

Twice the Love to Share

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Summary: While in the midst of a murder investigation, Superman and Lois are hit with a double-ray Kryptonite gun. Clark is rendered powerless, while Lois is split in two, one simple Lois and one super-powered Ultrawoman, each carrying different aspects of Lois's personality. Now, they have to learn how to collaborate as a trio, in order to solve the case and get themselves back to normal.

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Chapter 1: Games of Seduction

****Downtown Metropolis****

Lois and Clark were driving through Metropolis in the famous gray Jeep. Lois, true to form, drove with a touch of boldness, skillfully weaving between the vehicles. Their conversation was light and pleasant:

“So, Clark, do you think the court will finally reach a verdict today, or will the jurors still be spending their time deliberating?”

“In my opinion, there won't be a verdict today; the jurors were really divided when they withdrew yesterday at noon. Why? Do you want to get rid of me?” Clark asked, teasing her.

Lois played along with her husband, a mischievous smile forming on her lips:

“Yes, I wanted to chase after villains and put myself in danger without you scolding me.”

Clark was about to respond when Lois turned her head toward him, her eyes sparkling with mischief—she had got him. They continued their playful exchange.

“So you still want a certain superhero to come to your rescue... The tabloids are right, you have a soft spot for Superman.”

“A soft spot? Maybe, yes... and maybe even more...”

Clark rolled his eyes with an amused smile.

“And you admit that to your husband without flinching? You know I'm very jealous...”

“Oh really? And what about your past flames... Mayson, Tony, Cat...”

“None of those women ever interested me.... But if you want a scoop, I have a soft spot for a certain Superheroine who spent a few days in town last year. She had a really sexy blue and pink costume...”

Clark placed his hand on his wife's thigh, his gaze drifting into memories. He thought about his wife flying through the skies of Metropolis during the few days she had inherited his powers. He had hated that time because he felt helpless and lost without his powers, but he had loved how the fitted costume accentuated his wife's body, although a part of him couldn't help but worry about her. And the way she responded to calls for help without a hint of doubt had made him fall even more in love with her. She was the generous Lois he had learned to discover beneath the shell she had forged.

“And then, once everything was back to normal, she proposed to me. What a wonderful memory!”

Lois didn't answer immediately, focusing on the increasingly dense traffic as they approached the Planet. They finished the drive in a comfortable silence, both reminiscing about that special week when their roles had been reversed.

****Daily Planet****

A few minutes later, they entered the elevator. A courier was already present and got off on the 1st floor, leaving Lois and Clark alone.

The moment the doors began to close, Lois turned to her husband, placed her hands on the front of his suit, and began to caress him while cooing:

“So, you find Ultra Woman sexy?”

“Yes, very sexy,” he replied, moving his mouth closer to hers and pulling her nearer by the waist. He placed a gentle kiss on her lips, conveying all the tenderness he felt for her.

Lois deepened the kiss, sliding her tongue into her partner's mouth and wrapping her arms around his neck. The kiss intensified until the elevator came to a halt. Clark pulled away, slightly dazed, with a look of regret. Lois whispered a promise in a breath that only her super husband could hear:

“Later...”

Clark took Lois's hand and they exited the elevator.

They had barely taken two steps into the newsroom when Perry called out to Clark, as if he too had superpowers....

"Clark! I thought you were at the courthouse."

"The verdict probably won't be rendered today; I think I'll be more useful here."

"Indeed, there won't be a verdict today. George Winter was found dead in his cell, and his cellmate has escaped."

Lois, shocked, asked her boss:

"Dead? Was he murdered?"

"The police are leaning towards suicide, but nothing is certain yet. I want both of you to investigate this case! A mafia member dying during his trial, right after revealing the names of the big players in his organization—that's suspicious. Why wasn't he in a high-security cell? Did he really commit suicide? What names did he reveal to the DA? I want to know everything!"

"Yes, boss! We're on it!" Lois responded, grabbing Clark's hand as she pressed the elevator button, which had closed after their exit!

Chapter 2: Escape and Kryptonite

Metropolis Prison

At Metropolis Prison, Lois and Clark met Inspector Henderson, who was examining the scene. They approached him behind the security cordon.

"Henderson!" Lois called out.

"Lane, Kent, I figured you'd come. We found George Winter hanged in his cell at 6:20 a.m.. When we tried to question his cellmate, we discovered he had disappeared."

"This is a high-security cell. Wasn't he checked every 20 minutes?" Lois was unfortunately very familiar with the procedure.

"Yes, of course. If I didn't know Superman so well, I'd think he was the one who helped him escape... The cellmate was Michael Brown, a member of Intergang. He had been here for two years. The guard claims to have seen him asleep during his 6:00 a.m. check. But since we found a rag doll in the bed, he could have left before then. No one knows how he got out; one of my men is reviewing the prison cameras. I should know more by late morning."

"And about George Winter?" Clark asked.

"Hanged with an electrical cable. Even though suicide seems plausible, the simultaneous escape makes me very doubtful. The body is with the coroner."

"Thanks, Inspector. Will you keep us informed?" Lois asked.

"Of course, don't forget to share your findings with me as well!"

Somewhere in a Warehouse in Suicide Slum

Meanwhile, in the underbelly of Metropolis, two men were plotting in a dark warehouse. A man in his forties, dressed as a prison guard, changed into jeans and a t-shirt. His cold blue eyes turned towards another man dressed in camouflage.

"Well, now that I'm out, let's get down to business. Can I see the rock you told me about?"

The man in camouflage opened a chest and a red glow escaped from it.

"Wonderful! What exactly does it do to Superman?"

"According to my information, it makes him apathetic; he wouldn't care if a crime was being committed. Other times, it makes him uncontrollable; he loses control of his powers and becomes unable to overpower anyone."

"Perfect, perfect. We can plan our little shopping spree now... I've seen some artwork that interests the boss a lot."

In Front of Metropolis Prison

Lois and Clark exited the prison. Clark looked puzzled.

"This suicide is too convenient. George Winter talks and then kills himself? His cellmate, a member of Intergang, disappears... It looks like a murder disguised as a suicide."

They stopped and faced each other.

"Who are you thinking of? We've had Johnny Bermuda in prison for almost two years..."

"He's always denied it... And then it was too easy, Mindy Church's call just as we arrived... What if it's her?"

"She's way too naive to be a hardened criminal..."

"An act! Aren't you the one who should be wary of appearances?" Lois replied with a wink.

"Why?" He adopted his most innocent look possible...

She planted a quick kiss on her husband's lips and turned towards her car parked nearby. Clark stood there, hypnotized by his wife.

"Come on, Clark, let's go interrogate the DA. Maybe he'll give us some clues to confirm my theory."

Suicide Slum

"What's the plan?" Mr. Camouflage asked.

"Do you still know how to shoot?"

“Who do you take me for? I was awarded the Gold American Sniper two years in a row during the Gulf War before those damn Marines tossed me aside like a common fly for refusing to shoot at soldiers designated to me... they were kids, damn it!”

Mr. Camouflage was very agitated, running his hand through his hair as he paced back and forth in the dark warehouse, lit only by small, grimy windows four meters off the ground.

“We’re going to install the kryptonite in a laser weapon. We’ll arrange to lure Superman, and while he’s busy saving the world, you’ll shoot from a rooftop... and then we’ll have a clear path!” Michael Brown’s usually cold gaze took on a sinister glint.

Chapter 3: Flames and Frustrations

348 Hyperion Avenue

Clark, standing by his bed, removed his glasses. He placed them on the nightstand before taking off his t-shirt and laying it on the sofa next to the bed.

“The DA was very vague; it was as if he wanted us to believe that George Winter hadn’t revealed anything to him...”

Lois arrived a few moments later, dressed in a beige nightgown.

“Indeed, but did you catch his slip of the tongue? I’m sure he said “she.” On the other hand, what am I saying, of course you heard it... You always hear everything... if only I could super-hear.”

“Your hearing is nothing to envy Superman over; you heard perfectly well,” Clark replied with a wink.

He pulled back the sheets and lay down. She snuggled beside him, resting her head on his chest. Clark gently held her close, appreciating the comforting warmth of her presence—a rare moment of peace in their hectic lives.

“Anyway, that confirms your theory... I can’t believe that a woman so...” Clark began.

“So what?”

“I can’t find the right word, but she doesn’t seem very smart...”

“She hides it well; who would imagine that the ingénue is a crime lord? She plays the grieving widow. Honestly, I never bought her perfect wife act when we met them with Bill Church. She’s a gold digger; you can trust my instincts.”

“Yes, maybe...” Clark wasn’t entirely convinced, but he wasn’t going to argue with her.

Her proximity gave him other ideas. He wanted to fully enjoy this moment with her. He caressed Lois’s back, then quickly rolled them over.

He lay on top of her, hovering slightly above to touch her without pressing his weight on her. Lois laughed softly and gave him a smile, looking deeply into his eyes. She saw all the love her husband had for her and the burning desire in his eyes. He closed the space between their lips and kissed her gently. The kiss soon deepened, Clark asking for permission to explore her mouth. Lois allowed him and wrapped her arms around his back.

She caressed his muscular shoulders, feeling all the quiet strength beneath his smooth skin. He was so strong he could lift her as if she were as light as a feather, or lift a plane with one hand, but when he touched her, he was infinitely gentle, never a force that could hurt her, whether in anger or during their intimate moments.

The heat rose quickly, and things were becoming decidedly interesting. Lois lost track of her thoughts, focusing on the moment and on her husband, almost naked in her arms.

Suddenly, Clark pulled away, tilting his head to the side, listening to a sound only he could hear. Lois sighed, her eyes filled with disappointment and sadness... this call came at the worst possible moment. Clark was not yet fully carried away by passion, focused solely on her, although the sexual tension between them was already very high... frustration would soon be their only companion.

She tried to hide her emotions and not make Clark feel more guilty for leaving her.

“What do you hear?” she asked.

“Firefighters, there’s a fire at the Baker Orphanage.”

“Go, save them, Clark,” she said, trying to mask the disappointment in her voice. “I’ll join you there!”

“No Lois, stay here; the fire has just started, I won’t be long,” Clark replied, turning into his famous costume.

“The evening is ruined. I might as well work; at least it will keep my mind occupied.”

“All right, be careful.” He kissed her lips and disappeared in a rush of air.

“I love you,” she replied; he was already gone, but she knew he could hear her.

Chapter 4: Red like...

Top of a Child Street Building

From the top of a building, Brown and Camouflage, dressed in black and hooded, watched the fire spread rapidly

through the orphanage. A weapon was set up on a tripod, equipped with a sighting scope.

Brown checked his watch:

“What’s he doing? It’s been 4 minutes since 911 was notified.”

“Patience, patience. Patience is the sniper’s greatest virtue; you have to wait for the perfect moment to take out a target...”

A blue and red blur entered the building.

“Ah, there he is! Get ready! Quickly!”

The blur moved extremely fast, entering and exiting the building, handing the children over to the arriving paramedics one by one.

Superman had scanned the building with X-rays as he approached flying. He detected several fires starting on each floor of the building. The children’s dormitories were on the upper floors and the kids were all trapped. There was no doubt that the fire was arson, but he channeled his anger towards the monsters who would harm children and set about ensuring their safety.

His speed allowed him to evacuate the children within minutes. They were shocked and some were slightly affected by the smoke, but they would survive. He had arrived in time, and once the last child was out, he sighed with relief.

“He’s there, go ahead, shoot!”

“No, you see he’s moving too fast; we won’t get a second chance. If he spots us, we’re done for.”

****Baker Orphanage****

Superman joined the Fire Captain to assess the situation. He landed in front of him, hidden from the snipers by the fire truck. He crossed his arms in his usual Man of steel posture. His gaze was determined.

“Captain! I managed to get all the children out. The fire is very intense; what do you want me to do now?”

“Thank you, Superman! If you could set up the hoses on the roof while I deploy my ladders, we might save valuable time. Do you have any idea where the fire started?”

“I saw fires starting in each staircase; it’s arson! I’ll leave you to it; the sooner the fire is out, the more evidence stay!”

When Lois arrived, Clark flew back up to the burning building. He carried a fire hose and directed it at the blaze. His movements were quick, and he spent a lot of time on the opposite side of the building, unaware that he was being watched.

Lois took some photos to illustrate her article.

After 15 minutes of fighting the fire, it was under control, and the firefighters had set up their ladders and were ready to take over.

Superman went back to see the Captain, who dismissed him.

At that moment, Lois called out to him.

“Superman! Do you have a few minutes for the Daily Planet?”

“Of course, Mrs. Lane!” he replied, trying to maintain a professional demeanor, though he wanted to ravish her. They didn’t need another scandal.

He approached her, and she took out her tape recorder, pretending to turn it on. Clark stood in front of her, back to the snipers, legs slightly apart and arms crossed in the confident superhero stance.

“Superman, what happened?”

“When I arrived, all the staircases were on fire and the children were asleep on the upper floor. I proceeded to evacuate them and then I...”

“Superman!” Lois interrupted. “Watch out behind you.”

Superman turned just as two red beams hit him. He quickly spread his cape to shield Lois, who was behind him.

He was about to investigate the source of the beams when he heard Lois faint.

He immediately bent to help her, cushioning her fall but ended up falling with her, overwhelmed by her weight. He got up, checking her pulse while calling her name. A wave of panic washed over him when she didn’t respond. He was slightly relieved to find her pulse strong, though a bit rapid.

She opened her eyes after a few seconds.

“Clark?”

“Lois, it’s Superman. How do you feel?”

“I’m okay, just a bit dizzy... what happened?”

“I don’t know, I saw those beams and you fainted.”

He deliberately omitted his own loss of balance.

“Could you help me up, please? It’s not very comfortable here,” she said with a half-smile to try to reassure him. Her husband’s eyes were filled with concern, although he was making a commendable effort to hide it.

“Of course,” he replied with a half-smile. How frustrating it was not to be able to hold her in his arms.

He stood up and extended his hand. She took it and began to rise, but Clark found her grip unusually heavy. Usually,

her 60 kg felt no heavier than a sheet of paper, and he was really shocked by the beams.

He tightened his muscular arms slightly, and Lois sat up slowly.

As Lois's upper body leaned forward, he saw a second upper body of Lois remaining on the ground, as if she were splitting in two.

Chapter 5: Double Trouble

The shock was evident on his face.

"Superman, don't be afraid, it's just me!"

He stammered:

"Lo... Lois, are you... are you feeling... okay?"

"Yes, of course, it was just a little dizziness..."

"Lois, you need to look behind you, but above all, don't panic!"

Lois examined her husband's face, finding it unusually pale.

"Superman, what's going on? You look unwell..."

She turned around to see what was troubling him and, upon seeing her "double," she fainted again. Clark caught her, ready to support her weight.

An ambulance worker who had seen Lois fall called out to them. Panicked, Clark quickly thanked him but said that everything was fine and that he would drive Mrs. Lane home himself. The ambulance worker returned to his duties, and Clark exhaled a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

He bent down to pick up the other Lois.

"Lois, come quickly with me, we need to be discreet, let's hide behind this wall."

She followed him in silence, too stunned to disobey. Once behind the wall, Clark asked Lois to stay there for a few minutes while he took the "double" home.

She nodded, and Clark tried to take off, but his body remained strangely glued to the ground. He furrowed his brow, a wave of concern overtaking him.

The Lois in his arms began to regain consciousness, and he gently set her down on the ground.

****Child Street Building****

In the emergency stairs of the building behind them, Brown and Treillis descended quickly but silently. To avoid the repercussions from the Man of Steel, they had left the roof quickly. They had confidence in their plan, but they knew Superman wasn't without resources, especially

with the journalist present and apparently affected. It was public knowledge that even though Superman had denied any intimate relationship with her, he remained her personal bodyguard.

"That was a great shot, did you see? Right on target!" Modesty was not Treillis' strongest suit.

"We'll see tomorrow, let's not count our chickens before they hatch. He's tough. Underestimating our opponent would be a grave mistake," Brown replied sharply.

They emerged from the building and disappeared into a dark alley, blending into the shadows as they moved, making sure not to draw attention to themselves.

****Behind the Wall****

Superman, still dizzy from the last three minutes, met the gaze of the Lois on the ground, still in his arms. He was relieved to see her coming back to consciousness, her eyes slightly dazed but able to meet his gaze. He looked up at the other Lois, kneeling beside him, and questioned her with his eyes. The other Lois was just as perplexed as he was.

"What's going on, Clark?" She placed her hand on his arm in support.

"I... I can't fly?"

"Kryptonite?"

"No, I haven't felt any pain, and apart from the fact that I clearly have no powers, I feel fine."

"No powers? No super vision? No super breath? Super hearing?"

Clark stopped for a moment, trying to sense the hearts of the Loises. He shook his head, fear beginning to show on his face.

