

Investigate: Intergang

By [Blueowl](#) <blueowl617@yahoo.com>

Rating: PG-13

Submitted: November 2021

Summary: Clark Kent is a Private Investigator and former military, a more assertive and proactive Superman. This is the second story (“Act II”) of an alternate universe series starting with the author’s “Investigate.” With Luthor’s empire in shambles, another quickly moves in to take its place. However, they didn’t account for Kent, not to mention Superman’s direct approach.

Story Size: 33,062 words (184Kb as text)

Aug 2021

A/N: Another special thanks to Morgana, Chereche, and Mary who helped beta this fic and acted as soundboards ^_^ . And thanks to those on FOLC’s Skype group who helped me clarify ideas.

A/N 2: Reading Investigate is strongly recommended.

Summary: 2nd Act of AU series, Investigate. With Luthor’s empire in shambles, another quickly moves in to take its place. However, they didn’t account for Kent, not to mention Superman’s direct approach. Private Investigator & prior military Kent. More assertive and proactive Superman.

Read the first story in the series, “[Investigate](#).”

However, since regaining his memory, he knew one thing: He needed to be Kal-El as much as he needed to be Clark.

He could not be whole otherwise.

Entering his apartment, he turned on the television, preparing to wind down and call it a night. Unfortunately, what he saw on the news channel instantly changed his mind.

A sonic boom roared overhead.

End of Act I

Chapter 1: Return

The azure blue skies were blissfully clear, and the ocean below churned lazily as a cruise liner rode the waves, but the people onboard were a far cry from enjoying the spring day.

“To the main deck! This way to the rafts!” the crew ordered, ushering the frightened and confused passengers as calmly as anyone could given the situation.

Smoke was pouring from a cluster of windows on the port side, even as the waterline continued to creep closer to the level of the lower deck, eclipsing many of the cabin windows.

They were sinking.

Hundreds of passengers were on the main deck, and hundreds more were clamoring from their cabins, quickly realizing this was a real emergency. Suddenly, the vessel rocked violently to the side with a resounding boom. The black greasy smelling smoke thickened, billowing up from areas it had not been moments earlier.

“What’s happening?!” someone cried.

“The engine room! Oh, Lord, has the fuel ignited?!”

Panic ensued.

The screams and cries of terror drowned out the clap of a sonic boom and the splash a dozen yards from the blackening hull.

The crew worked on preparing the rafts for loading, moving as swiftly as they could, even those within the area of smoke.

However, before any rafts could be launched, an immense thrum of what the crew and passengers could only describe as a disturbance rumbled beneath them. Fear of not knowing what it was made everyone freeze, but it was just as well.

The smoke gushed out faster than ever, as if something more than fire was propelling it as its dark hues began to rapidly fade into gray. A metallic cluster of whines followed, droning through the walls worse than nails on a chalkboard and screeching more piercingly than all the panicked screams combined.

And then it stopped, but only long enough for most everyone to gasp in a large breath as the entire vessel, all 225,000 tons of it, **rose**.

Those who could see over the ship’s guardrails stared at the water line descending along the bow of the ship, and for a long moment no one could comprehend how it was happening.

“It’s Superman! It’s got to be Superman!” someone cried.

“Thank, G-d!”

Where seconds before there was a loud cacophony of frightened voices, now the ship grew quiet as everyone waited to see what would happen next as the deck beneath their feet stopped moving up and instead the entire vessel began moving forward, even as the smoke thinned and finally disappeared.

The Captain, standing in the command deck, updated the Coast Guard on their situation as best he could, grateful disbelief thick in his voice.

They would be joined by the Coast Guard within an hour.

Lois shook her head with a grin as she folded the newspaper on the way to her desk. Kal-El’s return hadn’t disappointed. The cruise liner had made it to a safe harbor, and no one had been lost at sea; although, tragically, there had been some loss of life which had occurred from the explosion in the engine room.

It looked to be an accident, but the Office of Marine Safety had its investigation underway.

Superman gave a brief but happy report that he had regained his memories and stated he would be meeting with his doctor in the near future.

Things were getting back on an even keel.

“Lois, I left a message for you on your desk. From Henderson,” Jimmy said as she sat down.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” she said, quickly spotting the note and picking it up.

She immediately gathered up her things and rushed out after she read it. If she hurried, maybe she would catch him!

The great, mysterious P.I., Clark Kent.

Clark left the police station with a quick apology, stating he had just been paged by a contact and needed to go. He would have to meet with Ms. Lane later. As he dashed out, he told Henderson to ask her to call him.

Hopefully their ‘first’ meeting would go well, whenever that happened to be.

The smell of ash reached him before the sight of flames spewing out of the side windows. An apartment complex was engulfed, and he could hear the fire engines two minutes away, too far to save the family huddled in a stairwell filled with smoke, the old man trapped in his bedroom, and seven others panicking throughout the doomed structure.

He acted quickly, depositing people he removed from smoke-filled rooms across the street into the willing arms of good Samaritans as the ambulances began loading the most severely burned onto stretchers to take them to the nearest hospital.

Superman swooped into the building, blowing out the remaining flames he hadn’t been able to extinguish as he ensured everyone was out.

There were two fatalities: an elderly couple.

It was doubtful he would have been able to save them even if

he had managed to arrive right after ignition.

He slowed his pace, hearing the firemen enter the first floor beneath him. With a skilled eye, he examined the evidence before him. Taking in the charred path and propellant smell, coupled with the mangled gas line, this had not been an accident.

“Superman?” a fireman asked, approaching the closet—or rather, the gaping black hole that remained.

“This wasn’t an accident. I can smell remnants of jet fuel.”

“Jet fuel?” a second fireman asked, surprised.

“I imagine whoever is responsible for this didn’t want the building to remain standing,” he said, scanning the walls, ceiling, and floor around them, which would appear odd to the firemen if they didn’t know he could look through them. “The fire went up from here and the floors above are not safe to walk on. The beams have all been severely damaged. If you have chalk or paint, I can mark where the damage is beneath the floors and in the walls.”

“Yes, we have a spray can in the truck,” the fireman said, happy they would be reducing the hazards to the inspectors and cleanup crew as they carefully walked out.

She had just missed Kent, but it was just as well when she heard about the apartment fire from Henderson’s police scanner. She flagged down a cab and hurried over to the fire, knowing it was unlikely anyone from the Planet would be there already considering the location. She frowned, recalling earlier that morning when Perry was fuming over the fact the paper’s sales were plummeting since Preston Carpenter bought the *Metropolis Star*.

Apparently, the *Star* was scooping the *Planet* on all major stories occurring within the city. The only reason they were still in the black was because of her previous stories on Superman and Nightfall, as well as the ongoing investigations into Luthor and LexCorp.

Her taxi pulled up just as it seemed like the worst was over. Pulling out her notepad, she hurried to the nearest fireman and quickly learned Superman had already headed out. But then she spotted a familiar face.

“Linda,” she said loathingly.

“Lois, it’s nice to see you too,” Linda King said, quite pleased with herself.

“What are you doing here?” Lois asked, failing to ignore how perfectly coiffed Linda’s signature red hair appeared. Did the woman have a stylist living with her?

“Scooping you, apparently. I even got a quote from Superman. Very helpful,” she informed her.

“What?”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m working for the *Metropolis Star*.” Not waiting for a reply, she walked off, victorious.

“Just—my—luck,” Lois hissed slowly to herself, not looking forward to telling the Chief that they had been scooped once again.

The week passed faster than he would have liked, but at least he had arranged a meeting with Lois Lane on the ongoing investigations into Luthor and LexCorp.

He felt bad. For the past week the Daily Planet seemed to be coming in second place in reporting the city’s news, especially in Superman rescues.

Which was odd, now that he thought about it. Suspicious, more like, considering how many of them he was certain were not accidents. Hmm, something to look into for sure.

He paused as his television gave a blurb of the coming trial of Lex Luthor at the end of the month. He shook his head. So many horrendous secrets were coming to light. What a waste of a human being. So much waste in general. How much good could Lex Luthor have done if he had set his genius on generosity and compassion instead of greed and power? But such questions aside,

there were other things he needed to focus on now.

He had finished providing Henderson with all he knew that could help the side investigations and had been interviewed by several agents from many government agencies. He provided copies of his research as well as relevant recordings and the like that he had collected. He knew dozens of arrests soon followed those meetings, and he felt reassured by the thoroughness of the investigators that were taking the torch from him, so to speak, and closing a multitude of cases. From assaults to missing persons and murders, he did not envy the Attorney’s Office.

Although, throughout this time, Mayson Drake was in her element, bouncing from one case to another, tying up loose ends and preparing the courts for the coming trials of individuals who had participated in the tangled web of Luthor’s empire.

He looked at the time.

Spinning into his suit, he shot to the Foundation where the investigators had agreed to meet and discuss the coming trial with him. He had been selected as a prosecution witness and would likely be cross-examined by Luthor’s defense. He wasn’t surprised.

“So you finally locked in a meeting with Kent?” Henderson asked as she finished compiling her notes and was getting ready to head back to the *Planet* and write up the story following up on the dozens of cases with clear ties to LexCorp.

“Yeah, tonight. He’s a hard man to lock down,” she admitted.

Henderson laughed. “He certainly is, but he’s dependable.”

“Anything I should know about him?” Lois prodded curiously. Now that the conversation had started down this vein, she had no desire to stop it.

“I’m sure you’ve already looked into his background. “What are you fishing for?” he asked, amused at her not-so-subtle attempt at gathering information.

“What happened to make you trust him so much? I mean, I’ve gleaned a bit of his personality from his profile I’ve compiled, and he’s certainly a good investigator and likely a good man, but you require more. So what did he do?”

“It’s really killing you, isn’t it? I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it. Although it was just before Congress’s meeting with Superman, the Luthor mess, Nightfall, and all of that. It was easily buried.”

“What?” Lois asked.

“He took a few bullets for me, four actually. He had a vest on, but still. He saved my life.”

“He did?! When?” she asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

“During the Tibs’ case. Gregory Tibs, missing persons cold case, fifteen years. He solved it in less than two weeks. Anyway, he took bullets meant for me when we went in to arrest Tibs’ murderer.”

Lois blinked.

“He’s never mentioned it since. He’s extremely humble, despite how much he’s done. You will never meet a better guy,” Henderson said.

“I see. Thanks.”

She left soon after, looking forward to meeting Kent more than ever.

