

Rules of Engagement

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Rated: PG-13

Submitted: June 2018

Summary: In the next installment of the “Rules Series,” Lois and Clark balance wedding plans with her mother and the reappearance of a DEA agent as mysterious gifts with threatening notes appear. An investigation into the murder of a doctor leads Lois, Clark and the DEA into a conspiracy theory with the military. (8 of 10)

Story Size: 27,382 words (151Kb as text)

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

Previously on Rules of the Game...

Clark ran his hands up and down his fiancée’s bare back, reveling in the feeling of having her in his arms. The pleasurable cries from their most recent lovemaking ran through his mind as he held her. The soap dish in the shower had come loose earlier. He’d have to remember to fix that. After the most recent encounter, the sheets and bedding had ended up on the floor, crumpled in the corner from frantic limbs seeking something to hold onto or kick during that moment of pure ecstasy in one another’s arms.

He stared toward the bed from his vantage point on the ceiling and grinned. She let out a satisfied sigh, running her palm against his chest, “Wow...”

“You can say that again,” he murmured in her ear. His hands moved up and down her bare shoulders as he held her close.

“That’s what that’s supposed to feel like,” she whispered through her euphoric haze.

“What what’s supposed to feel like?” he asked, looking at her curiously, running a hand across her cheek.

“This.” She placed a hand on his chest as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Blissful, uninhibited, mind-blowing...” She let out a heavy sigh, turning to face him. “I’ve never had that before.”

He smiled, stroking her cheek with the back of his palm. “Had what?”

“No regrets. No...fears. Just this.” She smiled, leaning up to kiss him. He smiled against her lips, moving his hands up her back to cup the sides of her face. She broke off the kiss and smiled back at him, love reflecting in her eyes, “I love you, Clark.”

It pained him that she had been hurt like that. His vibrant and tenacious whirlwind of a fiancée had had so many barriers put up to protect herself from reliving that pain again. He made a silent vow to himself never to be the cause of pain for her. “I love you, Lois,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss her. He slowly floated them back down to the floor where the comforter and pillows had been tossed earlier. She sighed happily against him. “Better?”

“Much,” she grinned happily at him. “Perfect.” Her gaze wandered around the room that was scattered with clothing, bedding and everything they’d been so eager to remove hours ago. “God, we made a mess.” She giggled, looking back at him with a blush.

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to fix that soap dish before we check out,” he murmured in her ear. He chuckled when he saw the pink flush across her cheeks.

“Oh, yeah,” her eyes sparkled with mischief. “I guess we got a little carried away.” She let out a long sigh, “God, why did we wait so long? That first visit here would have been so much less stressful...” She giggled and he tightened his arms around her.

“I did offer to share the bed,” he teased, letting out a mock sigh, “You just weren’t open to that idea.”

“I think we more than made up for that tonight.” She grinned up at him, raising her eyebrow as she looked at him. “Though I don’t think the bed got as much of a workout as the rest of the room.”

He smirked at her, letting out a light chuckle as she reached over to brush a stray curl that had fallen across his forehead out of the way. “I think our patience reached its breaking point. Too many interruptions.”

“And close calls,” she added, sighing as he nuzzled her ear.

“And close calls,” he agreed, tugging on her earlobe with his teeth. “And someone being way too handsy under the table this evening.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining,” she whispered, leaning back to allow him better access to her neck as he grazed his teeth against her throat. His hands moved to her sides, and her breathing hiked as she let out a throaty whisper, “God, how do you do that?”

“Do what?” He murmured against her, running his palms up and down the smoothness of her back.

“That.” She breathed heavily, “Know exactly where to... *Oh!*” She gasped as he rolled them over so he was hovering over her.

“Intuition, books, and a healthy use of super-hearing,” he whispered, accentuating each point with a kiss.

“Super-hearing?” she asked.

“When you’re really enjoying yourself your heart rate picks up,” he murmured, running his hands up and down the sides of her face as he leaned in to capture her lips. “Like this.” He moved his attention to her jaw, brushing his lips against the frame of her face. “And this.” He murmured, massaging his hands over her lower back.

“This,” she gasped in pleasure.

Three Weeks Later...

Dan Scardino rolled himself across the office floor, keeping his cast in the rolling chair in front of him. Three weeks of nothing but paperwork and typing reports for other assignments the agents in the bureau had been assigned. He was itching to get back out there but after his last case and defiance of a direct order from his supervisor, he’d been put on restrictive duty until his leg healed. “Three more weeks...” he muttered to himself, recalling the six-week window he’d been given by the doctor. Hopefully, everything would have healed correctly so he could get back to doing what he loved. There was nothing like rolling his sleeves up and digging into a complicated case. It was what drove him to do what he did.

“Here.” A folder crossed his desk and he looked up in surprise. “What’s this?”

“Suspicious activity from Fort Truman,” Agent Rogers said with a shrug. “I figured even you could take notes from a Humvee, right?”

“Right,” Dan beamed, feeling the adrenaline pumping through his veins at the new assignment.

“No stunts. You mess that leg up again and you won’t leave that desk till the next budget review,” Rogers warned, sauntering off.

Dan chuckled to himself, looking at the photo in front of him. A Middle Eastern man with a beard and a profile that was enough to give anyone nightmares stared back at him from the 8x10 glossy photo. Amir Muunour. Suspected leader of terrorist group in Lebanon. Communications regarding a missing shipment of Ticeon.

“Time to get back to it, I suppose,” he mumbled to himself, reaching for his crutches.

Teaser

Lois let out a long sigh of relief as she kicked her shoes off her feet and padded her way across the living room floor. The silence

in her apartment was music to her ears. She and Lucy had helped move her mother into her new townhome yesterday and now she had her apartment back to herself... sort of. She glanced toward the pile of laundry sitting in the corner of the couch and sighed, reaching over to move her sister's things back into her room. A room in which she thought her sister would never move out of.

'Well, alone for the moment,' she thought to herself, dropping the laundry on her sister's bed and then moving to her bedroom and into the master bathroom to start a warm bath. It had been a long weekend and her muscles were still sore from everything. Clark, Jimmy, and Lucy's friend Scott had been able to help somewhat but her mother, being the perfectionist she was, didn't trust anyone to move her antique furniture which resulted in her and Lucy carrying the brunt of the furniture and heavy pieces.

She reached down to turn the water on, feeling the cold water against her fingertips before shaking it off and waiting for it to warm up. She quickly began shedding her work clothes onto the bathroom floor, feeling the tension from the day disappearing as the steam from the water hitting the porcelain tub began to rise up.

She tossed the last article of clothing to the floor, preparing to step into the tub when a knock came from the other side of the bedroom door. She groaned, grabbing her towel to cover up and confront the intruder, suspecting it was her sister home early from class.

She jerked the door open and padded her way across the carpet to her bedroom door, "I'm coming!" she hollered, grabbing the knob and turning it with a hard jolt.

The smirk on her fiancé's face caught her by surprise, "I'm guessing that's a no on dinner?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with amusement as he stepped inside the room, closing the door behind him.

"Sorry." She gave him a wry expression. "I thought you were Lucy."

"Ah," he nodded, allowing his eyes to wander down to where her towel wrapped loosely around her. His gaze shifted toward the bathroom. "I think you're about to flood the bathroom."

"Oh!" She ran to the tub, turning the knob to the faucet, shutting it off and reaching in to release some of the water. She sighed, "Just barely." She threw him a smile from where he was standing in the doorway, watching her with an amused expression.

"Just giving up on the day, huh?" he teased.

"Yep," she grinned, watching his eyes darken as she allowed the towel to drop to the floor. He let out a tortured moan as she slipped into the bathtub and ran a hand over her bent knees.

"Something... wrong?" she asked in an innocent tone.

Lucy Lane set her keys down on the coffee table next to the stack of books that she just laid there. Three more weeks until she had a break from class. It had been a torturous year and she'd worked hard to make a comeback after the last semester of dropping out after the incident with Johnny Corbin. For the most part she'd done pretty well with her classes and had even been removed from academic probation.

A loud crash came from her sister's bedroom and she jumped up in surprise, uncertain what to make of it. "Lois?" she called out, approaching the door cautiously.

"Shhh," Lois giggled as she helped free Clark from the now soaked dress shirt that was clinging to him stubbornly as his hands moved up and down her bare thighs suggestively. "Lucy'll be home... any... minute," she reminded him, eyeing his perfectly sculpted abs as the last button came undone. She hovered over him, allowing her lips to brush against the newly exposed smooth, wet skin.

"You're the one with the bad balance," he whispered with a chuckle, floating them up from the floor and into the bedroom.

"I got... distracted." She ran an index finger down his chest, resting her hand on his belt buckle with a heated glint in her eyes.

"Lois?" the sound of her sister on the other side of the door broke the trance and he let out a muttered groan.

"See?" she whispered in a defeated laugh, resting her head against his chest.

"Shh." His hand ran up her back. "Maybe if we're really quiet she'll go away."

"Lois?" The knock came on her door again. "Are you okay in there?"

"Not likely," Lois groaned, sitting up.

"Where are my glasses?" He looked behind him as he floated them back to the floor, allowing her to get up.

"Bathroom," she said, standing to her feet, grabbing her robe from the door and throwing it on her. Another knock came and she sighed, tightening the sash around her waist. "Yes?" She opened the door a crack, poking her head out to see her sister looking at her with a concerned expression.

"Everything okay in there? I heard a crash," Lucy said in a careful tone.

"Fine," Lois said a little too quickly. "Everything's fine. I was just um... moving furniture."

"Naked?" Lucy looked at her robe where it had started to come undone.

"I don't judge you and your pastimes. I'd appreciate the same respect," Lois said with a straight face, knowing full well how ridiculous she sounded.

"Uh-huh," Lucy rolled her eyes. "Well, you've certainly been moving furniture quite a bit lately, sis." Before Lois could respond Lucy winked at her, turning back to the living room. "Tell Clark I said to keep it down. I do have finals coming up."

"I... have no idea what you're talking about," Lois lied, unwilling to back down from her story.

"Sure," Lucy snorted and she continued to ramble on as she walked toward the couch with the shrug of her shoulders. "You know, why don't you two just save yourself the headache and move in together? You're either over there or he's over here. Makes more sense than playing hot potato and you over here acting like I don't know exactly what you're doing when you want to 'go to bed early' or have a 'late night stake out' on a story that's good and dead." Lucy gave air quotes around the excuses as she laughed. "You're a terrible liar, sis."

"Good night, Lucy." Lois closed the door behind her, shaking her head. Even though her sister had grown up quite a bit in the past year it was still hard to think of her as a young woman capable of putting two and two together when it came to the excuses she and Clark had come up with to spend time together with either her or her mother around over the past few weeks.

She turned around, sighing as two strong arms wrapped around her waist, scooping her up into her fiancé's arms as his lips captured hers in a warm, fiery kiss. "Oh, yes," she let out a low moan as her bare back hit the sheets.

Two Weeks Later...

Dr. Alan Goldman rifled through his patient files until he found the file he was looking for. Today marked the anniversary of Dr. Wilder's death. It was also the anniversary of Project Valhalla. He'd promised to take the project's existence to his grave. He'd promised he wouldn't ruin his friend's legacy or how his daughter remembered her father. He'd made a lot of promises.

Unfortunately, Dr. Katherine Wilder had discovered Project Valhalla a few weeks ago. No thanks to her mother. She'd shown up at his office asking question after question regarding the project of her late father. He knew it was only a matter of time before she started digging further. He had to put a stop to it. The only way to do that was to own up to what he'd done to three innocent babies twenty-three years ago.

He pulled up the patient information, reading the familiar names before he reached over to make the call he'd been tempted to make for years. Three rings and an answering machine picked

up. The young man's chipper voicemail began to play, "You've reached Jimmy Olsen. I can't get to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and number, I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"I think that's the last of it," Clark said, helping Lois fold up the last of the empty boxes that were piled in the corner of their now very crowded one-bedroom apartment. After the last few weeks of having her sister interrupt at the worst moments, he and Lois decided moving in together was the right move. Both for their sanity and to protect his secret. Having Lucy accidentally find out about his alter-ego due to her bad timing was a concern they'd both had since her sister's return to Metropolis and her more recent move to Lois' apartment.

Lois nodded, setting the folded box with the stack behind her. "Yeah, if we forgot anything I'll check back with Lucy. Handy having her take over the lease." She grinned back at him.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her to him. "I think this move worked out for everyone." He leaned in to brush his lips against her cheek.

Her eyes sparkled as she gazed back at him. "Who knows maybe we can get an uninterrupted..."

He let out a long sigh as he ran his hands over the small of her back, leaning in to capture her lips with his. "Shhh, you're going to jinx it." His hands slipped to the edge of her blouse as he spoke and she let out a giggle. He grinned against her as he moved his hands up the small of her back. He moved his hands up her ribcage, and he murmured against her lips, "Every time you mention the 'u-word' something happens." His arms tightened around her, and he rested his forehead against hers. "I just want to enjoy this for a bit," he whispered in her ear.

The sign on the office door read '*Dr. Alan Goldman*'. A young woman sifted through the papers in her hand as the sound of her mother's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Any sign of the candidates?"

"I'm looking," Dr. Katherine Wilder muttered under her breath as she sifted through the filing cabinet for the names she'd found among her father's secret project, Valhalla.

"Hurry it up. Before someone comes looking for Dr. Goldman," her mother warned, glancing at the dead body of Dr. Goldman on the ground.

"Found them!" Katherine cheered, holding the two file folders up.

Her mother smiled back at her. "Years of your father's work." A look of distaste crossed her face. "It's about time he paid me back for the debt he collected."

"If we can make this work, then debt will be the last thing on your mind, Mother." Dr. Katherine Wilder said, gathering the files in her hands and walking toward the door.

Amir Muunour looked to his security detail as the glass doors behind them closed. The message he'd received had been most intriguing. If what Dr. Wilder promised turned out to be true then controlling his people in the current uprisal that was coming from the resistance group pushing for democracy would be easily attained. It had taken him years to get to where he was today. He wouldn't be snuffed out by something as silly as a vote from idealistic fools.

"Mr. Muunour, this way." He was directed to the dark town car that awaited on the curb with a driver standing by the door, ready to open the door for them as they approached.

"Mr. Muunour, welcome to America," the driver spoke, and he reached behind him to open the door, jutting his chin out in recognition as a smile spread across his face.

Amir Muunour looked around the dingy streets, unimpressed as he took his seat inside the town car. "Yes, well let's get on with it. Metropolis General Hospital."

"Yes, sir." The driver tucked his brown curly hair behind his ear and moved to the driver's side of the town car. Out of the corner of his eye, Amir thought he saw a glint from beneath the black suit jacket the driver wore but quickly dismissed it.

The driver smiled back at him as he readjusted his mirror. "Metropolis General Hospital?" he clarified, to confirm the destination.

"Yes, I have some business to take care of," Amir Muunour said, readjusting his tie as he met the driver's eyes. There was a glint of something reflected back at him that he couldn't quite place.

They pulled out onto the road, and Amir cleared his throat, "Mister...?"

"Scardino," the driver supplied.

"Mr. Scardino, I don't believe we've met before. Usually, Sanjay and Vincent handle my transportation when I'm in town," He began cautiously.

"Yes, I'm afraid there was an emergency, and neither one of them were available. I have been updated, Mr. Muunour," Scardino responded.

"What a shame," he remarked for a moment before continuing, "Well, Mr. Scardino, I don't normally work with people I don't know..."

"Oh, trust me, Mr. Muunour, I'll take good care of you. This visit will be one you won't ever forget."

Chapter 1

Ellen Lane took a sip of the sparkling cider in her glass, feeling a rush through her veins as she glanced at the catalogs laid out for her approval. She had met with four different wedding planners over the last few weeks and finally found one that shared her vision for her daughter and soon to be son-in-law's upcoming nuptials.

"Crystallized sparkling cider," Beverly Lipman, the latest wedding planner, said as if Ellen could read her mind to understand what she was referring to. "Nothing but the best for my clients."

Ellen smiled, looking around the room that had begun to resemble a wedding expo rather than the comfortable, newly renovated townhome she'd been living in for the last few weeks. After the fire that took place, she'd been offered a settlement from the complex and used the money to buy herself a new townhome. "Oh, it is refreshing."

