed them both an encouraging smile. "Bill, you ready for this?"

"I've got this, Dr. Snow," Henderson smiled back at her. "We've got more than enough now to prove who the real Bill Henderson is."

"And negotiate some assistance from the Metropolis P.D.," Cisco added, tapping his hand on the folder in his hand.

"Dan Taylor never did like bad publicity," Henderson grimaced, straightening his tie. He turned back to Cisco and reminded him, "Just be sure you don't come across like you're threatening him. He won't play ball if he feels like he's being backed into a corner."

"I've got it," Cisco reassured, typing a code in the keypad on the door. He looked back at Caitlin, "We'll keep you posted. Let me know as soon as Bruce gets back. We'll need to get that team underground as soon as we can."

"I still don't understand why we can't just send a team down without the Metropolis P.D.," Caitlin commented, shaking her head. "I mean, it's not like they're helping anything. How long

have they had a clone working your job?”

“It’s bureaucracy,” Henderson replied, ignoring the question. “It’s the same reason everyone was on edge when Superman first arrived—” He stopped mid-sentence, catching himself. “Sorry. Bad comparison.”

“We’re going to clear his name,” Cisco said with a determined glint in his eyes.

“I know we will,” Henderson responded. “Which is why we need all the help we can get. Dan Taylor is as fair as you can get. You don’t want him on your bad side.”

“Please.” Cisco shrugged his shoulders. “Remember who you’re talking to. I’m the King of Cool.”

Caitlin Snow rolled her eyes as she watched the two exit. “Good luck.”

\*\*\*

James McCall reached across the table for the spoon to stir the sugar into his coffee. He looked up at the television monitor, watching as the footage of the protesters outside City Hall filled the screen. The world was changing right before his eyes. And not for the better. Something had changed in the President too.

He had spent the last several weeks trying to retrace the President’s steps and make some sense out of the chaos that had overtaken the country. It was like the President was a completely different person, yet he couldn’t get anyone to see it. The President he had voted for never would have chosen the likes of Lex Luthor as his second in command. The man he knew never would have chosen Washington’s cesspool of corruption as representatives for the people.

The most bewildering part was how everyone continued as if it was business as usual. He couldn’t go to Congress. Most of them wouldn’t even be there if it weren’t for the President. He couldn’t take his concerns to the DOJ or FBI. Most of them were in the same predicament Congress was.

There was one person he knew that had vocalized his disdain for the new policies placed on the American people, but reaching out to him was a gamble. If this went the wrong way, he would be out of moves. He set his empty coffee mug down, then turned to the double pane glass window where a black town car had just pulled up. The driver stepped out of the car and nodded to him.

McCall let out a long breath, mentally preparing for the confrontation that would be taking place this morning. He made his way toward the exit, letting the door slam behind him as he left.

\*\*\*

Governor Wade walked through the deck of the Polar Coast, examining the debris that had collected over the last few weeks from the ship being put out of commission. A scowl crossed his face as he looked toward the steps that led to the cabin of the ship. A yellow tape with ‘Caution’ in black letters marked the area off.

It was hard to believe there had been a child labor ring running in his state without him knowing. The news of Harlan Black’s illegal smuggling ring had been a hard blow for him last year. He had prided himself on the safety he could offer citizens in New Troy. Now he wasn’t so sure.

“How many?” he spoke up, turning to the lead FBI agent on the case, Roger Templeton.

“Alive? Two-hundred and thirty-six.” Templeton responded with a catch in his voice. “There were roughly around thirty that didn’t make it, Governor.”

“We find who’s responsible and we make them pay,” Governor Wade said with a deep sigh. “We owe them that much.”

“Well, like I said before, Governor, all of the evidence leads us to believe this is Intergang’s handiwork,” Templeton said, gesturing to the cabin in front of them.

“Intergang was shut down.” Wade snorted.

“How sure are you of that?” Templeton asked.

\*\*\*

Clark watched as Lois eyed the steel doors to the elevator scrupulously. The nervousness she was hiding hit him like a wave. He reached over to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She gave him a forced smile but didn’t say anything.

“It’s going to be okay,” he reassured her. The words seemed hollow and insincere, but it was the only thing he could think to say. As of right now he had no one to turn to as Superman without putting those individuals in danger. Dr. Klein had already risked enough by helping reimage that video footage. Jimmy had received word yesterday that the entire staff of STAR Labs were being detained and questioned for their connection to Superman.

After the surprise package of C-4 showed up on his and Lois’ doorstep he knew the stakes were higher than they had ever been. He might not know as much as he’d like about Bruce Wayne but given they both had everything to lose he knew this was the right move.

The elevator came to a stop with a hard thud and the sound of metal grinding filled the elevator car. Lois threw an irritated glare back at Clark. “Can he make it any louder? I don’t think they heard it in Borneo.”

Clark flashed her a weak smile, relieved to see some of the humorous wit peeking through. The doors opened to reveal an amused Bruce Wayne with his acting CEO, Lucius Fox. Clark met Bruce’s gaze and stepped out of the elevator to greet him.

“Well, when I said drop by anytime I have to say I wasn’t expecting you to take me up on it so soon. Starting to make this a habit,” Bruce commented with an amused expression. “Do I need to get you a key?”

Clark shrugged his shoulders, noting the suspicious expression that remained on his wife’s face as they entered the hidden wing of WayneTech. “Not like we planned to get C-4 delivered to our doorstep, Bruce.”

“No one ever does,” Bruce said, his tone more somber.

Lois looked around, taking everything in. “What is this place?”

Clark looked to Bruce. “She knows.”

“This is where I work off the radar of everyone here at WayneTech.” Bruce looked to Lucius. “With the exception of Lucius here.”

“We don’t know anything about you,” Lois said carefully, looking around the room in dismay. “Yet we’re here trusting you with everything.” She set the remnants of the C-4 package he had disposed of earlier on a long table they stood next to.

“On the contrary, I’d say you know more about Mr. Wayne than most people that have supposedly known him for decades,” Lucius interrupted, clearing his throat.

Clark looked over at Bruce, uncertain how much Lucius had become privy to. Bruce shook his head ‘no’ and Clark nodded his thanks. “I think what Lois is trying to say is this isn’t easy for us, but we’re willing to take a leap of faith and stop *this*.” He pointed to the melted C-4 remnants on the table.

“I understand,” Bruce said, extending his hand to Lois. “I go by Bruce Wayne, Batman, the Dark Knight, and occasionally rat bastard.”

“Those references are usually by the opposing counsel that’s sore about not getting something by Mr. Wayne,” Lucius supplied with a reassuring smile.

“So, you don’t have to like me, but I think given the circumstances we all need to work together.”

“Then let’s start with the truth,” Lois pressed, pursing her lips as she spoke. “What really brought you to Metropolis?”

Bruce stared at Lois for a long moment. He seemed to be contemplating the pros and cons of answering Lois. Truth be told, Clark had the same burning questions, but his wife was more blunt about getting the answers they needed. Bruce nodded his head and then turned back to them. “I guess it’s the least I can do.” He turned to Lucius. “Lucius, why don’t you give us a minute?”

“Are you sure, Mr. Wayne?” Lucius asked.

“I’m sure.” Bruce sighed. “We have a lot to catch up on.” Lucius made his exit and then Bruce turned back to them. “My friend Harvey Dent was working on a case that involved Intergang. He got his hands on something I’m sure you two are familiar with.” Bruce paused a moment and then continued, “Kryptonite.”

“Harvey Dent. The DA that went crazy and took Gotham City hostage?” Clark asked, recalling the news cycle from a year ago.

“Yeah,” Bruce said soberly. “He wasn’t all bad. But Harvey got mixed up with the wrong people. Those same people made him pay the ultimate price.” Bruce grew quiet, looking toward the door behind him. “I knew if Kryptonite was in the hands of Intergang it was only a matter of time until they tried to peddle it here in Metropolis.”

“But you never approached anyone about your concerns,” Lois challenged, pacing in front of him. “Dr. Klein—the known expert on Superman. Myself or Clark.”

Bruce buried his hands in his pockets and sighed. “I know. I guess when my conversation with Superman didn’t go over that well I decided to take matters into my own hands.” He looked up at Clark, meeting his eyes for a second before continuing. “I wanted to hunt down Denetto and his gang.” He let out a long breath. “I never dreamed I’d walk into something like this.”

Lois was quiet a moment, her facial expression remained thoughtful as she mulled the revelation over. “I guess I can understand that,” she admitted, looking back at Clark. “We haven’t had much luck on chasing Denetto down either.”

“Or finding the missing piece to explain how Luthor ended up in the White House,” Clark added bitterly.

“Or how we ended up with a clone for a leader of the free world,” Lois finished with a shudder.

“Clone?” Bruce looked at her in surprise.

“We think whoever is behind cloning Bill Henderson may have had a much bigger vision in mind,” Clark explained.

“What better way to take over the most powerful country in the world than to plant a clone of the President himself there?” Lois prompted in agreement.

“It’s an interesting theory,” Bruce observed. “But how do we prove it?”

“We can’t.” Clark sighed.

“Yet,” Lois corrected.

“So maybe we put our heads together and see if we can get somewhere,” Bruce suggested. “It’s got to be better than what we’re doing now.”

“I guess it’s worth a shot,” Lois reasoned aloud.

“Great.” Bruce gestured to the panorama of computer monitors on the wall-length desk a few feet away. “I must warn you, what I’ve got isn’t much.”

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Police Chief Taylor eyed the paperwork on his desk and looked up at the man standing in front of him then to the younger man next to him. The man in front of him looked exactly like Bill Henderson. Then again, the man sitting in his police station, working the Pentagon break-in looked exactly like him too. He looked down at the paperwork once more, eyeing the terms on the page. ‘Genetic copy’ and ‘clone’ were sprinkled through the report along with ‘head injury’ and ‘amnesia.’ It all seemed bizarre and insane. Something you’d find in a sci-fi movie, not in the middle of his precinct.

“Mister...?” Taylor looked to the young man with dark hair, uncertain of his credentials.

“Ramon,” the response came from both Ramon and Henderson.

“Ramon.” Taylor nodded his head and leaning back in his chair. “This is a lot to take in.”

“It’s true, Dave,” Henderson spoke up.

“How?” Taylor ran a hand across his face. “How did something like this happen?”

“That’s what my team and I’d like to find out,” Cisco Ramon spoke up. “In order to do that we need your help.”

“What kind of help?” Taylor asked.

“Metropolis P.D.’s support of an independent team to conduct a thorough investigation into Inspector Henderson and the SWAT Team’s kidnapping,” Cisco Ramon explained, holding a hand up to silence Taylor’s protests before they could escape his throat.

“Before you say anything, I want you to remember something. You have had a genetic copy of your top detective working cases, accessing case files, and who knows what else for weeks. Don’t try to sell me on what’s appropriate. Wayne Enterprises has the top security company in the country. Discretion will be used throughout the investigation, but we need your support.”

“Come on, Dave,” Henderson coaxed. “You know it’s got to be done.”

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Harley threw her things into the booth of a small diner just on the outskirts of town. She had done everything that had been asked of her. She took the jobs that required her skillset and pulled them off without a hitch. Now, after everything, those pig-headed Neanderthals had not only cut her out of the deal but they had made it to where she couldn’t get anyone to take a chance on her.

Her patience had run out – not that she had a whole lot to begin with. It was time she started making plans for herself. She couldn’t trust Luthor. She couldn’t trust Falcone. She certainly couldn’t trust Church. It was all on her.

“You got my message?” a voice came from behind her.

She looked up and saw the waitress with red hair and smiled when she saw her eyes glow golden yellow. “Quite a stunt you pulled on that Coast Guard’s ship.” Harley let the evil grin spread across her face. “I don’t think you’ll be working with Mr. Luthor for much longer though.”