Clark couldn’t believe he was this nervous. It was just sad, and yet it wasn’t. This was the first time he would see her since recovering all of his memories. Maybe he should have made time to see her as Kal before doing this? But what time? The last few weeks had been horrendously busy. He hoped she wasn’t as bummed as he was about not seeing her — or maybe he did hope that. Good grief, he needed to get a hold of himself.

He still didn’t know when he should tell her. Certainly soon, if they ended up working closely for whatever reason, but how should he define ‘closely’?

He shook his head, wondering if that was moot. Maybe she would see through Clark and right to Kal-El upon their first meeting. Would that be good?

He swallowed. He didn't think so. He was as much Clark as he was Kal. Immediately seeing right through Clark would make that part of him unimportant, or, at the very least, second. That certainly wouldn't feel good.

Pushing his internal struggle aside, he stepped into 'Café Americana'. Lois had suggested it, and after confirming it had no ties to anything shady and discovering her uncle, Michael Lane, was the owner, he happily scheduled a reservation after agreeing to a meeting time.

"Reservation at 1?" the man behind the counter asked after Clark gave him his name.

"That's right," Clark said.

"Very good. Please, follow me," the waiter said, taking two menus and leading the way.

He didn't have to wait long before Lois entered and was quickly escorted to the table.

They exchanged smiles as she sat down and he hoped his nervousness wasn't noticeable. Fortunately, her uncle distracted her by asking what she would like to drink. Soon after, they decided on an appetizer and they were soon alone.

"Good to finally meet you, Mr. Kent," she said, busying herself with her napkin.

"And you, Ms. Lane. I'm sure Henderson has been telling you a lot of things about me just as he has been telling me about you," Clark said.

"Henderson really does like to talk, doesn't he?" she agreed with a smile.

"Just to those he trusts," Clark pointed out with a smile.

"So how is it that I haven't been able to meet you until now? Considering how much you uncovered about Luthor, I would have expected us to run into each other at some point," she said, dipping a slice of red pepper into the caramelized onion appetizer dip.

"Maybe we have but were both undercover," Clark offered.

"That sounds possible," she said with a laugh. "You do seem familiar, and it's not just because Bill has told me your life story."

"My life story?" he asked with a wide grin.

"Okay, so maybe not that much, but a fair amount," she admitted.

"Well, I suppose if he told you my life story we would pretty much be even," he said.

"Is that a roundabout way of admitting that you've investigated me?" she shamelessly asked.

"Got me," he said, enjoying the banter as the waiter came over.

Two minutes later, their order was taken and they were back to talking.

"So what did you find out?" she asked, referring to his 'investigation' of her.

"You're twenty-six, you were born here in Metropolis, your parents are Dr. Sam Lane and Ellen Lane, and your sister is Lucy Lane. Some people call you Mad Dog Lane, as you're a ruthless investigative reporter for the Daily Planet, which you have worked for just over four years, although if you count your time as an intern there, it would be six. You are dedicated to your work and admittedly don't have many interests outside of that. Simply, you're a workaholic, which certainly benefits the Daily Planet and the city, but I can't say it's exactly healthy for you."

"Is that concern I hear?" she asked, amused.

"Definitely."

"Well, I could say the same for you. You've been traveling the world how long now? And the speed in which you solve cases is extraordinary. How often do you sleep? Bill mentioned a case you solved in two weeks that had been cold for over a decade."

"Luck is sometimes involved, but I also have experience to help me know where to look," he said quietly.

"Know where to look?" Lois asked, intrigued.

"For that case, I saw the signs of sex trafficking and, due to the time frame, assumed someone arrested on a separate but similar charge around that same time might know something so I went and questioned some inmates fitting that profile. Criminals talk, especially if they have something to gain."

Lois hummed, impressed. "I suppose we all have techniques we use to uncover the truth. By the way, how did you get so much on Luthor?"

"I spotted signs of corruption throughout Metropolis while I was working on other cases. Gathering enough breadcrumbs, the path was clear, as I'm sure you found as well. Which, now that it's been brought up, have you been looking into anything lately?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, since Superman's recovery, my time has been focused on Luthor's upcoming trial, the cases coming forth from the ongoing investigations into his activities, and trying to keep up with the Metropolis Star. The Planet's been having some bad luck lately covering stories in the city, I'm sorry to say," she said, a little bummed that the conversation was curving into less enjoyable topics.

Clark frowned and glanced around. He seemed reassured by what he saw and refocused on her.

"I've started another investigation, but it doesn't involve Luthor at all. I think you should know that there is a new threat to the city."

"What?"

"Have you ever heard of Intergang?" Clark asked grimly.

"Not a whole lot, just rumors really. Why?"

"They're trying to move into Metropolis, now that Luthor is out of the picture."

Lois sighed. "Gotta love power vacuums."

Just then, their food arrived.

"So, why Metropolis?" Lois asked before taking a bite of her spinach lasagna, moving the conversation away from Intergang, as a family was now being seated at the table across from them. One could never be too careful.

"Felt it was time to take a break from travelling, and since a city as big as Metropolis has a surplus of cases to investigate, why not here?" Clark answered simply.

"Job security is certainly a plus," she agreed. "So what do you think of Metropolis so far? You got here, what, about a year ago?"

"Yeah, a little over a year, and I like most of what I've seen. It's a good city and I like the diversity."

"Yes, it is essentially a world in a city. Though, with Superman, maybe more than a single world now," Lois said.

"I suppose that's true," Clark said, before finishing up his grilled chicken sandwich. "So what's it like being the one who found Superman? Or would it be discovered?—Revealed maybe?"

"I would say 'introduced'," Lois corrected.

"That's the word. So?" Clark asked, curious.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe it. For a long time I had been trying to solve a mystery and then when the proof of what I suspected actually appeared in my apartment. ... Surreal doesn't even begin to cover it."

Clark smiled before movement at the table beside them caught their attention.

"Oh my gosh, you're Lois Lane!" a pre-teen girl squeaked before immediately being scolded by her mother.

"Sorry, please don't mind her. We don't want to disrupt your meal," the mother said.

"It's no trouble," Lois said, just as amused as she was taken aback.

"Could I have your autograph, please?" the girl pleaded

before wilting under her mother's glare.

"Sure," Lois said, her pen seemingly appearing in her hand as she tore a page from her ever ready notepad. She jotted down her signature with a simple, kind message, but then Clark held out his hand in silent request.

Confused but curious, she relinquished the pen and paper.

Clark jotted something down in the bottom corner out of the way and then handed it to the girl.

"Don't ever lose that. It'll be worth something someday," Clark stated kindly.

"You wrote the date and 'CK,'" the girl said, confused.

"This will give it credibility. My signature is on record in many cities," Clark explained with a knowing glint.

"Oh! Thank you both so much," she said, bringing it close to her chest.

The girl and mother turned back to their meal, both embarrassed but for different reasons.

Clark and Lois shared a smirk before Clark jumped slightly and pulled out his pager that apparently just vibrated.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I'm going to have to cut this short," he said regretfully while getting up. "I'm glad I finally got to meet you. Shall I call you to arrange a time for me to drop off that information I mentioned before?"

"Yes, please. And I'm glad we got to meet as well," she said, hiding her disappointment of him leaving fairly well with her professional tone as Clark pulled out a fifty and placed it on the table.

"Please tell your Uncle Mike to keep the change," he said, enjoying her look of surprise.

"You're good," she said appraisingly.

"I'll try to call you before the end of the week," he said on his way out.

Lois turned on her television, knowing the trial of Lex Luthor had already resumed.

The last few days had been what most would expect. She wondered how it compared to the Nuremberg Trials after World War 2. It didn't involve as many people, obviously, but the atmosphere itself was solemn with surges of heated testimony and tear-jerking words spliced between damning evidence.

The courtroom itself appeared identical to the chamber used for the Nuremberg Trials and was set up similarly. Dark wood paneling and heavy mahogany furniture adorned the room. The only substantial difference was the technology, which included cameras more discreetly lining the walls and ear buds instead of headphones for everyone participating.

They had gone through all of the criminal actions of Luthor's organization, going deep into the human trafficking that had occurred, racketeering, blackmail, etcetera (which impacted many nations), and the murders Luthor had personally ordered—which included Miranda Fairchild, Dr. Antoinette Baines, Commander Jack Laderman, and Dr. Samuel Platt.

Luthor was done for long before they started on the primary charge: conspiracy to commit mass murder.

After hearing several testimonies, which included personnel from EPRAD, they played the recording from Superman's helmet that had been backed up in EPRAD's communication system. The recording that would have contained Superman's final words had things gone worse.

Lois grinned as she watched Luthor's darkening expression throughout the trial, but his face went absolutely livid when Superman was called to the stand.

Everyone's eyes were on him as he entered the courtroom and stopped in front of the witness chair. His cape flowed behind him, his entire form a beacon of color.

He was introduced, sworn in, and sat down.

"For the court's record keeping and translators, please try to

speak slowly and pause between each question and answer," the Associate Trial Council for the United States, Colonel Gallagher, said.

"Understood," Superman said.

"Where were you born?" Gallagher asked.

"The planet Krypton, 27.1 light years from Earth, in the constellation of Corvus, orbiting the red dwarf star, Rao or LHS 2520."

"How old are you?" Gallagher asked.

"Somewhere between 26 and 30 Earth years. I don't know my exact age."

Gallagher blinked but decided to press on. "During your mission to Nightfall, where, presumably, Luthor contacted you, you called him by name. Why did you believe it was him?"

"I recognized his voice."

"You've heard his voice before?"

"On television and in person. Just before I stopped the nuclear meltdown in Metropolis is when I first heard him in person," Superman explained.

"Audio analysis was conducted and it was confirmed that the voice on the recording is Lex Luthor's. Do you know what he was referring to when he mentioned you lost him billions of dollars?"

"Yes. It's because I saved Space Station Prometheus. If it hadn't been saved, he would have put his own space station in its place. That would not only have allowed him to make billions from the patents of vaccines and other technologies developed but he'd have also become the supposed savior of the space program," Superman said.

"This is outrageous! 'Supposed savior'?! I am Lex Luthor and I refuse to sit—" Luthor said, standing up despite his lawyer's attempt to get him to calm down.

The head of the court slammed his gavel. "Mr. Luthor, sit down or you will be held in contempt of court!"