"And you, how are you?"

"Fine... except that I'm clearly not myself," she replied, pointing to her doppelgänger.

They both leaned towards her. She hadn't spoken yet, trying to understand what was happening, and anger began to rise in her. Clearly, while she was unconscious, someone had impersonated her and knew her husband's identity.

"Now, Superman, I'd like to know who this woman is and what she's doing here! Oh no! Don't tell me there's another clone!" Anger helped her recover quickly, and she pushed both of them away to stand up. Clark offered her a hand for support, which she rejected sharply, her eyes filled with defiance. They realized that Mad Dog Lane was not far off. Clark gave her some space and tried to address her with soothing words.

“Hon... Lois,” he corrected himself; she wasn’t ready to be called Honey... “can you tell me what you remember last?” The journalist mode, to limit emotions, was probably the best way to approach this.

“I was interviewing you, I warned you about a red light that was going to hit us, and then, I opened my eyes and found myself lying with you and this *thing*,” the word *thing* was filled with all the contempt she felt, “above me. And I find her way too familiar with my *husband*.”

The other Lois was about to respond but, knowing her own character perfectly, she chose to remain silent. She understood very well the emotional state of her counterpart and knew that this reaction was normal given the circumstances.

“Lois, we will clarify the missing pieces for you, I promise. But I think all three of us should go back to our... your home.” The “your” seemed more appropriate in this context. “We don’t want Superman to be on the front page of tabloids tomorrow with two Lois Lanes.”

Lois recognized the wisdom in these words and agreed:

“But we’re not done yet! And I’m driving!”

They headed to the Jeep. Lois, in anger, took the wheel. She wanted to regain control of the situation and allocated the seats in the car.

“You two, get in the back seat, it will be more discreet with the tinted windows. But don’t even think about plotting or touching each other,” her glare made it clear that it was wiser not to protest or challenge her.

The 5-minute drive seemed like an eternity, and the tension was palpable. Each person was lost in their thoughts, trying to make sense of this extremely foggy situation...

Clark wondered if he was simply having a nightmare; one moment he was in bed with his incredible wife, about to make love to her, and the next, he found himself powerless with two Loises, one of whom was extremely angry. The situation could have been a fantasy in other circumstances, if he were still in bed with *two* Loises... a smile crept onto his lips, which he quickly suppressed. No, it wasn’t worth getting involved in; this was clearly impossible, and an excited Superman wouldn’t calm Lois’ anger.

Chapter 6: Collision of Identities

348 Hyperion Avenue

They quickly entered the house. Clark headed upstairs:

“Where do you think you’re going?” spat Lois.

She was truly angry, and the drive had clearly not calmed her. She had, however, let her fury out while driving, the other Lois thought it might have helped her calm down a bit.

“Uh... to change clothes, I think the suit isn’t appropriate.”

“Good! But don’t take your time!”

Clark didn’t hear the rest as his super-hearing was lost in the staircase.

“I want an explanation and fast, so that *she* leaves!”

That was enough for Lois! She hadn’t asked to be doubled, and she was just as legitimate as the other Lois! She exploded:

“Now enough is enough! I’m not an impostor, we were victims of the red rays, I don’t understand any more than you what’s happening, but this is also MY house. So I’m not leaving. If you want to get out of this situation, we’ll have to collaborate. So you’re going to get off your high horse and let us...”

The angry Lois lunged at her counterpart, ready to fight. She wouldn’t be fooled. But she stopped abruptly at 1cm from the other Lois upon realizing that she was moving at super speed and was about to seriously hurt her. The rush of air caused by the super-speed had made the documents on the coffee table scatter.

When Clark came down, he had changed into jeans and a black t-shirt; his previous outfit was not suitable for the circumstances.

He discovered a rather unexpected scene: papers scattered around the room, the two Loises on the floor.

“What happened here? I was gone for 2 minutes and it looks like a tornado passed through.” He lowered his voice realizing that one Lois was crying while the other was trying to console her. He knelt down and held them both in his arms...

He tenderly rocked them, realizing that anger had given way to despair. He didn’t know what had happened, but the angry Lois was closer to despair than hysteria. A dull pain gripped Clark’s heart, unable to bear seeing his wife suffer.

They stayed like this for a few minutes, each trying to recover by drawing strength from the embrace.

The angry Lois had stopped and collapsed when she realized she had superpowers, controlling her body as she had to do a few years earlier when Clark’s powers had been accidentally transferred to her. She was struck with horror when she realized she could have seriously hurt the other Lois, and she fell to the ground, all her anger replaced by deep guilt.

Now that she was feeling better, she tried to lighten the mood, suppressing all her feelings to regain control. She spoke in an ironic tone:

“Clark, don’t enjoy the moment too much, I know having two women in your arms is a typical male fantasy.”

She took the opportunity to dry her tears and stand up. This time, she willingly accepted the hand offered to help her up.

They were all feeling a bit better. Clark responded in the same light tone:

“What can I do? Lois Lane is capable of bringing Superman to his knees, so how can Clark Kent, a mere human, resist two Lois Lanes? You are my downfall.”

“Well, I’m going to tidy up the mess I made earlier and then we’ll try to clarify this out-of-time evening.”

She accelerated into a blur, tidying up the room at super speed and sat down on the right side of the couch. The other Lois joined her, and Clark remained still, mouth agape. He hadn’t witnessed what had just happened. She called out to him:

“Clark, are you going to stand there with your mouth open, or are you joining us?”

Clark shook his head and joined them, sitting on the couch facing them. He buried his face in his hands and collected his thoughts, ready.

“I don’t understand everything that happened, but I’ll recount the events from the beginning and you can fill in the gaps at the end.”

They nodded.

“So, when you two alerted me about the beam, I turned around and was struck by two rays: one in the middle of my chest and the other on my stomach. I grabbed both sides of my cape to keep you safe. When I tried to see where it was coming from, I was interrupted because you were fainting. I caught you, but with some difficulty, I must have already lost my powers.

Then Lois,” he pointed to the Lois on the left, “came back to her senses, and when I helped her up, you,” he pointed to the Lois on the right, “appeared, lying unconscious as if you were being duplicated.

Then I took you in my arms and we hid behind the wall where you woke up. I wanted to bring us home by air, but I was never able to take off, that’s when I realized I no longer had any powers. The rest you know. But I’d like to know what happened while I was changing.”

The Lois on the right lowered her head, still ashamed of what she almost did... the other Lois took her hand,

wordlessly telling her that she had forgiven her, fully understanding Lois Lane’s character.

The Lois on the right stepped into the arena and recounted:

“When you went upstairs, you must not have heard, otherwise, you would have come down immediately. I said I wanted Lois to leave.”

“I couldn’t keep my calm any longer. I could accept her anger, putting myself in her place, but this was too much. I told Lois off and...”

“I was overcome with intense rage, I rushed at her wanting to fight... but to my surprise, I moved at super speed. When I realized this, I panicked. All my anger disappeared; I realized I was becoming dangerous and had judged the situation far too quickly. That’s when you arrived.”

“Thanks, Loises. Now we have all the facts. To recap: two rays hit me, stole my powers, hit you, duplicated you, and transferred my powers to one of you.” He pinched the bridge of his nose with his right hand, a gesture he often made when frustrated.

The Lois on the left stifled a yawn and glanced at the clock.

“I don’t know about you, but all this has exhausted me. It’s 1 a.m., the day has been long, we’ve experienced far too many emotions in such a short time, and we won’t solve this now. I suggest we go to bed.”

Clark squirmed, uncomfortable with what was about to happen... Going to bed... all three of them?

Clark had never considered himself a prude. His virginity at marriage was simply due to the fact that he was waiting for the right person to share everything with. He had never been attracted to the classic fantasies of men around him. His friends at university boasted about their exploits and “exotic” experiences, which had never interested him. Even though earlier in the car he had thought about the fantasy of having two Loises in bed with him, there was a huge difference between fantasy and reality. In the end, everyone was exhausted physically and emotionally, and they went to bed in silence, with him positioned in the center of the bed, each of *his* women on either side in his arms.

Chapter 7: Between Dream and Reality

Clark woke up with a start, his heart racing, and looked around for Lois. He was relieved to see her sleeping beside him. “It was just a dream,” he told himself, tightening his arms around her. Yet, a lingering doubt remained, a vague detail, a feeling that something was amiss. He pushed the thought away, focusing on the warmth of *his* wife,

spooning her from behind, and drifted back into a blissful drowsiness.

A few minutes later, a whoosh sound followed by a cold draft made him open his eyes. He sat up, looking toward the window, and his heart skipped a beat as he saw Ultra Woman landing. Suddenly, he realized that what he had thought was a dream... might not have been.

Clark watched Ultra Woman in silence, his mind trying to piece together the puzzle. The persistent feeling he had upon waking... everything fell into place. What he had believed to be a dream—multiple Loises—was actually the result of their encounter with the red rays. He ran a hand through his hair, suddenly feeling exhausted by this realization.

“It was true...” he murmured as Ultra Woman approached.

They were all three at the kitchen table over coffee. The day’s edition of the Daily Planet lay on the table, with the front page signed by Lane and Kent visible. They had written the article about Winter’s death and Brown’s escape following their court appearance. Ultra Woman had changed into civilian clothes.

“I was woken around 5 by an accident on the Metropolis bridge. Five vehicles were involved and in bad shape; I quickly sorted out the situation and slipped away before anyone could talk to me. Then, too agitated to go back to sleep, I returned to the orphanage as Lois. Clark, thanks to your quick intervention last night, all the children are fine this morning, but the building is severely damaged. According to the Fire Captain, they found accelerants under every staircase.”

While Ultra Woman recounted her morning, Clark glanced at Lois, still wondering how he had ever thought it was all just a dream. But the idea of two Loises, right there in his kitchen, left no room for doubt. It was indeed real, and they would have to get used to it.

“I’m not surprised. When I arrived, all the stairs were on fire. It’s impossible that it was accidental; the fire was very intense. If I hadn’t arrived so quickly, they wouldn’t have been able to get out in time.” The anxiety of arriving too late was evident on Clark’s tired face. He continued, visibly frustrated, “I can’t even go investigate the clues on-site. We need to understand what happened to us.”

“I might be able to help with that too. I also went to the top of the building where I think we were attacked. I’m pretty sure I found the right place. And I found something. I’m not sure if it will help us, but look.” She pulled a small button from her pocket. “Look, it has the Marine symbol on it.”

Lois took it and examined it closely.

“I wrote an article on this when I first started at the Planet, remember?” she asked Ultra Woman.

“Yes, they’re specific to each unit and each year. The differences are quite limited, but they help identify when the soldier served.”

“Great, now that we have a lead, how do we handle all this? Superman not showing up is not really a problem; it wouldn’t be the first time he disappears for a few days... But those who shot at me were probably expecting to neutralize me. Given Ultra Woman’s report, it’s likely the Red Kryptonite is to blame... but the double ray and duplication are new.” Clark took a deep breath. “We need to consider what this implies... I think we have no choice. You can’t ignore the calls, but could you take me with you so my helplessness isn’t too noticeable? Two Loises in town won’t go unnoticed. You should stay as Ultra Woman all the time, so no one suspects anything...”

The two Loises looked at each other, nodded, and... burst into laughter... Clark babbled... it was so unusual, it betrayed his deep anxiety.

Ultra Woman addressed Lois:

“I think he’s under pressure. Come on.”

They stood up and each gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then they pressed their foreheads against his temples. Clark closed his eyes, savoring the moment and regaining his composure. They knew him so well.

They agreed on a plan of action for the day. Although none of them knew exactly what lay ahead, they were ready to face the situation together.

Chapter 8: Undercover

****Daily Planet****

Thirty minutes later, Lois was sitting at her desk when Clark approached with a coffee, handing it to her.

“Thanks,” she replied, meeting his loving gaze.

“I started looking into the Marine buttons. Can you draft the article about the fire?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied, kissing him on the cheek before settling into her desk.

Perry emerged from his office and approached his favorite reporters.

“Lois, Clark, I need the follow-up from yesterday for the afternoon edition.”

“Yes, boss. We also have an article on the arson at the Baker Orphanage.”

“That’s my reporters!”

He turned back to his office but halfway there called out, “And the accident on the Metropolis bridge? I heard a certain Ultra Woman made a reappearance... got any info?”

“Uh, no Perry, not yet,” Lois answered.

“Keep on it, kids! She’s a friend of Superman, isn’t she?”

He finished his walk to his office, leaving the question hanging in the newsroom.

Sometimes Clark thought Perry might know his secret. It didn’t really bother him; it was actually quite comforting, saving him from having to justify his many disappearances. And Perry didn’t lose much; he still got most of the stories.

“Yes!” Lois exclaimed.

Clark looked up from his screen to see his wife excited. He got up and joined her to see what had got her in a tizzy.

On her screen was an exact copy of the button found by Ultra Woman.

“Look, this uniform was used in Kuwait during the Gulf War by snipers.” She didn’t let him respond and shouted, “Jimmy!”

Jimmy rushed over:

“Can you find the names of all the snipers who participated in the Gulf War in Kuwait? See if they’re still in the army and what they’re currently doing otherwise.”

“Consider it done!”

Clark turned to Lois, “In the meantime, would you edit my article?”

“I get privileges now?”

“You’ve always had privileges, Lois,” he replied with the smile that made her melt.

She didn’t have a chance to respond as a familiar whoosh sound echoed, and Ultra Woman entered the newsroom through the stairs, right next to the elevator. She walked confidently toward them, and the entire newsroom froze, trying to figure out her direction and the reason for her presence. It had been almost two years since the superheroine had made a brief appearance in Metropolis, disappearing as quickly as she had appeared. Many speculations had arisen, but no one had confirmation or denial; Superman avoided all questions on the subject, stating that his private life was, by definition, private. The steely look he gave during those moments was enough to stop questions, which soon dwindled and disappeared completely. Metropolitans had forgotten their savior, which suited Lois and Clark perfectly.

“Lois, Clark, may I see you privately?”

Clark nodded and led the two women to the conference room.

All eyes followed them, and once the door was closed, they also closed the blinds. Privacy was complete: whispers were heard and no one was focused on their work. Perry emerged from his office and called everyone to order:

“I don’t think your articles for the afternoon edition are on my desk. Either get back to work or you’re fired!”

He turned back to his office, smiling, enjoying making his newsroom tremble, and a scoop was in preparation in the conference room. The day couldn’t have been better.

In the conference room, the three conspirators also enjoyed the situation. The small plan they had prepared during breakfast was going wonderfully. They just needed to write the article for the afternoon edition: “Superman on Secret Mission: Ultra Woman Steps In to Protect Metropolis!”

Ultra Woman explained that she had been tasked by Superman to replace him on Earth during his undercover mission. Having greatly enjoyed her previous visit to Metropolis, she had gladly accepted. Ultra Woman also came from Krypton and was a very good friend of Superman. She would do her best to help the Metropolitans and Earthlings if needed.

The article was typed at super speed by Ultra Woman. She also shared her morning rescues, mentioning she had been shaken by a young boy drowning in a pool, although she arrived just in time to save him. Clark did his best to reassure her, explaining that everything she was doing was enough, and what mattered was that she had saved the child who was now doing very well. He held her in his arms, and to dry her tears, lifted the mask over her eyes, which she removed completely.

Lois informed her that they were looking for a sniper who had participated in the Kuwait War.

Just as Ultra Woman was about to ask a follow-up question, Jimmy knocked and entered the conference room without waiting for a reply. Ultra Woman, having removed her mask when she was crying, quickly turned to hide her uncovered face.

“I have a list of snipers; there were 183.”

“That’s quite a list,” Lois replied.

“Yes, but I was able to narrow it down to 30 who left the army...”

“And do you know where they live?”

“...and only 10 live in this state, with 7 in Metropolis.”

“Last known activity?”

“Two are building experts, one opened a gun shop, another a shooting club, one is in the police. The last two have no known activity. They are,” he looked at his sheet, “Peter Huge and... Oliver Brown.”

“Brown?” Clark asked. “Can you please check if there is a connection to the escaped convict from yesterday’s Metropolis prison?”

Jimmy nodded before leaving the room, casting a glance at Ultra Woman.

Chapter 9: Broken Hopes

Intergang Headquarters

In a richly decorated basement, the latest issue of the Daily Planet, featuring a photo of Ultra Woman standing with her arms crossed in a very “Superman” pose, and the article by Lois and Clark, was prominently displayed on a table. A platinum blonde, wearing a very short dress barely covering the top of her thighs, spoke in a girlish voice to Brown and Trellis. Both had their heads bowed.

“But Mrs. Church, it’s incomprehensible. I’m sure Superman was hit; he’s probably unable to perform any rescues, and his friends are covering for him with this story...”