“Who needs ‘em?” Whisper asked, taking a seat next to her. “We now have the bargaining chip or should I say chips to guarantee ourselves freedom and a nice kick in the cojones to Mr. Vice President.”

“Vice Crazy Town you mean?” Harley let out an uncontrollable giggle. “So, what’s the next move?”

Whisper pointed to the door where a familiar FBI agent had just entered. “He just came in.”

\*\*\*

“Congressman!”

The shout came from the crowd of protesters as Congressman Lawrence attempted to leave the coffee shop undetected. The Congressman shot a glare into the crowd before darting in the opposite direction to avoid the angry mob that was camped on the corner of City Hall. Just when he thought he wouldn’t make it, he spotted his limo. The door opened, and he quickly climbed in, grateful for the escape.

“Thanks, Lou,” he called out to the driver. He stopped short when he realized he wasn’t alone.

“You!”

“Joe, it’s been a long time.” The smile smoothed across the gentleman’s face as they drove off. “Make yourself comfortable. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

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Entering STAR Labs felt more like entering airport security under a code red than one of the top scientific laboratories in the country. In the corner a station had been setup for the soldiers and officers that were currently doing the interrogations. Cisco craned his neck to get a good look through the crowd at who the latest victim of the interrogations was.

He felt a bitter bile in his throat when he saw Dr. Bernard Klein with what appeared to be some sort of high-ranking military officer. His tag read ‘Reynolds’, and from the looks of it, the

interrogation had been going on for hours.

A tap on his shoulder startled him back to the present as he jumped and turned around to face the intruder. He let out a sigh of relief when he found himself face to face with his friend, Barry Allen.

“Barry, don’t do that!” Cisco hissed out, looking over his shoulder to see if his outburst had gotten any unwanted attention.

Barry chuckled. “Sorry, you were the one that wanted to meet here.” He looked toward the lab where Dr. Klein was. “They’re still going at him hard, aren’t they?”

“He’s their only known source on where Superman is,” Cisco muttered in disgust.

Barry shook his head. “Think they’ll give up anytime soon?”

“They can only question him like this for seventy-two hours,” Cisco said, shaking his head. “By then, I’m hoping we’ll have something to help clear Superman’s innocence.”

“You and me both,” Barry commented. “Dianna said things are getting worse. She’s been working double time to make up for Supeman’s absence.”

“Well, he hasn’t been completely absent,” Cisco said proudly. “Nice work on that diversion. Superman made it out of there and no shots were fired.”

“Replacing their ammunition is a cinch,” Barry commented, “but clearing Superman’s name and getting Lex Luthor out of office is going to be a bigger challenge.”

“Well, Caitlin’s got a few theories on this cloning project. If we can get access to that room Zymack and the rest of the SWAT Team stumbled onto we can get to the bottom of all of this.” Cisco said, looking over his shoulder. “How’s the new suit?”

“Did you have to make everything so...sensitive?” Barry asked with an eyebrow raised. “I mean, I just run by a nuclear plant and everything goes off.”

“That’s the point,” Cisco said, patting him on the shoulder.

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Bruce stared at the panoramic wall that was now covered with the background information on the Congressmen and Congresswomen that had resigned thus giving Lex Luthor the in that he needed to take his place in the White House.

Lois Lane paced in front of the monitors and pointed to the image that had graced everyone’s news circuit just before the landslide of resignations occurred. “Congressman Riley,” he pointed to the Congressman’s picture. “That’s the one that held this...party.”

Clark shook his head. “Yeah and every news circuit received anonymous pictures in the mail. No one knew who sent them, but a number of organizations ran with the story.”

“Of course,” Lois folded her arms across her chest. “What sells papers better than a political sex scandal?”

“I think there’s more to the story,” Clark said, pacing in front of the screen.

“There’s more to all of this,” Bruce agreed. “I’ll run a scan on the images I can find and see if there’s anything out of place that might offer an explanation other than the standard line we got from everyone.”

“What about this clone of Henderson’s?” Lois asked. “He’s been living as Bill Henderson for weeks. What’s being done about that?”

“Cisco and Bill are talking to Chief Taylor now. I have a team that will be going to the tunnels Bill and the other officers were trapped in to see what we can find down there,” Bruce answered. “Bill said there was a room filled with bodies that we now suspect is where the cloning experiments were being performed. We just need to find it, take some samples and track down who is behind these experiments.”

“Oh, is that all?” Clark asked sarcastically.

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Roger Templeton checked over his shoulder to make sure he

wasn’t being followed. The meeting he was having was now illegal, but it was a solid lead, and right now he needed something—anything to point him in the right direction. The game of cat and mouse he’d been playing with Nigel St. John and his allies, Alexander Luthor, Carmine Falcone, and Bill Church was growing old by the second.

He wanted to see St. John behind bars. Until he could ensure his imprisonment, the witness he had would remain silent. The call he received today had been out of the blue, and he had every right to ignore the lead and press on, but something told him to take a chance. So here he was.

He reached the coffee shop he was looking for, noting the scarce number of patrons and baristas behind the counter. In the corner, he spotted the table that was occupied by two women. One was a redhead and the other a blonde. Though they wore disguises, he immediately recognized the well-known felons.

He took his seat, sliding into the chair across from them. “Harley, Whisper, I never thought we’d be meeting under these conditions.”

“Cool the gloating down a bit, won’t you?” Harley snapped, tapping her long fingernails on the table. “We’re only here because we have a common goal.”

“Not a fan of the latest law change, I take it?” Templeton asked.

“We want a deal,” Whisper said, cutting in before Harley could respond to the jab.

“Depends on what you can give me,” Templeton responded. “You’re both at the top of the most wanted list right now.”

“And yet you’re meeting with us here...no backup,” Whisper replied coolly.

“Maybe because there’s someone you want more?” Harley purred.

“You want Luthor, you have to take down the whole operation,” Whisper hissed out smugly. “You won’t do that without us.”

“What kind of deal are we talking about?” Templeton growled out.

“Immunity in exchange for everyone,” Harley responded happily. “We walk, or we don’t talk.”

“Take it or leave it.” Whisper added smugly, crossing her arms over her chest.

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Bill Henderson set his glass down on the table in front of him, running a weary hand across his face. The circles he had gone through over the last few hours only to find himself in the same predicament. He had no clue on where to start with this clone or how to repair the damage that had been done.

Chief Taylor believed him so that was a start, but they were still a long way from restoring his life back to what it had once been. His clone had canceled his lease. Destroyed case files. And made a rift the size of the Grand Canyon between himself and Trish. Time was what had been asked of him. Having someone show up on your doorstep and claim your husband wasn’t really your husband had to be alarming he guessed. It didn’t make his current living situation any easier to digest.

He wanted his life back.

No matter where he turned he found himself face to face with another disaster that had been created by his clone.

“When does it end?” he muttered to himself.

Cisco patted his shoulder as he walked by. “How you holding up, man?”

“My career is in the pits. My marriage is on the rocks and ...I honestly don’t know,” Henderson replied with a groan.

“Just give it some time,” Cisco soothed, popping the can of soda in his hand to open it. “Chief Taylor said the IAB investigation would be over in a few weeks.”

“I’ve been with the department for over twenty years and I’ve

never been investigated, Cisco,” Henderson muttered with a low growl. “Stuff like this. It stays with you.”

“It’s not your fault, Bill,” Cisco reminded him. “None of this is.”

“But I’m paying for it,” Henderson reminded him, cocking an eyebrow up.

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*Six Weeks Later...*

**Congress Demands Testimony From Superman!**

**United Nations Peace Talks Commence!**

**Riots Continue: Equal Rights Demanded!**

**White House Correspondents’ Dinner Cancelled!**

**Child Labor Linked to Intergang!**

**Stitches Still At Large: Double Homicide = Double Trouble!**

John Radford with WGBS news walked the streets of Metropolis, New Troy, guiding his cameraman with him as he pointed to the picketing lines outside the businesses they passed by. “Metropolis is just one of the numerous cities around the world that has been gripped with protest after protest over the President’s new law, stripping women of their rights to be treated equally in this country.”

He pointed to the hospital they passed by. “Hospitals are turning patients away because they don’t have enough staff. Many businesses are struggling to remain afloat. The country is in turmoil and yet President Garner and his right-hand man, Lex Luthor, remain silent. No scheduled public outings, press conferences or events for our President. The visit to the UN is the first public appearance the President has made in weeks. Negotiating other nations problems are clearly more important than fixing the issues at home for our president. Our country is in peril yet our leader is nowhere to be found.” He pulled the microphone up and spoke to the camera, “Where are you, Mr. President?”

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Trapped. That was the only way to describe the emotions running through Will Garner as he buried his face into his jacket, making his way past the crowd of protesters lining the streets. He looked over his shoulder as he reached the end of the street, turning down the alley that would lead him to the safe house they had found shelter in. It had been six weeks and true to his word, the man -- cyborg-- that had rescued them had kept them safe. He never would have imagined his life like this. Living on the run with the likes of Johnny Corbin, scrounging for food while an imposter sat in the White House, ruining his hard work and good name.

Who was this stranger?

Corbin claimed not to know anything more than the fact that he was an experiment but it seemed there was more to the story than that. There was a lot about Corbin that he wasn’t sure of. How had he become mixed up with the people responsible for this coup on the White House and why was he helping them?

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Lex fumed angrily as he stared at the headline of the Daily Planet. *Child Labor Linked to Intergang!* He knew it would be only a matter of time before Bill Church came looking for the culprit who had double crossed him. Nigel and Gretchen both had been unsuccessful in apprehending Whisper for her treachery. He had given specific orders and Whisper had taken it upon herself to plant the explosives on the wrong ship, drawing Superman to the ship Bill Church had been using to smuggle in the labor that was keeping his partners’ businesses running at low cost.

Over the last few weeks since the misstep, Lex found himself being shunned by the Congress he had once controlled. He was sure Carmine had something to do with that. What did he expect him to do? Go against Intergang and risk everything?

He was in too deep to go back now. Church knew far too much. A problem he planned to handle once he took office. He’d

left Garner to wither under his own ego, suffering from the policies and laws he had put in place. It would be a few short hours before the President would find himself permanently removed from office. Not only were Garner’s approval ratings dropping like flies but now his image was being tarnished. There was just one last thing he needed Garner to do as President before he snuffed him out like the useless bug he was.

He reached over to the briefcase in his office, setting it on his desk and examining the contents once more. The nuclear arms codes he’d been gifted would come in handy with his plan to permanently terminate any memory of the Garner administration.

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<< “You’re hurting me!”>>

<< “What am I?!”

“Well, actually you’re a... robot...”

“Cyborg!”>>

Johnny Corbin’s eyes flickered open and he sat up with a start, looking around the rundown apartment he was currently squatting in. What better place to hide than on the worst street in town, right?

He still wasn’t sure what to do. His memories were jagged, filled with times from before he had been changed forever --converted into a robot that would be doomed to walk the Earth as a half man and half machine forever. If that was his destiny he would make sure it was a life he wanted. Not some life dictated by others.

He looked around the room, noting where Garner was huddled in the corner of the room by the oven, trying to take up what heat he could. The cold breath that escaped the President’s lips told him it was a bitter cold out.

They couldn’t hide here forever.

‘Lucy might know what to do,’ he thought to himself.

A smile crossed his face as the memory of his former girlfriend pushed its way to the present. Lucy was smart. Surely she could help him find a way out of this mess.

He stood up and walked toward the door. Garner called after him, “Where are you going?”

“Out,” Corbin responded curtly. “I’ll be back.”