"Cleans the palate for the guests. I serve it at all the weddings I do," Beverly explained happily. "Now let's talk dates..."

"They haven't settled on a firm one just yet, but I'm told sometime by the end of next month." Ellen blushed and let out a sigh, not wanting to voice her frustration at the situation in front of Beverly. Truth be told they couldn't confirm a date because her ex-husband refused to return a phone call. Lois was still holding out, hoping they would finally hear back from Sam but she knew all too well that family wasn't high on her ex-husband's list of priorities. She just hoped he didn't disappoint their daughter again.

"Oh, that's quite all right. I can work with a flexible schedule," Beverly soothed.

"My daughter hasn't actually done much on the wedding planning. We have a few ideas. She doesn't even know I'm meeting with you," Ellen blushed.

"*O-kay*," Beverly pursed her lips and flipped through the catalog. "Let's see what we can find here...I'm sure once your daughter sees everything she'll be thrilled."

"I'm sure we can get a date confirmed soon," Ellen stammered, pasting on a smile. Her inner doubts remained in the back of her mind.

The phone from the kitchen rang, and she stood to her feet to answer it. "Oh, excuse me, I'll be right back." She answered the phone, "Hello?"

"Ellen?" her ex-husband's voice echoed on the other end of

the phone line.

“Sam.” Her tone went to ice. “Are you averaging a number of missed calls before you respond or maybe you’re just waiting until the messages have just enough panic in them?”

“Now, Ellen, don’t start...” Sam interjected.

“Don’t you ‘Ellen’ me!” she shrieked in a harsh whisper, stealing a glance toward the living room where Beverly was engulfed in her catalog. “Six weeks. Six weeks of phone calls and messages and talking to everyone in that God forsaken office you call a laboratory... Six weeks of silence. Your daughter is getting married, Sam. Married. I would think that somewhere in that cold heart of yours you might be able to take some time out of your life for that, but no, you disappoint everyone again. No response. No nothing.”

“Married?” Sam’s voice echoed from the other end of the phone.

“You didn’t listen to all the messages I take it?” Ellen let out a sigh.

“No, no, I didn’t,” Sam responded.

“Well, the wedding’s going to be at the end of next month. You better show up, or I swear to God...”

“I’ll be there,” Sam interjected. “Listen, I’ve got to go, but we’ll talk about this tomorrow? Are you free for lunch? Eleven?”

“You’ve got to be kidding...”

“Ellen, I’ve got to go,” Sam said in an impatient tone.

“Fine. Eleven is fine.”

“Great. I’ll meet you at the club. The usual table.” The dial tone echoed in her ear, and she sighed, hanging the phone back on the receiver.

She turned back to Beverly who was approaching her cautiously, “I believe I have just the thing...”

Still reeling from her anger at her ex-husband she found the words coming out of her mouth before she could stop them. “The twenty-third.”

“Sorry?” Beverly looked at her in confusion.

“The twenty-third. The wedding date.” Ellen confirmed. “The twenty-third.”

“Twenty-third it is,” Beverly said, noting in her planner.

“Now, about the wedding party...”

‘*GE Mallow Still Missing*’ the red ticker ran across the television screen. Lois’ gaze wandered to the seemingly less cluttered apartment she and Clark shared. Most of the weekend had been spent finding creative ways to maximize space and consolidate some of the larger items where they could. The move had forced both of them to let go of some items that weren’t used as much and some that she was looking for an excuse to get rid of. The gaudy sweater dress her mother had purchased seven Christmases ago and the cat-themed appliances that did nothing but collect dust came to mind.

The right corner of the apartment was covered in folded down boxes. Next to it, her seemingly ‘ridiculously sized’ fish tank--as Clark had put it--was set up. Try as she might, fish seemed to be the only pets she could maintain. Something about watching them swim around and explore was so soothing after a hard day. Having them here, helped the apartment feel more like their apartment rather than just Clark’s apartment.

She smoothed the wrinkles in her dress and readjusted her jacket as she scanned the apartment. You wouldn’t think it had only been two days since they had moved in. Thanks to some super help they had been unpacked in a matter of minutes. Consolidating and sorting through the double appliances had taken some time. Her gaze shifted to her left hand where the clear diamond caught her eye. A smile crossed her face, recalling her and Clark’s recent engagement and how far they’d come. From partners to friends to more than friends and now soon to be husband and wife. They still needed to settle on a date but now that she and Clark were under the same roof finding the time to sit

down and plan everything out would be a lot easier. Over the last few weeks, interruption after interruption seemed to get in their way.

A hand reached across the table to hand the mug to her, and she looked up into the spectacle covered mocha brown eyes of her fiancé. A smile crossed her face as he leaned in to kiss her.

His arm looped around her waist, pulling her to him as he murmured in her ear, “Morning.”

She cocked her head, turning to look at him. “Morning.” She caught a glance of the clock. “Cutting it a bit close, aren’t you?”

“I know.” He grimaced, stepping back as she reached for her purse sitting on the table. “I wanted to scan the area G.E. Mallow disappeared at again before heading in...”

“Still nothing?” she guessed from the sour expression on his face.

“I just don’t get how a guy could up and disappear without a trace in broad daylight like that.” He let out a resigned sigh as he ran a weary hand through his hair.

“There has to be an explanation. There always is,” Lois reassured him.

Clark offered her a small smile. “Yeah, let’s just hope it doesn’t turn into something bigger in the process.”

“Like?” she ventured, picking up on his disheartened tone.

“Like Intergang or resurrected mobsters, or money hungry scientists looking to experiment on unsuspecting hoodlums...” He let out a long sigh. “It’s been a crazy year.”

“I’ll say,” Lois said, turning to the door as she hooked her arm in the crook of his elbow. “In case you’ve forgotten Mr. Darryl confessed to running Intergang. Al Capone is dead, and his other resurrected gang members are sitting behind bars along with Lex Luthor and the crazy scientists that turned Johnny Corbin into a Kryptonite cyborg. So, that only leaves us with one possibility.”

“Which is?” He looked at her curiously.

“It could be a really big story when we crack this case wide open and figure out who’s behind this.” She grinned back at him, tugging him toward the door. “Come on, we’re going to be late.”

“Sounding pretty confident there.” He smirked at her as they walked down the steps to their apartment.

“Always.” Her eyes sparkled, and he leaned in to kiss her.

Claudette Wilder took a long puff from her cigarette, allowing the white smoke to circle around her. She looked to the dark room where her latest beau stood over the hooded figure strapped to a steel chair. The sound of the muffled screams could be heard as she pulled out a needle, “Mr. Mallow, we have so much to catch up on.”

The sound of the cars moving across the street at high speeds and the honking of horns filled the air as Clark followed Lois to the crosswalk. He caught the slight arch of her eyebrow as she cradled her phone between her shoulder and ear and finished her conversation. “Well, what do you mean you don’t know? You either hired her or you didn’t.”

The shrill of Lois’ mother on the other end echoed in his eardrums, unable to help but listen to the conversation as he watched the red blinking hand at the other end of the street, “It all happened so fast. There was champagne and bonbons, and then you father called and...”

“Daddy called?”

“So, the next thing I knew I was giving her a check and had confirmed the twenty-third for the wedding.” The confession his future mother-in-law let escape her lips hung in the air flew out. He stole a glance at Lois whose hand was clenched tightly around the mobile phone in her fist to the point that her knuckles were white.

The light at the crosswalk changed, but Lois didn’t move.

“You, *what?*!”

“Now, before you say anything I...”

He heard a loud click of a button ending the call and the sound of his fiancée letting out a muttered curse as she shoved her phone into the outer zipper pocket of her purse. Even if he didn't have super-hearing, he would have been able to pick up the crystal clear foul language escaping Lois' lips as she cursed her mother's name.

"Lois?" He ventured carefully as he followed her through the crosswalk after she'd darted out into traffic, yelling obscenities at the oncoming drivers that dared get in her way of crossing the street, despite the blinking red hand signifying to 'not cross.'

Dr. Katherine Wilder ran a hand across her tense muscles in her neck, looking around the dimly lit office as she finished reading through the file in her hand. She'd spent the last forty-eight hours consuming everything she could find of her father's files on Project Valhalla. In just a few moments they would be meeting with their potential buyer, Amir Muunour, one of the most feared and hated leaders in the Middle East.

"He's here." Her mother's head poked into her office before slamming the door shut once more and disappearing.

Katherine sat up straight, clearing her throat and running a hand through her hair as she threw her shoulders back, preparing herself for coming face to face with one of the most ruthless leaders in the world. The door cracked open, and the man she recognized as Mr. Amir Muunour stood in the doorway with her mother and a tall man with curly brown hair stood behind him.

It hadn't taken any longer than it normally did, but Lois could have sworn Clark had flown them at super-speed across the crosswalk, through the Daily Planet lobby doors, and into the elevator. She still couldn't shake her shock and anger at her mother. She and Clark hadn't even had time to settle on a date yet because her father hadn't responded to any of her phone calls or messages.

It was her and Clark's wedding. All she'd asked for was time. Time to give him—her father—a chance to step up. Time to pick her own wedding date.

Time to plan her own wedding the way she and Clark wanted it.

Instead, she had a date thrust on her that she now knew would exclude more than half of Clark's family and friends from Smallville.

A frustrated grunt escaped her lips, and she went into full babble mode without any warning, pacing around the small quarters of the elevator as her fiancé stared back at her with a concerned expression. Her mother was trying to take over just like she did with everything else.

"Unbelievable! I cannot believe she did this. How hard is it? She's already probably told over half the town by now and ordered the invitations in a color I hate, on a day that won't work just to spite me and"

Two strong hands firmly grasped her shoulders as her fiancé's lips covered hers, silencing her ramblings. She let out a muffled sigh against him, losing track of where her mind had been headed moments ago. His hand moved across her cheek in a fluid motion as he pulled away, resting his forehead against hers.

"You're babbling again," he whispered, letting out a heavy breath.

She smiled into his eyes, twisting her mouth. "I don't babble."

He opened his mouth to retort, but the chime of the elevator doors opening and Perry's bellow across the newsroom for Rodriguez made him pause. "We'll finish this later," he said, guiding her out of the elevator with an arm around her shoulders.

They shared a look before exiting the elevator and rounding the corner of the stairs to enter the bullpen. As with any other morning, the Planet newsroom was filled with the sound of journalists hard at work, mixed with the 24/7 news circuit from the television sets playing in the background.

"Gary Edwards Mallow was last seen Sunday morning leaving

his local church at around seven a.m. and has not been seen or heard from since. Authorities suspect..."

"Hey, guys!" Jimmy approached them, arms full of files. "Did you guys hear about the missing persons case?" He gestured to the television monitor with his head.

Lois followed his gaze to the image being shown on the screen. A full-screen photo of a middle-aged man in a green polo shirt panned across the television. It was the same image that had shown up when the first report aired the previous evening. "No leads?"

Jimmy shook his head, scratching his arm as he spoke, "Nah, nothing."

Lois noticed the large rash on Jimmy's arm and looked at him with concern. "That must be some itch," she commented as he rubbed it.

Jimmy looked at the red rash on his arm and shrugged, "Yeah. I get it every year around this time. Ever since I was a kid."

"Isn't there something you could put on it?" Clark asked, eyeing the rash.

"I've tried everything, but my doc says not to worry." Jimmy shrugged and turned toward Lois' desk. Lois caught Clark's concerned expression as Jimmy pointed to the thin file sitting in her inbox. "There's the file you asked me to pull. Not much there, unfortunately. Army brat. Lived in Metropolis most of his adult life. Married. No kids. Nothing really screams kidnapping."

Clark frowned. "Well, there's been a lot of odd occurrences over the past few years." He began flipping through the file, cautiously under Jimmy's watchful eye.

Lois peered over his shoulder. "He used to work for LexTel before they went under."

"Him and about half of Metropolis," Jimmy added, holding his finger up and reaching over to flip to the page for Clark.

"Although there was one interesting thing. There's a file listed 'classified' under the military's database."

"Well, you said he was an army brat." Lois shrugged. "You know how secretive the military can get."

"For soldiers. Not their dependents," Jimmy corrected. "I was born at Fort Truman. Believe me, everything dumb I did on base you can look up and pull the file. Whatever that is, it's not something the military wanted anyone to know about."

Lois glanced over at Clark, and they shared a look. "Well, let's start digging into Mr. Mallow's time at Fort Truman then."

"Ms. Lane?" Lois felt a hand tap her on the shoulder.

"Yes?" Lois turned to see one of the Planet's couriers standing in front of her with a medium sized box.

"This just came for you." He handed her the box.

She frowned, uncertain what it could be. She set the box down on her desk and opened the card that was taped to it. "I wonder what it is," Jimmy commented, looking at the ribbon on the box and pointing. "It's probably an early wedding gift. Open it up," he prompted before adding, "Speaking of which, when are you guys going to choose a date? I thought you said you wanted a short engagement."

"We're working on it," Clark interjected before Lois could respond as he lifted the top of the box open. She smiled, silently thankful not to focus on the chaos her mother had created this early in the wedding planning. "Oh, no."

"What is it?" Lois asked, peering over his shoulder. Inside the box was a miniature wedding cake that had been smashed with the bride and groom broken. "What in the world?"

"Maybe the guy dropped the box? That happens, right?" Jimmy asked, his tone was anything but convincing.

"Yeah, I don't think so," Lois said, revealing the note on the card. '*Marrying Clark will be the beginning of the end.*'

Katherine Wilder pointed at the small vial in her hands, watching the crystalized bubbles move as she spoke in a confident tone to Amir Muunour and her mother, "Only three of Project

Valhalla's one-hundred test subjects are still living in Metropolis."

Her mother smiled proudly, filing her nails as she spoke, "Katherine's completed the tests on one. I think you'll be impressed with her findings."

"I am impressed with nothing I have seen so far," Muunour replied dryly, unaffected as Claudette ran a hand across his shoulders.

"Nothing?"

"Mother!" Katherine scolded, mortified at her mother's behavior, "Have some respect for yourself."

Claudette pulled her arm back and smiled. "My daughter views this project as some kind of validation of her late father's work. Me? I smell money...lots of money. So my goal is to please you."

Muunour looked between Claudette and Katherine unamused, and Katherine chose that moment to continue her presentation, "The synthetic virus injected into these subjects is lying dormant and can be activated only during heightened metabolic periods. These periods are indicated by a red rash."

"Go on." Mr. Muunour nodded.

Katherine lifted a model of the human brain from her desk and continued, "The virus only affects the cerebral cortex... that's the area that controls free thought."

"I know what it is. I'm not a moron." Muunour sniffed.

Katherine narrowed her eyes, challenging him as she handed the model to him. "So I can assume you know where that area is?"

His chest rose with confidence as he reached out his hand to pinpoint the temporal lobe. Katherine couldn't help but celebrate a silent victory as she moved his hand an inch to where the cerebral cortex was. He glared at her and withdrew his hand.

He turned away, looking back to her mother as Katherine continued, "The ultimate effect is similar to brainwashing. Once the subject is injected with the pentobarbital serum, the virus is activated. Then they're able to be controlled by use of the trigger word, 'Warrior.'"

"But given the price you ask, you still haven't convinced me of its value." Muunour sniffed.

Tired of the games Katherine snapped, "You know, Mr. Muunour, unlike my father, you are a man of little vision."

"Katherine!" Her mother scolded.

Katherine shook her head, ignoring her mother's pleas. "The virus can be mass produced. Under the guise of public health, you can set up clinics and alter everyone in your country."

Claudette smiled wistfully, running a hand over Mr. Muunour's shoulder, "Imagine a whole nation that blindly answers to your command. I'd say that's valuable, wouldn't you?"

It was clear the presentation had swayed Muunour. "I want proof. And on a male subject only. He turned to Katherine and added snidely, "Where I come from, we don't need drugs to control our women."

"Well, aren't we in luck." Claudette pointed to a door in Katherine's office. Katherine got up from her desk and opened the door, revealing GE Mallow, bound, gagged and unconscious on the exam table. "Mr. Muunour, meet Mr. Mallow."

"The virus can be mass produced. Under the guise of public health, you can set up clinics and alter everyone in your country."