“Tsk, tsk, you failed... There’s still a superhero in Metropolis preventing me from conducting my business in peace...” She turned to a man in a suit beside her. “Freddy, can you take care of these two losers? I don’t like being made a fool of...”

“But Mrs. Church...” Brown’s protests were cut short as a man injected a substance into his neck, and the same was done to Trellis.

348 Hyperion Avenue

Clark and the two Loises were having dinner in the dining room of their townhouse when the phone rang. Clark got up to answer:

“Hi Mom, hi Dad.”

“Clark, we read your article. What’s going on? Nothing serious, right?” Martha asked.

With all the commotion, he had forgotten to inform his parents.

“Sorry, I didn’t take the time to call. I was hit by red rays, and it transferred my powers to Lois, like last time, so she pulled out the costume you made for her.”

Clark tried to hide Lois’s duplication from his parents, not wanting to worry them unnecessarily, but his voice wasn’t as steady as he had hoped.

“Everything okay, son?” his father asked.

“Yes, yes, Dad.”

“You’re not trying to pull one over on your parents, are you?” Martha added.

Clark squirmed uncomfortably and sighed, running a hand through his hair.

“No, it’s just that the rays also duplicated Lois...”

Martha let out a small gasp of surprise before composing herself.

“How is she?”

“Fine, I think. The situation isn’t easy, but I’m sure we’ll get through it.”

“Do you want us to come, sweetie?” Martha asked.

“That’s kind of you, Mom, but you have your own problems. I know it’s harvest time.”

“It doesn’t bother us, you know. Our son and daughter are much more important.”

“I promise we’ll be okay.”

“All right, but call us. You know we’re always here for you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Goodnight, Clark,” his father concluded.

“Bye, Dad, Mom.”

As he returned to the table, Ultra Woman picked up the police scanner.

“What do you hear?” Lois asked.

“The police. Two bodies were spotted at the port. I should go see if I can help.”

She stood up, spinning into the costume, leaving Clark speechless. She gave him a quick kiss on the lips and took off:

“So that’s what it looks like when I change?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s pretty cool, isn’t it?” Lois replied.

“Yeah, I don’t know if that’s the word I would use, but it’s interesting, for sure.”

“By the way, I’ve never had the chance to ask you—you’re always gone too quickly...” She got up from the table and approached him, starting to play with his tie. “Do you completely undress when you change outfits?” Her hands were now around his neck.

Clark blushed slightly and closed the distance between their mouths, kissing her lovingly. Lois pulled back quickly:

“Don’t try to dodge the question... although, judging by your reaction, I have a pretty good idea of the answer... I

might need to invest in a camera to film you and watch in slow motion,” she finished in a sensual voice.

This time, Clark turned bright red and gasped... he was both embarrassed and excited. Clearing his throat, he said:

“She mentioned bodies at the port, didn’t she? Don’t you think we should go check it out?”

****Metropolis Port****

At the port, Ultra Woman landed next to the Police Lieutenant who seemed to be in charge of the operation:

“Lieutenant, can I help?”

“We found two floating bodies about an hour ago. Unfortunately, there was nothing we could do; they were dead. My men are trying to retrieve them but are having some trouble. If you could assist them.”

Ultra Woman joined the Zodiac crew and went to help the divers.

Lois and Clark arrived as the bodies were being placed on the dock.

They approached the police line, and Lois called out to the officer guarding the perimeter:

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet, and this is my partner Clark Kent.” Clark showed his press card “We’re with the...”

“Daily Planet, and you want to see my boss,” the officer finished.

Lois didn’t hide her smile:

“Exactly.” She began to lift the police tape.

The officer stepped in front of her:

“Who authorized you to enter the perimeter?”

“You just did!” Lois asserted.

“Absolutely not! So you stay on this side and wait. My boss asked me to maintain a crime scene free of pests, and that includes the press.”

“But you don’t have the right to...”

The Lieutenant in charge approached at the commotion and introduced himself:

“Lieutenant Wolf, what’s all this noise?”

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet, and this is Clark Kent, my...”

“Husband, yes, I know... go ahead, what do you want to know?”

“I was going to say partner... but all right, what happened?”

“We recovered, with Ultra Woman’s invaluable help, two bodies. According to our information, they were brothers: Michael and Oliver Brown.”

“Michael, as in the escapee from yesterday?” Clark asked, shocked.

“Affirmative!”

“...And this Oliver, what did he do for a living?” Lois hesitated to ask, fearing the answer.

“He’s a former Marine who served in Kuwait, no known occupation since.”

“What happened to them?” she continued.

“Execution, a bullet in the back, and their hands were tied behind them.”

“Revenge killing?” Clark asked.

“Probably, but we’ll know more after the autopsy. I have to go now,” and he walked away.

Lois turned to Clark, her eyes moist:

“Clark, that was our only lead...”

“I know, but we’ll find another. Come on, let’s go home.”

“No, let’s go to the Planet and write the article.”

****In the Jeep****

The drive to the Planet was heavy with silence. Clark was as distraught as Lois and didn’t know how to comfort her. He hadn’t been able to approach Ultra Woman to check on her either. He felt guilty for not being able to ease the burden on his women. The murder of their main suspect had dashed their hopes of returning to a normal life.

He needed to inform Ultra Woman of their destination, as returning home alone wouldn’t be easy. He pulled out his cell phone and left a message on their voicemail.

****Daily Planet****

Once at the Planet, they worked mechanically. The goal was to focus on the article and avoid dwelling on their disappointment, but it wasn’t very successful.

Chapter 10: A Ray of Hope

****348 Hyperion Avenue****

When they returned home two hours later, they didn’t feel much better, except for the small satisfaction of having written an article that would please their editor-in-chief.

Ultra Woman was already back and hadn’t bothered to change. She was sitting on the windowsill, staring blankly into space. They approached her, hoping to offer some comfort. Lois took her hand.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Ultra Woman shook her head, tired, then changed her mind.

“It was horrible. The water was red, and those two bodies were just lying there. They were disfigured by the water, their eyes fixed, filled with terror, frozen forever. Once we got them to shore, we saw they had been executed. And when I learned who they were...it felt like all hope had been ripped away from me.”

No one said a word as she spoke. Her tears began to fall, quickly followed by Lois's and Clark's. They embraced each other, seeking comfort in their hug and their shared love.

After a few minutes, Lois suddenly stood up. An idea had sprung into her mind. Clark and Ultra Woman looked at her questioningly.

“All is not lost! We know who our suspects are, and even though questioning them would have helped, it's not indispensable. We just need to find where they lived, and maybe we'll find the weapon there.”

The light of hope started to return to the faces of the three companions. Clark was the first to respond.

“I'll grab the laptop to search for places where they might have hidden.”

“I'll leave you for five minutes; I desperately need a shower. The water was disgusting,” said Ultra Woman.

“Five minutes? That's slow; Superman usually doesn't take more than fifteen seconds,” Lois teased, winking at Clark.

When she came back downstairs, Lois and Clark were engrossed in the laptop screen. They were examining an information file on the two suspects. On the left, Michael Brown, born on May 24, 1957, had a long criminal history that included armed robbery, pimping, and numerous stints in prison. He was also suspected of having ties to Inter-gang, but the evidence was lacking. On the right, Oliver Brown, born in 1960, had been a sniper in the army, twice decorated as an American Sniper. His career had ended abruptly in January 1991 when he was court-martialed for treason after refusing to shoot Iraqi targets designated by his superiors. Released after four years in prison, he had seen his wife leave with their five-year-old child and disappear completely.

Ultra Woman, with her superpowers, had quickly absorbed the information.

She broke the silence.

“No known addresses?”

“None,” Lois replied.

“Past addresses?” asked Ultra Woman.

“There's the address of Oliver's ex-wife, but it's unlikely he went back there,” Clark answered. “But she might have some useful information.”

“It's worth a try. It's our only lead anyway,” Lois agreed.

****Livia Johnson's House****

The next morning, bright and early, Lois and Clark stood in front of a small blue house, typical of a nice suburban neighborhood, with a perfectly manicured lawn and impeccably trimmed rose bushes. The serene appearance of the house contrasted sharply with the seriousness of their mission.

A man opened the door, looking slightly irritated but remaining polite.

“Hello, does Livia Johnson live here?” Lois asked.

“Who's asking?”

“Lois Lane and Clark Kent from the *Daily Planet*,” Lois replied, showing her press badge.

The man glanced at their IDs and nodded.

“This isn't a good time. Livia is busy explaining to her son that he'll never see his father again...”

Lois felt the weight of the situation and added, “We're really sorry to intrude, but we're investigating her ex-husband's death. We thought she might be able to help us with some information.”

“I understand, but it's a difficult time. I'll pass on your message.”

Before the man could close the door, a young boy, about eight years old, with tear-stained eyes, approached.

“Are you here to find the person who killed my dad?” he asked, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Clark crouched down to the boy's level.

“Yes, we're trying to find out what happened to your father. Can you help us by telling us what you know?”

The boy nodded, eager to cooperate.

“Sure, I want to help.”

Lois and Clark were invited inside. They sat in the living room, where Livia, seated with her son Jake, was waiting for them. Clark and Lois exchanged a glance before starting their questions.

“Jake, when was the last time you saw your dad?” Lois asked gently.

“Five days ago, we went to the fair!” Jake’s eyes brightened with happy memories. “We ate ice cream, and I even got to go on the Top Spin!”

“Did you go to his place?” asked Lois.

“No, I’ve never been to his place. He said it was better to enjoy the sunshine outside.”

“Did anything seem different or strange since that day?” Clark asked.

“No, everything was normal. After that, he won me a Superman doll at the shooting gallery. Do you want to see it?”

“Of course, sweetie,” Lois agreed.

Jake stood up and went upstairs. The man who had opened the door, James, followed him, leaving Lois and Clark alone with Livia to ask more questions. Livia started speaking.

“He didn’t want to bring him to his place. He kept telling me it wasn’t a neighborhood for kids. He was such a good father, but he lost his way after the trial and prison. He refused to let me visit him in prison; he became more and more distant. He broke up with me after two years in prison and refused any visits. But for Jake’s sake, I did everything I could to reunite them when he got out.”

“Do you know what he was doing after his release?” Lois asked.

“Officially, no. He never talked about himself, but I overheard a conversation once, probably with his brother. They were arguing, whispering, but I think it wasn’t something legal. They talked about neutralizing, about escape...”

“His brother Michael?” Clark asked.

“Yes. I never met Michael, but I know he had run-ins with the law. Oliver always tried to keep his distance from him, but they were in touch sometimes.”

“Do you know his or his brother’s address?” Clark asked gently.

“Yes, I think I have it somewhere, on the last alimony check.”

Livia searched through a drawer and quickly found the address, which she wrote down.

“Here you go. I hope it helps you figure things out. Sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

Livia’s tone indicated she wanted to end the conversation. Clark and Lois stood up, and Clark took the address, slipping it into his jacket pocket.

Jake came back downstairs at that moment, holding his Superman doll in a classic pose, arms crossed. He handed it to Clark.

“Look, it’s awesome! His eyes light up red, and he flies! And if I press here, he talks!”

The doll emitted a deep, heroic voice: “I fight for truth and justice.”

Clark smiled, touched by the demonstration.

Jake continued, “Did you see? It’s awesome! Do you know Superman?”

Clark smiled, slightly uncomfortable.

“Yes, I’ve met him.”

“And you?” Jake asked, looking at Lois.

“Yes, I meet him sometimes during our investigations,” Lois replied with a smile.

Jake, his eyes shining, asked, “Do you think he could help find who killed my dad?”

Clark crouched down to Jake again.

“I’m sure he’ll do everything he can to help you.”

And Clark made a silent promise to bring justice to the young boy who was far too young to be an orphan.

Lois and Clark thanked Livia and Jake for their time and left the house. Once outside, Ultra Woman joined them in a flash.

“Did you get the address?”

“Yes, Clark has it in his pocket,” Lois replied.

Ultra Woman quickly moved over and started rummaging through Clark’s jacket. Clark laughed at the situation—it was pretty amusing, a superhero going through his pockets. He had to brace himself to avoid falling backward because of her speed. She finally found the address and exclaimed, “Yes!” She quickly unfolded the paper and read it. “Butler Street, it’s in Oaktown. At this time of day, we’ll get there faster by flying. Shall I take you?”

She didn’t wait for their answer and whisked them up into the sky.

Chapter 11: The Key to the Mystery

In a Run-down Building in Oaktown

The trio arrived at the top of a staircase leading to a dilapidated hallway. The walls were stained and peeling, a sad reminder of the place’s former glory. The floor was littered with debris, and rodents and insects had taken over.

“I can see why he didn’t bring his son here,” murmured Lois, trying to maneuver around the clutter.

When they reached the door, Ultra Woman leaned in and used her x-ray vision to scan the interior. Seeing that it was empty, she extended her hand and opened the door without difficulty; the lock was unlatched. Clark tried to stop her, but he wasn’t quick enough to halt his determined wife. Faced with Lois’s resolve and Ultra Woman’s powers, he shook his head, resigned.

Inside, the apartment was a stark contrast to the exterior hallway. The decor was simple, the furniture minimal, but everything was clean and welcoming. It wasn’t the kind of place one would associate with criminals. The apartment consisted of a large room and two small bedrooms, along with a bathroom.

The trio began to search the place. Ultra Woman scanned everything with her super-vision, then collapsed on the couch, defeated.

“There’s nothing here! We’re never going to get back to normal!”

Clark quickly approached and crouched in front of her, gently taking her hands.

“Hey, keep the faith,” he whispered.

She lowered her head, refusing to meet his gaze. Clark gently lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him.

“We’ve overcome so many obstacles; we’ll get through this one too. The important thing is that we’re together. Remember, ‘together we are stronger than...’”

“... you alone,” finished Ultra Woman with a small smile.

“Exactly. As long as we’re together, anything is possible,” Clark confirmed, planting a soft kiss on her lips. He looked into her eyes again, conveying all the love and confidence he had in them.

Meanwhile, Lois continued searching the apartment for clues. She listened to the exchange between her husband and Ultra Woman and realized she wasn’t at all jealous of the special connection they shared. She didn’t feel threatened by their relationship. She realized that all her insecurities and anxieties had vanished when her body was split into two. Ultra Woman had inherited the powers but also all the “negative” aspects of Lois’s personality—the Lois who needed reassurance, comfort, the Lois who was starved for love, the Lois she was before Clark. Meanwhile, Lois retained her confidence in herself, in her relationship, and in her husband. She understood that she hadn’t lost anything in this duplication. If they remained this way, Lois would hardly be affected. Sure, her husband wouldn’t be “super” anymore, but that was almost a plus—after all, she wouldn’t

have to share him with the world. She’d still have her job at the Planet, alongside Clark, her social status, a “normal” life. But Ultra Woman wouldn’t be legitimate in the job she had devoted her life to, wouldn’t be able to go out to dinner with Clark; in short, she would be excluded from her own life. No wonder she was terrified of the situation.

Determined to restore normalcy, Lois resumed her search with renewed intensity. That’s when she found a key in a drawer. The key resembled one for a padlock and was attached to a keychain with cryptic characters: “SSW-1946DS.” She exclaimed:

“I think I’ve found something.”

Clark and Ultra Woman broke apart from their embrace and rushed over to her.

“Do these initials mean anything to you?” Lois asked.

“At first glance, no, it could be someone’s initials and a year?” suggested Ultra Woman.

“1946? That was just after the war. SSW could refer to the Waffen SS? But what’s the connection to our suspects? They weren’t even born in 1946...” Lois continued, puzzled.

Ultra Woman didn’t hear the rest; she had picked up a signal from the firefighters’ radio.

Clark instantly understood something serious was happening, judging by the look on the young woman’s face.

“Go!” he ordered, knowing she could intervene faster than anyone.

Lois, snapping out of her thoughts, turned to Ultra Woman.

“What do you hear?” she asked, concerned.

“A building is on fire. The firefighters are reporting that there are offices with people trapped inside, at the corner of Fifth and Child Street.”

Lois, realizing the proximity to the Baker Orphanage, reacted quickly.

“That’s near the Baker Orphanage! We’ll meet you there!”

Ultra Woman vanished in a whoosh.

Chapter 12: Backdraft

At the Corner of Fifth and Child

Lois and Clark arrived at the scene by taxi, and were greeted by the sight of a burning building. Firefighters, already on site, were struggling to control the blaze, using ladders to reach the lower floors, while occupants from the upper floors signaled rescuers by waving white hand-

kerchiefs. The sirens of emergency vehicles filled the air, creating a deafening din.

Ultra Woman reappeared, carrying two people in her arms. She quickly placed them on stretchers prepared by paramedics on the ground. Then, she approached the fire chief, with Lois and Clark moving closer to question the firefighter:

“Captain, I’ve counted 210 people between the 10th and 15th floors. The stairs are impassable, with fires starting in each one. I’m the only one who can reach the occupants, but I’m worried I won’t be fast enough,” Ultra Woman explained, looking concerned.