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Congressman Riley held the glass of bourbon in his hand, allowing the liquid to swirl around in the crystal glass before bringing it up to his lips to drink. The liquid stung against his taste buds as he leaned back in his favorite leather recliner. He looked to the sofa where his guest was seated,

“Mr. Wayne, I’m not sure I can help you.” Congressman Riley tapped his hand against his chin. “That night is completely blank.”

Bruce Wayne nodded and set a folder on the table in front of him. “It doesn’t surprise me, Congressman.”

“It doesn’t?” Riley asked, looking at Bruce Wayne in surprise. Anyone he mentioned this to before had laughed him off. Denial was what they had called it. No matter how many times he told his story it didn’t resonate as truth with anyone.

He had lost his good standing in his church. His wife would barely speak to him. His children called him a hypocrite. His so-called friends treated him like an outcast. But this man sitting in his living room knew nothing about him and yet believed him.

“That surprises you, doesn’t it?” Bruce observed.

“No one believes me,” Riley said with a grunt. “I swear I have no memory of those girls or anything that happened that night. I was setup.”

“Why didn’t you fight it?” Bruce asked.

“I couldn’t.” Riley shook his head in dismay. “I probably should have, but no one believed me. I thought it would be better to resign rather than waste the taxpayer’s money on hearings to force me to resign.”

Bruce pushed the folder to him. “I had a lab go through the images that were released to the press and I think we found

something that could help you.”

Congressman Riley looked back at him suspiciously. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I don’t think it was an accident that just before a new Vice President had to be named you and your fellow congressmen and women were caught in such a public scandal,” Bruce explained calmly.

Congressman Riley opened the folder and looked inside. The first photo was of him unconscious with a young blonde wearing hardly anything but a small blue dress—if you could call it that. Beneath it was the same image but what appeared to be a closeup of the table next to him. On it was a needle with a small bottle next to it with clear liquid inside it. “What is this?”

“I take it you don’t recognize those?” Bruce asked.

“Despite what the local supermarket rags say I’m unfamiliar with recreational drugs, Mr. Wayne.” Riley snorted, running a weary hand across his face.

“From what my scientists have been able to tell from the pictures it looks like it was some sort of hallucinogen.” Bruce cleared his throat and pointed to the report behind the photos. “As you can see memory loss is just one of the side effects.”

“Can we prove it?” Riley asked.

“Can we get more than just your statement, Congressman?”

“I’ll make some calls.”

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“Hospitals are turning patients away because they don’t have enough staff. The country is in turmoil and yet President Garner and his right-hand man, Lex Luthor remain silent. No scheduled public outings, press conferences or events for our President. The visit to the UN is the first public appearance the President has made in weeks. Negotiating other nations problems are clearly more important than fixing the issues at home for our president. Our country is in peril yet our leader is nowhere to be found.” The anchor, John Radford pulled the microphone up and spoke to the camera, “Where are you, Mr. President?”

Lois Lane tightened her arms around her chest as she looked at the television coverage of the growing uprising that had begun across the country. It was hard to believe it had only been a little over a month since the entire country had been turned upside down. The bomb on their doorstep had been just the beginning. The stronghold the government now held over everyone was growing and people were beginning to revolt. Namely, her sister, Lucy.

Lucy had been one among many that she had known to join what was beginning to be called *Resurge Ex Cineribus* – Latin for Rise from the Ashes. Many of the members were once prominent members in society. Congresswomen. Attorneys. Lawyers. Councilwoman. All working together toward one goal.

Justice.

The less than reserved members of society had begun to band together but instead of seeking justice they sought something else. Revenge. Many of the members were instigators for riots, looting and arson attacks throughout the city.

The news that Bruce Wayne not only was Batman but also knew Clark’s identity had been shocking to say the least, but the silver lining had been the newfound friendship Clark had found with Bruce Wayne. Wayne Enterprises’ resources were a godsend along with his team from STAR Labs.

Cisco and Caitlin had been working tirelessly to trace the money trail on Officer Sahid while Henderson worked within the department to correct his clone’s handiwork. The clone had been handed over to STAR Labs. Dr. Klein was leading the research into the clones that had been found in the fallout shelter where Henderson and Zymack had been trapped with the SWAT Team. So far, the DNA of at least four prominent officials had been found. Nothing yet had been found to prove the President had been cloned.

Discovering who was behind the cloning experiments was currently the main focus for Caitlin and Cisco. She and Clark had put the word out on the street that they were looking for information on the STAR Labs break-in. So far there hadn’t been much, but she was certain given enough time someone would come forward.

Since teaming up with Bruce and his team they had been able to answer some of the burning questions she and Clark had had regarding their investigations and the events that had taken place over the last few months. The current angle Bruce was pursuing was with Congressman Riley and the massive resignation that had allowed the President to name his own Congress. The bottle in the images they had found had been identified by Dr. Caitlin Snow as a hallucinogen called ketamine capable of causing memory lapse, hallucinations and disassociation. Under the influence of this drug it would be easy to put the Congressman in a compromising situation and leave him with no memory of it.

If the Congressman agreed to work with them then that would be the first step for them to reveal the corruption that had been plaguing the White House and Washington. She still had the burning questions about the President’s behavior and of course her and Clark’s unsolved case that she was afraid might have died along with Hugo Strange.

Since Hugo Strange and Alberto Falcone’s murder there had been no sign of Denetto and the missing Kryptonite. A shudder ran through her as she recalled not only the green eerie glow that had rendered her husband helpless to take action during the gunfire but a mysterious red glow that looked just like the green Kryptonite they had come up against over the last few years.

Bruce said Denetto was running Intergang from Gotham City. She and Clark had had their suspicions about the sincerity of Darryl’s confession as the leader of Intergang a few months ago. If Denetto was running things from Gotham City that meant whoever was over Intergang was still out there.

Lois turned to the large board she had relocated to WayneTech, glancing over the red marks where they had indicated the questions that had remained. Why was the President going against everything he campaigned on? How was Luthor controlling him?

The mobile phone in her pocket chirped and she reached in and pulled it out to answer it, “Hello?”

“Hey, girl, I wasn’t sure if this number still worked.” Bobby Bigmouth’s loud slurping filled the line.

“Bobby, it’s been a long time...” Lois commented softly as she felt a smile cross her face.

“I been in and out of jams. Had to keep my head down, but I see that was a mistake.” Bobby chomped down on whatever he was eating. “Word on the street is you’re working on the downlow to reverse this stinkin’ new law? Any truth to that?”

“I’m looking for the truth,” Lois responded carefully before adding, “What have you got?”

“Hobb’s Bay. Bring the usual from Phil’s Butcher Shop,” Bobby said hurriedly. “I’ll be on the pier.” Before she could respond he hung up, leaving the long dial tone on the line to fill her ears.

“Time to get to work,” Lois mumbled to herself.

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“All right, people, we’ve got an hour till deadline, what have we got on the President’s visit to the U.N.?” Perry barked around the conference room as he led the staff meeting. The last few weeks had left him weary, struggling to keep the Planet afloat amid the loss of some of his top journalists. He looked around the room in dismay hoping for something, anything they could lead with that didn’t sound like the same regurgitated spin they had been pandering for the last three days.

“President is trying to act like the big man while ignoring what he’s done to his own country,” Jimmy offered up, not looking up

from his notepad.

“The White House has been silent on the border closure,” Ron Troupe offered with a defeated sigh. “No one’s talking.”

“Of course not,” Perry muttered in dismay. “Come on, people, you’re news people! Where’s your nose for news?”

“I’m covering sections, and I’ve got no sources,” Ralph grumbled.

“Same.” Jimmy held his hands up in defeat.

“Everyone’s just stressed out, Chief,” Clark offered, looking up from his notepad. “It’s the same story because nothing’s changed. No headway on challenging Garner’s position on reversing the Nineteenth Amendment. No leads on the cyber-attacks. No leads on Hugo Strange and Alberto Falcone’s murder. Nothing. It’s the same depressing spiel because that’s what it is.”

“Now, look, I know it’s been a rough few weeks, but this is what we do. When times are tough, we hit the pavement, knock on doors and demand answers,” Perry lectured. “We can’t just roll over because someone with a bigger title tells us to. We have an obligation to the American People to tell the stories that no one wants to tell. Are you with me?”

A grumble of agreement filled the room, and Perry sighed. “Just get me what you’ve got in the next twenty minutes. We’ll try to pull off a miracle with it.”

The room began to disperse, and Perry waited by the door until the only one left in the room was Clark. “Clark, hang tight for a second, would you?”

“What’s up, Chief?” Clark asked, reaching for his notebook.

“A little bit of doom and gloom, don’t you think, Kent?” Perry asked, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“Just keeping up appearances,” Clark said with a frown.

“Well, it’s one thing not to let anyone in on the investigation into Luthor and Garner, but you don’t have anything to funnel?” Perry asked, with a frown. “I mean, the blackout story of Henderson’s and the cloning research you and Lois uncovered...”

“We can’t afford to leak anything just yet,” Clark said with a sigh. “Don’t worry, the Planet will have the exclusive on everything when we get them.”

“Until then we just have to pander filler for...how long?” Perry asked.

“I’ll check with Bruce and see if I can get a timeline on when everyone will be ready to move in,” Clark said with a reassuring smile. “We’re going to get him, Chief.”

“I know, but it’s the waiting that’s killing me,” Perry grumbled.

“You and me both.” Clark said. Jimmy tapped at the conference room door and Clark and Perry both looked to him, “What is it, Jimmy?”

“Hey, CK, sorry to interrupt but your friend from the FBI, Roger Templeton is on line one.” Jimmy said, pointing to the phone.

“We’ll talk about this later,” Perry said, patting his shoulder as he moved off.

Clark nodded, reaching over to answer the phone. “Roger, this is a surprise.” He hadn’t heard from the FBI Agent since the fiasco with Ryan Wiley and the Resurrection pill that was used to smuggle criminals out of prison.

“Hey, Clark, I wish I could say this was a social call,” Roger responded on the other line. “I stumbled into something big. I could really use your expertise on this though.”

“Expertise?” Clark asked, taken aback.

“Intergang.” Roger responded with a hushed whisper as if he were trying to keep someone on the other line from hearing him. “I got an inside source willing to make a deal.”

“What kind of source?” Clark asked.

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Rollie Vale sat in the middle of the nuclear laboratory wearing a lead-lined hazmat suit to protect him from the radiation. He

looked at the green cylinders resting in the cooling tray in front of him. After weeks of trial and error he had perfected the science of melting down the radioactive meteorite. The timer dinged and he turned to his left. He pulled out a tray of newly cut green and red gems cut into perfect round crystals and set them on the table in front of him.

Vale picked up one of the green gems with a pair of tweezers and brought it under the microscope, checking for any change to the molecular structure. “Perfect.” He smiled to himself and set the crystalized meteorite back on the tray.

Rollie Vale moved to the other side of the room, opening the door that read ‘Radioactive Caution’ and entered the containment building with the tray of crystalized meteorites with him. He typed the code into the keypad to open the nuclear core. A light emitted from the center and a metal shaft lifted up showing a bright yellow cylinder in the center.

A smirk crossed Vale’s face as he placed the crystalized meteorite gems around the nuclear warhead’s case. As he placed each one in its home, he grinned to himself as each green gem fit snugly into place. When the nuclear warheads were fired off this afternoon, the Kryptonite and nuclear radiation would fill the atmosphere, ensuring even Superman wouldn’t stop them from ending Garner’s presidency once and for all.

\*\*\*

Governor Wade looked down at the lab report in front of him. There in black and white from both STAR Labs and WayneTech Labs was the writeup identifying the substance Congressman Riley had denied ever using for the last few months.

“Ketamine.” Bruce Wayne read the lab report aloud. “A hallucinogen used for starting anesthesia known to induce a trance-like state.” Bruce tossed the other half of the report to him. “I have over a hundred signatures from the former members of congress that have agreed to come forward. All of them report to have no memory of the night in question.”