"Imagine a whole nation that blindly answers to your command. I'd say that's valuable, wouldn't you?"

"I want proof. And on a male subject only. Where I come from, we don't need drugs to control our women."

Dan Scardino hit the stop button on the tape recorder, looking to the office door where Amir Muunour had disappeared behind. This was bigger than he'd initially anticipated.

Chapter 2

The sound of the fax machine humming a few feet away screeched in Lois' ears as she stared down at the notepad in front

of her, willing the list in front of her to magically transform into something useful. After Clark had gone through the file on GE Mallow at super-speed, they found more and more notes on the file that referred to a 'confidential' status. They had a call into the detective leading the investigation, but so far they hadn't received a call back.

She still couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that had come over her when that package had arrived. Clark had quickly disposed of the box and card for her so as not to upset her any further but her mind kept coming back to one question: why?

Why would someone send her something like that? It didn't make any sense. The usual suspects that would try something like this were behind bars. Could it be Lex? Could he be behind it? She wouldn't put anything past the former crime lord and philanthropist. A chill ran down her spine as she recalled her last encounter with the man. He'd risen from the dead and tried to force her to go to Zurich of all places to escape. He wouldn't take no for an answer. She still didn't know what would have happened had Clark not shown up when he did.

A look of determination crossed her face, and she turned to Clark. "We need to pick a date."

"Didn't your mother already do that for you?" He teased, trying to lighten the mood.

She crossed her arms, looking at him defiantly. "I'm serious." She ran a hand through her hair, letting out a frustrated sigh. "I don't get it. We said we'd give it until Friday and then pick a date. Of course, my mother would pick the date that wouldn't work." Lois shook her head in disgust as she set the notepad down on her desk.

"I'm sure there's something we can do," Clark reassured her, taking her hand in his. "It's only been twelve hours since she picked a date. She can't have gotten too far in the planning. Especially considering we're keeping this small."

"You don't know my mother." Lois grimaced, shaking her head. "She's able to throw together a thirty-top dinner party complete with synchronized service and a full seven-course meal in an hour's notice. Don't underestimate her."

"Well, what had we put on the list to book when we settled on a date?" Clark prompted. "Maybe we can make some calls and find out if they're available on some of the other dates we were looking at."

Nodding her head, she reached for the notepad where the list of possible venues and vendors had been. "Here. You call the church and the Metro. I'll call Luigi's and..."

The phone on her desk rang, and she glared at it defiantly. "Maybe that's your mother calling to apologize?" Clark guessed, trying to be optimistic as he reached for the handset on his desk and began to dial.

"Or she's scheduled something else for our wedding," Lois grumbled, reaching for the handset to answer the phone. "Lois Lane."

"Lois?" Martha's voice echoed through the phone she held cradled between her shoulder and the side of her face.

"Martha, hi," Lois said, a smile crossing her face when she heard her future mother-in-law's voice on the other end.

"I hate to bother you at work, but I got a call from a woman named Beverly and wanted to make sure I had everything correct." "Beverly?" Lois echoed in surprise.

"Apparently she's your wedding planner?" Martha prompted amused. "She said the date had been set for the twenty-third of next month? That's the weekend of the Mid-West Farmer's Festival."

"I know, I know. We're trying to sort this out. We did not hire a wedding planner, and we are not having the wedding that weekend." Lois sighed, shaking her head, recalling the conversation she and Martha had had about this last week. Even though the Kents could have someone cover for them, not everyone had that luxury. Many of Smallville's residents relied on

the income from this festival to carry them through the winter months. Asking them to risk their families' financial security to attend their wedding wasn't something she or Clark was comfortable with.

"Any other weekend would be fine, Lois," Martha added. "It's just with how much income that festival brings it's hard to miss it. At the same time, nobody wants to miss your wedding either."

"Believe me, we don't want anyone to miss it either," Lois reassured her. She glanced at her notepad, drumming her fingers against the imprint from where she'd written the names and dates. "Do you have the number for this ... Beverly?"

"Sure," Martha said, finding the number for her. "Beverly Lipman. 555-0515."

"Great," Lois said, jotting down the name and number. "We'll call you once we get the date situated."

"Thanks. Have a good day."

Lois replaced the handset and swiveled in her desk chair back and forth contemplating her next move.

"Bad news?"

She looked up and saw Clark standing over her with a look of concern. "That's the understatement of the century. Please tell me you have good news."

"Unfortunately, no," he grimaced. "I spoke with the church and the Metro. The dates we're looking at are all booked." He glanced at the notepad where she'd written down her notes from her conversation with Martha. "How about you?"

"I was able to get the wedding planner's number." At Clark's surprise expression she added, "Yes, wedding planner. She hired a wedding planner."

Clark ran his hand over his face, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Oh, I've got a bad feeling..."

"God only knows what's already been ordered." Lois sighed, looking back at her notepad. "So, we need to pick a date. A real date."

"Lois, Clark?" Perry interrupted, approaching with a distraught Jimmy in tow.

"Jimmy, what's wrong?" Clark asked in concern.

Jimmy had his arms crossed tightly over his chest as he struggled to find the words, "My...my doctor's been murdered."

"What?" Lois gasped in surprise.

"He just called me yesterday. Left a message on my machine. I was gonna call him back today..." Jimmy's voice cracked as the emotion overtook him.

Perry handed Lois a file. "I want you two on this."

"Absolutely." Lois stood up, gathering her things to leave.

"Chief? I want to help," Jimmy said adamantly.

Lois and Clark exchanged a look as Perry shook his head. "Now Jimmy, I understand how you feel, but..."

"We could use an extra pair of eyes," Lois prompted and shrugged. "Besides, if the story breaks it'd be nice to have someone that knows how to take a page one photo nearby." Perry still didn't seem convinced.

"Chief, please. I knew Dr. Goldman my whole life," Jimmy pleaded.

That struck a chord with Perry, and he nodded, "All right." Jimmy beamed back at him and raced to his desk to grab his camera, and they headed out.

Ellen took a deep breath, nervously smoothing the imaginary wrinkles in her dress as she stared at the door in front of her. She'd gone inside countless times. She had hosted parties here and attended luncheons. She had been the life of the party—until she wasn't. The pain from her betrayal came rushing back, hitting her like a wave until she found the strength to push it back.

"Pull yourself together," she told herself, reaching for the door.

At Metropolis General, Lois, Clark, and Jimmy approached the nurse's station. A few feet away three police officers and a

detective stood outside the door where police tape had been taped over one of the doctor's offices. A large woman in her mid-thirties was at the front counter. Clark approached her. "Excuse me; we're from the Daily Planet. We'd like to take a look at Dr. Goldman's office."

"Oh, you would? Well, I have strict orders not to turn this into a media circus," the nurse replied, "and Nurse Berkley never breaks her orders." She gave them a threatening look and pulled out a sign handwritten with 'No Press' and laid it on the counter.

Lois eyed the nurse's name tag. "Nurse Berkley, I can assure you that we..."

"Do you understand English?" Nurse Berkley looked to Clark. "Maybe you can translate for her? 'NO.' Do I need to call security? Security!?"

"Uh, that won't be necessary. We'll be going." Clark steered Lois away from the nurse.

"Unbelievable!" Lois muttered as they stepped away from the nurse's station. "Do you believe that woman?" Lois asked, dumbfounded.

"Talk about your bedside manner," Jimmy commented.

"Well, we'll need a distraction to get past her," Lois remarked.

Clark watched as a pregnant woman, obviously in labor was wheeled into the ER in a wheelchair. "I've got an idea." He motioned for Lois to follow him. "Jimmy, watch for your chance to get into Dr. Goldman's office and see what you can find."

"Okay." Jimmy nodded.

"Where are we going?" Lois asked curiously.

"Come on." He pointed to the medical supply closet, motioning for her to follow him.

Dan Scardino typed away at the keyboard, reading the information he'd come across in amazement. "Project Valhalla, eh?" The phone in his pocket chirped, and he pulled it out to answer it.

"Scardino?" The voice on the other end of the line asked before he could say 'hello.'

"Hey, Sarge, what's the word?"

"Orders are to stay close but under no circumstances are you to orchestrate a single-man mission. Authorities have been alerted and will rescue Mallow. Do not interfere."

"But..."

"That's an order, Scardino." There was a click, and a long hum from the dial tone ringing in his ear.

"Great."

Back at the hospital, Lois laid on a gurney Clark had found, wearing a hospital gown they'd retrieved from the supply closet. Clark wore doctor's scrubs and a surgical face mask, wheeling her around the corner and toward the nurse's station.

"Oh! I'm in so much pain!" Lois cried out. She could feel her breath brush back against her through the oxygen mask she wore.

Clark leaned in to whisper to her as he pushed Lois through the hospital, "Just keep it up, Lois." He lifted his head and shouted as he approached the nurse's station, "Nurse! I need some help!"

"What seems to be the problem, Doctor?" Nurse Berkley asked.

"I'm in so much pain!" Lois cried.

"Uh, we need to prep for a C-section," Clark replied, uncertainly. He wasn't sure how long he could keep up the act, but he was doing his best to keep the charade up for Jimmy to get into Dr. Goldman's office.

"Who do you want me to call for Anesthesiology?" Nurse Berkley asked, picking up the phone.

"Whoever can get there first," Clark replied, using his Superman-toned voice.

"Take the staff elevator," Nurse Berkley called after him.

He headed toward the staff elevator and almost ran into a trio walking down the hall. "The security in this hospital is atrocious,"

one of them, a woman, said.

She wasn't looking where she was going and had walked right in front of his path. He stopped the gurney at the last minute.

The jolt caused Lois to lose her grip on the basketball she'd been hiding beneath her hospital gown. A hard bounce of rubber against the tile floor was her and Clark's undoing as the basketball continued to bounce around the gurney. The trio stared at Lois and Clark in surprise. Clark caught the ball and smiled. "Look, congratulations, a healthy baby basketball."

"Whoops! I guess I won't need that C-section after all." Lois grinned as she stood to her feet at lightning speed. Clark took her hand, and they made a break for it.

Nurse Berkley hollered out, "Security!"

"I think that's the last of it," Clark said, setting his surgical mask on top of the hospital gown and oxygen mask Lois had already disposed of.

Lois ran a hand through her hair, smoothing the stray strands and shooting him a grin, "That was a pretty good idea. Hopefully, Jimmy was able to get into Dr. Goldman's office."

He tapped his earlobe and pointed his head toward the hospital behind them. "I haven't picked up any yelling from him, so I think we can assume he's okay."

Lois ran a hand down his chest and smiled at him flirtatiously. "You look good in green." Her hand wandered down his arm, feeling the firm bicep under her palm.

"Is that so?" he whispered. "I think it might be too late to change the suit."

She laughed, "I don't think that would go over very well."

"Probably not." Clark shook his head ruefully. He ran his palm against her cheek and leaned in to kiss her.

"Hey, guys!" Jimmy jogged toward them, holding a notepad in his hands. "That was cutting it close."

Clark sighed, pulling away from Lois to turn toward Jimmy. "Of course," he muttered under his breath.

"Yeah, our, um, basketball came a little early," Lois laughed, turning to face Jimmy.

"Jimmy, what were you able to find out?" Clark asked.

"It's what I didn't find that was interesting. Three files were missing from Dr. Goldman's office. Mine along with two others... Dr. Goldman also tried calling them as well. One of the names is someone we already know. G.E. Mallow." He handed them his notes.

"Sarah Goodwin and G.E. Mallow?" Lois read the names off Jimmy's notes. "The same G.E. Mallow that was kidnapped?"

"One and the same." Jimmy shook his head.

"What did your message from Dr. Goldman say?" Lois prompted, looking to Jimmy.

"He said he had some test results to discuss," Jimmy explained. "I get a blood test done every year around this time as part of my physical."

"Do you know what lab your doctor used?" Clark asked.

"STAR Labs," Jimmy answered.

"Hmm, it may be nothing, but it's worth checking out," Lois said, turning to Clark. "Why don't you check out STAR Labs and Jimmy and I'll see if we can find this Sarah Goodwin."

"Okay, I'll meet you back at the Planet," Clark said, leaning in to kiss her before pointing at Jimmy. "Keep an eye on him."

The room was the same.

It was always the same.

Ellen scanned the crowded dining room until she saw the familiar face. It had been a few years, but he was still the same. Tall, mid-fifties with a balding hairline and white hair that she was sure he would find a way to blame on her. She took a deep breath, approaching the table as he stood, "Sam."

"Ellen," he nodded, pointing to the chair across from her.

"You know, it doesn't seem like they've changed anything

here." Sam chuckled as he reclaimed his seat.

"Nope," Ellen said carefully, tapping her hand on the table.

"So, you called," Sam prompted, taking his glass of water from the table and taking a sip from it.

"Several times." Ellen gave him a disapproving look as she stared him down.

"I've been busy," Sam said simply as if that explained his lack of returned phone calls. "You said it was important. I called as soon as I could. What is it? I heard about the condo."

"Yes, well, that's already been taken care of," Ellen replied coolly. "This has nothing to do with the condo or the real estate."

"Hmm, I see," Sam grunted, setting his glass back on the table. "Then what is it about?"

"You haven't listened to any of your messages, have you?" she accused.

"I'm in the middle of a medical breakthrough. I got the first message. I figured the rest was more of the same." Sam shrugged.

"Typical." Ellen snorted, trying to remain calm.

"Oh, don't start with me, Ellen. I'm here. What do you want?" Sam barked irritably.

"I don't want anything from you. Your daughter does," Ellen snapped, doing her best to remain calm.

"Lucy in some sort of trouble?" Sam guessed, a concerned expression on his face.

"No," Ellen responded carefully, feeling her anger boil inside her as she fought the urge to yell at him for being so disconnected from his children that he had no clue what was going on in either of their lives. "When was the last time you spoke with either of them, Sam?"

"I, uh..." He drew a blank for a moment then snapped his fingers. "Christmas Eve."

"Which one?" Ellen prodded, knowing full well neither of her daughters had heard or seen their father this past Christmas Eve.

"Oh, I guess it was..." He shook his head. "I've been out of touch with them for a while, is that it?"

"Sam, Lois is getting married," Ellen said as calmly as she could, feeling her voice quiver as she spoke. "She's engaged. She's getting married, and she can't set a date because you won't return her phone calls."

Sam looked back at her in surprise. "Married? To who? I didn't even know she was dating anyone."

Ellen couldn't resist the urge to add, "I wonder why that is. Maybe if you actually were involved in your children's lives, you'd know these things."

Sam held up a finger and wagged it at her. "Hey, I have to work. That's how you can afford the nice things you have and how we could afford to keep putting Lucy through school and..."

Ellen scowled at the inference he was trying to make and snapped, "Oh, don't give me that, Sam. Your guilt money has only gone toward taking care of your children. Lucy is doing quite well for herself considering everything she's been through this year. Not that you care!"

"She moved across the country in the middle of the night without a word." Sam snorted. "She's the one that doesn't reach out."

"And what's your excuse with Lois?" Ellen challenged, staring him down. "She said the last time you even called her was the week after that Metallo fiasco. Even then it was a five-minute chat." She could feel her voice growing louder and louder as she added sarcastically, "Great parenting there, Sam. Really, you should hold a seminar."

"I'm not doing this." Sam stood up from the table and threw a few bills down. "I knew this was a mistake."

"That's what you're good at, Sam. Throwing money at a problem and walking away," Ellen chastised as he headed out the door.

Chapter 3

Lois looked down the hall she and Jimmy were in, reading the apartment numbers silently until she found the one that matched Sarah Goodwin's address. "This is it." She pointed to the door. Just as she was about to knock on the door, a muffled scream came from inside.

Jimmy backed away from the door and kicked it in. "Hey! Get away from her!" he shouted when the door opened and they saw a blonde haired man standing over a young woman on the couch. The woman was screaming while the man held her arm with one hand and a needle in the other.

The man seemed to be spooked by Jimmy and Lois' presence and raced to the window and jumped in an attempt to escape. Jimmy chased after him down the fire escape, and Lois turned to the woman on the couch. "Are you okay?"

"I...I don't know. I woke up, and he was standing over me..." she stammered, helplessly.