Clark, still determined to find a solution, suggested:

“Are the upper floors affected by the flames?”

“No, not yet. The fire is currently on the 8th floor but spreading rapidly,” Ultra Woman replied.

“Is the East side of the building still intact? It might be possible to evacuate people from there. I heard Superman used a similar technique in Montreal last year,” Clark added.

“Yes, you’re right, Mr. Kent. He mentioned that rescue,” she said, scanning the building with her X-ray vision, formulating a plan in her mind, then looked at the Captain. “Can I take your men with me? We’ll need to gather everyone. There’s a window on the 8th floor of the adjacent building that leads directly to this one. Do you have an evacuation slide? I could set up a bridge between the two buildings and evacuate people through there. There’s a 4-meter gap between the buildings. Do you think that’s feasible? I’ll make sure the slide is secure and stable.”

The Captain, though skeptical, agreed to the proposal. He gave instructions to one of his men:

“Bobby, gather your team and accompany Ultra Woman. She’ll guide you above the fire. You’ll need to gather everyone and evacuate them through the...”

“11th floor, East side,” Ultra Woman completed. “There’s an alternate staircase that connects the 10th to the top floor. It’s not affected by the fire. That should be a safe access.”

“... and you’ll set up an evacuation slide. You’ll need to get everyone out through there once the passage is secure. I’m counting on you to follow her directions precisely. We must guarantee total success.”

“Understood, Captain,” replied Lieutenant Bobby, who got to work.

Ultra Woman, with the help of the firefighting team, began to implement the bold plan to rescue the people trapped

in the burning building. Meanwhile, Lois and Clark stood ready to assist and manage the situation as best they could.

After a few minutes, shouts from the crowd of onlookers could be heard. The first evacuees emerged from the neighboring building, still in shock but physically unharmed. Clark, feeling a tension he had been holding, finally exhaled.

Since the beginning of this ordeal, he had put aside his own emotions to protect *his* women with all his might. But deep down, this situation was hard for him as well. The situations Ultra Woman faced every day demanded extraordinary mental strength and the ability to shield oneself from others’ distress. Clark had taken time to understand this reality. The Superman costume, much more than just a suit, acted as a shell that allowed him to endure pain and sorrow. Although he was frequently moved by what he encountered, returning to Lois and his life as a journalist allowed him to unload his feelings and prepare for the next rescue. But here, he felt powerless in several respects:

- He could not directly help the people in distress.

- He had to let Lois face all these tragedies and horrors without the same protective shell. While everyone saw Lois as a force of nature, the famous “Mad Dog Lane,” Clark knew better than anyone that behind that facade was a deeply sensitive person unable to bear misery and injustice. Truth and justice were Superman’s credo, but they were just as much Lois’s.

- He wasn’t yet able to find a solution to restore Lois’s unity.

- There were still two arson cases, two murders, and one suicide unresolved.

In summary, every aspect of Clark’s life was marked by difficulties: his role as a journalist, as a superhero, and as a husband. He felt a deep discomfort in this situation where all his roles seemed entangled in complex challenges. However, he was happy to have contributed, even modestly, by suggesting the idea of evacuation through the adjacent building. It had saved lives and given Ultra Woman a bit of hope, thus strengthening her determination to overcome this ordeal.

At that moment, as he observed Ultra Woman’s heroic efforts and Lois’s determination to face this desperate situation, Clark realized that despite the difficulties and the temporary inability to resolve everything, every small victory counted. And he knew that together, they could confront and overcome the obstacles in their path.

Lois continued to work despite the surrounding chaos. As soon as she found a moment of calm during the evacuation maneuver, she turned to the Captain for more information.

“Captain, what can you tell us?” Lois asked.

The Captain, taking a moment to catch his breath, explained:

“We were called for a fire starting in a stairwell. By the time we arrived, all the stairwells were on fire, and the flames had reached the first two floors. Many people were able to get out, but above the second floor, everyone was trapped. Fortunately, between the 3rd and 8th floors, there was no one; the building is under renovation. My men evacuated everyone up to the 9th floor, but our ladders are too short to go higher. Ultra Woman helped my men set up extinguishing measures and conducted reconnaissance of the floors. You arrived for the next part.”

“Is it usual for all exits to be blocked by flames?” Clark asked, well aware of the answer as Superman.

“No, emergency staircases are designed to be safe. If the flames have reached them, it’s definitely intentional.”

“Like at the Baker Orphanage?” Lois continued.

“I wasn’t there, but from what I heard, it sounds similar. But you didn’t hear that from me; the investigation hasn’t even started yet.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Clark concluded.

They stepped back a few paces, with Lois taking some photos for her article.

“Clark, I think we should go write the article for the next edition. The night will be long, and unfortunately, there’s nothing more we can do here.”

“But...” Clark hesitated, reluctant to leave Ultra Woman “alone” at the scene.

“I know, Clark, but she’s a big girl,” Lois, knowing her husband well, added quietly. “You often say that Superman doesn’t have a partner, and neither does Ultra Woman. Our place isn’t here. Don’t you want to avoid having her and your gazes crossing every time she leaves the building, ending up as the headline of the National Inquisitor?”

Clark nodded, realizing the validity of Lois’s words.

They headed towards the exit, Clark saying aloud:

“All right, Lois, let’s go write the article and then we’ll head home. I hope Ultra Woman and the firefighters have a welcoming home to return to.” This last sentence was, of course, intended for Ultra Woman.

Clark and Lois left the scene, leaving Ultra Woman and the firefighters to continue their work. They knew the night would be long and that the extent of the events would require a detailed report for the Daily Planet.

Chapter 13: In the Light of a New Day

****The Next Morning, 348 Hyperion Avenue****

Clark sat at the kitchen table, flipping through the Daily Planet. Dressed in a charcoal suit, a purple shirt, and a black tie adorned with psychedelic spirals, he sipped his morning coffee. The steaming mug sat beside him, offering a warm contrast to the elegance surrounding him.

Lois entered the kitchen, dressed in black pants, a black jacket, and a pale pink silk top. They were perfectly coordinated, each in distinct but stylish shades.

Clark looked up at the sound of Lois’s footsteps and smiled at her. She approached and kissed him on the lips before sitting down at the table.

“Great editorial, Lois,” Clark said as he glanced at the newspaper. “I didn’t have a chance to read it last night. I admire your ability to raise awareness and call on the city’s residents to stop these heinous crimes.”

Ultra Woman entered the room, dressed more casually in a blue tank top and light gray leggings. She wore a cheerful smile, contrasting with the gravity of the previous day’s events.

“Good morning, everyone!” she said in a cheerful voice. “What did our dear Lois write?”

She sat next to Clark, casting a curious glance at the newspaper he was reading. Clark smiled and began reading Lois’s article aloud:

*** * ***

****When Fire Consumes More Than Buildings****

By Lois Lane, Daily Planet

Metropolis has been the scene of two arson attacks in just a few days, targeting an orphanage and an office building, endangering the lives of hundreds of innocent people. Thanks to the quick intervention of firefighters and Ultra Woman, no lives were lost. However, these attacks reveal a troubling reality: a growing indifference to safety and human life in our city.

*** * ***

****Intergang Headquarters****

Mindy Church, a cigarette in hand, tossed the latest issue of the **Daily Planet** onto a large table around which a dozen men were seated. She had just read Lois’s editorial and, visibly annoyed, read aloud the article’s conclusion:

“To those responsible for these crimes: know that Metropolis will not be intimidated. We will fight for every life threatened, every hope shattered, and every building destroyed. And we will not stop until justice is served.

Because Metropolis is more than just a city. It's our home. And we will protect our home."

"Looks like Mrs. Lane doesn't appreciate our bonfires... Well, I don't appreciate her tone... Metropolis is MY home, and I throw whatever parties I want here. So... I think we'll keep the festivities going. Last night, I was at the Metropolis Opera House, and I found the performance very disappointing, a bit 'cold'... let's warm things up!"

The men stood, ready to carry out her orders. But Mindy stopped them before they left.

"And find me a way to get rid of that Ultra Woman!"

The men exchanged glances, aware of the difficulty of the task. Mindy stared at them with unwavering determination. It was clear she was willing to do whatever it took to maintain her power and terror over Metropolis.

* * *

348 Hyperion Avenue

Clark finished reading the editorial.

"To those responsible for these crimes: know that Metropolis will not be intimidated. We will fight for every life threatened, every hope shattered, and every building destroyed. And we will not stop until justice is served. Because Metropolis is more than just a city. It's our home. And we will protect our home."

Ultra Woman listened attentively, then, after Clark finished, expressed her admiration:

"That's an excellent article, Lois. Really well-written."

Lois smiled, clearly pleased with the impact of her work.

"Thanks, Lois. I hope it helps move things forward. And you were incredible last night."

Clark added with a touch of pride:

"Yes, and I'm sure your courage made a big difference."

They exchanged smiles, enjoying this moment of peace before diving into the challenges of the day.

Suddenly, Lois's cell phone rang. She answered, seeing Inspector Henderson's name on the screen.

"Lois? Henderson! I've got the autopsy report on George Winter! You're still on this case?"

Lois hesitated for a moment. Caught up with the aftermath of the rays and the fires, she had completely forgotten about the case. She quickly regained her composure.

"Of course, Inspector!"

"As I suspected, he was murdered. The hanging was staged. Under the rope marks, we found fingerprints. Strangulation!"

"I knew it!" Lois exclaimed. "And have you made progress on the escape?"

"My men have reviewed all the surveillance footage, but so far, nothing conclusive."

"Can we get a copy?"

"Yes, I'll take care of it. But you haven't found anything on your end?"

"No, nothing concrete yet, but we won't forget about you! Can I ask you one more favor? Do you have the transcripts of his conversations with the DA about the Intergang bosses?"

"Yes, I'll send that to you too. I understand you're onto something bigger. This could help untangle it all."

"Thanks, Henderson."

"You owe me two now!"

"Count on us to settle it."

Lois hung up, her mind already racing through the next steps. Clark, observing the scene, stood and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"We'll figure this out, Lois. We've already overcome so much together. We'll find the answers."

Lois nodded, determined, and replied:

"Yes, but we need to act quickly. Lives are at stake, and I'm convinced this case is tied to everything happening right now."

Ultra Woman, having overheard the conversation, added:

"I can help review the surveillance footage if needed. With my vision, I might spot details the cameras missed."

"Thanks, that would be really helpful," Lois said. "We should get started right away."

Clark, Lois, and Ultra Woman set out for the next stage of their investigation, ready to uncover the mysteries and put an end to the wave of terror sweeping through Metropolis.

Chapter 14: Decodings

Daily Planet

The elevator doors opened, revealing Lois and Clark. Lois let go of Clark's hand and quickly headed towards the bullpen.

“Jimmy! Do you have the items I asked for last night? I need to figure out what this symbol on the key means! Has a courier from Henderson dropped by?”

Jimmy, caught off guard by Lois’s urgency and determination, could only nod.

“On your desk!”

Lois grabbed the files without wasting a second, and taking her husband’s hand—who was arriving with a cup of coffee for her—she swiftly headed towards the conference room. Clark, following her, offered a compassionate smile.

“I figured you’d need some coffee with all this work,” he said, handing her the cup.

Lois nodded in thanks and rushed to the large conference table, where she laid out the files. Clark stood beside her, watching his wife’s determined effort while taking a sip of his coffee.

“Where do you want to start?” he asked softly.

“The videos—we need to send them to Lois today; she’ll go through them faster than we will. We still have to decode the key’s code and transcribe the DA’s documents. Do you have a preference?”

“I’ll take the code. I was unbeatable at treasure hunts when I was a teenager.”

Lois chuckled.

“With superpowers, I’d win every race too...”

Clark feigned shock.

“I never cheated! Are you questioning my investigative skills?”

The conversation flowed easily, and it was nice to share this lighthearted moment of complicity.

“You’re a great investigator, trained by the best. But I would’ve cheated!”

She planted a kiss on her husband’s playful pout and grabbed the DA’s file.

Silence fell for a few minutes until Clark suddenly stood up, scanning the room.

“What if...” he began.

“What are you looking for, Clark?”

“A directory! Or a map of Metropolis.”

Lois wasn’t entirely sure where he was going with this but told him, “Check the cabinet at the back of the room. I think there’s a directory.”

Clark walked over, grabbed the directory, placed it on the large table, and began flipping through it, stopping at

the city map. Lois stood next to him, watching her husband closely. His eyes sparkled as brightly as the wedding band on his left hand. After a few seconds, he stopped.

“I think I’ve got it. What if 1946 isn’t a year but a street number?”

He pointed to the map, indicating “Dixon Street.”

Lois followed his reasoning, her eyes lighting up.

“And SS stands for Suicide Slum!”

She examined the map more closely.

“So, we might have a clue leading us to an address in Suicide Slum. It could be a meeting spot or a hideout for Intergang.”

Clark nodded, excited by the discovery.

“Exactly. 1946 on Dixon Street could be a key location. We should check it out and see what we can find there.”

Just then, the conference room door opened, and Jimmy walked in. He didn’t have time to deliver his message before Lois started:

“Jimmy, you’re just in time! I need you to look up everything...”

“...you can on 1946 Dixon Street...” Clark continued.

“...owner...” Lois added.

“...history of activities, previous owners...” Clark completed.

“...recent movements...” Lois finished.

They were in sync again, completely in tune with one another, unstoppable. Jimmy, caught in their momentum, quickly nodded and left the room, forgetting his original reason for coming.

Lois turned to Clark, an excited smile on her lips.

“We’re getting there. With all this information, we should be able to move the investigation forward.”

Clark looked at her with pride and affection.

“Yes, we’re on the right track. Now we just need to analyze everything and put our findings into perspective.”

The investigation was progressing rapidly, and the determination of the two journalists drove them to leave no stone unturned.

Meanwhile, Jimmy was already hard at work, contacting the necessary services to gather all the information about the mysterious address. The wheels of the investigation kept turning, and each discovery brought Lois and Clark closer to uncovering the truth behind the fires and Intergang’s activities.

Lois returned to her transcriptions, feeling lighter. The second breakthrough of the morning wasn't long in coming.

"Clark! Clark, look at this!" she exclaimed, her voice full of jubilation.

Alerted by Lois's excitement, Clark turned to her. His eyes fell on the paper Lois was waving in front of him. He took it and read what was written. The words confirmed what she had suspected, providing tangible proof for her hypothesis.

Lois couldn't contain her joy. Her hands trembled slightly as she pointed out the key details of the document.

"Intergang is being led by a woman. Winter didn't know her name, but a platinum blonde, sophisticated, opulent, very sexy, full of charm—that's the description any man would give of Mindy Church."

"I wouldn't describe her that way."

"You're not a typical man, Clark. You're my husband. But look, it all fits! I'm sure it's her. You can't deny it, Clark!"

"I admit, there's little room for doubt. Well done, Lois!"

She kissed him with renewed enthusiasm, each kiss expressing her joy and gratitude. Together, they knew they were on the verge of a significant breakthrough in their investigation, and this victory was their first major step toward justice and restoring order.

The sound of someone clearing their throat brought them back to reality.

"Sorry to..."

"...interrupt? No worries, it's the story of our life," Lois quipped with humor. It was Jimmy Interruptus once again. Jimmy had a knack for appearing whenever Lois and Clark shared a tender moment. However, Lois was only momentarily annoyed, as Jimmy's arrival often signaled a breakthrough in their case.

"Tell us everything, Jimmy," Clark encouraged as Lois turned in his arms to face the young man.

"1946 Dixon Street is a warehouse owned by Mrs. Evelyn Winter, widow of a certain..."

"George Winter," Lois suggested.

"How did you know? Anyway, it's an inheritance she received from an old uncle 40 years ago. There's no official or legal activity at this building, but there were suspicions a few years ago that it was a hub for art trafficking on behalf of Bill Church. However, no proof was ever found, and the warehouse was never raided by authorities."

Clark, visibly interested, asked, "So, this building has been tied to Intergang for a long time. Any recent developments? Recent movements?"

Jimmy consulted his notes before replying, "No notable recent movements, but I found something interesting. The latest records show that Mrs. Winter recently carried out major renovations. That could be a sign she's preparing for something important."

Lois, excited by this information, broke free from her husband's embrace and began pacing the room, thinking out loud.

"The renovations could be tied to preparations for illegal activities. If Intergang is planning something big, this warehouse could be a key location for their next move."

Clark nodded, his expression growing serious.

"We absolutely need to investigate the place. If this building is indeed a central point for Intergang, we might uncover crucial evidence."

Jimmy nodded in agreement.

"I'll keep monitoring the situation for any new information. If I find anything else, I'll let you know immediately."