“You were the first one to throw the first stone during the scandal.” Bruce glared him down. “Do the right thing, Governor.”

“It’s too late,” Wade retorted. “What good is it going to do?”

“What good is staying silent going to do?” Bruce challenged. “Congressman Riley and his fellow guests were setup. Doesn’t that bother you in the slightest?”

It more than bothered him. It was the turning point that haunted him. He had made the protest against Riley at the request of his friend, Will Garner. Seeing how things had spiraled from there had been a humbling experience. His part in the corruption that had taken over the country. Will Garner played his part as did others, but the guilt that weighed on Wade remained.

He picked up the report once more, scanning it again and looked up at Bruce. “Riley was a good man. He had a lot of great ideas and values that this country desperately needed.”

“And you helped take that chance away,” Bruce remarked, sinking down in the chair across from him. “But you do have a chance to right that wrong. The country is in turmoil and continuing to spiral.”

“I’m not without fault, Mr. Wayne, but if I do this it could cripple everything.” Wade was quiet for a moment and he added. “And I would ruin any chance I have at a political career.”

“If you don’t there may not be a future left,” Bruce said cautiously.

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After wrapping up his conversation with Roger Templeton, Clark caught Jimmy coming out of the darkroom. “Hey, Jimmy, you got a sec?”

Jimmy nodded and looked over at him. “What’s up, CK?”

“Ever hear of CF Incorporated?” Clark asked

“CF Incorporated?” Jimmy scrunched up his nose at the mention of the name. “Like the mob boss, Carmine Falcone’s shipping company?”

“That’s the one,” Clark said as he walked toward Jimmy’s desk with him. “The name keeps coming up and I’m not sure if it’s because someone is trying to point us in the wrong direction...”

“...or if it’s really Carmine Falcone rolling the bank,” Jimmy finished for him. “I’ll take a look and see what I can find out, but I’m going to need a much more powerful computer than the stuff we’ve got here at the Planet.”

Clark nodded, motioning for him to follow him. “I think that can be arranged.”

“Jimmy!” Perry bellowed across the newsroom.

They both turned to see Perry standing outside his office. “Metropolis National Preserve reported an arson to their campgrounds. Get down there!” He pointed to Ralph. “And take Simms with you!”

“Me, really?” Ralph’s ears perked up.

Jimmy cringed, looking back at Clark. “Sorry, CK.”

“We’ll catch up later.” Clark nodded, heading toward the stairwell. Arson in the middle of a national park was unusual, but in the middle of winter it was unheard of. Careful to stay out of sight, he disappeared up the stairwell at super-speed and changed into a blur of red and blue as he shot himself up into the sky to investigate.

\*\*\*

*‘Women’s Rights!’*

*‘Eviction Time’*

*‘Impeach’*

The signs swirled around in the air as Lucy found herself on the frontline, shouting at the closed doors of City Hall, through the megaphone. “Equal rights!”

“He’s coming!” one of the protesters by the door shouted hurriedly.

She watched with bated breath as the governor made his way out to the podium. The crowd behind her continued to shout their protests. There was something different about the governor’s expression that told her not to join in. “Wait!” she turned behind her. “Let’s hear what he has to say.”

The microphone chirped as the governor cleared his throat. “This country was founded on the men that fought for the right to protest their government and encourages the right to protest. You have every right to be angry and if I had the power to reverse the President’s bill I would.” Governor Wade cleared his throat. “I can’t do that, but I can call into question the legitimacy of the current Congress.”

There was a murmur among the crowd and Lucy looked around her, uncertain what to say or think as the governor relayed the latest news that the congressmembers that had been forced to resign had done so under duress and while still under the effects of the drug they had been given. Then came the shocker.

“With this new information coming to light I ask that the DOJ review the legitimacy of the Congress currently seated and review all laws voted into effect during their tenure. Including the confirmation of our Vice President and the reversal of the nineteenth amendment.”

The crowd erupted in cheers and Lucy stepped away, pulling her phone out to call Jimmy. She had barely heard the first ring when she saw a familiar figure approaching her from behind the crowd blocker that was positioned at the end of the City Hall steps.

The phone fell from her hands as she stared at the figure in surprise. “Johnny?”

\*\*\*

“Metropolis National Preserve reported an arson attempt that was later found to be started just outside the campgrounds in a private cabin owned by Bill Church. Mr. Church has yet to comment and ...”

The signal left the television as Bill Church Jr. sat seething at his desk, swiveling in his chair to set the remote down. He reached

for the phone and began to dial. “Safehouse. Line 34821.”

A moment later a voice came on the line. “Denetto? They’re closing in. You need to move.”

Unseen from the corner of the room was a Siamese cat, watching in rapt attention as she listened in on the conversation. Her eyes glowed golden yellow as she watched and waited for more information.

\*\*\*

Lois took a deep breath, looking up and down both sides of the street, catching sight of the pier Bobby had asked her to meet him at. On the edge of the dock, leading to the pier was a bench where Bobby was seated, slurping from probably the largest size Slurpee he could find.

Lois cracked a smile as she approached him, looking over her shoulder to be sure she hadn’t been followed. “You always do pick the spot with the best view, don’t you, Bobby?”

Bobby looked up with a grin on his face when he saw the bag from Phil’s. Thankfully Lucius had been gracious enough to pick up Bobby’s order for her. She’d have some explaining to do later for the huge bill that was put on the WayneTech credit card but if this panned out it would be well worth it. Right now, they needed a break and Bobby always had a way of delivering those.

“You look good, kid,” Bobby said, reaching for the bag in her arms. “Married life agrees with you. I’ll try not to take it personally that I wasn’t invited to the wedding.”

“It was a private ceremony,” Lois said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Very small guest list.”

“I’ll bet.” Bobby nodded, taking a bite out of the sandwich he had pulled out of his bag.

“So, you’ve got me here, Bobby.” Lois looked around the rundown street they were on. “What’s up?”

Bobby motioned for her to come closer, looking over his shoulder before he spoke up. “Come with me, I got something to show you.”

“I’m not in the mood for show and tell, Bobby,” Lois said, slightly agitated. “What is it?”

“Okay, okay,” Bobby waved her protests off. “Don’t come with me. I mean, it’s only the President and the former Vice President alive and well squatting in the old Miller place.”

“What did you just say?” Lois asked, uncertain if she’d heard him correctly.

“Morgan Johnson is alive,” Bobby said in a harsh whisper. “He and the President have been seen coming and going from the local fish market on 3<sup>rd</sup>.”

Lois shook her head. “The President isn’t even in the country right now.”

“How sure are you of that?” Bobby asked. Before she could respond he waved her toward him. “Come on, it’s just a few blocks from here.”

\*\*\*

“With this new information coming to light I ask that the DOJ review the legitimacy of the Congress currently seated and review all laws voted into effect during their tenure. Including the confirmation of our Vice President and the reversal of the nineteenth amendment.”

The governor’s speech played on the twenty-four-hour news circuit and Lex growled at the image of his new sworn enemy. He would destroy that traitor if it was the last thing he did.

“I’m afraid there’s more, sir,” Nigel spoke up, setting a polaroid image on his desk. “It seems we’ve found our missing patients.”

“Any sign of Gretchen?” Lex asked, standing up, straightening his tie on instinct as he checked his reflection in the mirror.

“Last I saw she was working on the cyborg project,” Nigel answered with a shrug.

“Let Vale know there’s been a change of plans. I’ll need to initiate the launch in person,” Lex said with a grunt. “Leave things

to be handled by these halfwits and look what happens. Mistake after mistake. I don't tolerate mistakes." He turned to his Secret Service Agent waiting a few feet away. "Get the motorcade ready. We're going to Metropolis."

\*\*\*

The fire was brutal. The flames quickly spread with the strong wind and the dry ground only fueled the spread of the overpowering flames. Clark moved at super-speed, trying to contain the flames before they spread further into the preserve. The water the firefighters used against the giant blaze was continuing to grow as he used blast after blast of cold breath to snuff the flames out. It seemed that once he silenced one flame another one would grow in its place.

"Who are you?!" a commanding female voice shouted from below.

Clark exhaled a long breath, watching as the blaze before him simmered down. He turned to find the source of the voice, shocked to see a man in a flame-retardant suit being hoisted up with a golden lasso and a woman that couldn't be any taller than Lois glaring him down with fierce disparagement. She looked like something out of a fable book for Greek mythology. A golden band with a double 'W' symbol was planted above her brow. Her raven hair waved in the air and the armor she wore was plated in gold and red.

"The lasso of truth forces you to reveal the truth," She ordered with a sharp glare.

"M-mario Falcone. I'm here to avenge my brother's death and bring his killer to justice." The man shouted out in dismay at how much he'd revealed. "Why did I just tell you that?"

A smile spread across the mysterious woman's face. "The lasso of truth is powerful. The more you resist the more painful it will be." She pointed to the discarded flame torch and turned to the police chief that was standing a few feet away. "I believe we've found the source of your arson." She turned back to Mario. "The proper authorities will take you into custody and you will face justice."

The Police Chief seemed to come to, realizing what was going on. He quickly directed the officers on site to take Mario into custody as Clark landed a few feet away, unable to take his eyes away from what he had just seen.

Who was this person?

What was she?

As the smoke began to clear he felt a force moving around him. He looked behind him, surprised to see all the debris neatly cleaned up, ready to be taken away. He turned to his left and called out, "I know you're there."

Just like that a man dressed in red and a white crest with a yellow lightning bolt through it appeared before him. He smiled back at Clark. "I guess I got too close this time."

"You're the one playing games in the Speed Force. Did you really think you could hide in there forever?" the mysterious woman asked, walking up behind the man in red.

"Hey, can't blame a guy for trying." The man shrugged, turning back to Clark. "Not exactly how I envisioned this first meeting. Can we have a do-over? I can go back and—"

A hand struck the man across the shoulder as the woman scolded him, "Do you not remember what happened the last time you tried to change the timeline?"

"Timeline?" Clark finally spoke up, finding his voice. "Who are you people?"

"I am Dianna Temiscira. Princess of the Themyscira." The woman answered, smiling warmly back at him.

The man in the red suit tightened his jaw and meekly added, "You can call me Flash."

Clark raised his eyebrows, uncertain how to respond. He was vaguely aware of the small team of firefighters on the other side of the charred remnants of the cabins that had once been ablaze.

Though he was certain they couldn't hear the conversation taking place he still was apprehensive of these strangers—super-powered strangers — that had appeared.

A man that moved so fast he was invisible, disappearing into what this Dianna had called the Speed Force. A woman with the power to compel the truth from the most nefarious villains — calling herself the princess of Amazons- mythical tales of warriors that fought. Could he really be face to face with a goddess?

"Your world is in peril, Kal-El. We're here to help," Dianna said.

Everything around him came to a standstill as Clark stared at Dianna in surprise. The pieces seemed to fit in place. The mysterious woman that referred to him as Kal-El and warned of a war was Dianna.

<< "A war is coming and we are all here to fight." >>

<< "She pointed at the President and said he wasn't the President." >>

"Where did you hear that name?"

"Oh, we're giving our *real* names?" Flash asked, looking between the two of them.

Her lips pursed in a smile as she commented, "No, Kal doesn't consider that his name. It's Superman? That's the name the people have bestowed on you?"

"That's what I go by, yes," Clark responded cautiously. "And who might you be, Dianna?"

"Not to kill the party here, but we might want to take this somewhere else." Flash pointed to the helicopter buzzing from above as a floodlight came over the trio.

"Great," Clark muttered.

"Superman, we have you surrounded!" the pilot called out from his megaphone.

\*\*\*

Lucy Lane made her way through the long alley, unsure where Johnny Corbin was leading her to. She looked around the rundown street, uncertain what to expect when she turned the next corner. She had been too shocked to argue when Johnny had pleaded with her to help him. He said he had something important to show her. Something that would fix things.