A familiar sonic boom could be heard from outside, and Lois moved back to the window where Jimmy and Superman had apprehended the mysterious man. "It's going to be okay," Lois reassured her. She caught sight of the red rash on her arm.

The woman caught her glance and ran a hand over the rash self-consciously. "Oh, I've had it since I was a kid. Happens every year around this time of year."

Lois did her best not to react so as not to alarm her. She extended her hand. "I'm Lois Lane." She pointed to Jimmy who was climbing back up the fire escape. Superman appeared to have taken the attempted kidnapper and left. "We wanted to talk to you about Dr. Goldman?"

Jimmy made his way back up to her window and stood outside on the fire escape. "Superman took him to the police station to see if he can get some answers from him." He looked at the woman and smiled. "Jimmy Olsen."

"Sarah Goodwin." She held her hand out to shake his.

He caught sight of the red rash on her arm. Sarah smiled and pointed to Lois, "I was just telling your friend I've had it since I was a..."

"Kid?" Jimmy guessed, pulling his sleeve up on his plaid shirt to reveal his own red rash. At her surprised expression, he added, "Had it all my life. Ever since I was born at Fort Truman."

"I was born at Fort Truman too," Sarah exclaimed.

"I think we need to get to STAR Labs," Lois interrupted.

Clark quickly spun back into his suit and tie, readjusting his glasses as he turned the corner to come to the front of STAR Labs' prestigious building. He hadn't had a chance to meet with Dr. Klein yet. He'd picked up on Jimmy's calls for help before the front desk could finish paging the doctor.

After helping grab the attempted kidnapper and dropping him off at the police station he'd returned to STAR Labs. Hopefully, Dr. Klein would have some answers.

The front desk security guard nodded to him. "He's expecting you, Mr. Kent." He pressed a button under the desk, and the double doors opened.

The apartment was covered in boxes and yet to be sorted clothing in the corner from the weekend's move. Lucy Lane had finally gotten her things from her old apartment and moved them in at the same time Lois was moving her things to Clark's apartment. Truth be told she'd been grateful her sister had come to the decision on her own. Finding an apartment with an affordable rent in the area her sister lived in was hard to come by. Thankfully, the landlord had agreed to the transfer of the lease at the same rate.

With her new job she'd taken at the photography studio and change in course load with her new major, she finally felt like she was figuring it all out. It felt good. She only had a four-day work week which gave her the time to get things settled in her apartment as well as allow time for studying.

The hard knock at the front door pulled Lucy back to the present and she set her things down to answer the door. A petite woman with red curly hair, expensive perfume, and a Prada bag stood at her door. "Can I help you?"

"Maid of honor, right?" She held her hand out. "Beverly Lipman. Bridal Consultant. You and I'll be spending a lot of time together over the next few weeks."

"Um, I'm sorry, few weeks? Lois hasn't even picked a date yet," Lucy stammered, watching as the woman moved past her and made herself comfortable on her couch, laying out catalogs for her to look at.

"The twenty-third. I need to order dresses today." She pointed at the catalogs. "Sit. Read. Choose one."

"But..." Lucy stopped when she heard another knock at the door.

She opened the door and saw a thin man in a leather jacket with a long narrow box in his hands. "Lois Lane?" he asked, handing her a clipboard to sign.

"Uh, she doesn't live here anymore," Lucy apologized.

"Oh?" The man frowned, looking at his clipboard and then at the apartment number on the door.

Taking pity on him, she sighed, "She's my sister. I'll give it to her."

He sighed in relief. "Here." He handed her the package and clipboard to sign.

"Here you go." Lucy handed the clipboard back to him. He nodded to her and turned to leave. Lucy closed the door behind him and turned her attention to the package. A card on the outside read 'To the Bride.' Curious who the package might be from she opened the card and felt a cold chill go down her spine when she saw the cutout letters with the threatening message. 'Marry him and die.'

"Miss?" A hand waved in front of her, and she saw Beverly looking at her in concern. "Are you all right?"

Lois stood next to Clark as Dr. Klein went over the test results from his blood draw on Sarah and Jimmy. She wasn't sure what it was, but something told her that the rash on both Jimmy and Sarah was no coincidence.

"Ticeon?" Jimmy and Sarah echoed in unison, looking back at Dr. Klein in surprise.

Dr. Klein nodded, "Yes, according to your blood tests there are trace amounts in both your bloodstreams. I'd like to do a battery of tests to see if we can determine what it's being used for. Ticeon is a highly regulated drug. I'd like to know how it got into both of your systems without your knowing it."d

"What is Ticeon typically used for?" Clark asked, looking at Jimmy in concern.

Dr. Klein swiveled in his chair to face them, "Most cases of Ticeon are used by pharmaceuticals for creating mind-altering drugs used to treat psychiatric patients. Now, the dosage in both of their systems is low, but given the potency of pure Ticeon that doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"What about the rashes on their arms?" Lois asked. "Is that a side effect from the Ticeon?"

"No, that is something else entirely. I'd venture to guess it's some sort of virus," Dr. Klein explained pointing to the rash on Jimmy's arm.

"A virus?" Clark echoed.

"But I'm not sick," Jimmy argued.

The intercom in Dr. Klein's office beeped. "Dr. Klein, I have a federal agent here to see you."

Dr. Klein sighed, looking irritably at his computer. He reached over to press the button. "Let him in, Harold." A loud humming noise could be heard from the intercom, and the door to Dr. Klein's lab opened.

Lois heard Clark groan when they saw who was standing at the door. He strutted into the lab with a smug expression on his

face. “Now, why am I not surprised to see you two here?”

“What are you doing here?” Clark groaned.

“Aw, come on, you know you’re happy to see me.” he announced with a smug grin.

“No, not really,” Lois shot back, crossing her arms over her chest defiantly.

Dr. Klein looked at the man. “Excuse me? Can I help you?”

“Agent Scardino.” He pulled out his badge for Dr. Klein’s inspection. “I’m investigating a report of Ticeon theft and thought you could help analyze something for me.” He held up a small vial of crystallized liquid.

Dr. Klein took the sample from him. “What is it?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Scardino said, pulling up a seat. “I can tell you what I suspect it is but where’s all the fun in that?”

Dr. Klein looked from Lois and Clark to Dan Scardino then to the sample in his hands before replying, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Great.” He folded his hands behind his head and stared back at Dr. Klein. “I’ve got time. I’ll be right here.”

Dr. Klein turned to Jimmy and Sarah, “I’ll call you with the results. In the meantime, stay around people you can trust. There’s no telling what those test results could show.”

“Test results?” Scardino asked, looking at them curiously.

“Don’t worry about it,” Clark cut him off, steering Jimmy and Sarah toward the door. “We’ll call you later, Dr. Klein.”

After they’d left Dr. Klein’s lab, Jimmy shook his head. “Man, is he always like that?”

“Unfortunately,” Lois groaned, looking around the hallway. “We should head back to the Planet.”

“Dr. Klein was right. You guys shouldn’t be alone. Is there anyone you can stay with?” Clark asked as they made their way through the lobby doors.

“Most of my family is across the country,” Sarah explained. “I’m here on a scholarship attending Met U. I’m a psych major.”

“I can talk with my sister. She’s actually attending Met U as well,” Lois supplied. “There’s a spare bedroom there. You can probably stay with her.”

Jimmy shrugged, “I can call up my mom or sister. Or I can check with the Chief. I’m sure someone’s got a spare room I could crash at until we figure this all out.”

“Sorry, Jimmy,” Clark apologized. “We just don’t have the room right now.”

“I totally get it.” Jimmy smiled back at him.

Lois’ phone rang and she reached in her pocket to pull it out, pressing the call button to answer it, “Hello? Lucy, slow down.” She pleaded.

“I can’t calm down, Lois. I just got a really creepy message and package delivered here for you.” Lucy’s voice rang in her ear.

“What?” Lois gasped in surprise.

Clark looked at her with concern, and Lois mouthed, ‘Another package.’

“We’ll be right over,” Lois said, hanging the phone up.

“Mr. Mallow will demonstrate how Project Valhalla works,” Dr. Katherine Wilder said, motioning for her mother and Mr. Muunour to follow her into her office. “As infants, the subjects were injected with a serum undetectable to many of the general pediatrics today. It isn’t until they are activated with this – “ She held up a long needle filled with a crystallized liquid, “–that the subjects are activated and become trained assassins.”

“You’ve still yet to prove anything,” Mr. Muunour sniffed. “Mr. Mallow is still unconscious.”

“Would you like a test-run?” Dr. Wilder inquired with an arched eyebrow.

“What did you have in mind?” he asked.

Lucy placed the last of her textbooks on the dining room table and looked back in the kitchen where Clark was helping clean up

the last of the dishes from dinner. “You guys didn’t have to buy dinner and help clean up.”

“It’s no problem,” Clark said, looking back over his shoulder as he set the dish towel on the counter.

“Thanks for helping Sarah out, Luce,” Lois said, glancing toward the guest bedroom door where Sarah was settling in.

“Anytime,” Lucy responded.

She hadn’t been sure at first when Lois had asked, but after meeting the woman and hearing what she’d been through, she knew she couldn’t turn her down. Lucy followed her sister’s gaze then recalled their phone call from earlier. She didn’t want to bring it up in front of Sarah. Her sister’s face, when she and Clark had arrived with the young woman, had been troubling. Though, the entire time neither she nor Clark brought the note up.

The water started running, and Lucy turned to Lois, pulling out the white notecard from the gift that had arrived earlier. “So, about that gift that arrived...” Lucy waved the card in her hand.

Clark walked up behind Lois, placing a hand on her shoulder as Lois took the card from Lucy, “You said this came with a package?” She asked carefully, pulling the white notecard from the envelope.

“I threw it away,” Lucy said, shaking her head. “It was a bunch of dead roses.”

“Oh, my God.” Lois’ eyes widened when she saw the message on the card. Clark took it from her and wrapped an arm around her protectively.

The pitter-patter of the raindrops hitting the glass of the bedroom window continued to echo in the background as Lois pulled back the comforter and climbed into the bed. She let out a soft sigh when she felt the crisp cotton sheets against her skin. The sound of Clark moving around the apartment at super-speed finally came to a stop, and he reappeared in front of her in a t-shirt and sleeping shorts with a concerned expression on his face.

“I couldn’t find the card from a few weeks ago, but Henderson has the police report, so I’m sure they’ll be able to compare the three cards and see if there’s a match.” He said, climbing into bed next to her.

“That’s the second one in twelve hours,” Lois said, rolling on her side to face him.

“I know,” Clark said grimly, running a hand across her shoulder. “Henderson has the cards. With any luck, he can find a match and help track down who’s behind all this.”

“Maybe we should just elope.” Lois joked, half-heartedly, running a hand across his chest as she rested her head against his shoulder. “That would take the stress out of everything.”

“Maybe, but then we’d have some explaining to do to that wedding planner your mother hired...and all the family and friends that have probably already been contacted.” He brushed his lips against her temple, and she let out a soft giggle. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her to him.

“From the sound of things, I don’t think that Beverly woman would take that very well.” She grew thoughtful for a moment and added, “But it might be nice doing something like that. Getting away from Metropolis. That would guarantee a small guest list. Only family and friends.”

His hand ran across her cheek, and he looked back at her. “If that’s what you want.”

“Maybe,” she admitted sheepishly, lifting her head up to look into his eyes. She saw the concern in his eyes and added with a sigh, “Though, I’m not sure trying to pull something like that together would be easy to do in a short period of time.”

Clark’s face grew thoughtful, moving his hand to cup her cheek as he pondered aloud. “Well, as long as we didn’t have to book a big place we could get married anywhere.” A broad smile crossed his face, and his tone became wistful, “There are some pretty spectacular views all over the world that don’t require us having to book them in advance. Plus, we’ve got this friend that

...” She laughed when she felt herself float a few inches above the bed. “...owes us a favor or two. I don’t think getting there would be an issue.”

“Where would we go, though?” she asked with a thoughtful expression.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked, outlining her jaw with his palm as they floated back down to the bed.

“I don’t know.” She sighed happily against him, “Let me think on it.”

“Thinking I can do.” He whispered against her ear. She felt a shiver run down her spine and let out a soft moan as his solid form pressed against her.

“Towels are in the linen closet.” Lucy pointed to the door to the right. “Fresh sheets are on the bed.”

Sarah gave her a genuine smile. “Thank you. It’s really nice of you to do this. I know we don’t know the first thing about each other.”

Lucy’s face fell, seeing the forlorn expression on the girl’s face. It was true. She didn’t know her from Adam, but Lois seemed to trust her, and that was enough for her. “Lois trusts you. That’s all I need. You’re in trouble. You need help. Believe me, my sister has bailed me out more times than I can count. I consider it just paying it forward.”

Sarah looked at her curiously. “You seem to be very trusting.”

“Well, I am to a point,” she said, eying the white box she’d thrown in the trash earlier. After she’d found the note, she’d opened the box and found dead roses inside. Instead of upsetting her sister further she opted to just throw the gift away and save the note. Lois didn’t say anything about the note. She just stared at it for a minute before Clark had taken it from her. It was obvious the note had been upsetting to her. The couple had left shortly after, leaving Lucy with Sarah.

“To a point?” Sarah asked.

Lucy looked at her curiously, and Sarah elaborated, “I’m a psych major. Lack of trust is usually a sign of childhood trauma you know.”

“Really?” Lucy forced a smile, trying to hide the sense of dread creeping into the forefront of her mind. “What have I gotten myself into?”

Chapter 4

Fifteen minutes.

Lois stared at the red digits on the digital clock staring back at her. In fifteen minutes the alarm would go off and put an end to the pure bliss she was feeling, being held in her fiancé’s arms. She didn’t want to think about everything they had to do today. She didn’t want to think about the investigation or the messed up wedding plans...but more importantly, she didn’t want to think about the threatening gifts that kept arriving at her and Clark’s doorstep and place of work.

Fourteen minutes.

She heard a soft groan and turned to see Clark staring at her, a stray lock of hair had fallen over his face. “Hi,” he brushed a strand of hair out of her face, nuzzling her neck as he held her close.

She grinned back at him, “Hi.” She let out a long sigh.

“You’re up early,” he noted, looking at her in concern. “You okay?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said simply, avoiding eye contact. He knew. He always knew, but right now she didn’t want to talk about it. She didn’t want to think about it. She just wanted to ignore it and try and enjoy the few moments of peace she had before the world intruded once more just as it always did.

He seemed to sense her hesitancy and nodded, nuzzling her ear as he held her close. He ran his hand against his cheek. “Still thinking about it?”

“Yeah.” She gave a sour expression. “I just can’t figure out

what the end game is.” She sighed, leaning her head back on the soft feather pillow. “It doesn’t make any sense. Why send the threats?”

“I don’t know,” he said, letting out a breath as he tightened his arms around her. “Maybe there is no reason.”

“It just doesn’t...” She let out a soft gasp as the bridge of his nose hit the sensitive flesh of her ear. Her train of thought quickly disappeared as his hands moved against her.

It had only been a few weeks since they’d finally taken that step in consummating their relationship. Already, she found her body responding to him in a way she’d never experienced in any of her previous relationships. The connection she felt when she and Clark made love was more than just physical. It was a connection on all levels that made her feel like she was learning something new about him and him about her each time they made love. She’d never felt that before, and she knew she never would. It had taken some time to get here, but it had been worth it.

She let out a low moan and felt a flutter inside her abdomen as his limbs intertwined with hers. “I’m starting to like this whole waking up with you here thing.”

“Yeah?” He grinned, moving his attention to her jaw. “I really enjoy waking up with you too.” He nibbled on her throat, running his upper lip against the curve leading to her shoulder. “Makes for great practice for this whole marriage thing,” he teased nuzzling her ear as she let out a soft giggle.

“Marriage thing, huh?” she whispered, moving her hands to cover his as they moved up and down her ribcage. “I guess that means you’re not backing out?”

“Nope,” he said simply, tightening his arms around her as she concentrated on the feeling of his palms as they moved up and down her sides, moving the sheet wrapped around her further and further down as he did so. “Have I told you how much I love you?” he whispered in her ear, tugging on her earlobe with his lips.

“Not since last night,” she breathed heavily, feeling a pleasurable jolt run down her spine when the last of the sheet was pushed to the side, and she felt the skin to skin contact against her.