Clark thanked Jimmy with a smile and a nod.

"Thanks, Jimmy. Keep up the good work. We have a solid lead now."

As Jimmy left, Lois and Clark turned to each other with renewed determination. It was time to prepare for a field visit.

"We should go before the renovations are completed," Lois suggested.

"We need to be cautious and plan our approach," Clark replied.

Clark took Lois's hand, gently leading her to their desks to gather their notes and make a detailed plan for their next step.

Chapter 15: Catching a Glimpse of Light

In front of 1946 Dixon Street

Lois and Clark sat in the Jeep. Lois held a pair of binoculars in her hand after observing the door of the warehouse they were targeting.

"I hope we'll be done with all this soon. I can't wait to have my husband all to myself again."

Clark heard the hint of jealousy in Lois's voice.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to act with the two of you. It feels so natural to be intimate with both of you." He took her hand and kissed her fingers. "You are both my wife, and I love you both so much. I can't treat you any differently, and I don't think either of you is ready to stop any kind of intimacy."

"That's not what I'm saying, Clark. I know you're doing your best to meet both our needs, and I understand that we are essentially the same person. But seeing your husband with another woman, even if that other woman is me, it stings a little. I know the other version of me is much more fragile and needs your attention even more. My brain knows and handles it all just fine. My heart, however, sometimes feels a little pang. When you kiss her, when you hold her, I wish it were me. Actually, I just wish I was the only one you looked at. I know, it's selfish," she said, lowering her gaze, feeling ashamed of her feelings.

"Hey," he said softly, lifting her chin to meet her eyes, "you don't need to be ashamed of loving me or wanting me all to yourself. That's perfectly normal; you didn't marry a man to share him. This situation is quite strange, but I promise I'll do everything I can to make things go back to normal. After all, you're the one who's polygamous: Clark and Superman," he finished with a touch of humor to lighten the mood.

Lois smiled, regaining a little confidence in herself.

"How do you always know just what to say?"

"Because I speak from my heart, and in my heart, there's nothing but love for the amazing and wonderful Lois Lane. Lois, do you want me to change the way I act with both of you? Do you feel neglected?"

"No, Clark, really, I don't want you to stop acting from your heart. I know you're doing your best, and that this situation isn't easy for you. After all, I was split in two, but you had a part of yourself taken away, the part that expresses your altruism and generosity, the part that helps millions of people on this planet every day. Just be yourself; that's what we both need the most."

The smile they shared sealed their understanding.

The magical moment was interrupted by Lois's phone ringing. She answered and put it on speaker. Immediately, Ultra Woman's exasperated voice filled the Jeep:

"I can't see anything! Everything is lined with lead!"

"Did you spot any other exits besides the one on Dixon Street?" Lois asked.

"No, it seems like a dead end."

"We'll have to go in. Can you keep watch?"

"No, I'm coming with you!" Ultra Woman refused.

"I don't think that's a good idea. There might be kryptonite."

"Exactly, we don't know how it might affect Clark!"

"Or you! I'll go in alone."

Ultra Woman and Clark responded in unison, "No way!" They stopped for a second, surprised by their synchronization. "It's too dangerous," they finished together.

"Okay, okay, we'll all go together," Lois decided.

****Inside the warehouse****

As they opened the door, a long corridor appeared, lined with numerous doors on the right. To the left, the corridor ran along the outer wall, where small, dusty windows perched three meters up faintly lit the space. They quietly entered the building and closed the door behind them without making a sound. Ultra Woman tried to scan the rooms but was thwarted by lead-lined paint.

"Should we split up?" Lois suggested.

"No, it's better if we stay together," Clark insisted.

So, they began to explore each room, starting with the first one. The first five were identical, desperately empty, except for the spiders that had taken up residence there. They had only two more rooms left to check, and their hopes were beginning to fade. The sixth room, however, held a pleasant surprise. They found a space set up like a studio. They began searching the room.

Lois opened all the kitchen cabinets, Ultra Woman approached the desk, and Clark headed toward the bookshelf. Clark moved the books, tapping the back to check for hidden compartments, while Ultra Woman inspected the desk drawers.

The sound of Clark's tapping changed. Ultra Woman looked up, leaving the drawer she had just opened, from which a red glow was emanating. She shut the drawer and walked over to Clark, pulling him toward her and kissing him passionately.

Clark pulled back slightly, scanning her face with a questioning look.

"What did I do to deserve that?" he asked, careful not to accuse her. It wasn't the best time for an embrace, but he knew she lacked confidence and didn't want to push her away.

"You're a wonderful husband, and I'm sure we could spend this time in a more pleasant way," she replied, her hands sliding over Clark's body, moving dangerously close

to his groin. He gently caught her hand, placing it somewhere more appropriate.

“Uh, yeah, I’m sure we could, but we’re currently searching a warehouse we’ve broken into. Not exactly the ideal place for this, wouldn’t you agree?”

“You’re here, and I’m here, I don’t see what could be more perfect,” she purred.

Clark was completely bewildered by the situation. He looked toward Lois, seeking her help. She had been observing the scene for a few moments, feeling an odd sense of déjà vu, but couldn’t quite place it. After a few moments of reflection, she finally remembered.

Clark had behaved like this a few years ago, the first time he encountered red kryptonite. Back then, he had let some thieves steal the Daily Planet’s payroll checks, allowed Perry to be kidnapped while he flirted with a “bimbo” who, by the way, wasn’t remotely his type, and even suggested going to the movies in the middle of their investigation into Gene Newtrich’s office. Lois realized that if they had been intimate then, he would probably have been just as forward, even in the middle of a break-in.

“Lois, where did you search?” Lois asked Ultra Woman.

Clark gave Lois a puzzled look.

“Clark, you acted this way the first time you encountered red kryptonite. Remember?”

“Yeah, now that you mention it... I think the kryptonite was near the desk,” Clark replied, trying to keep a reasonable distance from Ultra Woman, who continued to touch, caress, and kiss him.

Lois headed to the desk, quickly searched it, and found the piece of kryptonite. She grabbed it and showed it to Clark before placing it in a nearby box, hoping it was lead-lined.

Clark, visibly relieved, sighed. They had finally found the source of their problems. Now, he had to convince Ultra Woman of the situation so she could regain her composure.

He placed his hands firmly on her arms, holding her at a distance.

“Lois, you’re not in your right mind. Red kryptonite completely disorients you, remember? I was in this exact state the first time I was exposed to it.”

Ultra Woman hesitated but stopped her advances. Clark could almost see the gears turning in her mind as she processed the information she had just received. Once she realized the situation and her rather forward behavior, she stepped back and murmured:

“Oh, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for loving me and wanting me. In other circumstances, I would have been happy to join in,” Clark responded with understanding.

“Now that we’ve got what we came for, we should get out of here as quickly as possible,” Lois said, taking the lead.

“Yeah, good idea,” Ultra Woman agreed. “I’ll go first.”

Chapter 16: Reflections of Danger

348 Hyperion Avenue

Lois was examining the sample of red Kryptonite she had found in the warehouse. Clark and Ultra Woman stood at the other end of the room, keeping a safe distance to avoid the harmful effects of the rock on their powers and minds.

Lois turned the sample over in her hands, trying to unlock its mysteries. Her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized every facet of the stone, until she noticed a small “anomaly”. The light reflected strangely off one side, catching her attention. She continued to rotate the stone, intrigued, trying to understand the origin of this peculiar glimmer.

Clark and Ultra Woman watched her with growing interest, eager to hear her conclusions. Ultra Woman, however, was beginning to show signs of impatience. The situation was dragging on, and she was struggling to contain her restlessness.

Suddenly, Lois broke the silence, raising her eyes toward Ultra Woman: “Lois, there’s something off with the stone. The light is reflecting strangely on it. Can you look with...” She gestured to her own eyes, implicitly asking Ultra Woman to use her enhanced vision to analyze the stone.

Ultra Woman nodded.

“Can you lay it flat in your hand and rotate it slowly, please?” she asked.

Lois complied, carefully holding the stone in her palm. Ultra Woman squinted, using her advanced vision to scrutinize every detail of the crack.

After a few seconds of intense observation, she declared, “There’s a crack in the stone, as if it had been struck.”

Clark, who had already begun pacing, rubbed his chin, clearly deep in thought.

“So, let’s recap,” he said. “We’ve found a sample of red Kryptonite. Based on our past experiences, this stone has the ability to transfer my powers to someone else when a ray of light passes through it...”

“My powers were transferred to me, but it also caused me to split into two,” Ultra Woman continued, her thoughts following Clark’s logical trail.

“And this piece of Kryptonite, which seems to be the source of the transfer, has an anomaly,” Lois added, her gaze fixed on the visible crack.

“And just like that, this transfer was different from the previous ones,” Clark concluded. “Three successful transfers without this kind of complication, and now, with this crack, we have an unexpected result.”

“Let’s assume this anomaly is the cause of our problems,” Ultra Woman suggested, her voice filled with determination.

Clark nodded, contemplating the next step.

“We need to test that hypothesis. But before we do anything, we have to understand how this crack might have affected the properties of the red Kryptonite. Maybe that could give us a clue on how to fix the duplication... or at least prevent it from...”

Clark abruptly stopped when he saw Ultra Woman freeze, her gaze distant.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, concern permeating his voice.

“A fire. Again! This time at the Metropolis Opera House,” Ultra Woman replied, shaking her head, visibly exhausted by this new emergency. All these fires were taking their toll on her. She was starting to feel overwhelmed; she wasn’t made to be a superheroine, she was a journalist at heart.

Clark approached her, trying to boost her courage and energy.

“Hey, sweetheart, I know this is heavy, I know what it feels like to feel powerless. But I also know that you’re so much stronger than this! You’re the bravest woman I know, you never give up. So trust yourself! You can do this! Go ahead, we’ll join you as soon as we can!”

He kissed her deeply, trying to pour all his love and faith into her. Ultra Woman broke the kiss, and as she gazed into her husband’s eyes, she saw such confidence in her that she immediately felt recharged. She smiled at him with assurance before speeding off in a flash toward the fire.

Clark turned to Lois, grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward the door.

“Come on, we’ve got work to do,” he said determinedly. “We need to join her and solve all of this together.”

Chapter 17: Inferno in Metropolis

Dozens of people rushed out of the Opera Hall, fleeing the building through every available emergency exit. Cries of horror echoed in the air, mixed with the roaring flames that

mercilessly consumed the majestic century-old building. Women in high heels and evening gowns stumbled, losing their shoes in their frantic escape from danger. Panic distorted their faces, their frantic eyes desperately searching for safety. The men were no calmer, with loosened ties, disheveled shirts, and labored breathing. The night sky was tinged with a sinister red glow, reflecting the deadly flames licking the opera’s walls with ferocity.

The acrid smell of smoke filled the air, burning the lungs of those still caught in the disorganized crowd. The once-grand symbol of culture and elegance had become a death trap, its doors now the gateways to hell. The sirens of approaching firefighters pierced through the cacophony, but for those still inside, every second was a fight for survival.

Above the panicked crowd, Ultra Woman shot through the sky like an arrow, immediately identifying the critical areas of the burning building. Her face hardened into a look of implacable determination, fueled by the confidence Clark had instilled in her moments earlier. She pushed aside all emotions, transforming into a life-saving machine. The fire was colossal, a raging beast that had already devoured the stage, the floor of the main hall, and the beams supporting the balconies. These once-majestic beams were now fiery coals, ready to collapse at any moment.

The opera house, this architectural masterpiece, had become a blazing inferno. Every second counted, every decision could mean the difference between life and death. Ultra Woman scanned the scene, searching for the best entry point to begin her rescue. She darted towards a shattered window, ignoring the suffocating heat pouring from it. The scorching air lashed at her face, but nothing could deter her from her mission. She was ready to do whatever it took to save as many lives as possible, determined not to leave anyone behind in this hell.

Ultra Woman quickly assessed the building’s structure, identifying the safest elements to plan an effective evacuation route. Her priority was to secure a path for the firefighters to help the spectators still trapped inside. The opera house, dating back to 1890, had the advantage of being constructed from stone, a material that offered some resistance to the flames despite the wooden framework. The massive beams, though being eaten away by the fire, held firm, their strength buying precious moments.

She cleared the obstacles blocking the center of the hall, creating a corridor towards the south façade. Thanks to her intervention, a safe passage was quickly established. She guided the victims able to walk through this path, with the more able-bodied helping the weaker ones. Firefighters arrived as reinforcements, and once most of the survivors were evacuated, she entrusted the injured to their care.

Turning her focus away from the victims, Ultra Woman concentrated all her energy on the fire, using her icy breath to contain the flames. Gradually, the intense heat began to diminish, and the number of people still trapped inside the building quickly dropped. Within a few minutes, only rescuers and the bodies of those who hadn't survived the initial moments remained.

Despite their swift and efficient intervention, tragedy was inevitable. The fire, which had smoldered beneath the floor for several minutes before erupting, had already claimed many lives before they could respond. The opera, which had housed a festive atmosphere just minutes earlier during the hundredth performance of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, was now a place of utter desolation.

Outside the opera house, the situation became chaotic as journalists flocked to the scene. Television trucks, with their antennas for live broadcasts, clogged the streets, making traffic difficult. Lois and Clark, always ahead of the news thanks to their connection with Ultra Woman, had arrived just before the media flood became uncontrollable.

Within minutes, Lois had contacted the *Daily Planet* to dictate an article, ensuring that their paper remained at the forefront of the coverage on this devastating fire. However, upon seeing the scale of the tragedy, the couple quickly set aside their roles as journalists to focus on far more urgent tasks.

Alongside the rescuers, they helped the survivors. With over 3,500 people present at the opera when the fire broke out, managing the survivors was an immense challenge. Lois and Clark handed out water bottles and blankets, guiding the shocked survivors to the emergency tents hastily set up in nearby Centennial Park. Their presence, quiet but effective, helped restore a semblance of order amidst the chaos, as rescuers continued racing against time to save lives.

They collected the testimonies of the unfortunate spectators, and each account only fueled their anger towards the monsters responsible for this. It was once again evident that this was arson. The fire had consumed the entire building in minutes, the emergency exits were blocked, forcing the spectators to use nearby fire axes to break through the doors. There was no water in the building's fire hydrant system. If someone had wanted to cause mass casualties, they couldn't have done it better.

Clark clenched his fists, trying to control the rising anger within him. If someone had wanted to orchestrate a massacre, this was exactly how they would have done it. The feeling of injustice was overwhelming. Lois, beside him, shared the same sentiment, her eyes glinting with icy determination. This heinous act would not go unpunished.

It was clear to both of them that this fire had been meticulously planned to cause maximum damage and spread terror. They knew they had to find out who was behind this atrocious crime. Clark glanced at the burning opera house, his thoughts already forming a plan to track down and stop the culprits. As for Lois, she vowed to dig into this story until the perpetrators were exposed, no matter how difficult the investigation would be. Soon, justice would be served.

Chapter 18: A New Dawn

At dawn, Ultra Woman was still on-site at the opera house, her unwavering energy dedicated to aiding the rescue teams and forensic police units. She moved tirelessly among the ruins, helping lift beams, stabilizing fragile structures, and ensuring the safety of various areas. The night before, the opera house had been a majestic century-old building, but now, only charred stone walls remained, blackened by the intensity of the flames. The TV trucks had disappeared, the emergency tents dismantled, and only a few wisps of smoke still rose from the debris.

The night had been long. The once sturdy frame had finally collapsed around two in the morning, sending the roof crashing through the building. By that time, thanks to Ultra Woman's tireless efforts, all evacuations had been completed. Still, the human toll was devastating: 186 people had lost their lives, men and women who had come to enjoy a cultural evening that had turned into a nightmare.

Ultra Woman was exhausted, both physically and emotionally, but she refused to let it break her. The images of charred bodies and the desperate cries of the survivors were etched into her mind. She knew the coming days would be crucial in uncovering those responsible for the tragedy. But for now, there was one last task to complete before leaving this place of sorrow: helping the forensic teams gather the last pieces of evidence that might lead to justice.

She looked over the smoking ruins, a deep sadness washing over her. The memories of the past night, the lost lives, and the broken families weighed heavily on her heart. Yet, at the same time, this tragedy pushed her to keep fighting, to ensure that such horror would never happen again.

Lois and Clark arrived, equally exhausted. They had stayed at the site all night, only leaving after the last ambulance departed. Around 4 a.m., they had gone to the *Daily Planet* to write additional articles, paying tribute to the rescuers and sharing the survivors' stories. Now, it was 6 a.m., and after a quick shower and a change of clothes, they were ready to resume their investigation. The shock had turned into fierce determination: it was time to find those responsible.