What that was, he wouldn't say.

So here she was following him around the worst block in town, wondering if she would get mugged or maimed at any second. She had dropped her phone back at the rally. She was completely isolated with all her trust being put into her former cyborg boyfriend as he led her through Hobb's Bay, searching for someone that held the answers to her problems.

They reached a door at the end of the alley with peeled red paint. He knocked on the door with three insistent knocks. The door cracked open and Johnny entered, pointing to the two men standing in the doorway.

The two men that looked exactly like the President of the United States and the deceased Vice President, Morgan Johnson. The men were silent, looking between each other until the man that looked like the President spoke up, "You had us worried there, John. I thought you were going to get help."

"I did," Johnny said, looking to Lucy. "Lucy's the smartest gal I know. She'll help us figure this out." He gestured between the three of them. "Lucy Lane, Mr. President Garner and Mr. Vice President Johnson."

She stared at the two men in shock, "I-Is this some sort of joke?"

"No joke," a voice spoke up from the back corner. "But a problem we plan to rectify immediately."

Lucy jumped back as the door behind her closed. She turned and saw Lex Luthor standing in the corner of the room with two Secret Service agents behind him. "You're..."

Lex crooned, taking a step forward and pulling out a small black remote from his pocket. "Metallo, I'm disappointed in you."

Lucy watched in dismay as Johnny Corbin fell silent, falling to the ground in a heap of steel. “Perhaps a long hibernation will make you rethink your newfound treachery.”

“You’re insane!” Lucy hissed out angrily, fighting back tears as she stared Luthor down.

A creak of the wooden floor pulled Lucy’s attention away from Lex Luthor and she turned to see Johnny Corbin crumpled in a heap on the ground. She fell to the ground, feeling a wave of grief hit her as the flashback of seeing him motionless when he’d been taken into STAR Labs custody hit her. “You didn’t deserve this.” She whispered, feeling the rain of tears run down her cheek.

\*\*\*

Johnny Denetto fidgeted with his collar for the umpteenth time as he looked around the semi-empty waiting area in the boarding terminal. So far no one had been the wiser with his new identity and disguise. Church had been quick to provide the paperwork after the debacle with Falcone and Strange.

“Get out and disappear before I change my mind.”

Those had been Bill Church Jr’s parting words for him. Though he wasn’t one to run with his tail between his legs he knew when he’d bitten off more than he could handle. Going against the Falcone family and possibly the other families in Gotham that had an alliance with Falcone wasn’t how he wished to spend his final days.

There was also the complication of Hugo Strange.

He hadn’t meant to kill him.

He hadn’t even felt the trigger when he pulled it.

It was a poor excuse and he knew Falcone and Luthor would be less than sympathetic if they ever got their hands on him. Church had called this a suspension of their plans for Luthor until he called. It wasn’t like he could be smuggled into the White House to assassinate the President and Vice President without help. He’d burned several of the bridges Church had been planning on using.

Now he was left here—uncertain of his future and his destination. He looked down at the boarding pass that read “New Zealand” on the ticket. A smile crossed his face, wondering what the future would hold for him. He patted the briefcase in his hand.

“You know if you stare at that boarding pass for too long it might disappear.” A voice behind him said.

He looked behind him to see a dark-haired man staring at him. “I, uh, guess I got lost in thought.”

“Vacation?” he asked, taking the seat next to him.

“Yeah,” Denetto grinned happily. “A much needed one. Need to recharge and all that.” He said with a deep breath. “You?”

He shrugged his shoulders, “I haven’t done much traveling outside the United States in a long time. I probably need to.... but not today.”

“Not today?” Denetto’s brow furrowed and the hair on the back of his neck stood up, as he looked at him suspiciously. “I don’t understand.”

“Roger Templeton, FBI,” the man introduced himself, pulling out a badge. “Now, you don’t want to make a scene that is guaranteed to make its way back to your friends in Gotham, do you?” A confident smirk crossed the agent’s face as he added, “I heard Carmine Falcone put a five-hundred-million-dollar price on your head.” A low whistle escaped Templeton’s lips. “That’s enough to turn....*ohhh*, just about anyone.”

Denetto gripped his briefcase, staring at the agent uncertainly. “What do you want?”

Before he could ask anything more, three men in dark suits approached him. “You’ll have to come with us, Mr. Denetto.”

“Not till I know where I’m going,” Denetto answered.

“We can’t answer that,” Templeton responded, “but we can guarantee your safety against...everyone.”

“Take it or leave it,” the other agent added.

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Lois eyed the dark alleyway suspiciously before looking back at Bobby who was finishing the remnants of his sandwich. She gazed up at the rickety stairs that looked like they were one gust of wind away from collapsing into the street. “So, the President is squatting *here*, on the worst block in town?”

“Where’s the last place you’d look for him?” Bobby prodded, pointing to the door ahead with peeling paint. “That’s the one.”

Lois nodded, inching closer as she approached the door ahead that had red peeling paint. As she approached she noticed the door was slightly ajar.

“Lucy Lane, Mr. President Garner and Mr. Vice President Johnson,” she heard a familiar voice speak. Her eyes widened in horror as she peeked through the door and spotted a very alive Johnny Corbin standing with her sister. A few feet away was a man that definitely resembled the President. Though his attire and unkept appearance made it hard to connect him with the man whose campaign she’d followed on his way to the presidency. Next to him was his very much alive Vice President.

“What in the world?” Lois muttered under her breath as her mind tried to process what she was seeing in front of her.

“I-Is this some sort of joke?” Lucy gasped in surprise.

“No joke.”

Lois felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up when she heard the voice. She knew that voice from anywhere. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and began to dial the Metropolis P.D.. She whispered over her shoulder to Bobby, “We need to get out of here.”

The operator came on the line. “Metropolis P.D.. How can I direct your call?”

“Bill Henderson, please,” she said hurriedly, looking over her shoulder when she didn’t get a response from Bobby.

“He’s out on a case right now, would you like to leave a message?”

Lois felt the prickle of cold metal against her temple and an arm wrangle itself across her throat. A hot whiff of onions and garlic brushed against her nostrils and she let out a short whimper as the pressure against her throat tightened and the phone slipped out of her hand. She caught sight of Bobby slumped in the corner of the alley as her assailant shoved the door in front of them open.

“What do we have here?” the voice sneered in her ear.

She could barely keep up the pace as the assailant shoved her through the now open door, toppling her on top of her sister.

“Ms. Lane!” the President cheered in surprise

“Mr. President,” Lois looked over at where the President and Vice President Morgan were being held at gunpoint by a man she never thought she would see again. “Nigel.”

“Ms. Lane, it appears you’re impeccable timing continues to betray you,” Nigel said as he slapped a pair of cuffs on Morgan Johnson and Will Garner’s wrists, shackling them together.

“You won’t get away with this!” Lois spat out in defiance, letting out a raspy cough, trying to catch her breath.

“Lois?” Lucy reached out to help her sit up.

“Luce.” Lois reached over to hug her sister. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Lucy said uneasily. Her gaze shifted to the slumped over body of Johnny Corbin. “Johnny said he needed my help. Not that I was able to do anything.” A tear ran down her sister’s face. “What’s your excuse?”

“Following a lead,” Lois said softly, reaching over to grab her sister’s hand. “Just stay close. We’ll find a way out of here.”

“Mr. Vice President, sorry to intrude but we found this one lurking outside trying to call the police.”

Lois looked up at the tall suit that had manhandled her moments before. “Secret Service,” she muttered under her breath, recognizing the agent from Lex’s unwelcome visit to her apartment a few months ago.

“Well, this certainly is unexpected,” Lex circled around them

like a vulture moving in on its prey. A few feet away were two other equally intimidating Secret Service agents.

“The police are on their way,” Lois lied, trying to present a bravado she didn’t feel at that moment. If she screamed for help would anyone hear her? She had called the police. Tried. She knew there was a very real chance that any attempt to call for help would result in one of these trigger happy Secret Service agents firing a round that could either kill or seriously injure herself or Lucy.

“And I’m afraid it’ll be a waste of manpower.” Lex let out a menacing chuckle as he nodded to the agent standing behind the two of them. “Tie them all up. Bring them with us. I don’t need to make the headlines just yet.” Lex looked back at Garner. “I do have a public mourning to tend to this afternoon.”

“Mourning?” Lois grunted out in disbelief. “That would imply you have a soul.”

Another menacing chuckle escaped Lex Luthor’s lips as he knelt down and hissed out, “My dear, Lois, always quick with the wit. Tell me, how does the other side feel, hmm? No freedom. No independence. A bleak footnote in the book of life and forever second place. No journalistic accolades to collect or pavement to hit when your beloved Planet can’t employ you, hmm?”

Lois hacked a wad of spit at him, hitting him in the eye with her saliva. Lex let out an insincere chuckle. “You never learn, do you?” He reached over and grabbed her by the back of her hair, “You continue to fight me and it will only get worse. Things can get far worse. How quickly do you think I could make something small like a marriage license disappear? Or even worse a birth certificate? I can erase anyone’s existence with the snap of my fingers.”

“You’re a deranged coward!” Lucy snapped angrily, hoisting her foot up to deliver a hard blow to Lex’s gut, causing him to keel over in pain.

Lois didn’t need to think twice. She quickly grabbed her sister by the wrist and sprung up, bolting for the door as she let out a healthy, “Help, Superman!”

The last thing she remembered hearing was an aggravated Lex shouting, “After them!” as she bolted for the door.

A hard blow came across the back of her head and she fell to the ground, slumping over in pain. The distinct smell of chloroform reached her nostrils and she heard Lex laugh in the background. “You really think that’s all it takes? That overgrown boy scout wouldn’t dare show his face with him being public enemy number one. I am unstoppable!”

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## Chapter 16

Clark checked his watch, seeing the minute hand tick closer and closer to eleven o’clock. After being spotted by the local police, Clark had made a quick exit, agreeing to meet up with Dianna and Flash in a few hours. He’d been given a beacon to call the duo if he needed help before their planned meeting. He was still in shock that not only one, but two other super-powered beings were here—not to take over the world or to try and destroy the city, but to help. That wasn’t something he came across very often.

He looked at his watch again, growing impatient by the second as he paced in front of the lobby doors of the Planet. He had so much he wanted to tell Lois. His last message from her had been a few hours ago, indicating she would catch up with him in front of the Planet after her meeting with Bobby. The minute hand moved past the one on his watch and he let out a frustrated growl.

It was hard to remain patient given the current climate in the world. It wasn’t just a broken traffic light or car wreck he had to worry about but an entire population that was being fed this propaganda that suddenly turned his wife into a second-class citizen. He had endured enough ridicule growing up to know what someone with that mindset was capable of. Just when he was

about to make a quick exit to check the city for her he heard Ralph Simms approach with a loud cackle.

“Ha, ha!” Ralph cheered happily as he walked toward the Planet entrance with Jimmy a few paces behind. “You all told me I was crazy, but I finally got it!”

“Got what?” Clark asked as Ralph moved closer.

“Only the biggest story of the year,” Ralph boasted confidently. “Proof that the Savior Woman exists! This is gonna be bigger than Superman’s arrival – hands down. She’s hot too!”

“Uh-huh,” Jimmy patted Ralph on the shoulder. “Let’s just see how the pictures come out, Ralph.”

“I can’t wait to tell Perry!” Ralph cheered as he moved past Clark and disappeared behind the rotating glass doors.

Jimmy looked at Clark with a raised eyebrow. “So, should I accidentally spill some acetic acid on some of these, or is it okay to develop photos of Superman with this... Wonder Woman and Lightning Man?”

“Flash,” Clark corrected with a light chuckle. “He goes by Flash.”