“I am hopelessly in love with you, Lois Lane,” he murmured, against her neck.

Sarah poured herself a cup of coffee from the freshly brewed pot, inhaling the fragrant scent as the aroma hit her nostrils. It was strange staying with someone she hardly knew and hiding out from an enemy that had no name and no face. She’d spent most of her life studying human behavior, but she still had yet to come to a plausible conclusion for what made a person choose to perform malicious acts against another.

A sharp knock at the door intruded her thoughts, and she sighed, setting her coffee mug down, then made her way to the front door where whoever was on the other side continued pounding. “I’m coming already,” she said to herself, stealing a glance at the clock that read ‘7:05.’

She opened the door and saw a man with dark curly hair and a khaki jacket on the other side. She recognized him from the day before at STAR Labs but couldn’t recall his name.

“Hi, is Lois home?” he asked, looking at her with a broad smile.

Sarah stared him down for a minute, uncertain if she should let him in or not. The encounter she’d witnessed yesterday didn’t seem to be that of colleagues or friends between the reporters and... whomever this man was.

“No,” Sarah supplied, crossing her arms over her chest. “Who are you again?”

“I’m a friend,” he said as if that explained his presence on Lucy’s doorstep at seven a.m.

“A friend?” She looked him up and down, sizing him up as she countered, “You didn’t seem that friendly at STAR Labs.”

“I’m what you would call an acquired taste,” he defended,

taking a step inside the apartment. “Once you get to know me you’ll love me. Everyone does.”

“Quite confident there, aren’t you?” Sarah countered, taken aback by the self-absorbed attitude the man had as he walked through the apartment, making himself at home without even being invited in. “Please, make yourself at home,” she added sarcastically.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said, leaning back on the sofa and propping his feet up on the coffee table.

“I can’t see why you have trouble making friends,” Sarah muttered under her breath.

He seemed oblivious to her comment as he looked around the apartment with a frown. “So, where is Lois?”

“Why?” Sarah asked, giving him a mock pout. “Am I not good enough company?” He just laughed at her comment.

“Sarah? Who was at the door?” Lucy called coming out of the bedroom in a pair of yoga pants and t-shirt. She stopped short when she saw the man sitting on the couch. “Uh, who...?”

“Apparently, he’s a friend of your sister’s,” Sarah said, pointing at the man sitting comfortably on the sofa.

“I doubt it,” Lucy said, looking at him with an annoyed look. “Who are you?”

“Agent Scardino.” He stood up, handing his card to Lucy to introduce himself. “You can call me Daniel.”

“Scardino? The DEA Agent?” Lucy asked with a curious expression.

“You’ve heard of me?” Scardino asked.

“Vaguely.” Lucy handed him back his card. “Look, I’m not sure what it is you’re doing here, but Lois doesn’t live here anymore. You’ll have better luck tracking her down at the Planet.”

“I tried there already.” He frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. “And unfortunately this can’t wait.”

“What can’t wait?” Sarah asked, curious as she watched Lucy stare Scardino down suspiciously. She wasn’t sure what exactly was causing her host to give the man such a cold shoulder, but given his behavior since he’d been there, it wouldn’t surprise her if there was a history.

“That’s confidential,” he said quickly, looking back at Lucy. “So, where can I find Lois?”

“Well, she’s probably still at home,” Lucy said, pointing to the door.

“Home?” Scardino looked back at her expectantly.

“Not here,” Lucy snapped irritably, pushing him toward the door. “Now, if you don’t mind?”

“Right.” Scardino seemed to take the hint and headed out the door.

Bill Henderson took a sip of his coffee from the styrofoam cup as he laid the three notecards out in front of him. Each one had a different message. Each one was carefully put together on standard white cardstock with letters from magazines, newspapers, and other published papers.

There was nothing unique about anything in the threatening notes.

The only commonality was the message that came through the colorful yet menacing words spelled out with scissors and glue.

‘Marrying Clark will be the beginning of the end.’

‘You’re Next.’

‘Marry him and die.’

It was clear the sender had a strong need to prevent Lois Lane from going through with her upcoming marriage to her partner. Who the sender was still remained a mystery.

His first instinct told him it was Lex Luthor, but after a thorough search of his cell and combing through his mail, there was no sign of any outgoing mail nor any calls to anyone other than his attorney. This was someone else’s doing. The question remained, who?

Clark glanced at the time as he stepped off the elevator. It wasn’t even nine thirty yet, and already Superman had been busy. Just as he and Lois had been heading out the door, Detective Zymack had called requesting a confidential meeting with Superman about the Mallow case. When he’d arrived, he found himself in the middle of a SWAT mission to rescue G.E. Mallow from Metropolis General.

It was the very place he and Lois had been the day before. GE Mallow had been right under their noses, and they didn’t even know it. He knew there was nothing to alert them that G.E. Mallow could have been there, but he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt over missing a chance to help him sooner.

Everything seemed to be going well until he saw him.

Daniel Scardino.

He wasn’t sure what it was about the guy, but every time he saw him he felt like he had to be on guard. He didn’t play by the rules others did which was helpful in some instances but proved to be detrimental in cases like this. Thankfully Zymack’s lieutenant had intervened and gotten him escorted off the property until Mallow had been rescued.

It had taken them ten minutes to get in and out after evacuating the hospital of its staff and patients. G.E. Mallow had been found in an old wing of the hospital, unconscious and obviously drugged. The hospital was now a crime scene.

After making sure his help wasn’t needed any longer he’d left to update Lois. Hopefully, Perry wouldn’t be too upset with his late arrival. He planned to have Superman give Lois an ‘interview’ about what happened before the scheduled press conference that was supposed to be set for eleven. Perry’s bark usually disappeared when he smelled a scoop.

“Morning, CK!”

Clark turned and saw Jimmy approaching with an armful of files.

“Hey, Jimmy.” He smiled at his young friend. “How’d everything go with your sister?”

Jimmy gave a slight cringe as he responded, “Let’s just say there’s a reason we only see each other once a year.” He shook his head. “I ended up going over to Perry’s. It was closer and definitely safer considering the alternative.”

“I’m sorry.” Clark gave him a sympathetic look.

“It’s fine.” Jimmy shrugged. “I’m used to it.” He looked back at Clark. “The sooner we get to the bottom of this the better. Any word from Dr. Klein?”

“Nothing yet, but I’ll let you know,” Clark said, catching a glimpse of Lois in Perry’s office. “I’ll catch up with you later.” He called over his shoulder, moving toward the Editor-in-Chief’s office. He cringed when he caught sight of the familiar looking DEA Agent standing with his back to the door.

‘Oh, no.’ he thought to himself, uncertain what the DEA Agent could be doing at the Planet. He remembered all too well the last investigation he and Lois had been involved in. He was grateful Scardino had been there to help, but the way he went about it had put Lois in harm’s way. That combined with the man’s pompous attitude and need to make subtle digs at him while attempting to hit on Lois right in front of him made Clark’s tolerance for the man meager at best.

“All I’m saying is let’s work together on this. You’ve got sources that could be beneficial to my investigation. I’ve got information that could be helpful in your, ahem, investigation,” Scardino said with a roll of the eyes as Clark opened the door to let himself into Perry’s office.

Clark cast a glance toward Lois who was standing next to Perry in the corner of the office with a pleading expression on her face. Perry seemed to be contemplating something and didn’t notice him come in. He decided to make his presence known by jumping in, “What information would that be, Scardino?” He pushed past the agent to make his way across the office to where Lois and Perry were standing.

“Well, Kent, nice of you to join us.” Scardino gave a broad grin. “Boy, I thought you guys hit the pavement before dawn. I guess you needed your beauty sleep, huh?”

“No, just doing something you’re not familiar with... investigating. You know, instead of showing up and getting escorted off the property during the SWAT Team’s raid?” Clark shot, snapping his fingers as he looked at Scardino with a sympathetic expression, “Too soon?”

“I was not escorted.” Scardino snorted defensively, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Well according to several sources, you were,” Clark said, raising his eyebrow to challenge Scardino’s statement.

Scardino opened his mouth to counter, but Perry chose that moment to interrupt. “Okay, what’s this about a raid?”

Clark turned to his editor and explained, “Police rescued G.E. Mallow this morning.” Clark glanced at Scardino, watching him shift uncomfortably as he spoke. “Apparently they got an anonymous tip this morning.”

“That’s probably what that press conference is about,” Lois guessed aloud.

“Could be,” Perry pondered aloud, tapping his index finger against his chin. “Make sure you two are front and center on this.”

A curious expression crossed Scardino’s face as he turned back to Clark, “How exactly did you hear about this, Kent?”

“Right place at the right time I guess,” Clark said evasively, uncertain of how much he could trust Scardino.

“Superman and the police are pretty good about keeping the Planet in the loop as long as we hold off on printing things like this before the official announcement,” Perry supplied, pointing at Lois and Clark. “These two especially get a lot of exclusives because of that.”

“Which brings me back to why I think it would be a good idea to work together on this one.” Scardino pointed out, looking to Clark. “The DEA put me on this case a few weeks ago. I finally got a break, and now I’ve been stonewalled again. You’ve got the sources, and I’ve got the information. I’m pretty sure if we compared our notes we could probably figure out who’s behind this and stop them before it’s too late.”

“Before what’s too late?” Lois asked curiously.

“First, I need to know you’re on board,” Scardino said, looking at her expectantly. There was a hitch in Scardino’s voice and an expression Clark had never seen there before: fear. Whatever was going on it was something that scared the agent enough to turn to them.

Lois cast a glance at Clark, and he nodded. He may not like Scardino, but he could tell whatever it was, was big enough to harm a lot of people. He could tolerate the aggravation of working with him for the greater good of keeping Metropolis safe from whatever danger was lurking in the shadows.

“On one condition,” Lois said, pointing her finger at him. “Our sources are our sources. You keep your mouth shut and you don’t pull them into any of your official investigations. They work with us because they can trust us. If we can’t guarantee their anonymity, then we can’t work with them, and we can’t help you.”

Scardino seemed to ponder that for a moment then agreed, “Okay, no names will be used unless they agree beforehand.” He held his hand out for her to shake. “Deal?”

Lois pursed her lips then nodded, shaking his hand. “Deal.”

“Great,” Scardino grinned turning to Clark. “Looks like it’ll be us three amigos, partner,” he said, patting Clark on the shoulder.

“Why don’t you three exchange notes and get back to me before the press conference. I want to hear more about this raid when you’re all caught up,” Perry instructed, pointing to the door. “I’ve got a ten o’clock with the board.”

They made their way into the bullpen and headed toward the conference room. “Let me just grab my notes,” Lois said, turning to Clark and Scardino who were a few steps behind her. “I’ll meet you in the conference room and we can...”

Clark looked back to where Lois was standing, noting the hike in her heart rate as she stared at her desk. “Lois?” His face fell when he saw the flower arrangement on her desk and the pale expression on her face. Leaving Scardino by the conference room door, he made his way to where Lois was standing, placing a tentative hand on her shoulder as he whispered, “It’s just me.”

“This is stupid. It’s probably stupid, right?” she pondered aloud. “I mean most girls love gifts and flowers, and here I am scared of a stupid flower arrangement.”

“What’s wrong, you allergic?”

They turned to see Scardino standing behind them, oblivious to the threat that they both knew to possibly be hiding in the colorful flower arrangement with a single white envelope sticking out. Lois glanced back at Clark, silently pleading him to look for her.

He caught Dan Scardino’s frown at the lack of response but didn’t pay it any mind as he took the card from the plastic floral pick. ‘Please don’t be another one,’ he silently prayed, catching the annoyed expression on Scardino’s face. Right now he didn’t care how rude his actions might seem to the agent. Getting into why Lois was so apprehensive about a bouquet of flowers wasn’t something he or Lois were prepared to deal with at this point.

He tore the envelope open, expecting to see another menacing note. But it wasn’t there. He sighed in relief when he saw the handwritten note on the card. The flowers were from Lois’ father. ‘Congratulations! I’m in town until Friday. Send me the Save the Date, and I’ll be there.’

It appeared he’d finally gotten Lois’ messages, but a phone call would have been better. He held up the card and handed it to Lois. “They’re from your dad.”

“My dad?” Lois sighed in relief as she took the card from him and read it. “Unbelievable.”

“Birthday?” Scardino guessed.

“Congratulations,” Lois explained with a smile as she waved her left hand in the air, showing the ring to Scardino.

Scardino’s face visibly fell as he caught a glimpse of the diamond on Lois’ hand. Clark could have sworn he saw a scowl before Scardino quickly tried to save face and smiled. “Well, uh, congratulations.” He seemed to be at a loss for words as he struggled to sound genuine. “Uh, who’s the lucky guy?”

Lois’ face softened as she pointed back to Clark and said, “Clark.”

Dan Scardino seemed to still be reeling from the news as Clark placed his arm around Lois. “Kent?” Scardino finally echoed in shock. “You two are, uh...”

“Engaged,” Clark supplied, studying Scardino’s body language as the word hit him like a ton of bricks.

“Right, engaged,” Scardino said, forcing a smile. “Well, uh, congratulations.”

“What do you mean you lost your test subject?!” Amir Muunour practically screamed as he stared at the two incompetent women standing outside his town car. He could feel his anger rising further and further. He should have known better. He never should have trusted them to complete a task that required a man’s firm hand.

“Sir, your blood pressure,” Kahnman, his bodyguard reminded him.

“Thank you, Kahnman.” Amir took a deep breath, attempting to calm his rage before he breathed. “We’re done.”

“What?!” Dr. Wilder practically screeched. “You can’t do that.”

“You have wasted my time.” Amir shook his head. “No, you promised a demonstration. I have yet to see any proof that this scheme of your father’s has any merit.” He turned to Kahnman. “We’ll leave on the first plane out tomorrow. Make the arrangements.” He hit the button to close the window, thus ending the conversation.

“No, you don’t understand there are other test subjects we can use...” Dr. Wilder called out to him.

Amir lowered his window, staring at the desperate woman with a solemn expression. “You have until nine a.m. tomorrow to prove your worth. Otherwise, consider our business arrangement terminated.” With that, he hit the button to close the window and instructed his driver to leave.

Chapter 5

Jimmy could feel his eyes starting to close as Perry continued with his latest Elvis yarn about the Colonel and the King. Most days he could suffer through stories about the rock and roll legend from Perry, but after listening to them all evening and then coming to the Planet and hearing them he could feel his patience growing thin.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t grateful for Perry and Alice putting him up—because he was. The Elvis stories were just beginning to grate on his nerves. Hopefully, with this latest assignment, he’d have enough of a distraction to keep his mind busy and off the many what-ifs that continued to plague his mind.

Jimmy sat on the old plaid couch in Perry’s office, staring out into the bullpen. He could see Lois and Clark from his vantage point, sitting in the conference room with Dan Scardino. He could tell from Clark’s face the meeting of the minds wasn’t going as well as could be expected. He’d much rather be in there helping with the investigation rather than being holed up in Perry’s office under house arrest.

“Jimmy?” Perry snapped his fingers and whistled to get his attention.

“Oh, sorry, Chief.” Jimmy sat up, grinning sheepishly. He’d been caught zoning out. His gaze shifted up to Perry’s unamused face.

Perry pointed to the door. “Interview for the new Gossip columnist. Meet him in the Lobby. Give him the tour. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“You got it, Chief,” Jimmy said, standing to his feet, heading back into the bullpen. He jogged up the steps to the elevator and pressed the call button to meet the potential new columnist. It seemed ever since Cat left the position to fill the hole her column had left was a revolving door. No one ever could fill her shoes, and no one ever lasted more than a few months.

Maybe one day.

Lois glanced across the conference table to where Dan Scardino was sitting. She still wasn’t entirely sure teaming up with him was the best idea but given this was Jimmy’s safety at risk she was willing to go out on a limb to keep her friend safe. Clark sat next to her, tapping his pen against the notepad, staring back at Agent Scardino expectantly. There still seemed to be a little tension between Clark and Dan. More so from Agent Scardino than Clark.

“So, all cards on the table?” Scardino prompted, looking toward the file in front of Lois.