Ultra Woman was standing beside Inspector Henderson when Lois and Clark arrived. She avoided looking at Clark. She felt miserable, as dull as her once flashy costume, now gray and worn after the long night fighting flames and death. She knew that meeting his gaze would reveal her distress, and in return, she would see the pain and guilt he would feel seeing her like this. She feared she would immediately break down in tears.

Keeping a professional tone, Lois asked:

“Ultra Woman, Inspector, what can you tell us about the cause of the fire?”

Inspector Henderson, his usual calm demeanor replaced by barely controlled anger, responded:

“The firefighters and Ultra Woman have identified multiple fire sources, with notable similarities to the previous fires. The speed of spread, the obstruction of evacuation... It’s a methodical, organized act, likely a terrorist attack. Whoever did this has no humanity and only wants to spread fear. So far, we haven’t found any decisive clues, but I know you two can work miracles. Go ahead and examine the scene, but be careful, we’ve had enough casualties. Ultra Woman can go with you; unfortunately, she knows the place inside and out by now.”

Lois and Clark nodded. They began walking, escorted by Ultra Woman, and came across a man in a tuxedo, or rather what was left of it. The opera house director, once immaculate in appearance, was now unrecognizable. His jacket and pants were torn, and his once-pristine shirt was stained with blood and soot.

He spoke spontaneously, his voice filled with sorrow:

“They were here to have fun, to enjoy a relaxing evening. They had taken great care with their outfits. For some, it was a dream... and it turned into a nightmare.”

A heavy silence followed, each person reflecting on the director’s words. Finally, Lois broke the silence:

“Mr. Garnier, do you know why the exits were locked? Safety regulations clearly state that emergency exits must remain open during performances, correct?”

“Yes, and we always keep them open. The safety of the artists and the audience is our top priority. You can ask my head of security; he’s over there.”

The director pointed to a man in a black-and-white suit, his shoulders slumped as if carrying the weight of the world. Given the circumstances, the impression was justified—186 people had perished in the building he was supposed to keep safe. The director called out:

“Paul, can you explain our fire safety protocols to these reporters?”

The man responded without hesitation, reciting a routine he knew by heart after eight years on the job:

“Two hours before opening to the public, we conduct a full inspection of the facilities to ensure all fire extinguishers and hydrants are accessible and functional. After that, the emergency exits are opened. We check all entrances, hallways, and corridors. Nothing should block movement or a possible evacuation. We conduct evacuation drills every six weeks. Our smoke detectors are checked twice a year, and the fire extinguishers and hydrants undergo annual maintenance.”

Clark intervened:

“Did you encounter any issues during your inspection last night?”

“No, everything was perfectly normal,” the head of security replied.

Lois continued:

“Do you trust your team?”

“Of course. We’ve worked together for years. It’s essential in this line of work.”

“How many people are on your team?” Clark asked.

“There are 33 of us in total, including myself.”

“Have you worked with the same 32 people for several years?”

“No, there have been some arrivals and departures, but I trust every one of them completely.”

Clark pressed on:

“When did the most recent members join your team?”

The head of security paused for a moment before answering:

“Now that you mention it, I can vouch for 28 of them. I had four temps last night. Four of my men were out with the flu, so I had to call an agency for temporary staff yesterday morning.”

Lois frowned:

“Do you work with this agency often?”

“Yes, but I could only interview one of the four temps. He made a great impression: he had excellent references and was used to working with a team of three others. So, I took all four.”

Clark asked:

“Can you give us their names?”

“Unfortunately, no. All the files were in my office... and that’s now reduced to ashes. But the temp agency should have their records. Ask for Mrs. Collins at SafetyClean.”

“Thank you, Mr....” Lois began.

“Finch, Paul Finch. I hope this helps you find out who did this.”

****At SafetyClean Agency****

Lois parked the Jeep a few steps away from the temp agency. She was about to get out but stopped when she noticed her husband lost in thought.

“Clark, are you coming?”

“Yes, yes, I’m coming, but I can’t stop thinking about Lois. I feel guilty for leaving her home alone. She’s putting on a brave face, but I know she’s still deeply shaken by last night’s fire.”

“Clark, believe me, I know her very well. She’ll be fine. We Earth women aren’t just fragile creatures, you know?”

Clark nodded, but his expression remained troubled. He knew Lois was right, but it didn’t lessen his guilt.

“I know you’re right,” he said softly. “But this double of you... You’re so identical and so different at the same time... It’s like I have to protect two versions of the person I love most in the world, and I wonder if I’m up to it.”

Lois placed a comforting hand on his.

“Clark, you’re doing everything you can, for her, for me, for everyone. This isn’t a burden you have to carry alone. We’re a team, and Ultra Woman knows that too.”

Clark sighed, resigned to set aside his worries for now.

“You’re right. Let’s see what Mrs. Collins has to tell us.”

They got out of the car and entered the SafetyClean agency. The interior was modern, with sleek lines, glass desks, and state-of-the-art computers. A receptionist, seated behind a counter, greeted them with a professional smile.

“Good morning, how can I help you?”

Lois spoke:

“Good morning, we’re here to see Mrs. Collins. It’s about four temps sent to the Metropolis Opera last night. We have some questions regarding their files.”

The receptionist quickly typed on her keyboard before looking up.

“I’ll notify Mrs. Collins. Please wait a moment.”

She signaled to a colleague, and within two minutes, a woman in her fifties, with graying hair pulled into a tight bun, approached them. She exuded efficiency and authority.

“I’m Mrs. Collins. You’re here about the temps sent to the Opera? I’m already aware of the tragic fire last night. How can I assist you?”

Lois replied:

“We need the identities of those four individuals. Mr. Finch unfortunately lost all his files in the fire.”

“I expected this question, so I’ve prepared copies of the records. I’ll get you a set.”

She returned a few minutes later with four sheets in hand. Each sheet contained a résumé and photo of the temps. Lois and Clark skimmed through their names, but none seemed familiar. Clark asked, “Have they been with your agency long?”

“No, I entered them into my system just two days ago. Mr. Carter came in, claiming that he and his team had been laid off from the company where they worked, which unfortunately closed down. Their résumés were quite impressive, so I hired them on the spot. Mr. Carter was very charming and assured me that their former employer had let them go with regret after ten years of loyal service. That’s all I can tell you. That’s all I’ve got,” she dismissed them.

Lois and Clark left the agency, and Lois immediately took out her phone:

“Jimmy, it’s Lois. We have a lead. Can you look up everything you can find on: John Carter, Eddie Buffet, Calvin Hogg, and Preston Porter? We’re on our way and will need their files as soon as we get there.”

****Daily Planet****

No sooner had Lois and Clark stepped out of the elevator than they scanned the room for Jimmy. He wasn’t in sight. Lois hoped he had left the file on the four temps on her desk, but she was disappointed to find nothing.

Perry emerged from his office and walked toward them.

“Lois, Clark, what are you doing here? You’ve been working all night, you should be resting.”

“Chief! You’re just in time,” Lois interrupted him. “Do you know where Jimmy is? I asked him for four files, we might have a lead on the arsonists.”

Perry, intrigued, didn’t press further on the much-needed rest for his star reporters.

“He was here a few minutes ago, he can’t be far. Ah, there he is!”

Jimmy was stepping out of the elevator, empty-handed.

“Jimmy! Where were you? Do you have the files I asked for?”

"I was in the archives, and no, Lois, I didn't find anything! And I think that's actually the most interesting part... your four people don't exist."

"What do you mean, they don't exist?" Clark asked.

"Those names don't match anyone in our databases, which is why I went down to the archives. And down there, nothing either..."

"How is that possible? That makes no sense," Lois said, surprised.

"But it does, Lois. It makes perfect sense. They probably gave fake identities... which moves them from potential suspects to prime suspects," Clark explained.

Lois' expression became very interested. She could finally feel the tide turning and saw a real opportunity to put these criminals behind bars.

She handed Jimmy the files she had retrieved from the recruitment agency.

"Do you think you could run a facial recognition search using these photos? At the very least, John Carter's should be real."

"On it!"

Jimmy walked away, and Perry turned to his star reporters:

"Can you explain?"

"There were four temps on the security team last night, called in at the last minute because four regular employees suddenly got the flu," Lois explained. "These temps introduced themselves as former colleagues, and only John Carter had gone through an interview. Well, John Carter, under an alias," she added. "I'm hoping Jimmy can figure out their real identities."

He came back a few minutes later:

"It's going to take a while. Go get some rest."

Lois grimaced; her need to solve the mystery was consuming her. Clark tried to convince her, wanting to go home to support Ultra Woman, who was very shaken by the night. Jimmy insisted:

"Promise, I'll call you as soon as I have an answer."

Chapter 19: A Devilish Square

348 Hyperion Avenue

Lois and Ultra Woman were lying on the bed in their bedroom, deeply asleep. Clark, however, was on the sofa, having dozed off from exhaustion while keeping watch over the two women. When they had returned home, they found Ultra Woman scrubbing the kitchen at human speed. She

had explained that she needed a mind-numbing task to keep herself occupied, not wanting to think about the horrible night she had just experienced: the sounds, the smells, and the weight of the charred bodies she had had to move to the morgue vehicles.

Both Lois and Clark tried to distract her to no avail, so they had decided that the best course of action was to sleep, hoping that their slumber wouldn't be haunted by nightmares. Clark had refused to sleep at first, preferring to be there in case of a bad dream, but without his usual abilities, sleep eventually claimed him as well.

The sound of the doorbell startled him awake. Clark jumped up and made his way to the front door to greet their visitor, who was none other than Jimmy, holding a thick file under his arm.

"I know I said I would call, but I thought it'd be faster to show you. I've identified the four men, and I don't think you could've hoped for better matches to the recent events."

"Where's Lois?"

"They're sleeping... I mean, she's sleeping," Clark corrected himself. "We didn't sleep at all last night."

Jimmy didn't comment on Clark's slip-up and continued:

"The four men have quite the records. First up, Reggie Dawkins, aka 'The Viper,' notorious for his cruelty and complete lack of remorse. Reggie is an expert in arson. His nickname comes from his sneaky and venomous way of infiltrating and striking without mercy. He started by setting his own family's house on fire at the age of 13, killing his parents because they refused to let him go out."

Jimmy pulled out a large portrait of the man, his face as sinister as his nickname suggested.

Next, Jimmy revealed another picture, this time of a man in his forties, with a square jaw and piercing eyes.

"Jack Randall, aka 'The Torch.' A hardened criminal with a career in arson. Jack's specialty is explosions and fire, and his nickname comes from his ability to turn anything into ashes. Shopping malls, banks... anytime a group of criminals needs to get rid of a building, he's the guy. He served 18 years in prison, sentenced to three consecutive 40-year terms, and he escaped six months ago by setting fire to the van transferring him from Metropolis prison to Gotham."

Clark, shocked, asked, "Is he connected to Intergang?"

"No, he seems to freelance, going wherever his lighter takes him," Jimmy replied.

Clark was stunned by the level of malice these men embodied. Even though, as Superman and a journalist, he

had often faced massive criminals, he had always retained faith in humanity. At that moment, that faith was shaken.

Jimmy continued, and the next profiles were just as ruthless:

“Ethan Caldwell, the strategist of the group, specialized in diversion and manipulation. He’s suspected of involvement in numerous armed robberies, art thefts, and other highly technical crimes. The last one, Nico Barone, the brains of the group, cold and calculating, is one of Intergang’s most feared members.”

Lois appeared just then, having overheard the tail end of the conversation.

“Ethan Caldwell, that name sounds familiar. Didn’t I write an article involving him a while ago?”

Clark thought for a moment before responding, “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“I think it was before you joined the Planet,” Lois added.

She started pacing the room, clearly searching her memory. After a few seconds, she exclaimed:

“I remember! He was involved in the embezzlement of funds from a charity that raised money for fighting HIV in children. The Hope for Tomorrow foundation was doing outreach to mothers and funding research for effective treatments in kids. At the time, three million dollars were siphoned off by Caldwell, who was the treasurer. He got three years probation because he managed to sow doubt in the jury’s mind, but I’m sure he knew exactly what he was doing and wasn’t the victim he claimed to be. He’s been lying low ever since.”

Lois shook her head, visibly annoyed.

“Doesn’t look like he used that time to get back on the straight and narrow,” Jimmy remarked. “Well, I’ll leave the files with you guys. The Chief’s probably already wondering where I am!”

As soon as Jimmy shut the door, Ultra Woman rushed into the living room.

“Come on, let’s go get them. You’re joining me, right?”

“Wait, wait, Lois,” Clark said, placing a calming hand on her shoulder. “This is a big breakthrough, but we need to organize and continue our research. If we rush in, they’ll find a way to slip through our fingers. These guys are precise, methodical, and I’m sure their boss won’t hesitate to take them out, just like the Brown brothers, if we get too close. We need to be better than them and go for the head of Intergang!”

Clark paused, choosing his words carefully, then resumed with a gravity that matched his resolve.

“Someone is trying to destroy everything Metropolis stands for: its children, its workers, and now its places of entertainment. They’re behaving like terrorists, and we need to put a stop to it.”

It wasn’t just the journalist speaking; it was Superman, despite the absence of his powers. His posture, his unshakable determination, reflected a resolve that went far beyond mere words.

Ultra Woman, sensing that quiet strength, slowly nodded, realizing that it was crucial to proceed with caution and strategy. The anger that had consumed her since that night gave way to cold determination, ready to follow Clark into this new battle.

“So, what’s the plan?” Ultra Woman asked, impatience and resolve mixed in her voice.

Clark thought for a moment, weighing their options. Then, with a calm but firm voice, he answered:

“We need allies. We should notify Henderson and put these men under surveillance.”

Ultra Woman agreed, understanding that their priority had to be securing the situation before taking action. Rushing could jeopardize their efforts, and these criminals, as dangerous as they were, couldn’t force them into making mistakes.

“I’ll handle it,” Lois said, already grabbing her phone. “Henderson needs to know right away.”

“Perfect,” Clark replied. “In the meantime, I’ll see what more I can dig up about these guys and their connections. The more we know, the better we can anticipate their next move.”

As Lois dialed Inspector Henderson’s number, Clark grabbed the laptop to start his research, feeling the weight of the situation but also the strength of their union in the face of this growing threat.

Clark, leaning over his desk, was deeply immersed in his search when Lois finished her call with Henderson. She hung up and turned to him, looking concerned.

“Henderson is putting his men on alert, but it’s going to take time to locate these guys and set up surveillance. We need an extra push.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully.

“I think it’s time to call in Bobby Bigmouth. If anyone has information or can help us track these guys down, it’s him.”

Lois smiled, knowing Bobby was often their best source for under-the-radar intel.

“I’ll handle him. I know his weakness,” she said, standing up. “A cream pie with a double helping of whipped cream should do the trick.”

Clark smirked, recognizing Lois’s typical approach.

“Good idea. While you reach out to him, I’ll keep digging through the files and see if I can find any additional leads.”

Lois grabbed her bag and headed to the door.

“I shouldn’t be long. Bobby’s always quick to respond when food’s involved.”

At a Metropolis alleyway

An hour later, Lois stood in a dimly lit alley, a cream pie in one hand, waiting for Bobby to show up. As expected, it didn’t take long for him to appear, the enticing smell of the pie seemingly guiding him.

“Ah, Lois! You really know how to speak to a man,” Bobby said with a grin, his eyes glued to the pie.

Lois smiled and held the pie a little higher.

“And you, Bobby, know how to help me out. I need information on four guys. Reggie Dawkins, Jack Randall, Ethan Caldwell, and the sneakiest one, Nico Barone. They’re dangerous, and we need to stop them before they cause more damage.”

Bobby took a bite of the pie, thinking for a moment.

“Those guys aren’t small-timers. They run in pretty tight circles, but I’ve heard about some recent activity in certain areas. There’s an abandoned warehouse near the docks—rumor has it Intergang’s been using it for discreet meetings. Might be a good place to start your search.”

Lois nodded, absorbing the information.

“Thanks, Bobby. I knew I could count on you.”

“Always a pleasure, Lois. Give my regards to Superman and his girlfriend... And if you need more help, you know what to do.”

Lois left the alley, Bobby’s comment still echoing in her mind. “Superman and his girlfriend...” She couldn’t help but wonder if he knew more than he let on. But there wasn’t time to dwell on that now. The information she’d just gathered was crucial, and they needed to act fast.

Back with Clark, she relayed the details Bobby had given her.

“Bobby mentioned an abandoned warehouse near the docks. He says Intergang might be using it for secret meetings. We might find our guys there.”

Clark nodded, his expression becoming serious.

“That’s a good lead. We need to coordinate with Henderson to get surveillance on the place. If that’s where they’re hiding, we can catch them in the act.”

Lois nodded, but a shadow of concern crossed her face.

“Bobby also made a strange comment,” she said quietly. “He said, ‘Give my regards to Superman and his girlfriend.’ Do you think he might... know about us?”