"—here and listen to this abomination speak like this about me! You think you've won—" Luthor shouted, shaking his handcuffed fists about and bashing his chair over with his leg.

"Remove him from the courtroom," the head said, both resigned and disgusted by the scene before him.

"—but you haven't! I still have sway, you'll see!" Luthor cried as they dragged him out.

Lois stared in shock and disbelief, certain the rest of the world watching was gaping as well.

"Well, how the mighty have fallen," she muttered as the court adjourned and she picked up her ever present caramel-colored suitcase.

Retrieving a thick envelope within, she pulled out a stack of papers. She had work to do.

"Well, Mr. Kent, let's see what you have for me," she said, ignoring the commercial about oat cereal and getting to work.

The bank alarm went off silently as Jeff pressed the button under the counter. Hopefully help would come before too long. These people were unhinged. They kept jumping around, as if expecting someone to rush in and surprise them.

Jeff's manager was handling things fairly well, doing what he was told while keeping his co-workers calm. He was definitely doing a better job than Jeff felt he himself would be able to do.

"Everyone, up against the wall!" the biggest robber shouted suddenly as two other robbers continued piling money into bags.

"Is he gonna come?" one beside the giant one asked. Like all of them, he was in all black, armed, fully armored, and had a mask on. The only feature of note was that he was the shortest.

"I don't know, man," Giant said. "We're just paid to do as we're told, so just chill."

"Doesn't he only show up when people are in danger?" Shorty asked.

"That's usually how I work," a voice said near the hostages.

Jeff couldn't believe he hadn't seen or heard him arrive. Superman was just suddenly there!

"Shoot him!" Giant ordered.

Several people screamed, but Superman was suddenly a blur. The bullets fell harmlessly to the floor until the gunfire stopped. Everyone stared, and Superman had the oddest look on his face as he focused on the single bullet still between his thumb and forefinger.

"A silver bullet? Are you kidding me? I'm a Kryptonian, not a werewolf," Superman said before glancing at the floor littered with dozens of other bullets. None were the same.

"Gold, cast iron, titanium, quartz," Superman listed off a few before shaking his head. "Sorry to break it to you, but none of these can hurt me. Whoever hired you sent you on a fool's errand."

Jeff had never seen so many grown men slouch in defeat so dejectedly so quickly as police swarmed in. And Jeff had never been so grateful to another living being. He looked at Superman, who was still standing there, watching the police handcuff each man who had fired upon him.

Jeff was suddenly struck by how he would have felt in Superman's place.

These men had robbed this bank in the hopes of finding a way to harm Superman. How messed up was that?

Chapter 2: Threat

Clark couldn't believe four days had passed since he had given Lois the envelope full of his notes and findings on recent cases and events pointing to the existence of Intergang infiltrating Metropolis. He wondered if she had found anything, especially after he (as Superman) put out a suspicious fire just outside her uncle's restaurant the other day—which had conveniently been reported by the Metropolis Star. He had no doubt there was something going on there.

The number of times a reporter for the Metropolis Star happened to be at the right place at the right time . . . no one was that lucky. Things were being set up and he suspected Intergang was fine with arranging their illegal activities to help the Planet's top competitor, perhaps even going as far as sending anonymous tips—assuming Intergang hadn't already fully bought the Star and was orchestrating something far worse.

He picked up his apartment's phone and dialed.

He smiled when Jimmy answered and said Lois would pick up shortly. He hadn't been sure if she would be at work.

His call was re-routed.

"Hello?" Lois asked.

"Hi, Lois, it's Clark Kent," he said, mindful of his voice so she wouldn't instantly identify him as Kal.

"Oh, hi! I'm glad you called," she said happily.

From the altered background noise, Clark could tell she was away from her desk and likely in a conference room, which, due to the lack of anyone else breathing nearby, was vacant, save for her.

"Oh?" he asked.

"Let's just say that the bad luck I mentioned before wasn't really bad luck but opponents having inside information. The story is going to break in the morning," she said, sounding very pleased.

"If this is what I think you're talking about, I doubt it will stop here," he said. "Be very cautious."

"You think there's a connection to the power vacuum?" she asked, lowering her voice while alluding to Intergang.

"Yes. I imagine certain people would benefit greatly if the Daily Planet was no longer a concern."

"Hm," she muttered, considering his words. "Have you made any breakthroughs?"

"I've gathered some more information, but nothing that can be shared over the phone, and unfortunately nothing that would stand up in court yet," he said.

"Well, then we should officially pool our resources," she suggested, although he could hear a slight strain in her voice, as if she was partly stunned that she was proposing any sort of the thing. "In a roundabout way, we worked together to bring down Luthor. I don't imagine either of us minding if we bring another shady enterprise down together."

"And I certainly won't turn away a good partnership," Clark said, his voice essentially beaming all on its own.

"Well, I can meet . . . shoot. I'm going to be out of the country for the end of Luthor's trial and probable sentencing soon. Hmm."

"That's okay. We can get together when you return. I need to wrap up a few side cases anyway, so this will enable me to do that before we hit this investigation hard," Clark assured, and he did have a few minor cases he needed to see Henderson about.

"Alright. That's a good idea. Well, I'll call you when it looks like I'll be back in Metropolis."

"Okay, thanks. Talk to you then."

"Bye."

Clark grinned, feeling the lightest he had felt since recovering his memories, but just as he was about to head out for a snack, a sharp shrill came to his ears before refining into speech.

"*Superman*," the voice said. "*I'm contacting you on a hypersonic frequency that only you and a few bats can hear. I don't know where you spend your off hours, but if I were you, I'd be at the Arboretum, east gate, inside of three minutes ... or someone is going to die.*"

He changed into his uniform and shot to the location of the voice. He came to an abrupt stop in front of a sharp-looking man in a grey suit.

"Hey, there," the man greeted, holding out his hand. "Martin Snell, good to meet you."

Kal raised an eyebrow but slowly took the offered hand, shook, and then let go.

He recognized Snell as a lawyer who often represented individuals he suspected to be employed by Intergang, and although he had no proof, it was clear the man was shady at best. Now he suspected the man's ties were far more sinister.

"I bet you're wondering how I made that little person-to-person," Snell continued, retrieving a little black object from his inner pocket and holding it up near his mouth. "*Superman, let's talk. Nice little piece of equipment, eh?*" he asked with a chuckle, putting the device away.

"If you wanted to arrange for a meeting, my Foundation exists for that purpose," Kal stated plainly. "Threatening that someone will die is not a good way to get my attention."

"I'm glad you're taking this seriously, but I unfortunately still have to do as I was directed, which includes telling you the person who's going to die. I think you know her. Lois Lane?" Snell asked. "I think she has about ten seconds. Think you can get there in time?"

Kal disappeared with the familiar sonic boom echoing after him.

He flew to the Daily Planet in seconds and seemingly appeared in front of Lois' desk, surprising Lois and everyone else in the newsroom as he suddenly snatched an object out of the air right before her.

A small little rocket.

"Kal-El, wha—?" Lois asked, but before he could answer, he disappeared again and appeared beside Jimmy, catching a second projectile.

Everyone gaped, but it was the expression on his face that stunned them the most.

He was livid.

"They're filled with paint," he stated. "I'll handle this."

He vanished once more, leaving the mini rockets on Lois' desk, and no one was sure of what they had just witnessed.

Clark barely quelled the rage bubbling within him, knowing

he had to think and act quickly if he was going to properly respond to this threat.

He flew high over Metropolis, gazing down and zeroing onto the District Attorney's office after scanning the police department. Not seeing Henderson but someone else, he took a deep breath and decided to take a chance. He abruptly descended.

Mayson was finishing up yet another case tied to the Luthor mess. She closed the file containing evidence against one of the many small fish entrapped by the recent revelations. It was tedious and unending, but she knew the better job they did today would mean less crime committed later. It was mind numbing how quickly the bad guys would join the next crime syndicate if they managed to escape justice the first time.

She put the folder down as she spotted movement at the window before a rushing sound whirled around her office and the click of a lock seemed to echo loudly soon after.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Drake, but this is an emergency and I need to take you somewhere to observe something from a distance. I also need to borrow some subtle recording equipment. I believe this involves Intergang and that they're trying to coerce me into doing something," Superman said as her eyes managed to focus on his form that had appeared with a blur.

"Intergang?" she asked, standing up and opening a drawer behind her. "I have a small microphone and wireless transceiver. It's pretty short range though. Less than a block. I also have a video camera."

"That will work. Will anyone miss you for the next hour?" Superman asked as he glanced at the equipment in her hands.

"No, and when I shut my door, everyone knows I'm not to be disturbed," she said professionally.

"Good. Now, we don't have much time. Martin Snell is at the park and I suspect he expects me to return soon. I'm sorry I can't explain, but I'll answer all your questions afterward," he promised.

"Well, now that I know it involves that man, I can hardly wait for your explanation, but what is the plan?" she asked.

"You keep the recorder, and tape what you see. I'll place you where he can't see you. I'll need the microphone. How close does it need to be to record properly?" he asked as she handed him a small, discreet looking rod that could be mistaken for a pen at first glance.

"Within ten feet to catch normal conversation, minimal background noise," she said.

"That will have to do," he said, placing it in a pocket that was subtly sewn into his cape.

She placed the camera and transceiver into her purse before placing the earpiece connected to the transceiver's recorder by a wire into her ear so she could hear what was being recorded.

He looked at her, for the first time appearing uncertain. "I'll need to fly us quickly. Would you prefer..." He held out his hand in question.

"As long as it's not bridal style or fireman's carry, I'll deal," she said simply, stepping toward him and taking his hand more calmly than she would have months before.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm going to say some things I won't mean. I believe my deception will be worth it," he warned before he wrapped his other arm around her back and closed the distance so his side was touching hers.

And then her office disappeared in a blur, and for a long second she felt horribly disoriented, but it quickly bled away into a feeling of simple movement. It was surreal.

They stopped and she found he had placed her in a cluster of trees across from a bench facing away from her with a man who could only be Martin Slimy Snell. Superman was already gone,

leaving her with the camera and transceiver. She aimed the camera and pressed record the moment his red and blue form appeared before Snell.

"Easy. I just wanted to get your attention so we could have a talk," she heard Snell say through the earpiece, which was a relief. It meant the microphone was working.

Superman glared. Actually glared. "What do you hope to accomplish by antagonizing me?"