Lois exchanged a look with Clark, and he nodded, divulging the first part of their investigation. “Dr. Alan Goldman was murdered at Metropolis General. We’ve found three patients of his with a mysterious rash on their forearm.”

Recognition crossed Agent Scardino’s face, and Lois prompted, “That means something to you?”

“Maybe,” Scardino said, tapping his pen to his chin. “I’m still waiting to confirm it with STAR Labs but I suspect what you may be dealing with is a part of the virus I found.”

“Virus?” Lois asked.

Scardino flipped open the file in front of him and pushed it toward them, revealing the image of Amir Muunour. “Four weeks ago the DEA had three shipments of Ticeon, a highly regulated drug go missing from Metropolis General and Fort Truman’s medical facilities.” He pointed at the image in front of them. “This

man was linked to the shipment of Ticeon and illegal arms to the Middle East.”

“Amir Muunour,” Clark said, connecting the name with the face in his photographic memory as he nodded for Agent Scardino to continue. Lois glanced to her left where Clark was sitting, noting the hardened features on his face. She’d heard the name before. Every reporter that had been covering world news over the last decade had heard of him. He was one of the most ruthless and deadliest leaders in the Middle East.

“What’s he got to do with this virus?” Clark asked.

“I went undercover as his driver.” He laid out the image of a young woman with short blonde hair and a familiar face for them along with another image of an older woman that seemed to have the same features as the woman in the first photograph. “Muunour was given an offer by these two of a guaranteed way to control his people and create an army of blindly led citizens with said virus.”

“That explains the meeting with a terrorist leader,” Clark reasoned aloud, glancing back at Lois.

“That face.” Lois frowned, tapping the image. “Where have we seen her before?”

“Metropolis General,” Clark said with a frown. “When we were trying to escape the clutches of Nurse Berkley.”

“Dr. Katherine Wilder, daughter of retired Army Colonel, Dr. Henry Wilder. I’ve tried accessing his file, but that’s been sealed off even from the DEA,” Scardino explained with a frown. “The pitch to Muunour was that this virus, given to infants, would make it so they could be controlled by using a code word. I took a sample to STAR Labs to analyze.”

“If that’s true, then that would make sense,” Lois reasoned aloud. “Jimmy, Sarah, GE Mallow. They all had that same rash. They were all under the care of Dr. Goldman...”

“You think Goldman was performing tests on his patients?” Clark asked.

“Could explain the motive for killing him,” Lois ventured.

“Well, then these two just became our prime suspects,” Scardino said, pointing at the image of Katherine and Claudette Wilder.

The elevator doors opened, and Ellen Lane stepped out into the Daily Planet newsroom. It had been a few years since she’d last visited the newsroom. There had been quite a few modernizations. The sounds and the smells were all the same though.

Ellen made her way through the familiar crowd of reporters, glancing around the room until she found someone that didn’t have their nose in a file or a phone to their ear. “Excuse me?” She waved at the woman, hoping to catch her attention.

“Yes?” The blonde-haired woman looked back at her with an annoyed expression.

“Yes, thank you. I’m looking for my daughter, and I was hoping to...” Ellen rambled as the woman threw her an irritated look. “There’s no need to be rude,” she scolded, calling the woman out as she continued.

“Look, I’m swamped right now. Can’t you just...”

“Mother?” Her daughter’s voice came from behind her and Ellen turned to see Lois standing behind her with her arms crossed over her chest and a very annoyed expression on her face.

“Lois!” Ellen cheered happily, moving toward her.

“Figures,” she heard the blonde mutter before walking off.

Any other time, Ellen would have had a response for her, but she had business to attend to. There was still so much to do to plan this wedding and Lois hadn’t returned any of her calls since yesterday.

“Mom.” Lois placed a hand on her forehead, letting out a sigh as she motioned for her mom to follow her to her desk. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been trying to call.” Ellen gave her a disapproving expression. She hadn’t heard from Lois since she’d been hung up

on. She knew Lois was probably still upset, but given how soon she wanted the wedding to take place she had to know a date needed to be set. She looked back at her daughter, noting the uncertain expression on her face. “I, uh, spoke with your father...” She began carefully, recalling all too well how that meeting had ended.

Lois twisted her mouth and nodded to the bouquet of flowers. “Yeah, he sent flowers.”

“Oh, that’s so typical of Sam,” Ellen muttered, looking at the bouquet.

“Hi, Ellen,” Clark said, walking up behind them.

Ellen turned and saw another man standing next to Clark. His gaze seemed to be focused on Lois as she took a seat at her desk. Ellen made a mental note then turned her attention to her future son-in-law. “Hi, Clark.” She motioned to her daughter. “I was just telling Lois about my lunch with her father. He’s promised he’ll be there. We just have to get everything planned and...”

Lois exchanged a look with Clark, and he nodded to her before Lois cleared her throat, “Mom, we need to take a step back on the wedding planning.”

“What do you mean?” Ellen looked at them in surprise. A glance at the man in the corner and she could swear she saw a grin cross his face as he walked with the copy boy back toward the editor’s office. She turned back to Lois. “You’re not calling off the engagement?”

“No, no, no, nothing like that,” Clark quickly reassured her, shaking his head profusely along with Lois.

“No, if anything we’re looking at getting married sooner,” Lois added, a grin crossed her face as she glanced back at Clark.

“Sooner?” Ellen frowned, trying to mentally prepare for how to make the changes she needed to for a possible date change. She’d have to talk to Beverly about that deposit she gave to the caterer. She did her best not to let the worry show on her face as she began to stammer, “Well, I, I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Your venue’s been booked. The caterer and florist...” Ellen placed a hand on her temple to rub the tension out as she continued, “It’s not easy finding a place that nice without waiting months in advance...”

“Yes, and we appreciate all the work you’ve done,” Clark said, placing a hand on Lois’ shoulder as he spoke.

“But you want to change the plans?” Ellen prodded, arching her eyebrow at the couple with a defeated expression, hoping the guilt trip would help deter them from wanting to change her plans.

“There’s a lot of things that we need to consider,” Lois began carefully, looking back at Clark before she continued. “The date you picked isn’t going to work for half of our friends and family for one. You’ve hired a wedding planner without even talking to us...”

“No, no, no, she’s a bridal consultant,” Ellen corrected before adding, “And she’s not cheap.”

“Well, whatever she is, she’s trying to turn this wedding into a three-ring circus.” Lois shot back irritably, shaking her head. “We don’t need...”

“You have no idea how hard this would be without her,” Ellen argued, wagging her finger in the air as she spoke. “I mean the lists and lists...”

“Which is why we really feel like we need to rethink things,” Clark said firmly.

“We’re thinking of doing a destination wedding,” Lois added happily, sharing a smile with Clark as she added. “With Superman’s help that is.”

“A destination wedding?” Ellen looked back at the couple uncertainly. The plans. The numerous plans she’d made in the last forty-eight hours ran through her mind. She felt the tightness in her cheeks from the strain of keeping the forced smile on her face. All the planning and phone calls for what?

“I’m not sure that can be...I mean there’s already so much that’s been done.” Ellen began to ramble.

“Which is why we wanted to dial back on the planning so we can figure out exactly what it is that we want,” Clark said firmly, sharing a look with Lois.

Ellen caught the look and sighed, remembering a time when Sam used to look at her like that. The only difference was he looked at other women in that way too. With Clark, it seemed different. He only appeared to have eyes for her daughter. A fact that helped Ellen feel safe in welcoming him into the family, knowing Lois was putting her heart and trust into someone worthy of her affections.

“I got carried away, didn’t I?” Ellen asked sheepishly.

“Just a bit.” Lois generously held up her index finger and thumb to show a small gap, but Ellen knew all too well the way she could get carried away when she wanted to.

The man from earlier approached, offering a broad grin toward Lois and a lingering gaze before he cleared his throat. Ellen watched him with a careful eye as he began to speak. “Looks like we’re all set.” He glanced around the newsroom and frowned. “Where’d your friend go?”

Clark frowned. “Jimmy? I don’t know.”

Mike stood at the counter, changing the filter out of the coffee machine. The sound of the tapping on his counter pulled his attention away, and he sighed, seeing the middle-aged man tapping his hand impatiently on the wood. “Yes, can I help you?”

The man threw him an annoyed expression, “Yeah, I’ve been waiting for like an hour now. I’m here to see Mr. White.”

“Of course,” Mike looked back behind the counter where he was standing at and picked up the phone to dial the familiar number. “Yes, Mr. White? I have a gentleman here to see you?” He turned back to the man and asked, “What’s your name, sir?”

“Simms. Ralph Simms.”

“Jimmy?” Mike frowned, looking around the Lobby. “No, I haven’t seen him, sir.”

Lois heard the sound of the sonic boom from outside as she pressed the call button for the elevator repeatedly. The light came on and disappeared just as quickly. Again and again, she pushed it. “Not good.”

“Chief?” She called out, looking behind her to see Perry heading her way.

“I’ve got maintenance looking into it,” Perry explained, striding purposefully toward her.

“I should hope so.” Her mother grimaced, looking at the heels she was wearing. “I wasn’t exactly planning on wearing the sole of my heels out today.”

Perry looked over at her quizzically, opening his mouth to respond before he recognized her and opted to close it, letting out a grunt. He frowned looking toward Clark’s desk. “Where’s Kent?”

Her mother frowned, thinning her lips into a tight line. “He was just here a moment ago.”

“He, uh.” She bit her lower lip, hoping to come up with a plausible explanation given that Clark had ducked out when they discovered Jimmy was missing. “He went to see if he can find Jimmy.” Perry looked at the elevator with a perplexed expression and back at her with a frown but didn’t say anything.

The loud clank from the door to the stairs opening and Perry turned to greet the maintenance manager, “Marcus, good you’re here!” He pointed to the elevator. “Haven’t been able to get in or out of it. I got the call from the lobby about twenty minutes ago...”

Dan Scardino chose that moment to pipe in and ask, “How did he go find Jimmy if the elevator isn’t working?”

“I guess he took the stairs,” she said with a little more bite than necessary as she struggled to suppress the urge to throw something at him for poking a hole in her story.

“But...”

“Are we just going to sit around and talk about the schematics of going up and down the stairs or are we going to actually investigate? That is what you wanted to work with us on, right? Catching the Wilders and stopping this terrorist?”

“Right,” Scardino nodded, pulling out his phone. “If your friend is missing then more than likely the Wilders are involved.”

“No one’s seen or heard from Jimmy in the last hour.” Perry frowned, shaking his head as he returned to where they were standing. Marcus stood at the elevator where the doors had been pried open to see inside. The elevator car was empty.

Lois let out a muttered curse. Part of her had been hoping Jimmy was inside that elevator car. “That’s more than enough time to do God knows what...” Lois fumed, shaking her head in dismay.

A thought occurred to Perry, “What about that girl you all were hiding?”

“Lucy...” Realization dawned on Lois’ face, and she headed back to her desk.

“What’s your sister got to do with this?” her mother asked.

“Lois, there’s a Dr. Klein on line two for you,” Dianne called out to her.

Katherine Wilder watched as the unconscious body of James Olsen was dragged into the back of the waiting ambulance. She turned to the man her mother had hired, handing him an envelope with large bills inside. “Be sure he makes it to my private office.”

He took the envelope, flipping through it and smiled, pleased with the amount inside. “You’re the boss.”

Sarah sat at the dining table, munching on a bowl of cereal as she read through her notes for her Chem 2 class. It had been strange, waking up somewhere she wasn’t used to, but it had been even stranger finding herself relating to Jimmy Olsen on so many levels. It made her wonder if the connection was psychological due to them sharing the same rash and mysterious connection with Dr. Golden or if it was something more.

A smile spread across her face as she recalled the afternoon they’d spent together. He certainly was easy on the eyes. Dating wasn’t something she found herself drawn to due to the heavy course load she was carrying, but she could feel the attraction in both herself and him.

The phone rang, and she looked up, setting her bowl down on the table and reaching over to answer the call. “Hello?”

“Sarah, it’s time to choose the fallen warrior,” the voice on the other line said.

The word warrior seemed to have a mind-numbing effect on her. She felt a haze wash over her and everything went dark.

Nothing.

Jimmy was missing, and after scanning the city for his young friend, Clark was running out of ideas of where to look. He had checked the Planet, the parking garage, the local cafe Jimmy liked to get his daily dose of caffeine from and come up with nothing. He couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that he’d let his young friend down.

Whoever was after Sarah more than likely had Jimmy. He needed to catch back up with Lois and see if she had come across anything. Just as he was about to head back to the Planet, a call for help reached his ears.

“Help, Superman! Someone! He’s got a ...!”

Clark didn’t let the victim finish her statement as he flew through the air to answer the call for help.

“I shouldn’t be here,” Lois grumbled, climbing the steps that led inside STAR Labs.

“Since when does the ambitious reporter turn down a scoop?” Scardino asked, nudging her playfully. She shot him a glare, unamused with his antics and he quickly sobered. “Sorry.”

It was getting harder and harder to remain calm with Dan Scardino in tow. What she wanted to do was find out where Clark was so she could help him look for Jimmy. She couldn’t do that with the DEA agent hovering around her though. The annoyance Clark had with the agent was growing more and more evident by the second. She crossed her arms and muttered aloud, “Jimmy could be anywhere, and you’re...”

“You said your boyfriend was out looking for him, right?” Scardino reminded her.

She suppressed a growl as she bit back a muttered curse. She had told him Clark was looking for Jimmy. And he was. He was looking for him, but that didn’t mean she didn’t want to be looking for him or checking in with Lucy to make sure Sarah was still there. “Yes, Clark is looking for him.” She emphasized her fiancé’s name for good measure to send the message loud and clear she didn’t appreciate him being referred to as anything but.

Scardino checked his watch. “Been over an hour.”

“I know how long it’s been,” Lois snapped.

“You want to call him and make sure he didn’t get lost? I mean, this is really something that should be left to the professionals don’t you think?” He flashed her a smile.

“I’m sure he’s fine. He’s probably tracking down Superman to help,” she said, celebrating the fact that she’d been able to stretch the truth ever so slightly so as not to come out as a complete lie.

“How does he do that?” Scardino asked.

“Do what?” Lois frowned, fishing her badge out of her purse to show to the security officer at the STAR Labs security desk.

“Find Superman,” Scardino prodded. “I mean, is there a special signal or something?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Lois scoffed, pulling her phone out and dialing the familiar number as they walked down the hallway toward Dr. Klein’s lab.

“I see you both are working on the same side now,” Dr. Klein said cheerfully when they entered the lab. He tapped a few keys on his keyboard. “A good thing too because both of your cases are connected.”

“So we’ve noticed,” Lois said haughtily. “Were you able to find anything from the samples you took from Jimmy and Sarah?”

“Yes, indeed.” Dr. Klein pointed to the screen. “This is where the connection comes in.” He tapped a few keys and two separate patterns merged together, showing the lines an exact match on the screen. “As you can see the sample I took from Jimmy and Sarah are an exact match.” He tapped a few other keys, and another sample appeared on the screen. When he overlaid it on Jimmy and Sarah’s samples, it too became an exact match. “And so is the sample you brought to me, Agent Scardino.”

Lois exchanged a look with Scardino. “Which means whatever you got your hands on is what Jimmy and Sarah have been drugged with.”

“Yes, I’ve run it through the database and come up with one hit,” Dr. Klein explained as he spun in his chair, toward the monitor on his left and began typing in a few keys until the screen was replaced with a database for the New Troy Medical Patent and Trademark Registry. In it, he typed in the formula that generated from his experiment where one result came up.

“As you can see this name Valhalla keeps coming up.” Dr. Klein looked over his shoulder and nodded to the search results reading, ‘Valhalla’ and ‘Henry Wilder.’

“There’s that name again,” Dan said with a satisfied grin.

When he clicked on it an old worn out paper that had been scanned in appeared. Lois’ eyes widened as she read the details of the patent.

Amir Muunour stepped out of his town car, looking up at the crowded street as he spotted a familiar face in the crowd, standing by the steps of an apartment building with a young man in his early twenties. “What is the meaning of this?” He fumed irritably as he approached Dr. Wilder.

“You said you wanted proof. Here’s your proof.” She pointed to the young man in front of her. “James Olsen, age twenty-three. Photojournalist at the Daily Planet. Friends with one, Lois Lane—a reporter that’s begun snooping a little too close for our comfort.”