Clark furrowed his brow, thinking.

“Bobby’s smart, and he has his sources. But I doubt he has concrete proof. If he really knew, he might have said something more direct. For now, let’s focus on the mission.”

Lois nodded, deciding not to let the concern distract her. They had work to do, and every minute counted.

“All right, I’ll contact Henderson and have him send a team to the docks. If those guys are there, we won’t give them a chance to escape.”

Clark took a deep breath, feeling the urgency of the situation.

“And this time, we’re going to stop them for good.”

With that determination, they set out, ready to face the criminals threatening the safety of Metropolis.

Chapter 20: A Triumph on the Front Page

The SWAT team broke through the warehouse door. The officers were deployed with precision, each team covering a section of the building. The warehouse was vast, with many dark corners, and every step echoed slightly on the concrete floor, intensifying the tense atmosphere.

The commander watched as the teams advanced, their movements perfectly coordinated thanks to their intensive training. Everyone knew exactly what to do and where to position themselves. The silence, broken only by the sound of their boots and the faint crackle of radios, heightened the tension.

As they approached the small doors at the far end of the large hall, one of the teams halted. Their infrared goggles clearly indicated abnormal heat sources on the other side. A silent signal was sent to all units, notifying them they had located the suspects.

The commander gave a quick signal, and one of the men used a battering ram to smash the door. It gave way under the impact, revealing a small, dimly lit room. Inside, four men stood up abruptly, visibly surprised by the SWAT’s sudden entry.

“Police! Don’t move! Hands in the air!” one of the officers shouted, his weapon aimed directly at the suspects.

The criminals had no way out, but they weren’t ready to surrender without a fight. One of them, likely Reggie Dawkins, made a quick move toward his belt, but before he could draw a weapon, a warning shot rang out, forcing him to raise his hands.

The SWAT team swiftly moved in, neutralizing the suspects with professionalism. Reggie, Jack, Ethan, and the fourth man, who appeared more nervous, were all taken down and handcuffed.

Clark and Lois, watching the operation from outside, looked on with satisfaction as the suspects were escorted out of the warehouse under heavy guard. The trap had worked perfectly, and Intergang had just lost four of its most dangerous players.

Lois turned to Clark, a determined smile on her lips.

“We’ve finally got them, Clark. This time, they won’t get away.”

Clark nodded, but he knew this was just one battle won. The war against Intergang was far from over. But for now, they had won an important victory, giving them a brief respite in this relentless fight.

With the criminals in custody and the warehouse secured, they began to prepare for what came next—interrogations, gathering evidence, and continuing their investigation to reach the head of Intergang. But tonight, they could savor their success.

****Daily Planet****

When Lois and Clark stepped out of the elevator, the entire Daily Planet staff was gathered around the newsroom televisions. On the screen, a reporter was saying:

“Thanks to the meticulous investigative work of Lois Lane and Clark Kent, star reporters of the Daily Planet, a major bust has just been carried out at the docks. The four main suspects in the opera house fire have been arrested by SWAT.”

The TV reporter interviewed them:

“Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane, the embers aren’t even cold yet—what’s the secret to solving an investigation so quickly?”

Lois spoke up: “You can read all the details in the next issue of the Daily Planet.”

Perry, seeing the success of his reporters, grinned and addressed them with a mischievous smile:

“Well, look at you two! You put on a show worthy of Elvis! I almost expected to see a leather-clad Elvis burst in

with a guitar. Maybe next time, you two could show up in flashy costumes and bring a little rock ‘n’ roll to celebrate!”

Lois and Clark smiled, recognizing Perry’s unique way of bringing some levity to the most serious situations.

“All right, the show’s over, no resting on your laurels! You just promised five billion people on this planet an article in the next edition! I haven’t seen a single sentence of it yet, so get to work!”

The small crowd dispersed, and Clark let Lois walk ahead of him, guiding her toward her desk with his hand resting on the small of her back. He leaned close to her and whispered in her ear:

“If the costume’s leather, I want a private performance.”

Lois choked at her husband’s suggestion, not expecting such an invitation.

“We’ll see about that at home, cowboy! For now, get to work!”

“You’re such a workaholic!” he replied.

“And you haven’t seen me with my whip,” she whispered back.

Chapter 21: At the Crossroads

****Metropolis Police Department****

The next morning, Lois and Clark arrived at the police station, responding to Henderson’s invitation. He was waiting for them impatiently in the lobby and escorted them to his office.

Once they were seated, the officer, visibly exhausted after a night of interrogation, began to speak:

“I spent the night questioning the suspects, and I managed to get full confessions. Nico Barone planned the opera attack in every detail. Ethan Caldwell played a crucial role in ensuring that the maximum number of people were trapped, with no escape once the fire started. The other two were just the executors. Their pasts and behaviors show that they are also dangerous criminals, fully aware of their actions, with no external influence. Dawkins lives up to his nickname, Viper; he’s cold and sly. The Torch, on the other hand, is a psychopathic arsonist, obsessed with fire.”

“Do you think they acted alone, or were they hired?” Clark asked.

“They claim it was all their idea, but I haven’t found a clear motive...”

“That confirms our suspicions, Inspector. We believe Mindy Church is behind all of this,” Lois asserted.

“But I suppose, like me, you have no proof?”

“Exactly,” Clark replied.

“Inspector, what about the fires at the orphanage and the office building? Have they admitted to being involved?” Lois continued.

Henderson nodded, visibly worn out by the cruelty of humanity:

“Yes, they confessed. Barone orchestrated everything meticulously. Their goal was to cause as many casualties as possible. Fortunately, Superman and Ultra Woman saved hundreds of our citizens.”

“And what is their motive, according to them?”

“They just want to terrorize the population. They pretend to be terrorists, but their cause is non-existent.”

“How so?”

“Terrorists usually aim to send a message... but not them. They just want to spread fear and kill.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t add up. We need to keep investigating.”

“All right,” Lois replied, a determined glint in her eyes. “We could try to align our leads.”

Henderson nodded, his face marked by exhaustion but also intense concentration.

“Okay, where do you want to start?” he asked, sitting up slightly in his chair.

Clark briefly exchanged a look with Lois, and without a word, they silently agreed.

“We could go over all the events we suspect the Churches of being involved in but haven’t been able to prove,” Clark suggested, his deep voice betraying the seriousness of the moment.

“Good idea!” Henderson approved with a small encouraging smile.

They then began listing the investigations, the tension rising as each memory resurfaced. First, they brought up the museum bomb, the day when Bill Church Jr. and Sr. were arrested. Then, they mentioned the virus meant to kill Superman, a threat that had nearly cost their friend and hero his life. They continued with the near-simultaneous crime spree that had struck the city: armed bank robberies, embezzlement, leaving behind a city gripped by panic.

When they reached the Baker Orphanage fire, Lois paused. She turned her head towards Clark, and their eyes met. In that gaze, there was a depth of understanding and shared pain. Clark felt a pang in his heart, recalling that tragic event, but he knew they had to move forward.

With a slight hesitation, he spoke again, carefully choosing his words to protect their secret while providing the necessary information.

“We have evidence placing the Brown brothers at the orphanage fire. And in our investigation, we found their hideout.”

Henderson frowned, pondering the implications of these new findings.

“I could send the forensic team there, just in case,” he offered.

Clark shifted slightly in his chair, a hint of worry crossing his face. They hadn’t been very cautious during their investigation, and it was likely they had left behind fingerprints or stray hairs. Lois, always attentive, placed a comforting hand on his arm, silently offering her support.

Henderson noticed Clark’s discomfort but chose to ignore it. He knew that journalists sometimes took liberties that the law wouldn’t approve of, but he was willing to overlook these details. After all, Lois and Clark had proven time and again that they were on the right side, even if their methods were sometimes unconventional.

“All right, I see. How about we all go together, the three of us?” he added with a resolute tone, as if to signify they were all in this together.

****348 Hyperion Avenue****

Many hours later, Lois and Clark returned home, exhausted but still determined. They had spent the afternoon and much of the evening at the Brown brothers’ hideout with Inspector Henderson, exploring every corner, examining every object meticulously. The goal: to find any clue that could finally link Intergang to these heinous crimes.

Despite a few intriguing finds, nothing seemed enough to directly accuse Intergang or implicate its leaders. A palpable frustration hung in the air as they shed their coats, their minds still filled with details of the investigation. Yet, deep down, a glimmer of hope remained. Every small clue, every lead, no matter how insignificant, brought them one step closer to the truth.

Lois turned to Clark, a tired but encouraging smile briefly lighting her face. She felt that despite the obstacles, they were on the right path. The comfortable silence that enveloped them was suddenly broken by a characteristic “whoosh,” announcing the arrival of a visibly upset Ultra Woman, who swiftly descended from the upstairs.

“Where have you two been!?! I’ve been looking for you for hours!” she exclaimed, her gaze moving from Clark to Lois with barely concealed worry. “You’re investigating without me, fine. I know I have to stay discreet... but not a

call, not a message, nothing! I was worried! I thought you were stuck to a concrete block at the bottom of Hobbs Bay or dissolving in a vat of chemicals!”

Clark, caught off guard by this sudden outburst of anger and concern, took on a contrite expression. He realized he had been so absorbed in the investigation that he hadn't thought to reassure Ultra Woman, and he felt doubly guilty. The emotions she expressed painfully reminded him of what he felt every time Lois went out on her own, putting herself in danger.

Lois, meanwhile, gave a small amused smile. She found the situation almost ironic. Had her other self forgotten that she often got lost in her investigations without giving updates, plunging Clark into similar worry?

Clark and Lois remained silent, each lost in their thoughts, while Ultra Woman misunderstood the silence. Seeing Clark's guilty expression and Lois's smile, she immediately assumed the worst. They weren't investigating; they had spent time together as a couple, ignoring the urgency of the situation. She interpreted this as a personal betrayal. A strong sense of jealousy and betrayal overwhelmed her, darkening her features.

The silence following Ultra Woman's outburst was thick with tension. Clark, usually in control of his emotions, stood there motionless, unable to find the right words to ease the obvious pain in the eyes of the woman he loved. Lois, too, felt her heart tighten, seeing the hurt in her double's eyes. Jealousy and pain intertwined in Ultra Woman's mind, clouding her judgment.

Lois took a deep breath, her tone firmer than usual:

“Do you realize what you're saying? Do you realize the pain you're causing Clark? He loves you, he loves us more than anything in the world, and you have no right to doubt that, not even for a second.”

Her words hit with the force of undeniable truth. Clark, silent until then, lowered his eyes, touched by Lois's fierce defense. He knew how strong Ultra Woman's feelings were, how real they were, and seeing the confusion in her eyes broke him.

Lois continued, her voice soft but unwavering:

“I know your situation isn't easy. We lost track of time, and yes, we should have told you. But you have to understand, we spent the day investigating with Henderson. Besides, why should I even have to justify myself? No one asks what you're doing when you fly off, as far as I know. Our relationship has always been built on trust... Do you trust us?”

She paused, letting her words sink in. Ultra Woman's face showed a storm of conflicting emotions. Anger, pain, and maybe even shame mixed in her gaze. Lois continued, more calmly this time:

“You know us better than that. You know very well we wouldn't spend the day in a motel when the situation is this serious. You are the most important person in our lives, and you know that.”

The silence that followed was heavy with tension, but a glimmer of hope pierced through the discomfort, like a promise of reconciliation.

Clark hadn't said a word during the entire exchange, letting Lois and Ultra Woman sort things out, but inside, he was overwhelmed by a whirlwind of emotions. Guilt gnawed at him, as did a quiet anger at this absurd situation they found themselves in.

Finally, he straightened up, his posture shifting gradually. His usually gentle gaze turned determined. His arms crossed over his chest, and his entire demeanor changed. In that moment, he wasn't just Clark Kent but Superman, the Man of Steel, the symbol of justice and moral strength. He might not have been wearing his iconic suit, but his stance and expression left no doubt about the resolve within him.

He spoke, his deep voice resonating with quiet authority:

“I think it's time we lay everything out for the sake of the three of us. This split, this division between you two, is a terrible burden, and I can't bear to see the pain it's causing each of you any longer.”

He looked at each of them in turn, his eyes filled with deep sincerity.

“I love you both more than anything, and that's the problem. I'm constantly torn between you. Between wanting to spend time with you, Lois, without having to disappear at the first sign of trouble, and you, Lois, as Ultra Woman, who has to fly off whenever the situation demands it.”

He paused, searching for the right words.

“You, Lois,” he said, looking at Ultra Woman, “you often leave to save people, and I know you imagine that Lois and I are using that time to grow even closer. And you, Lois,” he said, turning to the other Lois, “you sometimes feel left out when the three of us are together because you see that I give more attention to your double. It's an untenable situation for all of us.”

He lowered his head for a moment, letting his Superman façade crumble to become simply Clark again, vulnerable and honest.

“And then, there’s Superman... I need to be able to help people, to use my powers for good, but right now, I’m stuck, and I miss being Superman.”

His voice cracked slightly at the last sentence, revealing the depth of his pain. It was no longer the Man of Steel speaking but a man deeply in love, torn by a situation he no longer knew how to handle.

Clark fixed his gaze on the two women, his eyes pleading, hoping they understood the importance of finding a solution together. He knew their current situation couldn’t last, that they had to find balance again, even if that balance was far from conventional—at least for a couple of reporters, one of whom lived a double life as a superhero.

After a moment of heavy silence, he spoke again, this time with a determination softened by tenderness:

“Lois,” he said, turning to Ultra Woman, “could you take us to Smallville with the kryptonite sample? I’d like us to run some tests to understand exactly what’s going on. Maybe that will help us find a solution to reunite you two and help me get my powers back.”

He paused, watching for their reactions, ready to face whatever came next, even if it meant taking risks. For him, returning to “normal” was crucial, not just for their relationship but also so he could fully embrace his role as Superman once more.

Chapter 22: Light and Reunion

Smallville - Kent Farm

Clark knocked on the door of the house. They had landed behind the barn a few moments earlier, moving toward the building in heavy silence. However, as they walked, Clark took a deep breath of the crisp country air, feeling a wave of serenity wash over him. Each step on the soil of his childhood seemed to dissipate a little more of the weight he had been carrying on his shoulders.

The contrast with the bustling life of Metropolis was striking. Here, everything had always been simpler. The Kent farm represented a refuge, a place where the world felt less complicated, where everyday problems could be tackled with a cup of hot coffee and the wise advice of his parents. This was what they needed—to return to the essentials, to find a clarity that had eluded them for far too long.

Clark turned slightly to look at Lois and Ultra Woman. He noticed that, despite their palpable tension, the soothing atmosphere of Smallville seemed to affect them as well. Lois, her face still marked by the exhaustion of the past few days, appeared to relax a bit, while Ultra Woman, though still reserved, seemed to have left some of her anger behind.

Suddenly, the door swung open, interrupting his thoughts. Martha Kent, with her warm smile and sparkling eyes, welcomed them.

“Clark! Lois! What a nice surprise!” she exclaimed before noticing Ultra Woman. Her eyes widened slightly, but she quickly recovered, inviting the three of them in. “Come in, come in, I just took a pie out of the oven.”

Clark felt a smile spreading across his lips. Whatever happened, he knew that here, on the farm, they could find a bit of the peace and clarity they all desperately needed.

A few minutes later, the four of them were seated at the table, a glass of milk and a plate of apple pie in front of them. The atmosphere, though marked by the exhaustion and tensions of the past days, began to ease slightly in the comforting warmth of the Kent kitchen.

A sound of the door was heard, followed by Martha’s warm voice addressing the newcomer:

“Jonathan, guess who’s here! The kids just arrived.”

Jonathan entered the kitchen, wearing his usual smile and carefree demeanor. If he was surprised to see two Loises, he didn’t show it and came over to greet the three visitors with the same sincere affection. He also sat down, and Martha served him a slice of pie and a glass of milk, completing the family tableau.

For a few minutes, they chatted about trivialities, the weather in Smallville, the harvest, and the latest news from town. But Martha’s straightforward nature eventually took over, and with her usual frankness, she asked:

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m very happy to have you all here at home, but I know you better than that. You’re in the middle of a big investigation, aren’t you? I don’t think this is just a courtesy visit.”

Clark gave a faint smile in his mother’s direction. She knew him so well, and he appreciated her straightforwardness.

“Yes, you’re right, Mom,” he replied softly. “We found the Kryptonite sample that affected me and caused the transfer of my powers, as well as the duplication of Lois. We’d like to take advantage of the space here to do some tests and try to get back to normal... if that’s okay with you, of course?”

Martha exchanged a glance with Jonathan, then nodded with a reassuring smile.

“Of course not, Clark. You’re at home here, and if there’s anything we can do to help you, just ask, right Jonathan?”

Jonathan, looking serious but with visible tenderness in his eyes, nodded.