“Flash? Like the red streak from Central City? That Flash?” Jimmy inquired curiously.

“I don’t know. Maybe?” Clark shrugged his shoulders. He looked at his watch once more, checking the street behind where Jimmy was standing.

“Everything okay, CK?” Jimmy asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” Clark admitted, shaking his head. “I haven’t heard from Lois since this morning.”

“Could she have gotten pulled into that protest at City Hall?” Jimmy asked, shrugging his shoulders. “Lucy was going to the demonstration with some of her friends from school. Maybe Lois went with her?”

“No, she was following a lead from Bobby Bigmouth,” Clark said, pulling out his mobile phone for the umpteenth time to check for a missed call.

Jimmy frowned, pulling out his phone. “Hang on, I’ve got a missed call from Luce.” He put the phone on speaker after typing in the code to his voicemail.

“Jimmy, you won’t believe it. The Governor’s going to push for a review of the acting Congress. If this goes through the whole thing could be reversed. This is so...” Lucy’s voice dropped and a low mutter could be heard. Clark made out a distinct name that he was sure his friend didn’t hear.

“Johnny?”

There was only one Johnny he knew of that Lucy had come across. Johnny Corbin.

The murmur of the crowd around Lucy filled the line before the line went dead. Clark looked at Jimmy with a frown. “Where was that protest at?”

“City Hall,” Jimmy answered with a frown. “You don’t think...”

“I don’t know,” Clark said hurriedly, backing away and heading toward the alley behind the Planet. Before he could make it around the corner, he heard a cry for help that made his heart lurch in his chest.

“Help, Superman!”

‘Lois.’

In a blur of red and blue, Clark disappeared into the blue lit sky, whispering to himself, “I’m coming, Lois.”

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Cisco stepped outside the laboratory at STAR Labs, turning to his friend, Barry Allen. Barry towered well over Cisco at six foot. His light brown hair moved from side to side as they walked toward the corner of the corridor where the vent to the AC unit was blowing.

“We’ve got a few more hits on the DNA samples Bruce Wayne’s team was able to retrieve last month,” Cisco responded, burying his hands in his pocket.

“Nobody from our neck of the woods?” Barry asked curiously. “Thankfully, I believe all the metas we’ve rounded up are incompatible for this experiment what with the black matter they have in their DNA.” Cisco shrugged.

“And them being trapped in the pipeline,” Barry reminded him. “Just as long as they don’t try cloning criminals like the Thinker or Savitar.” Barry shuddered.

“Amen to that,” Cisco agreed.

“Anything new on that data we pulled from the house of clone horrors?” Barry asked.

“Dr. Klein is making some headway on those files though. He said it’s about 70 percent decrypted.”

“That’s great news,” Barry replied excitedly. “How soon until we can get the full list over to the feds?”

“Easy there, cowboy. Just because you move at lightning speed doesn’t mean everyone else does. I said we’re close, but figuring out who was in charge of the cloning experiments is still in the works. Speaking of experiments…” Cisco tapped him on the shoulder. “Nice work on that forest fire. In and out in under sixty seconds and not even a singe on the suit.”

“It helps when it’s flame-retardant.” Barry smirked as he added with a hushed whisper, “Plus, it was *really* cool to finally meet him.”

“I still can’t believe you didn’t get at least a photo op or something,” Cisco admonished with a teasing grin. “I mean, this is definitely pretty high on the bucket list of celebs to meet.”

“Well, it’s kinda hard when you’re trying to be taken seriously as a superhero when you’re taking photo-ops.”

“And have your own shelf in your comic book collection,” Cisco teased.

“It was pretty awesome,” Barry acknowledged as his face fell. “It’ll be even cooler when this looming threat is gone.”

“We sure this threat isn’t already here? I mean, look around…” Cisco motioned around him. “The whole country is in an uproar.”

“The message we got from Jay Garrick indicated this threat would be something that would be bigger than all of the world wars combined. Political games might play a part in it, but we’re not at war,” Barry said.

“How are you liking the new suit?” Cisco asked, motioning for Barry to bring his wrist to him.

Barry shrugged his shoulders. “We’re getting there.” He tapped at the screen of Barry’s watch and a micro computer screen opened up, showing three different bars. “Well, given we’re expecting a war I’ve equipped you with a way to detect the biggest threats. Nuclear energy. Radiation. Black matter.” Cisco let out a heavy breath. “Just press this button here and it’ll check the city’s radius like this and…” The first bar began beeping insistently and blinking red.

“Is it supposed to do that?” Barry asked.

“It is if there’s a nuclear weapon nearby,” Cisco said with a worried expression.

“I’ll do a check around the city,” Barry instructed. “Can you see if someone can try and get a hold of Superman?”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Cisco asked.

“I’ve heard ‘*Help Superman*’ works.” Barry shrugged before disappearing in a lightning bolt of red pigments.

“Always a comedian,” Cisco muttered, moving off.

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Dr. Klein looked up from his computer, surprised to see a dark brunette a few feet away from him. He felt a blush fill his cheeks as he stared back at the mysterious woman. He straightened up in his seat, clearing his throat. “Y-yes, Miss. Can I help you?”

“You’re Dr. Bernard Klein.” The statement came out and he wasn’t sure if he was supposed to confirm or not. She paced in front of him, looking around his laboratory. “You are an ally of Superman, correct?”

“Uh, yes,” Dr. Klein said hurriedly, “but I don’t know where he is.”

“I am not here to shake you down, Dr. Klein,” she responded, pointing to the screen in front of him. “I hear you’re researching this cloning project.”

Dr. Klein eyed the woman suspiciously, “Decrypting the files, yes.”

“Time is of the essence, Dr. Klein,” she said warningly. “Your country and the world is in grave danger from this man.”

Dr. Klein blinked and the decryption program moved from seventy-five percent to one-hundred percent complete. He stared at the name on the file and felt a course of anger run through him as he recognized the name.

Dr. Gretchen Kelly.

She had been linked to the kidnapping of Metallo and later the resurrection of Lex Luthor. If she was involved, then he had no doubt her boss, Lex Luthor was neck deep in this as well. He looked back at the woman in surprise. “How did you do that?”

She smiled back at him. “If I told you I’d have to harm you. I don’t want to have to do that.”

He nodded, unsure how to respond. “Lex Luthor. That’s who you’re talking about?”

“He is a dangerous man,” she whispered, looking away with a saddened expression. “I have seen many dark hearts in my time but his is the darkest I have ever seen. His greed will destroy the world unless we can stop him.”

“We?” Dr. Klein asked nervously.

“What is the most dangerous weapon man has that could fill the skies with fire?” She asked, moving closer to him.

“Any type of weapon with nuclear or atomic energy could easily cause the destruction you’re describing.” He stopped looking up at her in confusion. “That’s a very accurate description though. Who are you?”

She smiled back at him. “You can call me Dianna.” She pointed to his monitor. “Can you find where these nuclear or atomic energy weapons might be?”

Dr. Klein chuckled. “Of course I can.”

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The fan in the small interrogation room rattled with each spin, creating a soft whine from above. Roger Templeton paced around the table where John Denetto was seated. In his hand he held the list of charges along with the information they’d gathered on the cases against Denetto. Roger Templeton read off the list of charges. “Let’s see, Johnny ‘Stitches’ Denetto. What do we have here?”

“I’ve already asked for my attorney,” Denetto harrumphed, ignoring the FBI agent as he circled around him.

“I’m just talking here, Johnny. You don’t have to respond,” Templeton let out a low whistle. “Murder of the mob boss’ son, huh? Boy, they must have a whole army looking for you.”

Stitches shifted uncomfortably under Templeton’s gaze. “Is that a question?”

“Just making conversation.” Templeton shrugged. “So sensitive. Does Billy know you have such a delicate side?”

“You’re going to have to do a lot more than empty threats to get me to talk!”

“Who says I need you to give me anything?” Templeton asked. “Seems to me you’re set up nice and pretty… Classic fall guy.”

“What are you muttering about?” Stitches spat irritably.

“Sorry, did I stutter?” Templeton asked. “Fall guy. You know, the one that takes the blame for everything while the big guns disappear and continue about their merry way.”

“I’m not a fall guy!” Denetto growled angrily. “People hear my name and they shudder. I’m what nightmares are made of!”

“Nightmares, huh?” Templeton chuckled to himself. “That must be why Church set you up to take the rap for the double

homicide and the child smuggling ring we recently busted up. Must have given him too many nightmares.”

“Child smuggling?” Denetto sniffed. “I have my limits. I don’t hurt women and I don’t hurt kids. Anyone that tells you differently is a lying sack of bologna.”

“Is that so?” Templeton prodded, taking a seat in front of him. “Well, right now there’s a whole bunch of transactions leading to CF Incorporated and according to the Federal Reserve the owner of that account is none other than John Denetto.” Templeton laid the printouts in his hand in front of Denetto.

“I haven’t done squat!” Denetto growled out angrily. “I’m no one’s fall guy and I ain’t responsible for that dirtbag’s mess.”

“Does this mean you want to make a deal, Denetto?” Templeton asked, leaning in closer.

“You think I’m an idiot? I want immunity!”

“I want a seven-bedroom estate with a waterfront view, but we can’t all have what we want, can we?” Templeton responded snidely. “Here’s how this is going to work. You tell me what you know about Church, who he’s working with and I take it to the Attorney General then maybe you don’t spend the rest of your life in the Federal prison’s solitary. You don’t tell me what you know then I throw you into prison for the double homicide and child smuggling. Let you into the general population where a lot of very big and very vicious criminals will all know you like to hurt children.”

“You backstabbing piece of...”

“Ah, ah, ah, now is that anyway to talk to someone willing to go out on a limb for you?” Templeton asked, pushing a statement form toward Denetto. He held his hands up, giving the impression of teetering a see-saw. “A or B. A or B. Tick tock.”

“Fine!” Denetto shouted, grabbing the pen from Templeton. He looked at the clock, “You might want to put a rush on getting the Attorney General down here though.”

“Why is that?” Templeton asked.

“Because your Vice President is about to nuke his cloned President and declare war on the U.N..” A chuckle escaped Denetto’s lips and he added with a sinister growl. “If I’m going down I’m taking every sorry piece of garbage with me.”

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Jimmy tapped at his keyboard, not looking up as he finished typing up his account of what he had seen at the fire. It would need some polishing for sure, but it had to be better than Ralph’s take – which ignored the whole reason they’d been there to begin with. He’d have to have Clark take a look at it before handing it to Perry.

“Take a leap of faith,” he told himself. If this last year had taught him anything it was that anything is possible.

“Hey, Jimmy?” He looked up and spotted one of the new interns waving a printout in his hand.

“What’s up?” Jimmy asked.

“You got a fax,” he handed the printout to Jimmy.

Jimmy nodded, scanning the printout. It was the request from the Federal Reserve Bureau on the owner of CF Incorporated’s bank account. A smile crossed his face as he muttered, “Well, well, well. Stitches it is, huh?”

There at the bottom of the printout was the name: John Denetto.

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Panic.

That was the only way to describe the way Clark felt as he soared over Hobb’s Bay searching for anything that would lead him to Lois. ‘Come on, Lois, where are you?’ he thought to himself as he circled the block where he’d heard the cry for help come from once more.

Where was she?

A million thoughts raced through his mind at once as every worst-case scenario pushed their way to the forefront of his mind.

There had to be something he was missing. She couldn’t just disappear into thin air. He landed on the dirt covered street just behind the pier where he’d heard the call for help come from moments ago. He scanned the area with his x-ray vision, hoping to find some clue that would lead him to Lois.

“If you would like to try your call again please...”