"Wow, you remind me of a few judges I know. Okay, I'll cut to the chase: like everybody else on Earth, you've got me dazzled. I'm a fan—numero uno. So I don't want you to stop being the Man of Steel. It's a beautiful thing; it gives us all hope. But what my partners and I *do* want is for you to stay out of our business."

Superman sighed heavily and surprised both Mayson and Snell by going to the bench, sitting down, and then motioning Snell to sit beside him (keeping Snell's back to Mayson).

"Look, I've been on Earth long enough to know there are some things I'll never be able to change. Human nature, specifically. I've also learned it's better to work with the established way of things. Which is primarily why, as I've said multiple times, I don't want to arrest people, and frankly don't want to be involved with the law beyond making sure people are kept out of harm's way.

"I can see you represent a serious group of people, and, considering the high-tech weaponry I just had to intercept, pretty powerful. So how about this, to keep things civil, I'll stay out of your business as long as you—A. don't harm children—and B. don't do anything to *make it* my business."

Snell leaned back. "You are a strange one."

"I'm not human. How is my being strange a surprise to you?"

"Hm. Well, you give a very interesting proposition. I must say I didn't expect this. I may have painted you wrong. I can say we will do our utmost to do no harm to children. I know a number of my benefactors are family men and abhor such things. Unfortunately, there may be instances where we cannot ensure your second request but will still require you to not interfere."

Superman didn't move, and Mayson wished she could see his face.

"However, maybe something can be arranged in those cases?" Snell suggested, not allowing his pause to stretch too long.

"Arranged?" Superman asked.

"Well, some more donations for that Foundation of yours for one," Snell said pointedly.

Superman paused, seeming to consider it, and Mayson was impressed by the act.

"I'll need to know more about who you represent and a bit about what you're doing so I know who to avoid and what not to interfere with," Superman said finally.

Snell straightened, and Mayson could easily imagine his triumphant expression—she had seen it first hand a few times in court unfortunately.

"Well, I can't go revealing that quite yet, especially not before certain people give permission, but perhaps I could get back with you?" Snell offered.

"I suppose that would be fair," Superman allowed.

"Until then, may I simply ask you to stay out of the Southside?" Snell kindly asked.

"As long as there are no notable emergency calls," Superman said.

"Very good, and please expect an anonymous donation to your Foundation by the end of the week," Snell returned.

Superman stood up and gave a curt nod.

"I'll contact you when I've heard from the higher ups," Snell said, holding out his hand as he stood as well.

"Very well," Superman said, before stepping back and disappearing with a sonic boom.

Mayson stood frozen, a little confused when she didn't hear

static in her earpiece at his departure (which should have happened if the mic was on Superman). Instead, she heard Snell chuckle softly.

“Well, I didn’t expect that. Did you, Mr. Church?” Snell asked into the air.

Mayson slowly lowered herself further into the brush to ensure she remained hidden as she pressed her hand over her earpiece, suddenly unable to breathe.

Clark had been right!

She remained still, quickly concluding that Intergang was listening and likely observing the area just as she was.

Had she been seen? Did Superman know the area was under surveillance? It would explain his hasty movements. And where had he placed the microphone?

“Maybe we won’t need to find a way to kill him after all,” Snell commented before walking off.

It was a full minute later, squatting in the thicket and praying no one would find her when she felt Superman step beside her.

“I’m sorry. I had to wait until they had left, otherwise I would have returned sooner,” Superman explained as she stood up.

“It’s fine. I just overheard something that I think you’ll be interested in. Come on. I’ll play it back to you in my office,” Mayson said, ignoring the leaves brushing against her arm.

He nodded and did as she directed, returning them to her office seconds later.

Stepping away from him and swallowing back her disorientation from the swift flight, she placed the recorder on her desk and pressed a few buttons. “We need to get Henderson and someone else I know in on this.”

“Alright,” Superman said.

The recorder began rewinding.

While they waited, Mayson anxiously spoke, “You understand how close you are to this now? Intergang believes they have you in their pocket now,” she warned, glancing up at him. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“I’ve essentially lived ‘undercover’ for well over ten years, Ms. Drake. Considering what I know about Intergang, they need to be taken down. I’ll help in any way I can and I see this as the surest way of doing so,” Superman said as the recorder stopped.

“As long as you’re sure,” she said before pushing play.

Lois closed and locked the door behind her, set on packing for her trip to cover the end of Luthor’s trial.

The Star was dealing with the fallout of the evidence of them orchestrating accidents to get scoops and prison time was inevitable for a number of editorial staff and others—and rightly so. She still couldn’t believe Linda had come to her for help, but as conceded as they both could admittedly be, they knew where to draw the line.

Unfortunately, despite their efforts, the more serious implications were not ready to be tried in court. Intergang got a reprieve there, but at least the *Planet* was not in danger of falling into the red as it had been.

Lois sighed, bringing in her laundry basket and getting on the dreaded, eternal task of folding clothes. Fortunately, she had handled most of it the night before, so now there were only shirt tops and socks left, but still. She hated folding and matching socks.

Sitting down on the couch, she pushed the basket over, letting the contents spill out onto the cushions as she picked up the top article of clothing. In the middle of folding her third shirt, she suddenly heard a soft ‘taptap’.

“Kal-El!” she said, quickly abandoning her mound of jumbled shirts.

“Hi, Lois,” he greeted as she opened the window and motioned him in.

Although he was smiling, his posture was serious, and

considering what had happened earlier that day, it was no wonder.

“Sorry I haven’t been able to catch you before now,” he said. “The few times I’ve tried I didn’t hear you or could tell you were asleep.”

“It’s alright. Things have been pretty hectic lately,” she assured, before digesting what he just said. “What do you mean by ‘hear me’?” she questioned.

“Your heartbeat,” he said with a shrug. “It’s the easiest way for me to locate people without, uh, completely invading their privacy.”

She blinked, faced with yet another aspect of his world.

“So ... you can identify people by the sound of their heartbeat?”

“Well, yeah. Every heart is different, so even though rhythms can sometimes be indistinguishable, the sound is ... unique to each individual. It’s hard to explain.”

She smiled softly. “That’s amazing.”

Kal grinned before following her further into the room.

“Oh, I, uh, am packing for my trip,” she explained, quickly stuffing the shirts back into the basket and righting it, embarrassed by the mess but exceedingly grateful she had taken care of the undergarments the night before.

He nodded, unsurprised. “You’re covering the end of Luthor’s trial and his sentencing, right?”

“Yeah. Perry figures it fitting, considering everything.”

Kal smiled. “You definitely deserve to be there to see this to its conclusion personally.”

“Will you be there?” she asked, curious—and somewhat hopeful.

“Probably not. Knowing Justice is being done is enough for me, though I’d be lying if I said I’m not relieved about his likely fate, as awful as that might sound.”

“It’s not awful, just sad that Luthor’s choices have resulted in such. And I know you’re not the only one feeling that way,” Lois said before taking a deep breath. “So, did you take care of whoever was responsible for those rockets?”

“Partially. Unfortunately it’s part of a bigger problem,” he said as she put the basket on the floor so they could both sit on the couch. Superman glanced at the basket. “Would you like some help with that?” he asked.

“Oh, I couldn’t ask you to—”

“It’s no problem,” he said, taking the initiative and simply moving. Five seconds later, there was a stack of neatly folded shirts on the table beside a small pile of paired socks.

“Wow. You must be great around the house.”

Kal chuckled as he sat down beside her. “My parents think so. When I first started zipping around, my dad would just make up stuff for me to do just to see how quickly I could do it. Turned it into a game.”

Lois smiled. “I’m so glad you got your memories back,” she said, deciding not to press further just then, despite every reporter’s instinct itching to barrage him with questions.

“Me too,” he agreed before returning to their prior topic.

“Anyway, the rockets—I believe they were sent by Intergang. I’m currently working with an assistant DA to gather evidence.”

Lois’ eyes widened. “Intergang! So Kent was right! They really are moving in to fill the void Luthor left behind!” She took in his surprised look. “Oh, Kent is a P.I.. He’s been helping with a lot of cases in Metropolis. I think I mentioned him before?” She thought she had, but considering how busy things had been, perhaps he did not remember.

“You have,” he said, before adding, “Ms. Drake is actually planning on bringing him in on this investigation.”

Lois wished she knew what he was thinking, but then she recalled something.

“That bank robbery. The one where they used bullets made of different materials,” she said, omitting the suspected motive. “Do

you think that was Intergang as well?”

“Undoubtedly. They’re really doing all they can to take Luthor’s place,” he said.

“And you’re in their way,” Lois said, smirking.

“I’m hard to move,” Kal said with an amused shrug before glancing at the window. “However, I’m also working on a more subtle approach with Ms. Drake, which I’ll explain when you return. Anyway, I should be going. Admittedly, I have my own laundry to do.”

Her eyebrows rose slightly, both at wondering what the ‘subtle approach’ was and trying to imagine him doing laundry. In the end, she realized she still had a lot of packing to do and that sating her curiosity would have to wait. “Okay. I need to finish packing anyway. Thanks for stopping by.”

“No problem, Lois. Glad I managed to catch you before you left,” he said with a smile. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Lois returned, before he disappeared. Her window gently closed behind the sound of his sonic boom.

Clark hovered above the clouds overlooking the Southside of the city, his eyes peering down and scanning for anything suspicious.

He didn’t need to wait long.

In his civilian clothes, he landed in the alley across the way and immediately dashed over to *Café Americana* just under the speed that would be abnormal for a human.

“Come on, old man, let’s see how tough you really are!” a young man shouted, brandishing a bat at Mike Lane as two other rough-looking men aggressively blocked any escape behind the determined but nervous restaurant owner.

Clark’s hand didn’t hesitate as it closed around the end of the bat, just as the man swung it back. Clark yanked it away, allowing it to clatter onto the pavement behind him.

“Three on one? Let’s even it up a bit,” Clark said, dodging a fist and pulling back his own.

His knuckles made contact with the first man’s jaw, and it was with careful force that he merely jostled out two molars. The man went down with a stunned yelp as Clark turned his attention to the other two.

“Where did he come from?!” the left one in a red shirt cried while retrieving a switchblade from his back pocket.

“Knife!” Mike warned, but Clark was already moving.

Red-shirt dropped the knife as soon as Clark’s fist whacked against his wrist and fell when Clark followed up with a second strike to his chest. The third thug charged Clark as Red-shirt landed with a thud, but Clark expertly tossed him over his shoulder thanks to years of military training.