“Absolutely. We’ll do everything we can to help you get back to a normal life.”

The weight of their worries seemed to lighten a bit more, the unwavering support of the Kents providing a solid anchor against the uncertainties that lay ahead.

Ultra Woman had stayed inside with Martha while Lois and Clark went outside to test the Kryptonite. Martha gently took the young woman’s hand and looked at her with concern.

“Honey, how are you coping with all of this?” Martha asked in a soft voice.

“I’m okay, Martha,” Ultra Woman replied, trying to hide her emotions behind a forced smile.

Martha didn’t believe it for a second. She knew Lois well and could see beyond appearances.

“Lois, I know you better than that,” she said gently. “I’ve watched the three of you, and I know my boy is doing everything he can to make both of you feel loved. And I also know how much you love to be in control of things...”

These words were the trigger, and Ultra Woman, who had been trying to stay strong, burst into tears.

“It’s so hard, Martha,” she admitted, her voice breaking with emotion. “I’m constantly having to leave to handle impossible situations. My every action can mean the difference between life and death, and I can’t even do my job. I miss the newsroom, just like I miss doing investigative work alongside Clark. I feel like we’ve lost everything that brought us together.”

She wiped her tears, but they kept flowing.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, Clark is perfect, so loving, caring... the ideal husband. But I can’t settle for that. I feel like he’s walking on eggshells around me. And I know he suffers from seeing me take his place. I’ve stolen his life.”

Martha listened intently to Ultra Woman, her features softening as she let the young woman express what she had been holding back for so long. She squeezed Ultra Woman’s hand a little tighter, an expression of compassion and understanding crossing her face.

“Oh, honey...” she said softly, her voice filled with tenderness. “I understand how difficult this must be for you. What you’re going through is far from simple. You’re thrust into a situation that demands you to be strong all the time, facing overwhelming responsibilities, all while seeing your life and your bearings turned upside down.”

Ultra Woman wiped her tears, trying to pull herself together, but Martha continued, her voice growing more assured.

“You didn’t steal his life, Lois.” Martha looked her straight in the eyes, offering all the support she could muster. “What’s happening to both of you is the result of an unforeseen circumstance, not something you chose. Clark knows that, and he loves you, just as he loves the other Lois. You are two aspects of the same woman, the one he chose, the one he wants to spend his life with.”

Ultra Woman nodded, though still overwhelmed by her emotions.

“But I can’t help feeling guilty... He deserves to be Superman; it’s his role, and there’s a part of me that says that if I hadn’t found myself in this situation, everything would be better. He would have his powers, his normal life, and we would be happy, like before.”

Martha shook her head gently, a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“Life is never that simple, my dear. Clark is an extraordinary man, but he never wanted his life to be easy. What he wants is for both of you to be happy. He suffers, yes, but not because of who you are or what you do. What hurts him is seeing you struggle alone, not being able to be there for you as he wishes.”

She paused, letting her words sink into Ultra Woman’s heart.

“You must remember that what you’re going through, you’re going through it together. And that’s what matters most. Clark, you, and the other Lois... you’ll find a solution, I’m sure of it. But in the meantime, don’t forget that you’re not alone. You have a family here, people who love you and are here for you. We will overcome this, together.”

Ultra Woman, still wrestling with her doubts, nevertheless found comfort in Martha’s words. She felt understood, accepted, and that, more than anything, eased her heart.

Outside, Lois and Clark, aided by Jonathan, began to set up the equipment for the tests. The Kryptonite sample lay carefully encased in its lead box. Clark spoke up to explain:

“I was hit by a double red beam coming from the top of a building, trying to protect Lois, who was with me. The beam hit me and must have passed through me, reaching her. We know the rest. Ultra Woman X-rayed the piece and detected a crack. We think a sniper shot with a laser-type weapon, similar to what the Newtrich sisters used during our last encounter. My hypothesis is that the laser hit the cracked Kryptonite, thus splitting the beam in two. Could we start by checking that?”

Jonathan nodded and moved toward his workshop. A few minutes later, he returned with a work table, which he began to set up. He turned to Lois:

“Lois, could you go get the laser from Martha’s workshop, please?”

As soon as Lois walked away, Jonathan turned to his son, his face marked by a serious expression but filled with wisdom.

Jonathan waited until Lois was out of sight before turning to Clark, looking grave but filled with the wisdom that characterized him. He took a deep breath, placing a comforting hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Clark, I wanted to talk to you privately before we start the tests.” His voice was gentle but firm. “What you’re going through right now... it’s not just about powers or Kryptonite. It’s also a test for your relationship, for your life with Lois, and now with these two Loises.”

Clark lowered his head for a moment, feeling the weight of his father’s words. He knew Jonathan was right. This wasn’t just a scientific or supernatural issue, but an emotional crisis that deeply affected those he loved.

“I know, Dad,” he replied in a calmer voice than he had imagined. “It’s... complicated. Every day that goes by, I feel this pull between them, and I wonder if I’m doing the right thing.”

Jonathan gently squeezed Clark’s shoulder, forcing him to look him in the eye.

“Listen, son. You’ve always been there to save the world, to bear the weight of that suit. But today, it’s not the world you need to save; it’s your family. These two women love you deeply, and I know you love them just as much. But you’re all lost in this situation, and if you keep trying to handle it alone, you’re going to lose them.”

Clark felt a knot form in his throat. He hadn’t realized how overwhelmed he had become by this situation. He had wanted to protect Lois, but in the end, he realized that he may have made things worse.

“You’re right, Dad. I feel trapped between my responsibilities and my feelings, and I don’t know how... how to set everything right.” He let out a sigh, his gaze lost on the horizon.

Jonathan nodded, fully understanding his son’s doubts.

“You’ll find a solution, I’m sure of it. But remember, you don’t have to bear this burden alone. Talk to each other, be honest with one another. Powers come and go. What really matters is the bond you share. So before you go any further, make sure you’re all on the same page.”

Clark slowly nodded, grateful to his father for his wise words. He now knew what he had to do. Above all, he needed to ensure that neither Lois nor Ultra Woman felt sidelined, and that together, they could find a solution not

only to regain his powers but also to restore their balance as a family.

“Thank you, Dad,” he finally said, a sincere but still somewhat sad smile appearing on his face.

Jonathan returned his smile and then patted his shoulder.

“Come on, son. It’s time to solve this mystery.”

Lois quickly arrived with the laser, which she carefully placed on the table. Jonathan immediately got to work, adjusting the device with precision. He asked Clark to step back, as they needed to take the kryptonite out of its lead casing. Clark complied without arguing. Lois cautiously took out the sample and showed the crack to Jonathan, who asked his son to find a magnifying glass to examine the detail more closely.

Jonathan then turned to his daughter-in-law with an expression that was both concerned and grateful.

“Clark has no powers now, but he still bears the weight of the world on his shoulders. Lois, you’ve always been his greatest support. Make sure you stay united through this trial. My son is pretty stubborn; he won’t admit he’s overwhelmed. And don’t let him lock himself away in the whirlwind that has swept you both away.”

Lois nodded, her gaze filled with gratitude and determination. She knew how important it was for Clark to remain strong, but she was also aware of the immense pressure he was under.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to support him, Jonathan. We will get through this together, no matter the challenges.”

Jonathan smiled gently, satisfied with his daughter-in-law’s response, then focused again on the kryptonite sample. Lois stepped away to prepare the necessary testing materials and get ready for what was to come.

When Clark returned, Jonathan concentrated on examining the crack in the kryptonite, using the magnifying glass to analyze the details. Lois observed silently, her mind occupied by the implications of this discovery. Clark, for his part, stood apart, looking thoughtful and concerned, the weight of his responsibilities evident in every gesture.

After a moment, Jonathan straightened up, his face marked by an expression of intense reflection.

“The crack does seem to be distorting the beam unevenly. It’s possible that the impact of the laser created a separation in the crystal, as you suspected. We need to conduct some tests to confirm this hypothesis and understand how...”

Jonathan meticulously adjusted the laser, the darkness of the workshop making the atmosphere even more intense. The laser beam began to emit a reddish glow, directed

towards the cracked crystal. Lois was taking notes, ready to capture every detail that could help them understand the phenomenon.

As the tests progressed, Jonathan explained the preliminary results.

“The crack seems to influence how the kryptonite interacts with the beams. We need to determine whether this crack has altered the radiation in such a way as to affect your powers this way.”

Lois shot Clark an encouraging glance, knowing how difficult it was for him to be without his powers and to feel so powerless.

“We’re going to find a solution, Clark. We’ll make it work.”

Clark nodded, his face reflecting both hope and concern. As Jonathan continued his analyses, the team was united in their quest to solve this mystery and restore balance to their tumultuous lives.

After several attempts, Jonathan successfully split the beam.

“Okay,” he said with a satisfied expression. “Clark, your theory about the crack seems plausible. We should see if we can split something with this beam.”

“Let’s avoid testing that on me,” Lois replied with a mischievous smile. “I think Clark wouldn’t survive a third Lois.”

Clark, amused, added, “I’m willing to take the risk... as long as the third Lois doesn’t decide to steal my place at the office.”

Jonathan smiled as he adjusted the laser settings.

“Or fight me for the last pieces of apple pie.”

Lois laughed, recognizing Jonathan’s sense of humor.

“All right, no extra versions for the pie, I promise.”

The group continued working, the atmosphere lightened by jokes and mutual support, ready to face the next steps with optimism.

Unfortunately, after many attempts with pieces of wood, stones, and various objects found around the farm, they couldn’t manage to split anything.

“Jonathan, I think your wish for a free new tractor is compromised,” Lois teased.

“Too bad, I’ll settle for borrowing Clark to do the lifting when I need to do maintenance,” Jonathan replied in a mockingly disappointed tone.

Clark, physically set aside from the conversation, exclaimed, “Could you stop pretending I’m not here?” His harsh tone couldn’t mask the smile that lit up his face.

“Oh Clark, you’re here, sorry, I didn’t see you,” his father continued humorously. “I thought you were still in Metropolis; I didn’t see anyone devour your mom’s apple pie in 2 seconds.”

The group burst into laughter, the relaxed atmosphere bringing a bit of lightness to their difficult situation.

Clark, unable to participate in the tests, took the time to observe and analyze everything that was happening. He came to the conclusion that the kryptonite only affected him or someone possessing his powers.

He called out to his father and Lois:

“I think we’re going to have to admit that’s how it happened. It must only work on Kryptonians or those who have their powers. Can we try to hit both Loises and then gather the beams? Ideally, we’d need lenses to converge the two beams into one, right?”

“You mean you want to impact both Lois and me, and then recombine the beams toward you?” Lois asked, raising an eyebrow, puzzled.

Clark grimaced, wondering if his idea was more ridiculous than it seemed.

“Maybe I should reconsider this idea,” he admitted, an amused smile playing on his lips.

Ultra Woman and Martha arrived at that moment. Martha, taking the initiative, said, “Your idea is good, honey, but may I suggest another approach?”

Clark nodded, curious. “Of course, Mom.”

“What if you only used one beam, which would first pass through Lois, then her,” she indicated Ultra Woman, “then Lois again,” she indicated the other Lois, “and finally touch you, Clark?”

The group pondered the suggestion. The silence that followed was filled with hope as each person envisioned the possibility of this new method.

Jonathan, the skilled technician, added:

“What Martha suggests is much simpler to execute. There’s no need for precise adjustments to get perfectly parallel beams, and adjusting the lenses would be just as complicated. However, you’re the only ones who have experienced the effects of kryptonite. What’s the risk if it fails?”

Jonathan looked closely at the three adults around him, his gaze resting especially on Clark. His question was

imbued with concern and realism, reflecting the seriousness with which he approached the situation.

Clark responded gravely:

“The impact of a simple beam from one person to another is fairly safe, all things being equal. Red Kryptonite has had varied effects on me with each exposure, but it wasn’t through a beam the last two times.”

Lois added:

“From Kryptonian to human, from human to human, and from earthling to Kryptonian, it worked well,” she recalled past events with the Newtrich sisters, “but it took three steps...”

“So the biggest risk seems to be that we might exchange powers between the two Loises?” Martha questioned.

“Your assumptions are as good as ours, Mom,” Clark confirmed.

The two Loises and Clark exchanged glances, drawing courage from the love they held for one another. Martha and Jonathan remained silent, knowing enough about the trio to understand that they functioned in perfect harmony. The silent exchanges came to an end after a few seconds. Clark took the hands of both young women, and Lois said:

“We’re ready; we’re going to do it.”

Jonathan nodded in understanding:

“All right. I’ll prepare the necessary equipment for the method suggested by Martha. We’ll try this approach while keeping the potential risks in mind. Let’s ensure we have all necessary precautions in place.”

Martha, with her practical nature, added:

“And let’s not forget to be cautious and closely monitor any changes. If something seems off, we can always halt the experiment in time.”

With the preparations underway, the team got to work setting up the necessary device.

Once everything was in place, Martha, who had once experimented with laser sculpting, lined up the three young people in front of the laser and the Kryptonite. Ultra Woman was placed first, then Martha paused for a moment and asked:

“Clark, how far away was Lois from you during the transfer?”

“She was interviewing me, so I’d say about one meter.”

“Very well. Lois, position yourself 50 cm behind Lois. We’ll try to minimize beam dispersion. Clark, the same for you, 50 cm behind again.”

Everyone took their places with great tension and palpable seriousness.

Martha burst out laughing, and everyone looked at her with concern. Had the situation become so absurd that she was losing control?

Trying to catch her breath, Martha explained:

“I’m sorry, but it reminds me of you, Clark, when you were young. With Rachel and Pete, you often played in the yard. You had cowboy and Indian games, but also, I remember you played trains... I can see all three of you lined up, mimicking the train arriving at the Smallville station.”

Everyone joined in Martha’s laughter, reminiscing or imagining the scene. It felt good to be here, with the hope of regaining some normalcy, and Martha’s joy of life brought a bit of lightness to the moment.

Once calm returned, Jonathan approached the laser and asked:

“Are you ready?”

“We’ll never be more ready,” Lois replied with a smile.

Jonathan pressed the button on the laser. A red flash shot out and struck the Kryptonite. The beam quickly reached Ultra Woman. Her body became almost translucent and began to drift toward Lois. The beam continued its path, hitting Lois and then Clark. Clark was enveloped in a halo of red light. When the two Lois became one, and the halo dispersed, Jonathan released the button.

Lois swayed slightly, and Clark placed his hands on her hips to stabilize her.

Chapter 23: Under the Gathered Stars

Lois recovered in her husband’s arms. She turned gently and gazed into his eyes, where she read deep relief. She was sure he could see the same thing in hers. At first glance, it had worked. The two Loises were one again.

“How do you feel?” Clark dared to ask.

“Whole, reunited, myself,” Lois replied, a smile of relief lighting up her voice.

Martha and Jonathan watched them, eager to see if everything had returned to normal.

Lois continued:

“And you, Clark?”

“I feel great.”

“Is it...?” Lois hesitated to finish her question, fearing the answer.

Clark placed his hands on his wife's hips and, with a smooth motion, gently lifted them into the air.

"Clark, am I dreaming? Is it really you making me fly?" A bright smile illuminated Lois's face, as a tear of joy rolled down her cheek.

Clark nodded, his smile radiant and full of the warmth that characterized him.

Martha and Jonathan embraced, happy with the resolution.

Clark kissed his wife deeply, and she returned the kiss before they floated back down to the ground. They then turned to their elders:

"Thank you so much for everything; you've been great help!"

"It's the least we can do; family is what we hold most dear," Jonathan replied.

"Come on, kids, go on. You need some quality time together," Martha encouraged.

Clark hesitated, but Jonathan confirmed:

"Your mother is right. You need to reconnect. Come over for dinner with us this weekend."

Clark nodded, took a step back, and changed into his super costume.

Lois clasped her hands in front of her mouth, still impressed by his change of clothes.

"I love when you do that!" she said, her eyes filled with admiration.

He responded with a smile, took her in his arms, and they soared beyond the clouds.

Once under the Milky Way, Clark slowed down and hovered, letting the currents carry him.

He wrapped his cape around them and took his time kissing her. They exchanged long, passionate kisses before he rested his forehead against Lois's.

Clark sighed and tried to articulate what he felt:

"I was so afraid of losing you, of losing us. What I feel for you... it's as if everything makes sense now that everything is back to normal."

Lois gently caressed his face, her gaze locked on his, filled with tenderness.

"Me too, Clark. But we made it through together, as always. Nothing will ever separate us."

Clark smiled, relief and love mingling in his eyes.

"You are my anchor, Lois. No matter what happens, as long as I have you by my side, I know I can face anything."

They remained there, suspended among the stars, enjoying the tranquility of the moment. The trials they had just gone through felt distant, and all that mattered was them, together, in the vastness of the night sky.

To be continued