Muunour stared at the young man who indeed appeared to be in somewhat of a trance as he stared blankly in front of him. He still wasn’t impressed until he saw the supposed assassin carry out an assignment all the way through.

“A problem Jimmy here will soon fix for us, isn’t that right?”

Dr. Wilder prodded.

“Yes,” the young man said flatly, a dark expression crossed his face.

Chapter 6

Clark finished latching the back door that led to his balcony, closing the drapes before he spun back into his suit and tie from earlier. After taking the attempted mugger to the police station and helping calm the would-be-victim down from the ordeal, he’d attempted another patrol around the city in search of his young friend but still came up empty.

Nothing.

No sign of Jimmy.

He’d returned to his apartment to get Jimmy’s spare key, hoping it might hold some clue as to where his young friend could possibly be. He caught sight of the blinking red light on the answering machine and typed in the code to play the messages. Lois’ voice filled the room as he walked toward the bookcase where the key was safely tucked away.

“Hey, it’s me. Listen, we got some information from Dr. Klein you’re going to want to hear. If you run into Jimmy get him to STAR Labs immediately. It looks like this doctor was trying to turn these kids into mindless assassins. Dan Scardino did find a sample of the drug for Dr. Klein to analyze. He’s working on a way to reverse it now, but don’t try to reason with him. Don’t try to talk to him...Unless his adrenaline gets high enough, there’s no way to...”

A hard knock at the front door pulled Clark’s attention back to the present, and he jogged up the steps to answer the door.

Nothing. That was what Lois had come up with after she and Agent Scardino had left STAR Labs. She hadn’t heard from Lucy. She hadn’t been able to track down Clark and short of calling attention to just how close her and Clark’s relationship was with the man of steel she was running out of ideas. Perry was no help and Lucy wouldn’t pick up the phone.

Lois let out a frustrated growl as she pressed the end button on her mobile phone once more. A look crossed Scardino’s face as he looked back at her. “Still can’t get ahold of her?”

She wanted to snap what she felt like was false empathy off his face but stopped herself. Her concern for Jimmy continued to plague her mind as she snipped, “She’s probably got the ringer off or has the music blaring...” Her heels made a loud click with each step as she stalked her way up the steps to Lucy’s apartment.

Scardino followed behind as he jogged up the steps to catch up with her. “Or she could be in danger and you, being the good big sister that you are, will rescue her from said danger.” He offered with a broad grin. She shot him a look, and he quickly sobered, clearing his throat as he looked up toward the sky. “Still no word from Kent. I guess he hasn’t found Superman yet?”

Lois glanced back at him, noting the disapproving expression on his face as she quickly covered, “He’s probably helping look for Jimmy.” Lois punched the familiar keycode into the door to open the apartment building.

Scardino frowned, looking at his watch. “Surprised he hasn’t tried to catch up is all. You’re out here doing all the legwork, and he’s...”

“What?” she snapped, crossing her arms to confront him.

“He’s ...not here,” he finished lamely, swallowing hard as she

glared at him, daring him to say the wrong thing. Truth be told she was slightly annoyed that she hadn’t heard from Clark, but that wasn’t something she was going to share with Dan Scardino.

Lois rolled her eyes and muttered, “Thank you for that captivating observation, Captain Obvious. Maybe you could use those astute skills to help track down our friend?”

“Well, once we find that Dr. Wilder we’ll probably find your friend,” Scardino reassured her, offering a weak smile.

“But under what condition?” Lois asked more to herself than anyone.

“Well, at least we know how to stop him if he is under Wilder’s control,” Scardino reasoned aloud.

“Yeah, get his adrenaline up. Not sure how we’re supposed to do that.” Lois rolled her eyes as they approached her sister’s apartment. She knocked on the door. “Luce, open up!”

“Kill Lois Lane.” The words echoed in his mind as he blindly walked up the steps. He knew Lois was his friend, but he couldn’t stop himself. He knew he’d feel better once he carried out the order.

“Kill Lois Lane.”

He lifted his arm up to knock on the door and then stopped, remembering he’d been entrusted with a key. He pulled the key out and turned the lock.

The door opened, and he stopped when he saw Clark Kent standing in the doorway. “Jimmy, what are you doing here?”

Lucy watched her sister open and close the closet door the umpteenth time before turning back to face her. Lois had shown up at the apartment twenty minutes ago after being unable to get her on the phone. Lucy eyed the familiar Agent Scardino with her warily as he took notes on the pad in his hand.

“I told you no one’s here,” Lucy explained as calmly as she could given the circumstances. “Sarah hasn’t even left for her classes yet.” She pointed to the couch where her books were sitting on the coffee table.

“Why weren’t you answering your phone?” Lois asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I didn’t hear it ring,” Lucy said with a shrug. “What is the big deal?”

Lois moved toward the kitchen. She stopped, holding up a phone jack that had been removed from the phone. “That explains that mystery.”

“I did not do that.” Lucy shook her head adamantly.

“Have you seen Jimmy?” Lois asked in concern.

“No.” Lucy shook her head.

“Where’s Sarah?”

“In the bathroom, I think.” Lucy pointed to the door in the hallway.

Lois quickly moved to the bathroom and opened the door to find it empty. She then turned to the bedroom and opened it, seeing no one inside. “Great,” Lois fumed angrily. “She’s gone.”

A single shot rang out, and she and Lois jumped, turning to see the man that had arrived with Lois slumped on the floor with a red stain on his shoulder from where he’d been shot. They both turned to see Sarah with a revolver trained on them and a blank stare on the young woman’s face.

It happened so fast Clark barely had time to react as he dodged the knife in his young friend’s hand. The look in his eyes wasn’t of the young man he’d gone to baseball games with and chased down leads with but of something far more sinister.

“Jimmy, stop!”

Clark held him at bay, doing his best to think of a way to break him out of the trance he was in. Lois’ message from earlier had said the theory was once the adrenaline got high enough the assassin would break free from the trance.

How he was going to do that without giving himself away, he

wasn't sure.

Adrenaline.

An idea came to him, and a determined expression crossed his face. Hopefully, Jimmy wouldn't remember any of this. At super-speed he moved through the apartment, changing into the suit at record-breaking speed and flying his young friend with him out the window.

Jimmy continued to fight him as they flew and then slowly his protests subsided. A familiar voice came from him, and he asked, "Superman, what happened?"

"Just hold on, Jimmy, I've got...." Clark stopped mid-sentence, hearing the familiar sound of a round of bullets being emptied. Panic crossed his face when he realized where it was coming from.

"Superman?" Jimmy looked back at him in concern.

Lois stared at the silver barrel of the gun, glancing around the room as she tried to formulate a plan. She caught the blank stare coming from Sarah as she held the gun up, her finger remained steady on the trigger.

"Sarah," she attempted to call out her name, but no recollection crossed the young woman's face.

Dan Scardino let out a low groan, and another shot rang out. Lois ducked at the last second, barely missing the rain of bullets as she dropped to the floor. She looked over and saw Lucy crouched on the floor by the bed, a look of panic covered her face.

One

Two

Three

Four

Lois counted each shot as she inched back toward the bed where Lucy had flattened herself on the floor. A loud crash and fumble could be heard, and then one more shot rang out.

Five

Lois looked up in surprise and saw Sarah on the ground and a wounded Scardino hovering over the dazed-looking Sarah.

"You two okay?" he asked, holding his shoulder with a grimace.

"Fine," Lucy said between heavy breaths. "Just...fine."

A sonic boom could be heard from outside, and a moment later the window blew open, and Clark dressed in his Superman suit with Jimmy in tow stood in the middle of the bedroom.

"Is everyone all right?" he asked.

"I've got everything under control here." Scardino flashed a smile to him as he held his shoulder.

Clark stared at his shoulder for a minute before responding, "You might want to get that shoulder looked at. That bullet's pretty close to a major artery."

"I'm fine," he wheezed out in a painful groan.

"Jimmy!" Lois breathed a sigh of relief as she stood to her feet and moved toward him. "We have been worried sick."

"He's still pretty out of it," Clark said, looking over to where Sarah was curled up in the corner. "Is she?"

"She tried to take us out with this." Scardino held up a revolver with a pen.

"I don't know what happened," Jimmy apologized, shaking his head, "I didn't hurt you, did I?" He looked back at Clark.

"I'm fine, Jimmy," Clark reassured him, patting his shoulder. "Come on, we need to get you two to Dr. Klein."

Inspector Henderson laid out an image of the blond woman with an envelope in her hand, passing it to the cashier at the florist shop he'd traced one of the mysterious packages that had arrived at the Daily Planet.

Dr. Gretchen Kelly. He recognized that face anywhere. He'd been chasing her since her raid on STAR Labs several months ago, resulting in Johnny Corbin's robotic body disappearing from police custody. He knew he should update the couple on what he'd

uncovered, but somehow it seemed cruel to give them a name without anything else. Especially considering he had no new lead on where to find her.

Once he found Dr. Gretchen Kelly and got some answers, he'd make the call. Hopefully, they wouldn't be too angry with him for keeping them in the dark.

The moonlit sky shone through the open window as Lois Lane nursed the glass of wine in her hand. It had been a long few days, but things seemed to be getting back to normal slowly. After Dr. Klein had looked over Jimmy and Sarah, Superman had captured Claudette and Katherine Wilder attempting to escape the country. It had only taken a few hours before they were singing like a canary on Amir Muunour who unfortunately was still in the wind. She didn't doubt for a minute that his capture was imminent. It was only a matter of time before they tracked him down just as they always did.

It had been three days since the near miss with Jimmy's and Sarah's assassination attempts. She and Clark had been swamped at the Planet covering the corruption scandal with Dr. Henry Wilder's Project Valhalla being revealed to the world and the military's involvement in a mind control scheme.

As of yet, there hadn't been any more gifts arriving on her doorstep. She could only hope that it remained that way. There was no new information from Inspector Henderson on who was sending the gifts, but his involvement seemed to have deterred whoever was behind the threats.

The familiar red fabric billowing in the night air as her fiancé floated down on the balcony caught her eye. "You're up late, Ms. Lane," he said, a glint in his eye as he reached for the door to the apartment.

"Just doing some thinking," she commented, watching with amusement as he disappeared inside the apartment then stepped out on the balcony dressed in a green button-down shirt, jeans and glasses with his usual Clark style. She laughed, shaking her head, "Aren't you afraid someone's going to catch you doing that one of these days?"

He shook his head, pointing to the brick building that faced the back of their apartment where the balcony was positioned. "That's one of the reasons I picked this place. Private entrance and exit. No windows."

She nodded, looking at the neon sign positioned on the far right of the tall brick building. He was right. No windows were facing the apartment building which gave Clark the cover he needed to leave on Superman rescues.

"Something wrong?" he asked, pulling her into his arms.

"You got lucky," she said softly, turning to look at him.

"Jimmy doesn't remember anything from when he was under that trance, but what if he did?"

He let out a long breath and turned to face her. "Then I'd be having a very long talk with my friend." His face tensed. "I couldn't let him hurt himself, Lois, you know that."

"I know," she said quietly. "I just know how long it took you to tell me," she reminded him, running a hand across his cheek. "You spent years hiding."

He moved his hand to cover hers, silently looking back at her as he seemed to mull over her words. "I still am." He cracked a half smile. "You and my parents are the only ones that know the real Clark Kent."

"But you still put all of that on the line," Lois remarked, moving her hand to his chest.

"And I'd do it again in a heartbeat. I wasn't going to let Jimmy hurt himself or anyone else...even if it did put me in between a rock and a hard place." Clark cracked a smile, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. "Thankfully Jimmy didn't remember the rescue."

"Yeah." She let out a long breath, resting her head against his shoulder, feeling her heart well up at the realization of how much

Clark truly cared...willing to put everything on the line to save his friend. It was one of the infinite reasons why she loved him.

"What brought all this on?" he asked, nudging her head with his shoulder.

"Just thinking," she said with a watery smile, leaning in to kiss him. "I love you, Clark Kent."

A warm smile crossed his face, and he responded, running his thumb across her jawline, "And I love you, Lois Lane."

A playful grin crossed her face, and she whispered conspiratorially, placing a kiss against his lips, "We should just fly back to Hawaii for a weekend and make it official. No lists. No wedding planners...just you and me."

"Are you serious?" he asked, cupping her cheek, "I can already hear the protests from our families if we tried something like that." He gave her a wry expression.

"Okay, maybe we bring them along too." She sighed, moving her palms against his chest as she continued, "It just seems like it's more work trying to plan out this perfect picture that's only for one day. I mean, we're not too keen on a long engagement anyway and trying to..."

Before she could finish her statement, his mouth found hers, burying his digits in her hair before he pulled away slowly, "Lois, I will marry you anywhere, anytime, anyplace. I don't care where it is. If you want to go somewhere for the weekend and elope, I'm game."

An impish laugh escaped her lips, "Good because you're going to have to help me break it to both my parents tomorrow night."

Clark's face blanched, "Both your parents?"

"Both of them." She nodded. "You said you wanted family there."

"Not exactly what I had in mind." He whispered, leaning in to kiss her.

<<"Jimmy, stop!"

"Superman, what happened?">>

"What was that?" Jimmy looked up at the bright light shining in his eyes just before squinting again. The sound of beeping from the monitor he was hooked up to reached his ears and the memory from earlier raced through his mind once again.

<<"Jimmy, stop!"

"Superman, what happened?">>

He had attacked his friend. He had attacked his friend, and a few moments later he was flying in the air. How did that happen?

"Mr. Olsen?" Dr. Klein's voice reached his consciousness, and he turned his attention back to the scientist. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Jimmy lied.

<<"Jimmy, stop!"

"Superman, what happened?">>

"No lingering side effects?" he asked.

"Nope." Jimmy managed to force a smile as he reached for his jacket, standing up. "Is there anything else?"

"No. All the test results came back fine," Dr. Klein explained. "Just take it easy the next few days."

<<"Jimmy, stop!"

"Superman, what happened?">>

"Sure." Jimmy waved and headed out the door.

Lois sat at her desk, typing the last line of her and Clark's article. Clark hovered over her shoulder, standing behind her as she finished looking over the story on her computer. "Just one more line and then I'll be ready to go," she promised moving her hands across the keyboard, biting her lower lip as she read over what she'd written.

"What do you think?" She asked, turning the monitor for Clark to read.

His chin rested on her shoulder as he read from her monitor. "Looks good." He reached over to hit send. "We need to get

going." He pointed at the time. "We were supposed to meet your parents half an hour ago," he reminded her, pointing at the time.

"I know, I know." She sighed, gathering the last of her things. "Is it my fault that I'm not looking forward to dinner with both of them for the first time in over ten years?" She and Clark were supposed to meet her mom and dad at the country club to go over the change in wedding plans.

Her dad wanted to have dinner to go over everything, and she suspected he'd do his usual '*pretend to be a good father*' routine for the night and then disappear for a few months. The last time her parents were in the same room together it had ended with her mother in a drunken stupor on the couch. It wasn't something she looked forward to repeating. More so, she wasn't looking forward to breaking the news that there wouldn't be a big wedding for them to plan but rather a weekend getaway to make it official with those closest to them.

"Come on, they said they'd behave." He smiled, leaning in to kiss her. His lips barely brushed against her lips before she felt him stiffen against her, let out a mutter of what sounded almost like a profanity and pull away.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Mugging." He sighed, tugging at his tie. "I'll meet you there." He pressed his lips against hers briefly before dashing toward the stairwell to leave.

Lois let out a long sigh and whispered, "Be careful."

"I...I...I..."

A bolt of electricity pulsed through the metal chest, emitting a green glow and Metallo jumped off the table from the electric shock.

"...feel tired."

"I'm sure you do." Dr. Gretchen Kelly smiled to herself. Finally. After months of tests and trials and errors, she'd finally gotten Metallo up and running.

"Easy does it," Dr. Gretchen Kelly said, taking a step back as she watched him attempt to sit up. She looked around the dark walls that surrounded them and felt a thrill of accomplishment wash over her as she saw him set his feet on the ground.

"Well, done, Gretchen," the British accent from Nigel St. John came as he approached, walking up the steps. "I can assume the latest test was successful."