The three defeated men groaned on the ground.

“Are you alright?” Clark asked, looking at Mike.

Mike blinked, in disbelief of what had just happened while trying to recall where he had seen this man before because he looked very familiar.

“Yes. Thanks,” Mike said as he suddenly remembered. “You had dinner here with my niece last week. P.I. Ke...” He trailed off, not sure of his name as he held out his hand.

“Kent. Clark Kent,” Clark said, taking his offered hand and giving it a firm single pump before letting go.

“That’s right. I’m not sure why you came by, but I’m glad you did. I wouldn’t have been able to take all three,” Mike said, waving at the still defeated men around them.

“Glad I could help. I actually just came by to ask you about the arson attempt on your place recently,” he said as they heard police sirens.

“I called Lois, so she must have called the police for me since this area hasn’t been getting a fast response from them lately.”

Clark frowned. “I see.”

Intergang apparently had more power than he already feared.

Lois clasped her hands in front of herself as Luthor was brought out. The last several days of the trial had fluctuated between being agonizingly boring (the monotonous back and forth bureaucracy), frighteningly enlightening (the endless reveals of what Luthor had done), and disgustingly putrid (whenever she looked at Luthor).

She never had believed someone could be the embodiment of evil, but she did now, and Luthor could be that someone.

The day of the verdict finally arrived, and after the standard protocols had been followed, the spokesman for the tribunal stood up.

“The tribunal finds Alexander Luthor guilty of eight counts of murder in the first degree, guilty of five counts of murder in the second degree, guilty of three counts of attempted murder, guilty of four counts of sabotage.” The man took a breath and Lois’ eyes widened as the man continued. “Guilty of twenty counts of extortion, guilty of seven counts of reckless endangerment, guilty of racketeering, guilty of conspiring to commit mass murder.” He flipped to the next sheet to continue reading.

Three minutes later, the list of verdicts had all been read.

That had to have been the longest list of guilty verdicts in the history of criminal justice read in one go. There had only been three ‘not guilty’s.

Lois looked at Luthor, knowing she wasn’t the only one staring at him.

He looked disgusted by it all, but not at all concerned over what he had done. It was as if he felt the convictions held no actual weight, and it was all an annoying inconvenience. As if it was all beneath him.

Sentencing would be the following week. She wondered if he would remain as carefree then.

Chapter 3: Mr. Church

He was leaving the precinct when he heard the odd whine once again, which soon gave way to speech.

Intergang was apparently ready to speak with him again.

“*Superman, please meet me on the roof of the warehouse on the corner of 4th and D street.*”

Slipping into an alley, he changed and shot across the city after making a quick stop at his apartment to pick up some equipment. Unfortunately, Mayson was busy in a courtroom but their preparations would suffice for now, he hoped.

Zippering faster than anyone could see, he placed a few microphones on and throughout the indicated building, including a room with a few chairs and a computer that was currently shut down, after spotting Martin Snell and a few other individuals. Hopefully one of the mics Mayson had obtained for him would be able to record something useful.

He left the building before arcing across the sky to give a sonic boom to make it appear that he was only just now approaching. He landed in front of Snell a moment later.

“Ah, happy to see you again, Superman,” the lawyer said with a grin. “Now, I spoke with my benefactors—or should I say ‘our benefactors’?—and they were pleasantly surprised by your stance. They appreciate your forwardness and respect what you do for the world.”

Superman gave an acknowledging nod.

“As such, they are willing to adjust a few of their operations to ensure they meet the two stipulations you listed. They, and myself, see no reason to refuse the reasonable arrangement,” he said, motioning him to follow.

Two other people appeared, and it was clear by their rough appearance that they were typical underlings who served as intimidating security.

“I figure it’ll be nicer to speak further inside. Especially since I believe you would like to meet the—” Snell coughed. “—the

head of Intergang. This way.”

Superman followed simply, seemingly unconcerned by that tidbit.

They went deeper into the building and Superman was privately pleased when they entered the room with the computer and his hidden microphone. Interestingly, the computer and equipment were now on beside a somewhat nerdy individual with a rumpled old plaid shirt with thick rimmed glasses.

Snell stopped beside the computer and the two guards stepped in behind him. The man, who had just finished his job of providing I.T. support, gave Snell a nod and a curious yet hesitant look toward Superman.

“Superman is here, sir,” Snell said, speaking into the computer’s microphone and turning the computer screen around to face Superman.

The view on the screen was of a rich, indistinct office with a chair’s back at the center. The individual in the chair was completely out of view.

“Very good,” an electronically distorted voice said. “Good evening, Superman.”

“Good evening.”

“I apologize I am not forthcoming with my identity, but one must be cautious,” the man said, his voice still distorted before he inhaled thickly and released a puff of what was likely cigar smoke above the chair.

“I understand,” Superman said amiably.

“I imagine you do. Well, as Martin already told you, your first condition isn’t a problem. Our business typically keeps children out of things, and I will now ensure that is always the case. I’m a family man, first and foremost, and a businessman second. I like to keep things in order—civilized, at least as much as possible. Does that comfort you?”

“It alleviates some of my concerns, I’ll admit,” Superman said.

The chair rotated slightly, still hiding the man in the chair but revealing a computer screen beyond it that was clearly a live feed of the room they were in since Kal could make out his cape covered shoulder.

Yet another example of Intergang’s power and influence. That was an impressive collection of technology—which made sense considering their previous stunt to get his attention.

“Good. You see, I’m not a bad man, I just understand human nature and wish to curtail it. If we were not here, others would be and it’d be worse. I do not want to see history repeat itself.”

“Repeat itself?” Superman asked.

“When the mafia lost their hold of cities across the US, a different form of criminality took hold. One that does not attempt to keep clear of the general population but terrorizes it through violent rites of passage and endless infighting, even going as far as targeting random individuals and uncaring of who they pull into the underworld. I’m talking about gangs, of course. Brutes of the worst kind.”

“So you believe, by leading Intergang, you are sparing the public worse forms of crime and harm?” Superman asked curiously.

“Yes. We keep those with a dark nature in check.”

Kal nodded thoughtfully, continuing his act. “Do you allow people to leave your organization if they wish? Surely some come to realize they don’t need to pursue criminal activities forever?”

“Leave where? Most of my employees have records and no legal skills. Why would they feel they could leave with no means to make a life? Most I imagine feel they don’t deserve the chance — and to be honest, many do not.”

Kal grew still, wondering if there was a way to help some of these people directly or if he was contemplating a pipe dream. If they managed to bring Intergang down, there would be a lot of people left in limbo, feeling they needed to find another syndicate

—or worse, feeling they could easily rise and fill the sudden void themselves.

They were already seeing it with Luthor’s crumpled empire, and they would see it again once Intergang fell, only it would be worse, because it would be worldwide and with no means to contain it. Granted, all of the individuals would be without clear leadership, but as cities terrorized by gangs could attest to, such infighting that resulted often means worse results for those within the vicinity.

Hmm, perhaps the Foundation could begin some programs to help such individuals get out of the vicious cycle. He promised himself to bring up the idea to Julie and Mav.

“I see you understand,” the man said, drawing another long puff from the cigar.

“No, I’m just thinking and—” Superman said, leaning forward and staring right in the camera as he thought quickly. “—wondering. Are you a man willing to make a real difference? If you are sincere in your desire to prevent those with ‘dark natures’ from running rampant, why not go a step further?”

“A step further?” he asked, exhaling a puff of cigar smoke that rose above his chair.

Superman straightened, clearly contemplating something.

It was a risk, but by this point he was well on his way to obtaining the evidence Mayson needed to get a warrant that would likely lead to more evidence, and if his somewhat crazy idea worked....

“May I speak to you without any other eyes or ears?” Superman asked.

“An odd request, but very well. Martin, clear the room. I will speak to Superman alone,” he said, his voice still electronically distorted and unidentifiable with the back of his chair still taking most of the view on the computer screen.

“Of course,” Martin said, motioning the other men to leave in front of him. They did so and Martin closed the door behind him.

“Alright, Superman. It’s just the two of us.”

“You may call me Kal, Mr. Church,” Superman said.

The smoke rising above the chair stopped wavering and simply rose from one location.

“I’ve known who you are for a long time. Traveling around the world, I hear things, and the connection between Intergang and CostMart was not too difficult to make. Every city with a CostMart has a high concentration of organized crime and essentially no gang activity.”

Mr. Church remained silent.

“Mr. Church, I think we could do a lot of good together. I don’t condone the things you’ve done through Intergang, but I understand your reason for creating and leading it. And now you have an opportunity. Starting today, let’s go a different path, together. We can make a better way, have a more positive impact. You have created a means to prevent the creation of more criminals and provide an avenue to those having second thoughts, wishing to become better people. You are already rich, already great. Why not good, too?” Superman finished, easing back.

Church was silent for a long time, saying nothing as he put out his cigar and shifted briefly in his chair. Finally, when Kal began to wonder if he had pushed too hard, too fast, Church rotated about in his chair and faced him.

“I will consider what you have said. You bring up something I have been hesitant to think about, but now that I have heard it from someone else.... We’ll be in contact,” he said, his voice normal before he swiveled back around, signaling the end to this meeting.

“Thank you, Mr. Church,” Kal said, silently standing up from the chair.

He went to the door and opened it, surprising Martin who was standing just a few feet away.

“Superman?” he questioned, for the first time looking weary.

“We’ve finished for now. Thank you,” Kal said simply, deciding he’ll come back for the hidden mic later and leaving with a parting nod.

Lois took a slow deep breath.

Luthor was to be executed by firing squad in three days’ time. Interestingly, the man had specifically requested that manner of execution, preferring it over lethal injection, hanging, or the electric chair. It was archaic, but Lois couldn’t say she was surprised. Luthor was the most dramatic person alive. She was, however, surprised by how prompt the tribunal was being. That was by far more surprising than the concession to Luthor’s violent request of meeting his fate by firing squad. She had expected things to take longer to be arranged, but she wasn’t going to complain.

Mayson shook her head and thought back to the situation in the hospital she had just left.

Bill Church Sr. was in the ICU. He had been brought in by his driver with burst eardrums and blunt force trauma that Mayson felt was clearly the result of an assault on his person. Unfortunately, neither he nor his driver could reveal how he had been hurt let alone **who** had hurt him. Bill was unconscious with swelling on his brain and his driver stated he had found him on Church’s property against the garage wall just outside of his mansion.