Clark turned, zeroing in on the machine operator’s voice and quickly scanned the alleyway until he found it. There right outside the door that had seen better days was a black mobile phone that looked like Lois’. He knelt down to grab it and hit end to stop the operator’s voice. He quickly scanned the phone and grimaced when he realized it was indeed Lois’.

He scanned the recently called list and noted the last call was to the Metropolis P.D.. He was just about to hit the redial button when he heard a groan from a few feet away. He turned around and spotted a very disoriented Bobby Bigmouth sitting up with his head in his hands.

“Bobby?”

“Superman?” The snitch looked at him with a dazed expression, nursing an open wound on the side of his head.

“You’re bleeding.” Clark pointed to Bobby’s head.

“Yeah, that agent came out of nowhere and clobbered me.” Bobby said, rubbing his head. “Hey, how’d you know my name?”

“Uh...” Clark wasn’t sure how to respond to Bobby’s question and opted to focus on his first statement. “What agent? What happened?”

“Secret Service agents. Big guys. Knocked me out –or thought they did anyway.” Bobby rubbed the back of his head. “Oh, I really should have asked for a double order for all this hassle.”

“Secret Service?” Clark asked, feeling a sense of dread fill him. “Did they say anything.”

“Something about making someone pay. Wayne...no, that’s not it. Wade.” Bobby snapped his fingers. “It was definitely Wade.”

“Are you sure?” Clark asked, unsure how reliable Bobby’s account was.

“Superman, I may have taken a few hits but my sense of hearing is impeccable. It was definitely Wade,” Bobby said, rubbing the back of his head once more. “They took them.”

“Them?” Clark asked.

“Lois Lane and her sister.” Bobby shook his head. “Poor kid got mixed up in something big that’s for sure.”

“When was this?”

“I dunno.” Bobby shrugged. “I was in and out for a bit.” He tapped his head.

Clark frowned. Pushing Bobby any further wouldn’t do him any good. He had to find Governor Wade and warn him. He still couldn’t get a read on Lois, but this was the only lead he had. He turned to leave and found himself blocked by a red blur.

“I don’t have time for games,” Clark called out. “I’ve got to get to City Hall to warn the Governor.” A lightning crackled in the sky and there where the red blur had been was Dianna and the Flash.

“Oh, I gotta lay off the energy drinks.” Bobby muttered from behind Clark.

“We know, Kal-El,” Dianna spoke up, taking a step forward. “But the Governor isn’t our only obstacle.”

“The nuclear energy levels throughout the city are going haywire,” Flash advised, holding up the device on his wrist for him to read.

“The only nuclear plant in Metropolis was shut down a year ago.” Clark’s brow furrowed, confused by the information.

“There is a threat of war, Kal-El,” Dianna insisted, crossing her arms across her chest as she stared back at him pleadingly. “Flash is correct. STAR Labs has picked up on the same energy.”

Clark’s brow furrowed as the pieces began to fit. “He’s going to declare war.”

“Who?” Flash asked.

“Luthor,” Clark shook his head in dismay, “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. I’ve got to stop him.”

“We need to stop him,” Flash corrected, taking a step forward. “This is our fight too.”

“You’re not fighting this alone, Kal-El,” Dianna said boldly. “It’s not just Metropolis that is in danger.”

Clark sighed, looking between the duo. It appeared arguing with them was futile. “Luthor’s got Governor Wade and Lois at City Hall.”

“Then he’s probably got the controls for whatever he’s about to launch with him.” Flash reasoned. “Let’s go.”

Without a second thought the trio disappeared into a blur of red and blue, leaving a bewildered Bobby Bigmouth muttering to himself, “They’re never gonna believe this one...”

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It hurt. Lois tried to move but felt like a weight was on her chest. She felt a breath of cold air enter her lungs and gasped in surprise producing a coughing frenzy from her lungs as she desperately sought to catch her breath. Her eyes fluttered open, and she gasped in surprise, seeing the dark wood-paneled walls around her. She sat up slowly, taking in her surroundings. She was in a brightly lit room – an office.

She looked to her left and saw her sister groggily coming to. To the other side of her was President Will Garner, and Vice President Morgan Johnson. Across from her she saw the governor tied to his chair with a tight cloth wrapped around his mouth, preventing him from speaking. The words ‘traitor’ were etched into the cloth with red ink.

“Wh-where?” Lois looked around, craning her neck to look up until she found herself eye-level with her kidnapper. “Lex.”

The venom dripping from her tone did nothing but amuse him as he let out a soft chuckle. “Now is that anyway to address your President?”

“You will never be president, you vindictive sociopath!” President Garner shouted out.

“Oh, won’t I?” Lex pointed to the television monitor airing President Garner’s address to the United Nations.

Garner’s address began, turning to those that stood around him to thank them. “Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, honored guests, and distinguished delegates, thank you for

the honor of permitting me to speak on this anniversary for the United Nations. The world awoke after enduring the war to end all wars when we dared to believe hatred’s unyielding grip had finally been broken, daring to believe the torch of peace would be protected in liberty’s firm grasp.”

“He’s got the speech memorized at least,” Garner grumbled from a few feet away. “You’re a disgrace.”

“Such a shame about those horrible laws you passed, President Garner. The American people will welcome me with open arms when I save them from your dictatorship of an administration. Right after witnessing your assassination of course...I’ll have to save the country from nuclear war, but that’s a price I’m willing to make.”

“You’re out of your mind!” Lucy shouted. “You really think it’s that easy? People will riot in the street to overthrow you. You are a disgrace to everything this country stands for.”

“Killing your clone won’t make you President,” Lois snapped, shaking her head in disbelief. “There are people out there that believe in justice and truth and they will stop you and—”

“Or maybe not,” Lex pointed to a ring with a bright glowing red rock in the middle of it. “I believe Superman’s days of meddling in my affairs are over.”

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“It stirs our soul and warms our hearts, but it also demands of us a realism that is

rock-hard, clear-eyed, steady, and sure. The differences

between some of us must not be permitted to degenerate into open conflict, and I come offering for my own country a new commitment, a fresh start.”

As President Garner’s speech played in the background, Rollie Vale was hard at work ensuring the nuclear warheads had all been armed, waiting for Lex Luthor’s authorization code to take off. All four warheads had been programmed to target the General Assembly Hall at the United Nations where the clone of President Garner was speaking. A smile spread across his face as Rollie typed in the last keystroke on the coordinates and the screen blinked back, ‘Armed.’

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General Reynolds and his Commander stood outside City Hall with a large crowd of officers, assessing the hostage situation. Jimmy bobbed his head up where he could, shouting for someone, anyone to take pity on him and tell him what was going on. He’d tried to remain patient waiting to hear from Clark but when LNN had played the coverage of Governor Wade being taken hostage along with two unknown female pedestrians he couldn’t wait any longer.

“We’ve got four other hostages along with the governor. We can’t just sit on our hands, General!”

“This is an FBI matter, not a military matter!” Jimmy scanned the crowd and saw one of the FBI agents getting in the General’s face.

“Nuclear war is a military operation, Agent Templeton!” the General shouted back.

Before either of them could react, a dark figure landed between them and Jimmy gasped out in shock, staring at the black cowl and emblem that he’d only seen in what Perry called supermarket trash. “No way!”

Jimmy quickly pulled his camera from his bag and began taking shot after shot, hoping at least one of the images would capture what was unfolding before him.

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Lex pointed to a ring with a bright glowing red rock in the middle of it. “I believe Superman’s days of meddling in my affairs are over.”

“Don’t be so sure of that, Luthor!” a booming voice came from the now opened doors to the governor’s office.

Lois turned her head, surprised to see her husband standing in the doorway. “Superman, stay back!” Lois warned. “He’s got Kryptonite.”

Clark’s face tensed as Lex moved closer. Lois bit her lower lip, unsure what to expect from this red variation. The last time he’d been exposed to it, it had made him angry and blasé, but Clark’s facial expression remained calm this time.

“Yes, stay back, Superman,” Lex moved closer, tauntingly moving his hand closer and closer to Clark.

Lex let out a chuckle, reaching in his pocket to set a metal box on the table. “Yes, stay back! You might get that nasty temper again!” He opened the box, revealing the red glowing meteorite inside. He set a small black handheld device that appeared to be some sort of radio and typed on it before letting out a sinister chuckle.

“Superman?” Lois called out to him. “Please, you have to fight it!”

“What’s going on?” Lucy asked as Clark stumbled backward, shaking his head as Lex taunted him with the red glowing meteorite.

“Stop it!” Lois shouted as Clark fell back, knocking the bookcase behind him down.

A growl escaped Clark’s throat and Lois saw a red glow come from his eyes. “Superman, don’t!” she yelled, desperate to get his attention.

“Kal, no!” a blur of red and blue filled the room and a woman with dark hair appeared, blocking Clark’s viewpoint of Lex. She

had long black hair and a golden band across her forehead. Her clothing looked like some sort of armor. She held a golden lasso in one hand as she held her other hand out to Clark. “This is not your way, Superman.”

Behind the woman was a man in red with a lightning bolt across his chest. She stared in shock as he knelt over her husband at what looked like super-speed as lightning lit up the room.

“It’s the meteorite,” the woman pointed to Lex. “He has it on him.”

Lex was already making his way to the exit when the man in red turned to Clark and winked at him. “How about a race?”

The red glow that had been in Clark’s eyes had disappeared and in its place was the mocha brown eyes she had looked into countless times. A thousand thoughts ran through her mind as she watched Lex race to the exit. A blur of red and blue filled the room.

Lois let out a sigh of relief when she felt her binds unfasten. She looked to her left and saw Lucy’s had been as well as the other hostages. The man in red came to a stop next to the governor’s desk beside Clark where the Governor had been untied from his binds and in his place Lex had been tied up.

The ring and meteorite were nowhere to be found as he smirked back at Clark. “They do call me the Fastest Man Alive.”

Clark held his head, shaking it as he looked at the man in red, “What happened to the Kryptonite?”

“Flash put it in the Speed Force for now,” the woman responded, looking at the man in red. She turned to Lex. “Safe from the hands of this one.”

“What are friends for?” Flash shrugged then pointed to Lex. “Now, about those nuclear warheads that went missing from the pentagon.”

Lex let out a cackle. “You idiots. You’re too late.”

“It’s headed for the UN,” Lois said, standing to her feet as she stretched her arms over her head. “He’s going to try and start a war and assassinate the President’s clone so he can take office.”

“And there’s nothing you can do about it,” Lex shot back angrily. “Each warhead is littered with Kryptonite and will sear itself into everything it touches once it blows. Let it blow and litter the world with Kryptonite or try and stop it and die. Either way, I win.”

Clark looked back at Lois, meeting her gaze for a moment before disappearing into a blur of red and blue, crashing through the glass ceiling from above. Lois let out a labored breath, unable to keep up the pretense of bravado any longer.

A loud bang filled the room and she looked up, seeing Bill Henderson surrounded by both FBI agents and military officers. She let out a raspy cry as she muttered, “He’s not here. You can put your guns away! Superman is trying to stop us from being plummeted into a nuclear war!”

“We’re not here for Superman, Lois,” Henderson said, pointing to Luthor.

The man behind him wearing an FBI vest approached. “Aww, I love it when he giftwraps them for us.”

Henderson chuckled. “It makes the cleanup easier that’s for sure.”

The agent looked to Will Garner. “Mr. President, are you all right?”

Will Garner nodded. “I’ll be fine as soon as we put things back where they belong.” He pointed to Luthor. “Starting with this treasonous rat.”

“Lex Luthor, you’re under arrest for crimes too numerous to mention. Including the kidnapping of fellow officers, the President of the United States, unlawful possession of office.” The agent read off as he handcuffed Lex through the binds that held him in the chair.

Lois looked to the woman who had helped Clark and the man who had identified himself as the Fastest Man Alive. “Thank you,”

she said, unsure how to respond to their presence. “So, you’re the Flash – the one from Central City.”