A green light flickered from Metallo's eyes, and he looked at her and asked, "Where am I?"

"You're in a place where no one will be bothering you," Nigel St. John spoke up from behind the column as he stepped out of the shadows.

"All his vitals are stabilized," Gretchen said. "Once we've completed the first battery of tests we should be ready to make our move."

"I'll make the call," Nigel spoke with an eerie calm as he pulled out his mobile phone.

Clark zeroed in on a cry for help from the sky, hearing the threats from the young thugs in the alley below. An elderly woman was screaming for help as she was surrounded by a group of teenage gang members. He landed in front of them, causing them to jump back from surprise and give him the upper hand.

He used his heat vision to melt the knife one of the members was using to threaten the elderly woman. The man attempting to mug her stopped and dropped the knife in pain. He turned to see Clark in his Superman suit and ran.

The other gang members were working on marking the brick wall with their gang's symbol. Clark called out to them to make his presence known, "Nice work." They turned around to see him and dropped the spray paint cans. "Too bad that's a public wall and not a canvas." They tried to run but were met with his super-breath pushing them backward. "Now that you've expressed your opinion, I'm going to express mine."

Dan Scardino smiled to himself as he made his way through the double doors that led to the Metropolis Country Club. One of the benefits of the badge he carried was it got him through the doors that were typically closed to others. After securing the arrest of Amir Muunour this evening, he knew the next thing he wanted to do was to give the scoop to Lois Lane.

He'd been a bit shell-shocked at the news of Lois Lane's engagement but then again Jenna—his old partner's engagement had taken him by surprise as well. A smile crossed his face as he recalled the satisfying thrill of finally winning Jenna over after she had broken things off with Frank. Engaged wasn't married. Engaged wasn't forever. If anything, it was what proved to tear couples apart. True, he'd yet to catch the eye of the lovely brunette, but that was a challenge he thought he could handle. He wasn't one to back down from a challenge. He knew if given a chance Lois Lane would see her attention was better spent elsewhere.

The way to Lois Lane's heart seemed to be through a story and a story he would bring her... again and again. Until she finally saw how useful he could be to her journalism career. He'd gone by the Daily Planet earlier and been sent here to find her. Hopefully, the news he had for her would be enough to pull her away from whatever it was she was doing... maybe she'd even be interested in having dinner with him? The sky was the limit as far as he was concerned.

Clark let out a long breath as he flew back to his apartment to change. It had been a long week. Between Jimmy's brainwashing and the involvement of the NIA and FBI in their investigation lately, he and Lois had been pulled into five hundred different directions. Him more so with having to account for both Clark Kent and Superman. He'd spent the last few days on pins and needles wondering whether Jimmy would put two and two together with him having to change into Superman in front of him but thankfully his young friend had no recollection of the revelation, or anything else for that matter, from when he was under the Wilder's control. Fortunately, they'd caught both Katherine and Claudette Wilder the day before, but Amir Muunour was still in the wind.

He knew Lois would probably be on edge after dinner with her parents and he planned on distracting her. He'd stopped by the florist and his favorite winery in Florence. He moved around the apartment at super-speed, ensuring everything was in place before quickly changing his suit and heading out.

Chapter 7

Lois took a deep breath, counting to ten as she prepared to enter the dining hall at the Country Club, uncertain what condition the room would be in when she entered. Would her parents be at each other's throats? Would they be making snide remarks with ice in the air all evening?

"You're stalling," A familiar voice said from behind her.

She turned and saw Clark standing there in a charcoal suit as he reached out to pull her to him. "That was fast," she commented, looking at the time. "Everything go okay?"

"Perfect," he said, leaning in to kiss her. "You look great," he complimented, looking briefly over the short black dress that came to her knees with the three-chord straps accented with a silk bow on each shoulder.

She smiled her thanks, toying with his tie playfully. "You look pretty good yourself. What if we just ditched dinner and went somewhere else? They probably wouldn't notice if we didn't show up."

"Lo-is..." he chastised offering her a comforting smile as he placed an arm around her shoulders. "Come on, it won't be that bad," he said, opening the door for her.

"Just remember I offered a way to retreat and avoid this whole

mess," she said playfully as he followed her into the dining hall. Across the room, she spotted her mother with an annoyed expression on her face. She grimaced, uncertain what could be bringing a sour mood over her given her dad's absence from the table until she spotted him. Dan Scardino was sitting at the table with her mother.

"Oh, no," she groaned aloud when she spotted the DEA Agent sitting across from her mother. "What is *he* doing here?"

"Let's find out," Clark said, his face was equally irritated as they approached.

"I'm telling you hospitals are feeding grounds for drug-addicts..." Scardino was saying when they approached.

"Agent Scardino, I didn't know you were a member," Lois said, taking the seat next to her mother as Clark pulled up a chair between her and Scardino.

"Oh, I'm not. I actually came here for you," he said, flashing a smile to her.

She caught a glimpse of the annoyed expression on Clark's face as he rolled his eyes at Dan and the stern look her mother was giving. How in the world Dan Scardino had managed to weasel himself inside her mother's country club was beyond her. Right now, she just wanted to get rid of him before her dad made it to the table.

"For me?" Lois looked at him uncertainly.

"Sorry, I'm late." The voice of her father came from the other side of the table. A frown crossed his face when he approached and realized that Dan Scardino was in his seat.

Thankfully for Scardino, he seemed to realize his misstep and quickly stood to his feet. "Sorry about that, sir." He cleared his throat. "Just catching up."

"Friend of yours?" Her father looked at her mother.

"No," her mother said between gritted teeth.

She caught the disapproving look her mother shot at her and sighed, running a hand through her hair. How long had he been here?

Clark chose that moment to intervene. "Agent Scardino was helping us with a story we were working on this week."

"Ah," her father grunted, looking at him with a frown. "And you're chasing down leads *here*?"

"Well, I just wanted to catch your..." He seemed to think better of his choice of words and quickly corrected himself. "Uh, Lois," he finished lamely, glancing around the table as he added, "up on the latest..."

"*The latest what?*" Lois mouthed to Clark who shook his head with a shrug. Though part of her was curious what Agent Scardino could have that would warrant a trip down here to update them. The other part wondered how in the world he knew where to find them and why he hadn't bothered to call either her or Clark's mobile phones if it was that important. Before she could entertain that thought, her father quickly cut in putting an end to the conversation.

"Whatever it is I'm sure it can wait." Her father frowned as he removed the glass of water in front of him and handed it to Agent Scardino. "Do me a favor and have Richard bring out a clean table set would you?"

Lois caught a defeated expression that crossed Agent Scardino's face before he nodded and muttered, "Right." A part of her almost felt sorry for the guy. She knew all too well how hard it was to handle Sam Lane as his child let alone as an outsider.

A look crossed her mother's face, and she quickly excused herself, "Mr. Scardino, I'll walk you out." She offered, getting up from the table. She turned back to them before leaving and added, "I'll have a half and half tea. Little ice with a slice of lemon on the side. Chef's special. Carbonara. The sauce on the side." With that she followed Dan Scardino toward the exit, grabbing him by the elbow and pushing him along.

"She never changes, does she?" her father remarked, watching the two of them leave.

Lois forced a smile, deciding it best not to respond to the subtle dig her father had laid out toward her mother. Clark seemed to pick up on the uncomfortable tension and reached beneath the table to squeeze her hand. She turned to him, offering a grateful smile.

“So, I hear congratulations are in order?” her father prompted, offering a smile. “I guess things have changed quite a bit in the last year.”

“Almost two,” Lois corrected, smiling at Clark before turning back to her father. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Ellen had had enough. She had seen the look a few days ago, and she’d seen it again tonight. She wouldn’t be doing her job as a mother if she let it stand. Though her daughter and future son-in-law appeared to be oblivious to Dan Scardino’s intentions, she was not.

She had stood by and said nothing with each nurse or assistant that had been hired at her husband’s firm then when things got rough at home she’d lost her family to that look. That adulterous, no respect expression. She knew people like Dan Scardino all too well, and she wouldn’t stand by and do nothing.

“Mr. Scardino, might I have a word?” she called after him as he set the glass of water down on the table in front of him.

“Me?” He looked at her in surprise.

“Yes, you!” she practically hissed as she took him by the elbow, forcing him away from her daughter’s table. “I think it’s time you find a new hobby.”

“Pardon?”

“My daughter is not on the market. She is never going to be on the market. So you can get that thought out of your head right now. I know people like you, Mr. Scardino. Those too lazy to try at a real relationship. Those that think they can float through life on their looks and take what doesn’t belong to them. Well, I’ve got your number.”

“Now hold on a minute. I’m not doing anything...” he began to argue.

“Oh, yes, you just happened to show up at this club to talk to my very engaged daughter about a case? I don’t think so. I wasn’t born yesterday. I know your type. I know it very well because I watched my family fall apart because of people like you.”

“I’m sorry, but that is not what I’m...”

“She’s happy. She’s really, really happy in an almost-makes-your-teeth-hurt kind of way. She’s found someone that can take her at her worst and bring out her best. That’s not an easy task.” Her eyes narrowed as she went in for the jugular.

Ellen’s voice hitched a few octaves as she growled angrily at the man in front of her. The rage and hurt she’d suffered came to a boil as she confronted the man she knew to be nothing more than a menace. She would not sit back and do nothing. “I will not stand by and watch you try to take that from her. I won’t stand by and watch you try and manipulate your way into my children’s lives. You will stay away, Mr. Scardino. You will stay far, far away because if you don’t, I’m going to get on the phone with a lot of very important people that I’ve worked with for the last twenty-five years and make sure you do stay away.”

She reached for his collar and whispered in a menacing tone, “Maybe you get fired. Maybe you get transferred. Maybe you can’t get promoted for the rest of your career. Either way, it makes no difference to me, as long as you stay away from my family. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.” He swallowed hard, eying her with apprehension as he readjusted his collar.

“Good.” She patted him on the shoulder. “I’m so glad we could have this talk.”

Clark sat across the table from Sam and took a sip of his iced tea and listened as the waiter went on about the specials for dessert. Ellen had been unusually quiet after her return earlier. He

wasn’t sure if it was from the tension between herself and Sam or if it was something more, but he decided not to press the issue for Lois’ sake.

“No thank you.” Sam waved him off. The waiter nodded, taking the dessert display with him and disappearing into the crowd.

Sam turned back to him and Lois. “So you were saying something about a destination wedding?” He set a worn out black notebook on the table with a pen.

Clark nodded his agreement, allowing Lois to take the lead on answering. For the most part, dinner had been pleasant, exchanging introductions and anecdotes from the previous year and giving the abbreviated version of how he and Lois had started seeing each other several months ago. Surprisingly both Sam and Ellen had gotten through dinner without the dreaded arguments Lois had been assuming would happen because they always happened.

“Something along those lines,” Lois said, taking a sip of her cream soda. “Our schedules are so hectic and crazy we thought having a destination wedding would give us the opportunity to recharge and plan a wedding we both love with the people we love most.”

“Given that Superman’s agreed to help fly the guests out that cuts down on a large chunk of the cost,” Clark added, placing an arm around her shoulders.

“Sounds reasonable.” Sam nodded, tapping his hand against his chin. “But exactly how small is a small guest list?”

“Ten.” Lois supplied.

“Ten?” Ellen and Sam practically choked out.

“Ten.” Clark agreed, sharing a smile with Lois.

“That’s...tiny.” Ellen began to stammer.

Lois quickly cut her off, shaking her head as she smiled dreamily back at him, resting her head on his shoulder. “We found the perfect place. It’s in Hawaii. A little hill off the coast of Molokai.” She gave a dreamy expression as she spoke. “It’s perfect.” After the idea of a destination wedding had come up a few nights ago, they’d talked about where and when until they’d come up with the perfect place.

“I see,” Sam said carefully. “And when exactly were you planning on doing this?”

Lois shared a look with Clark. “Well, we were hoping to be spontaneous and find a weekend when everyone was available.”

“But...” her mother began to argue but quickly closed her mouth.

Clark tightened his arm around Lois as he spoke. “We don’t need to turn this into a huge affair. Just everyone important to us there to share this moment with.”

“Simple,” Lois agreed looking back at her parents. They exchanged a look for a moment before her father sighed, pulling out a notebook.

“How about next weekend?”

Lois let out a low moan as her fiancé’s lips pressed against hers. Her hands wandered up the front of his dress shirt as the door frame to their apartment door hit her back. “We should go inside,” he murmured against her.

“You’re the one with the keys,” she reminded him, linking her arms around his neck as she nipped at the sensitive skin of his jawbone. The sound of the door lock clicking to release the lock and the doorknob turning reached her ears, and he pulled her to him, opening the door. He lowered his glasses and looked behind her.

She turned just in time to catch him lighting the last candle sitting on the coffee table in the living room. A smile spread across her face, and she turned to look at him. “What is this?”

He tightened his arms around her waist, pulling her to him as he walked with her inside the apartment now illuminated in candlelight. “I figured you might need a distraction after tonight

so...I thought an evening at home with no distractions was needed."

"No distractions?" she countered, drawing an imaginary 'S' emblem across his chest. His eyes wandered down to the short black dress she wore before returning to meet her eyes.

"No, I had a talk with a certain superhero, and he and I agreed that he should take the night off."

"Really?" Her eyes sparkled as she smiled, leaning in to kiss him, toying with the collar to his shirt as she responded, "You know, if you keep spoiling me like this I might get used to it."

He chuckled against her as he walked with her further and further into the apartment. "And the problem with that would be...?"

"Nothing I guess." She grinned back at him. "You're just full of surprises, Clark Kent." She reached up to brush a stray curl that had fallen across his face. "A surprise romantic gesture without an occasion or reason is something to get used to, I guess."

He moved his hand to brush a lock of hair out of her face. "The occasion is I'm in love with my gorgeous fiancée, and we're getting married," he whispered in her ear, running his hands up and down her sides, pushing the fabric to her dress further and further up her thighs.

"Next weekend," she purred, running her palms over his shoulders. She gasped in surprise when he floated them a few inches above the floor, moving his hands to her waist.

She felt a shiver run down her spine from the heat of his breath against hers. Her hands ran up his chest, feeling the fabric of his dress shirt against her palm as he leaned into her. He floated them to the bookshelf and grabbed the remote off the shelf, pressing a button with one hand and then returning his attention to her as the soft chords filled the room. "May I have this dance?"

<< "Jimmy, stop!"

"Superman, what happened?" >>>

Jimmy rubbed his temples, trying to will the image out of his brain. Ever since his last visit with Dr. Klein, the image of Clark and Superman kept merging together. He couldn't understand it.

<< "Jimmy, stop!"

"Superman, what happened?" >>>

The prison guard tapped his baton against the metal door, performing the nightly check of the inmates. "Thirty-nine!" he called out. The sound of the inmate inside moving could be heard. The door hatch opened, and two wrists came out. He placed the handcuffs across his wrists and opened the door.

"Safety check!" he called out, motioning to the guard behind him. A glint in his eyes shone as he entered the cell and began searching for the contraband he knew the inmate to be in possession of. Inside the toilet, he pulled out a small plastic bag filled with white powdered substance and smiled in satisfaction to himself. "Green, that's going to be two weeks in the hole. You should know better than that."

"That ain't mine!" He called out as the other guard carried him down the hall to where the 'Hole' was. The guard then turned his attention to his next victim. He tapped his baton on the door and called out. "Forty-one!"

Nothing.

He tapped his baton on the door once more. "Forty-one!" He banged on the door before adding, "Luthor, get your sorry ass out here. I don't have time for your theatrics!"

Nothing.

He turned to the other guard standing to his left and nodded. "Open it up!"

He tapped his baton in his hands, ready to handle whatever Lex Luthor had to throw at him. The door opened, and he prepared himself to throw the maggot to the ground and show him what for, for delaying his nightly roll call.

"Hodge, I don't think he looks too good." The other guard

spoke up as he stepped to the side of the now open door.

"Oh, he's faking, that miserable..." He stopped when he saw the pale bluish tone to his face and glassy eyes. "Oh, for the love of...!" He looked up and directed the other guard, "Sound the alarm now."

A few minutes later the siren went off, and everyone began to scramble.

Lex Luthor was dead.

THE END