It was truly baffling.

“Something wrong?” Clark asked, coming up behind her in the precinct.

“Oh! Clark, I didn’t expect to see you today,” she said, surprised but pleased.

He smiled and waited for her to answer his question.

“Well, Church Sr. is in the hospital with burst ear drums and blunt force trauma. His driver brought him in unconscious. He looks like he was slammed into a wall, although don’t ask me how that blew up his eardrums. The doctors are keeping him under and hoping his brain doesn’t swell much further or they’ll have to do surgery,” Mayson said as they went down the hall to her office together.

“What? Bill Church?” he asked, stunned.

“Yeah. I know,” she agreed.

Clark frowned, deep in thought as they stepped into her office. She closed the door. “I wonder ... do you think this could be a power struggle? The timing of this is highly suspicious.”

“A power struggle? Inside Intergang? Perhaps, considering Superman’s insane theory about Bill’s conscience.” Mayson sighed and shook her head. “Part of me hopes he is right. I’ve known Bill for a long time, and after learning about what he does behind CostMart.... I’d like to believe I wasn’t completely wrong in my initial feelings about the man even though I was clearly tricked by him.”

“You weren’t completely wrong because there is good in everyone,” Clark said. “Or perhaps it is better to say everyone is capable of doing good and choosing right.”

Mayson smiled. “That’s a nice belief.”

Clark tilted his head. “But you don’t believe it.”

“I’ve seen a lot of evil people, and imagining any of those individuals suddenly choosing to do something kind ... they wouldn’t, unless it gained them something, which usually involves enabling them to do more harm. Look at Luthor. Maybe they could have done good in the past, but not anymore. It’s no longer something they can consider. For whatever reason, they cannot even fathom doing something unselfish, and for people like that ... well, there’s only two things society can do with them,” she said, alluding to Luthor’s imminent execution that would occur in a few days.

Clark looked saddened by her words, but before he could respond, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” she stated.

Henderson stepped in. “Oh good. You’re both here.”

“What’s up, Bill, you seem a little rattled,” Clark said.

“Metropolis Bank was just robbed. Clean getaway, no suspects. Everyone in the bank who could have been witnesses weren’t because they were unconscious during the whole thing,” Henderson explained quickly. “Come on, I have the security tape. You’ve got to see this.”

Clark and Mayson quickly followed. It was rare to see Bill like this.

Bill closed his office door behind them and motioned toward the television set where the VCR and tape were ready. Once they were settled, he pushed play.

It was a recording of the inside of a bank, Metropolis Mercantile Bank, to be exact. They stared as suddenly the people within began collapsing for seemingly no reason or warning. And then a group of men with black motorcycle helmets and jackets rushed in and began robbing the bank.

Clark pressed pause.

“It’s the sound,” Clark stated, startling Mayson.

“What?” she asked while wondering why she was so tired.

“It’s what made everyone collapse, and what started making y—us drowsy,” he explained.

“That’s what I deduced, too, and even knowing to expect the sound doesn’t help much with staying awake,” Bill answered with a yawn.

“This is huge,” Mayson said. “Who else has seen this?”

“Counting us? Just seven. The mayor has already been called. The Chief of Police plans to show him before the end of the day,” Bill said.

“Good. This ... group could go and do anything they want again and likely get away with it. Do you think earplugs or headphones would protect officers?” Mayson asked.

“I don’t know. They were clearly able to protect themselves, but maybe they were listening to a frequency to counter the sound making people sleep,” Clark warned, pointing to their helmets.

“Good point, but I’ll request an order of earplugs just the same,” Bill said, hoping for the best.

Clark nodded in agreement. “Well, I’ll see if any of my contacts have heard anything about this group or sound technology.”

“Okay, thank you,” Bill said.

“I’ll let you know if Bill Church’s condition changes at all,” Mayson assured.

Clark nodded appreciatively before walking out.

Lois took a deep breath as she walked from the cab and to her hotel.

Luthor was dead.

She had stood as witness, along with a dozen other journalists and news correspondents selected by the international court to report on Luthor’s execution and cremation.

It had been so surreal watching the man that had nearly doomed the planet to an unparalleled catastrophe, an impact winter, march forward with such arrogant defiance before being secured to the shooting wall. Beforehand, he had refused a priest and the like, stating he was beyond such things. Lois doubted Luthor had any concept of remorse.

“Ready!” the order sounded in the square.

“The world will regret this!” Luthor snarled suddenly, yelling as loudly as he could since he had no mic to carry his voice unhindered to the assembled group behind his executioners. “Humanity will regret that I failed to terminate the alien!”

“Aim!”

“Mark my words!” he spat. “You all will—”

“Fire!”

He died instantly and she joined the even smaller group to the

crematorium soon after to witness and report that his body was properly put to rest.

She felt guilty about not having the urge to vomit after it was all over.

Instead, she took a bubble bath and tried to imagine herself back in her apartment, in the States.

She couldn't wait to fly back the next morning and put all of it behind her.

The noise was a dull, annoying buzz, but Clark instantly knew what it was as he flew over the city. Changing course, he scanned the area below, instantly finding the motorcycle-like gang wearing biker jackets and helmets in the bank. They were, without question, the same individuals from the video Bill had shown him and Mayson. They stepped over the bodies of sleeping bankers and customers as they emptied the vault. He also spotted another man standing watch out front with a bizarre gun. His eyes returned to those inside and decided it would be better to address those individuals first to prevent any from getting away or attempting to hold anyone hostage.

He shot past the man standing out in the street and went into the bank, swiftly transporting all of the bank robbers within into the vault before they could react. He closed and locked the door, knowing there was plenty of air for all of them to be fine for several hours.

He then twisted around and went back out, set to get the last man.

He shot outside, intent on removing the gun from the man's hand first to eliminate any threat to the people who were sleeping in and around the bank, but he was suddenly, unbelievably, deflected.

He found himself on his side on the sidewalk and quickly turned back to the man who immediately laughed and pointed the odd gun at him.

"Oh, hello, Superman. I see you have discovered the function of this glove. It creates a little something I dreamt up called the Wall of Sound. A sonic barrier so dense nothing can get through it, not even you, Superman. And there's no plug to pull—independent power supply," he said through his helmet, wiggling his gloved fingers at him before pulling the trigger of the gun.

An odd sound came forth but did nothing as Superman got to his feet, but then the man, who Superman decided to mentally refer to as 'Sound Man', turned a dial on the back of the gun and fired again.

The noise was tangible and Superman barely contained a gasp of pain as he stumbled backward onto the street. A pulsing buzz of pain rang loudly through his core and the ground beneath his feet felt as if it was tilting.

"Never thought super-hearing'd make you super-vulnerable? Guess under that steel skin, you're just a sensitive guy," he said, holding the trigger down as he adjusted the dial again.

The world spun violently around Superman, and he found himself crashing down onto the black pavement. The screech of invisible waves pummeled his whole being and the resounding force from it echoed in his mind so loudly that his vision actually wavered. Closing his eyes didn't help, as he was suddenly assaulted by nausea on top of a white hot spike of pain through his skull.

"Your equilibrium's shot. In a minute, you won't even be able to walk again—let alone fly," he said, walking forward.

Superman tried to back away but was mercifully given a reprieve when two police cars squealed onto the street. He wanted to sag in relief, but the knowledge that what had just assaulted him was about to hit people who did not have his abilities roared in his heart. Surely they would die if they were struck with this! He had to stop him!

The Sound Man turned around, dialing the gun up to an even

higher frequency. He took aim as the officers stepped out of their vehicles.

"Put the gun down!" an officer ordered.

Superman clamored forward, his balance completely skewed but he hoped he was moving in the right direction and that what he was seeing was actually where he perceived it to be. His target was the outstretched gun, his jumbled mind managing to instantly recall the wall of sound only reached a foot around the glove.

The gun was currently outside of that range.

He knew he did not appear graceful but he didn't care. He leapt forward, reaching out and desperate to stop the gun from being fired at the police.

O o O

Mayson jammed the earplugs in a little harder than she had intended as the officer she was driving with steered the car behind another cruiser. They had been on their way to a crime scene across town, but when they learned there was a robbery in progress she agreed to change course.

"Good Lord, is that Superman?!" the driver shouted as they made it around the bend and skidded to a stop.

Superman was on the road, and it didn't look good.

The driver didn't wait for a response as they assessed the situation and stepped out.

"Put the gun down!" an officer from the other squad car ordered. "We'll shoot!"

Mayson unholstered her weapon as Superman *moved*.

He was clearly unstable as he got to his feet and his expression was marred with what she could only define as pain, but he dashed toward the helmeted biker anyway. She was confused about why he didn't simply tackle him or why he wasn't moving faster, but maybe he was afraid of hurting him? Or maybe he was more off-balanced by whatever that man had done than she thought, but in either case, he managed to make it to the man in a stumbling leap.

Mayson could not believe her eyes as Superman fell — fell! — his hand tugging the man's aim away from them and down. Unfortunately, due to how he fell, Superman ended up directly in the path of the disc-like barrel just as the trigger was pulled. The gun released a massive long *boooooonng* that sounded like it should have come from a giant, car-sized cymbal instead of a handgun, especially since the sound—just—*kept—going*.

The pavement beneath Superman cracked under the blast as he was slammed down with it. The man took a step back, not even needing to shrug off Superman's hand since the Man of Steel had already let go as the weapon continued pouring out the unrelenting frequency.

"Drop the gun!" one of the other officers ordered again. "Stop!"

Mayson had seen enough and fired. Twice.

Two odd, flickering waves rippled out over the man's body, but in an instant he was down and the sound gun fell silent.

"Shots fired, shots fired. Suspect down, EMS needed," the officer nearest her declared into his radio.

Mayson hurried forward, adrenaline high as she quickly kicked the bizarre gun from the man's limp hand a moment before the three other officers cautiously approached. She wasn't sure if the man would make it, but she let the officers tend to him.

Heart still pounding in her chest, she turned toward the red fabric at the corner of her vision, not sure what to expect at all. She holstered her gun as her eyes scanned the Kryptonian.

He was alive, that much was clear by his feeble but successful move to sit up. However, one of his hands was over his ear and covering part of his face while the other was on the ground to keep him upright.

"Kal-El?" she asked. The foreign name still felt strange to say, but she preferred that over saying 'Superman'.

However, he didn't respond, which she found very alarming

for some reason, and so she stepped directly in front of him and knelt down to get his attention.