“That’s me,” the Flash acknowledged. “And you’re Lois Lane. The famous reporter.”

Lois turned to the mysterious woman who had saved her husband. The woman smiled and extended her hand. “I am Dianna. Princess Dianna of the Amazons.”

“We call her Wonder Woman,” Flash added in a less than discreet whisper.

The burning question remained in the forefront of Lois’ mind and she cleared her throat, speaking up finally. “He said there was Kryptonite in those warheads.”

Flash typed in his wristwatch, loading a 3-Dimensional map of the world. “Looks like he’s within range of all four. He’s making serious speed and altitude,” Flash remarked, staring at the digital image showing the nuclear energy moving further and further up into the sky.

“We interrupt this broadcast with a Special Report,” the newscaster interrupted from the television. The image of Superman flying through the sky showed on the screen as the news anchor narrated his progress. “Moments ago, Superman intercepted four nuclear war heads that were reportedly set on a trajectory for the United Nations General Assembly Hall.”

Footage of Rollie Vale being taken into custody from the nuclear plant played as the screen split between the multiple scenes of arrests taking place along with Superman’s attempt to stop four nuclear war heads from making impact.

“What is he doing?” Lois shook her head in confusion as she watched Clark fly further and further up with a hard grasp on the warheads in his reach.

The anchor continued to narrate, “It appears Superman is not taking any chances with these warheads and is attempting to dispose of them outside the Earth’s atmosphere.” There was a side conversation between the anchor and the cameraman that was picked up. “Is that right?”

Lois bit her lip, feeling the hard lump in her throat double in size as she whispered numbly. “He can’t breathe in space.”

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Clark flew higher and higher in order to slow down the countdown of the impending explosion from the warheads in his grasp. One wrong move and he would be caught in the imminent explosion, not only exposing Earth’s inhabitants to toxic nuclear radiation but also exposing them and himself to Kryptonite radiation.

As he pushed past the reach of the Earth’s stratosphere, he could feel himself growing weaker and weaker by the second. He looked down and saw the shell from one of the warheads had loosened, exposing the toxic radiation to him. He wouldn’t be able to make it out of the Earth’s atmosphere with both of the warheads. Not with his strength depleting by the second. He had to do something.

He could feel himself losing altitude as he steadied himself to give a mighty toss of both warheads into outer space. He moved further up, stretching his arms up before releasing the warheads into the sky above him. As he let go he fell back into the Earth’s atmosphere. A smile spread across his face as he saw the white light fill the air. He could have sworn he saw a crackle of red lightning behind it.

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“Moments before the arrest of Alexander Luthor took place, four nuclear warheads were seen on a trajectory path to the United Nations. Witness accounts have relayed Lex Luthor’s intention to assassinate his clone of President Garner. Yes, that’s right folks, clone.” The newscaster’s tone went solemn as he continued, “Superman appears to be flying the warheads into outer space.”

Footage of Superman leaving to save the Earth from the Nightfall asteroid displayed on the screen and the anchor

continued, “If you all remember, Superman had to have oxygen in order to breathe in space during his mission to destroy the Nightfall asteroid. This is truly a mission that could cost our beloved hero his life.”

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A loud crash of water erupted as a loud boom filled the air, lighting the sky with a white light. The boats at sea tossed from the motion and passersby pointed toward the red blur moving toward the object that had just crashed into the ocean.

“Did you see that?”

“Hey, isn’t that...?”

“No, it couldn’t be!”

“Superman!”

Before anyone else could question the witness further the blur of red stopped over where the crash had occurred and reappeared with an ocean-soaked Superman over the shoulder of a man in red. He gave a friendly wave and disappeared in a blur of red.

“Way cool!”

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***Garner Clone Arrested: Peace and Order Restored!  
Equal Rights Again!  
Stryker’s Island New Home to Wrongfully Pardoned  
Criminals!***

***Denetto Takes Stand!***

***Fall of Churches!***

***Falcone Family Falls!***

***Superman Hero Status Restored: Presidential Decree!***

***Superman Missing: Where is He?***

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Lois let out a long breath, resting her head on her husband’s chest as she listened to him breathe. After two days of him being in what Caitlin Snow referred to as a continuous unconscious state, her anxiety was through the roof. The longer he remained unconscious the more worried she became. The theory was the combination of the Kryptonite and the over exertion of his last bit of strength is what his body needed to recover from. They had tried sunlamps and moving him to a window with plenty of sun.

She’d spent the last few days side-stepping Perry and other well-meaning friends and family that just wanted to help. The stress of wondering when Clark would awaken continued to weigh on her.

The last two days had felt so surreal.

There were debates going back and forth on what to do with the President’s clone. Due to his involvement in the treason Lex Luthor had been charged with, he was being listed as a defendant for the Congressional hearings to give evidence on President Garner’s petition to strip Lex and the other co-conspirators of their citizenship in the United States. Hearings were set to begin next week.

The FBI and the Metropolis P.D. had worked tirelessly over the last few days, but as of this morning all inmates that had been pardoned were located and re-arrested with the exception of the Arkham Asylum inmates that had cut a deal with the FBI. The deal had been changed once the information had been evaluated, but the FBI kept their end of the bargain. Harley Quinn and Whisper A’Daire would be required to keep a monitoring device on so they could be tracked and barring any further arrests or indictments they would remain free to live their lives outside the asylums walls once the testimony had been given.

It still amazed her how big of a reach this story had. To not only stop Lex Luthor and potentially have him facing treason and exiled but to also shut down one of the largest mob operations in Metropolis and Gotham City. Bruce Wayne said the city felt different with Falcone and his family gone. Perry had been shocked to discover Bill Church Jr’s involvement in Intergang but had been supportive in making sure the story hit the front page without hesitation.

The warheads that were set off reportedly had done some damage to the EPRAD Satellite and one of the Russian weather satellites. A team had been deployed to begin repairs. The president had addressed the nation in regards to the laws that had been passed and the congress that had been put in place due to pressure from the clone on the former congress members to resign. It had been deemed unconstitutional as had all the other laws that had been passed during Garner’s kidnapping. The streets had been filled with celebration at the news. Along with the reversal of the laws, President Garner had issued a much-needed apology to Superman.

If only Clark were awake to see how different things were. She felt a tear escape the corner of her eyes as she swallowed the hard lump in her throat.

She placed a hand across his cheek, hoping for something— anything to stir him out of his unconscious state. She sniffed, wiping her eyes as she looked back at him. “You know, I think you’re taking this in sickness and health stuff a little too literal. I get it. You get worried and I drive you crazy when I jump in without looking...sometimes it’s necessary though. I can’t just sit back and do nothing and neither can you and...”

“...you babble too much.”

Lois stopped, letting out a startled laugh as she saw his eyes flutter open, biting her lower lip. “I don’t babble.”

“Ramble,” he corrected, squinting his eyes open.

“Hey.” She smiled weakly at him leaning into him, resting her hand on his cheek.

Clark turned toward her. “Hey.”

“You have no idea how badly you scared me,” she whispered hoarsely.

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily,” he promised, leaning toward her as he reached out to cup her cheek.

“I swear to God, if you ever scare me like that again...” she whispered tearfully.

He leaned forward, capturing her mouth with his and silencing her threat as he held her close. She pulled back after indulging herself in one last kiss. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“I’ll try not to cross paths with Kryptonite nuclear warheads,” he promised. His hands moved to cup her cheek and she whimpered in protest when he pulled away. “Everything’s fine,” he whispered, resting his head against her cheek.

“You could have died,” she breathed. “You didn’t even talk to me before you went and...” Her throat tightened as the fears from the last few days pushed their way to the forefront of her mind. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to jump into dangerous situations like that and put everything at risk without me. You jump, I jump.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I honestly didn’t know that I’d have enough time,” he whispered, nuzzling her ear. “Everything’s okay.” He grinned at her, running his hands up her ribcage, tracing the outline of her cotton tank top.

She fingered the gold band on his hand as he moved closer. “You’re supposed to be resting.”

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## **Epilogue**

### ***Six Months Later...***

The black emptiness of space could swallow you up if you let it. One wrong move and the simple task of repairing a weather satellite could become fatal. That’s what they always said down at Mission Control anyway. Commander Hurley had been doing this for so long it felt like second nature. It was driving a car or riding a bike. You followed the rules you stayed alive. It was that simple.

A static feed came through with the sound of Mission Control over the radio. “Commander Hurley, please verify the P-one ATA removal on replacement cap part one and two are complete.”

“DMA M-one, M-two, M-three and M-four are complete.” Commander Hurley said, gritting his teeth as he worked on the last

bolt for the new piece on the satellite.

“Copy that, Commander,” came Mission Control’s response with another bout of static over the radio.

“Houston,” Commander, tapped the screen where the lights on the satellite had all lit up green indicating they were ready to connect and finalize the install. “Diagnostics are green. Link to communications card ready for data reception.” The light from the satellite flickered with a green static looking lightning bolt. Commander Hurley opened his mouth to speak but found his voice unable to make sound.

“Commander, please boot comms card now and confirm link.” Mission Control chirped in Commander Hurley’s ear but all he could do was stare blankly at the light as he felt his consciousness begin to fade.

‘No,’ his mind protested against the loss of control as he felt his eyes roll into the back of his head. He reached up and felt something dripping. He brought his hand forward and saw the confirmation he needed before slipping into the serenity of unconsciousness.

“Commander, do you copy?” Mission Control called out but it was too late.

The screen filled itself with green led lights and a second later an arrow symbol appeared on the screen with the words ‘*Upload In Progress*’ as a robotic voice went through the radio waves with an eerie calm.

“You should envy your commander. Such a full life. He will never grow sick or die. He will live forever. Glimpsing at the infinite intelligence and seeing the deliverance that I bring. Your world is mine, Kal-El.”

The screen went black and the name Brainiac filled the monitor before going black, severing the connection with Mission Control and the Commander’s body permanently.

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The room was dark and dingy with light glinting through the dirty windows. The inside had promise. With a lot of work there was potential at it one day being something. Clark turned to Bruce, eyeing the structure of the building once more. “How much did you pay for this place?”

“It was a steal,” Bruce winked back at Clark as the doors behind them opened.

Dianna walked inside the dark room, eyeing the fixtures with a critical eye. “Bruce, this needs more than just a little bit of work.”

“It has promise,” Bruce commented with a shrug.

“Everything does,” came a voice behind them. They all turned to see the Flash with his mask pulled back. “Nice digs, but I hope you don’t expect us to do the cleanup.”

“No, we’ll be too busy to worry about cleanup,” Bruce said, motioning to the table for the four of them to sit.

“Something’s up,” Clark observed, noting the concerned expression on Bruce’s face.

“Since the blast six months ago I’ve been keeping a close eye on things to make sure we don’t have any fallout from the nuclear warheads,” Bruce explained, looking at Clark. “The last thing we need is for Kryptonite to make it into the wrong hands again.”

“Agreed,” Dianna said.

“I take it this history lesson isn’t for any of our benefit,” Clark noted, looking at Bruce with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s better if I just show you,” Bruce said, tapping the keys on the wireless monitor in his hands. He motioned for everyone to circle around and hit play.

“Diagnostics are green. Link to communications card ready for data reception.”

“Commander, please boot comms card now and confirm link,” Mission Control chirped in.

“Commander, do you copy?” Mission Control called out but it was too late.

The screen filled itself with green led lights and a second later

an arrow symbol appeared on the screen with the words ‘*Upload In Progress*’ as a robotic voice went through the radio waves with an eerie calm. “You should envy your commander. Such a full life. He will never grow sick or die. He will live forever. Glimpsing at the infinite intelligence and seeing the deliverance that I bring. Your world is mine, Kal-El.”

THE END