“Ka—?”

Her breath lodged in her throat as she spotted bright red blood beginning to trickle from his nose.

How could this be? This was Superman! An alien who took bullets at point blank range and who had survived crashing into an asteroid with a megaton bomb before making it back to earth under his own power! How could he be *bleeding*? Did he have internal injuries? Should she take him to the hospital? Call an ambulance?

He moved his hand from the side of his head, revealing more blood seeping from his ear, before he touched his upper lip. He pulled his hand away and looked down at the red now smeared across his finger tips.

Mayson was certain by the shock on his face that he had never seen his own blood before.

/This is bad/

The voice was strained but clear, which surprised her since everything was still muted due to having earplugs in her ears and after hearing that awful long blast from the gun. She removed the earplugs since they weren’t needed anymore.

“What?” she asked, glancing back to the officers behind her but they didn’t seem to have said anything.

Two of them were tending to the man in the hopes of keeping him alive, and the third was talking on the radio.

She glanced at the bank and spotted a number of people laying down, still out cold.

“Kal-El,” she said again.

He looked up at her with a grimace.

“I—” He cut himself off sharply, pain clear in his eyes as if struck by a blinding migraine.

/I need to get to the Foundation somehow/

She inhaled sharply, for he had not spoken, but there was no question that that was his voice, if somewhat unsteady. But she had heard it. Telepathy?

“Ambulance is on its way!” the officer called to her. “Does he need one?” he asked, referring to Superman.

She frowned, noting how the abrupt volume caused the Kryptonian to tightly close his eyes as his jaw clenched. She quickly made up her mind.

“No, just let me borrow your cruiser. I’ll take him to his Foundation,” she answered, unequivocally confirming her assumption that sound was causing him more than a little discomfort as he brought his bloodied hand back up to his ear.

The officer tossed her his keys, frowning in question at Superman’s abnormal behavior (the superhero was facing away from him and was still not on his feet), but Mayson waved him down. He gave her a nod in understanding, allowing her to do as she saw fit.

Boldly, she put her hand under Superman’s blue covered elbow and pulled up. She was pleased by how he didn’t resist or look at her bewildered, though maybe he cared more about getting to the Foundation than anything else — after all, he was alarmingly unstable. He seemed to be severely veering to the right as if the ground was uneven. Fortunately, the vehicle was not far and she was able to guide him there without too much trouble before opening the front passenger door for him and helping him in.

She hurried around to the driver’s side after closing his door and buckled up before pulling a handkerchief from her breast pocket.

“Here. Pinch the bridge of your nose and look up,” she said as softly as she could.

He gratefully accepted it and did as she directed, but winced sharply as she started the engine.

“Sorry,” she mouthed.

He looked at her through squinted eyes appreciatively before taking a deep breath.

/I wish I knew why it hurts so much/

Mayson tightened her hand on the steering wheel, not sure how to respond to the words in her head.

Heavens above, he better not be able to read her thoughts!

She glanced at him and he didn’t seem to notice.

‘*Kal-El, can you hear me?*’ she hesitantly thought.

No reaction.

‘*KAL-EL, HELLO?!*’

Nothing.

‘*Hey, why boots, why a cape? Don’t you feel ridiculous?*’

Still nothing.

She mentally sighed in relief and refocused on driving.

The streets to the Foundation were thankfully nearly all clear due to the time being after common business hours, so news of Superman bleeding would hopefully go unreported.

Now, should she go around the back of the building to avoid attention?

She glanced at him in question as they turned onto the street, but found he had his eyes closed. She pursed her lips and put her hand on his forearm to get his attention.

He opened his eyes and motioned toward the back of the building. She turned down the alley and spotted one of the building’s security guards by a door. Admittedly impressed by the set up, she slowly approached the curb near the back entrance.

The armed man came to the side of the police car after giving a word into his radio.

“Ma’am, can I help yo—” he started, only to stop as he spotted Superman in the passenger seat. “Kal-El?”

He was reclined in the seat, still looking up and holding the cloth to his nose, but what had caught the guard’s eyes was the red trailing down from Superman’s ear.

“He was hurt by a sound weapon,” Mayson explained quietly. “I figured it best to bring him here instead of the hospital.”

“O-of course. Thank you,” he said quickly, moving to the passenger side and engaging his radio. “Howard, I need your help back here, and tell Charlie to get Dr. Klein here asap. Over.”

“Copy.”

“Paul,” Superman greeted, before grimacing and opening the door.

“He’s sensitive to sound and his balance is off,” Mayson warned as he stepped out.

Gripping the door, Superman proved her latter words to be true as he began to tilt to the right. Not bothering to ask for permission, Paul Isaacs quickly moved to help him as Howard came out of the Foundation and went to Superman’s other side.

Mayson followed them into the Foundation, suddenly hesitant. “I need to head back to the precinct, but I’ll need to get a statement from him later,” Mayson softly explained.

“No problem. Thank you for bringing him here,” Paul said as Charlie and Howard took Superman toward the stairs.

Superman slowed and looked back at her and gave her a thankful nod.

/Thanks, Mayson/

She left with a short wave, and only when she was halfway to the precinct did she realize that that was the first time he had called her by her first name.

Chapter 4: Structure

Howard Stone, head of security at the Foundation, waited outside the room to brief Julie and the others as Dr. Klein examined Superman. Kal sat shirtless on the bed with some nervousness under the sun lamps. He was no longer bleeding, and he was no longer overly sensitive to sound, but his equilibrium was still severely skewed to the right for some reason.

He tried not to track Dr. Klein as he paced.

“Okay, the only thing that makes sense is that your dense molecular structure was forced to hurt itself. I’m thinking the frequency of sound you were hit with was high enough to cause certain cells to vibrate into each other, primarily those making up your softer tissues—capillaries, eardrums, ect..”

“That ... sounds likely,” Kal agreed.

“The good news is that your body recovers very quickly in sunlight. Your sound sensitivity appears to be gone. Is that right?”

“Yeah. I don’t feel like my hearing is completely back to normal, but it’s not painful anymore and I can hear what’s going on outside if I concentrate.”

Klein nodded, bringing his attention back to the microscope.

“I know today wasn’t great for you, but there is a silver lining. We now have a much better understanding of your blood chemistry and how your cells repair themselves. Sunlight is the best way to help you, by far.

“What I’m still not sure of is why your equilibrium is taking so long to recover. With your eardrums and cellular damage repaired, your sense of balance should be back,” Klein said, pulling back. “Can you describe how you’re feeling again?”

“It’s hard to put into words. Uncomfortable, crowded almost. Not exactly restricted but ... I don’t know.”

Klein sat down on the stool by the bed.

“I wonder if this ties into my theory I’ve been thinking about concerning your invulnerability.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I sort of took it from Dr. Daitch. If you recall he wrote a short memoir on working with you against Nightfall. He included his theory of you producing an aura that surrounds your body, which spreads your invulnerability to anything close to your skin, like your uniform.”

Kal-El nodded, remembering Professor Daitch’s brief comment about him having an aura that allows his uniform to survive going in and out of the atmosphere.

“I think it may go further than that. I believe your aura gives you another layer of awareness humans like myself do not have, and it may do more than that. I don’t know what this does for you exactly, but it’s clear your body generates some sort of energy that extends from your skin and it is likely why you are feeling what you describe right now.” Klein tapped his chin in thought. “And actually, I think we can test this.”

He went to the table and removed some tissues from the tissue box they had retrieved for him before his nose had stopped bleeding. He then grabbed two sterile scalpels from a drawer.

“Ok, hold out this arm over here and the other over there,” Klein said.

Kal, understanding what he was doing, did so.

Klein placed a thick stack of tissues on each forearm and then brought the blade down and across his left arm.

All but the very last tissue directly against his skin was cut through.

Klein’s eyebrows rose at the result before he then slid the second blade against the tissue stack on Kal’s right arm.

Amazingly, none of the tissues suffered any damage, even though the blade had compressed them just as much as the first stack.

“Your aura is warped,” Klein said, bewildered, holding up the top undamaged tissue to inspect it. “This must be why your balance is off. On your right side, your aura is extending out much further than normal, and your left side is nowhere near where it should be. I imagine, if you were shot, there would be areas of your uniform that would suffer damage, but thankfully your skin remains impervious.”

“Do you think this is permanent?” Kal asked.

“I don’t think so. When I first began examining you, your balance was much worse than it is now. I think you just need time to recover. Likely just a few days,” Klein assured. “We’ll still keep

an eye on it of course, but I think informing certain officials that you’re taking some personal time may not be remiss.”

Kal nodded slowly. “I haven’t taken any days off since I returned a few months ago, so it shouldn’t be too concerning for people. I’ll let Mav know to make a few calls.”

“No, I will. You get some sleep,” Klein all but ordered.

Kal chuckled. “Alright, doc.”

Lois dropped her bag by her front door, exhausted.

International flights were always a bear, but that last flight was especially rough.

She had stopped by the Planet after she landed, checking in with Perry and getting another round of congratulations for covering Luthor’s end so well. It was appreciated, especially since it had been one of the hardest stories she had ever covered and wrapped up. There were even noises that she might get a Pulitzer for her coverage of ‘Luthor’s Fall’.

But she didn’t let herself dwell on that. There was another monster to take down. Intergang, and as soon as she caught up on her sleep and recent events, she’d contact Kent and see where he was at on it all.

She kicked off her shoes and turned on the TV as she went to her room to change out of her clothes.

‘An investigation is underway at Metropolis Care Hospital following the suspected murder of Sound Gang leader, Lenny Stoke. An individual disguised as a nurse was confronted by hospital security after exiting Mr. Stoke’s recovery room. Unfortunately, the individual escaped after resisting arrest and is still at large. Minutes after the confrontation, the former Rockstar went into cardiac arrest and was pronounced dead twenty minutes later. The suspect is said to be a Caucasian, middle-aged female, 5’7”, short dark hair, medium build. She is armed and extremely dangerous. If anyone has any information, please contact the police department.’

Lois frowned, listening to the news anchor as she quickly got into more comfortable clothes before returning to the living room.

‘In other news, the Superman Foundation privately informed city officials and world leaders earlier in the week that for two days Superman would only be available for emergencies above level three due to personal reasons. The Foundation has just released the following statement, here it is—’

The screen changed from showing the news studio to the front of the Foundation where Mav Ervin stood behind a podium. Superman was not present.

‘As all first responders are entitled to some time off, we feel Kal-El should be afforded the same as well. Now, after discussing logistics with community leaders and even upper government officials, any time Superman will not be conducting his typical services, we will inform the necessary individuals in the community and the world so they can be ready in case minor or moderate emergencies arise. We will not publicly announce such times until after they have passed, however, as unlawful individuals may attempt to take advantage. Now, in the case of serious or global emergencies, Superman will of course be available, just as other emergency personnel are during their time off. Thank you.’

“Huh. Well, makes sense,” Lois said, pleased the Foundation was being proactive and direct with such things. The news anchor came back on.

‘Speculation for why Superman took two days this past week is wide. Some theorize it involves the bank robberies conducted by the Sound Gang earlier this week before being brought down by Superman and the MPD,’ the news anchor prattled. ‘Others believe it concerns the recent execution of Lex Luthor who had nearly prevented him from stopping Nightfall and returning to Earth. But whatever the reason, I have no issue with Superman taking time off for himself, and know many others feel the same

way.'

Lois nodded to herself, although she too was curious about why exactly Kal had taken time off. She frowned, suddenly recalling his return to Earth and subsequent recovery. She hadn't considered how he would feel after it all. She hoped he had someone to talk to—but perhaps that's why he took some time. To talk to his adopted family?

"I suppose I can just ask him the next time I see him."

"So your aura has recovered?" his dad asked.

"Yes. It's back to normal now, thankfully. I was tired of feeling like I was walking crooked or something," Clark said before taking a bite of his mom's cooking.

"I'll admit I was leery about this doctor having such ... access to you, but he's definitely been helpful," Martha said, scooting the bowl of mashed potatoes toward him.

"Yes, Bernard is one of a kind. I'm glad the Foundation has turned out the way it has," Clark agreed.

"So this sound man, Lenny Stoke, was murdered?" Jonathan asked after a moment.

"Assassinated more like. I'll be looking further into it when I get back. I have a feeling it involves Intergang, especially considering Church Sr.'s injuries. I called Mayson as Clark last night and suggested that that would be worth investigating, although she was already on it thanks to having seen that gun in action." Clark shuddered. "I hope Burton can help make that weapon disappear, although that wall of sound gauntlet has some helpful potential, despite its heavy power requirements."

General Burton Newcomb promised he would do what he could, but due to jurisdictions, it would be a bit more delicate. Hopefully, he would still be able to work his magic, especially with his round-about help.

"Well, I'm just glad he was stopped before he could do further harm," Martha agreed. "And if I ever meet Mayson I'll need to bake her a pie. Ask her what her favorite flavor is."

Clark chuckled. "She would want to know why though."

"I'm a farmer's wife. I don't need a reason to give someone a pie," Martha pointed out.

"Fair enough."

Clark heard Henderson coming up behind him but didn't turn around as his eyes continued to pass from face to face on the missing persons' and most wanted board.

"Whatcha doing, Kent?" he asked, stopping beside him.

"Memorizing faces and names," Clark said.

"Oh, is that your secret then?" Bill asked, both joking and not.

"Just one of many," Clark answered with a smile, now facing him.

"Uh, huh. Well, I'm glad I caught you. Two things. Those items we discussed a few days ago, they were picked up early this morning. Mayson and I spoke to those involved and we're in agreement. Thanks for getting us in contact with your inside source."

Clark relaxed, instantly knowing Bill was referring to the wall-of-sound gauntlet and the much more dangerous sound gun.

"Glad I could help. It's a huge relief to hear it worked out, let me tell you," Clark said wholeheartedly.

"Yes," Henderson agreed.

"And the second thing?" Clark asked.

"Church Sr. is set to be released from the hospital soon," Bill explained.

"Oh? I hadn't realized he had woken up. What's his condition now?"

"Stable and fair. His ear drums are on the mend and he'll have to take it easy for a bit due to his concussion and the stitches on the back of his head, but he'll likely make a near full recovery

within a month. The doctors are not holding much hope of him retaining all of his hearing though."

Clark nodded. "Has he said anything about what happened?"

"He said the only thing he can remember is being blindsided by a loud noise before he hit the wall behind him, and then waking up in the hospital."

"Lenny Stoke."

Bill nodded in agreement.

"Do you believe him?" Clark asked.

"I believe his account of the events, but I think he knows more than he's saying," Bill said.

"Indeed. Well, I need to head out and talk to one of my contacts. Thanks for the update," Clark said.

"No problem."

Clark made his exit quickly, hearing a rather disturbing sound of distress.

A mother's wail of despair.

Cutting across and disappearing into an alley, he shot across the city to the noise, his eyes peering through walls and material to enable him to better understand what he was about to burst into.

It was an indoor swimming pool, and there were people gathering along one side staring at the bottom of the pool as two people frantically dove up and down, trying to save someone small who appeared trapped near what he concluded was a drain.

He zipped around and into the building, going through the doors instead of breaking through the outer wall, and a split second later was in the water. He gently removed the man who was in his way and placed his hand on the motionless body.

The nine year old girl had a strap tightly around her neck and it had somehow gotten stuck in the drain at the bottom of the pool, refusing to come free. Clark inwardly surmised the child had turned the harmless ribbon into a water toy and the water toy had turned into a death trap.

His laser vision bubbled a straight line through the water and cut the stubborn strap clean, allowing him to scoop the girl up. He shot out of the water, placing her flat on the floor before many people there could comprehend what had just happened.

He looked into her lungs and found that they were still and had water within them. She also had no pulse.

He knelt over her and did several chest compressions, ignoring the concerned onlookers and the water rolling off of him and splashing on the concrete and little body. After three sets of compressions and two rescue breaths, the girl sputtered, choking out the water in broken gasps as he gently turned her to lay in the recovery position.

"Superman! Oh, thank you, thank you so much!" a woman cried, moving forward and hugging the girl the best she could while doing her utmost to verify to herself that her daughter was alive.

"You're welcome. She will need to go to the hospital to be fully assessed. Shall I take her myself or would you prefer to wait for an ambulance?" he asked kindly.

"Oh, please take her. Which hospital do I drive to?" the woman asked, not wanting to postpone any treatment for her baby.

"Metropolis General," Superman answered before asking, "What's her name?" The girl was understandably too out of it.

"Maggie. Maggie Taylor."

Superman then gently but swiftly took the girl back, holding her close like so many other children he had saved, and disappeared before their eyes.

Lois smiled to herself as she read the side article about a girl being saved from drowning by Superman. It still baffled her how so many people didn't realize how easy it is to drown. It's hard to recognize a drowning victim's struggle until it's too late, even from feet away. Drowning is often silent and meek instead of loud and boisterous.

Well, fortunately this had a happy ending. She had read too many instances of tragedy.

Pulling her mind from such things, she looked at the clock.

Kent should arrive soon. She had finally locked him down and he had agreed to meet her at the Planet that afternoon. She went through her notes again, happy she had the time to get up to speed on recent events. Other than learning what Kent had to say about the Intergang investigation, the only thing she was missing was an update from Bobby Bigmouth. She had spoken to him briefly the day before, and he had suggested something big was happening, but he said he wanted to check a few things before telling her more.

Whatever was happening, he had better like the food she got for him: genuine French cheese, Brie de Meaux, that she had purchased in Europe.

She sighed, wondering when Kal-El might stop by her place. She had been home for five days and she had somewhat expected him to contact her by now, especially where it concerned Intergang. Oh well, she shouldn't be selfish and they had both been very busy. She supposed she could just contact the Foundation and ask for them to forward a message to him directly, but that seemed so....

She looked up and spotted Kent coming toward her desk.

"Mr. Kent, right on time. Let's go to the conference room," she said, standing up. "How are you?"

"Good, good. You?" he replied, following her into the conference room. He closed the door behind him.

"Glad to be back. You can put your things on the table next to my notes," she said amiably as she sat down and motioned him to sit beside her. "My Uncle Mike told me what you did for him, saving him from those thugs wanting to burn down his restaurant. Thanks," she said as he sat down.

"Oh, you're welcome. I'm glad I was in the right place at the right time," he said, taken aback by her sincerity.

"Mike has helped me a lot, Mr. Kent," she said, feeling for some reason she should explain why she was so grateful. "I suppose you could say he's a surrogate dad to me."

"Then I'm very glad I was able to help him," Kent said. "And you can call me Clark."

Lois smiled. "Then it's 'Lois' to you," she returned before getting serious. "So, I imagine we should get straight into things since your schedule is likely as crazy as mine."

"Yes," he said with a chuckle, appearing both surprised and pleased as he handed her a folder. "Here are some of the police statements on recent arrests made who are likely linked to Intergang. There's also a separate document."

She opened it up and looked at the first sheet. "Sound Gang?" She frowned. "Didn't their leader just get killed in the hospital?"

"Yup."

"Uh-huh," she said, intrigued. "I knew there was something more with that," she said, scanning the next page before skimming through the rest. He let her read. Her frown deepened as she spotted a 'classified' stamp on the top corner of the last page. "This isn't a police report."

"No. It's not," Kent stated.

"A sound weapon? Cellular damage?" she mumbled, her eyes growing wide as it gave a brief description on the damage it could do. "Why are you showing me this?" she breathed.

"Stoke used it against Superman. From the police department, only four officers, Henderson, and Mayson know, and they're keeping it a secret, even from the government."

"Oh my—is he alright?" Lois asked, before putting it together. "That's why he took those days off."

Kent nodded. "He's fine now, but it definitely messed him up for a time," he admitted.

"How do you fit into this?" Lois asked, but continued before he could answer. "You're former military. You must know

someone in the government who helped make these things disappear. That's how you know what happened and how you have a copy of this document."

Kent gave a short nod in admittance, but he suddenly seemed almost hesitant.

"There's a little more to it, which I—" he began, only to be cut off by her pager going off.

Apologetically, she took her pager and looked at it.

"Oh!"

It was Bobby Bigmouth, and he was paging a 911, something he never did. He wanted to meet with her NOW.

"I'm so sorry, I've got to go! I just got a 911 from an informant," she said quickly, standing up and grabbing her purse.

"Do they need help?" Clark asked, standing up as well. "Should I come with you?"

"No, no. I just need to get to him asap. And you can't come with me, sorry. He won't talk if he sees someone he doesn't know," she said, quickly gathering her things.

"Alright, I understand. Some of my contacts are finicky too," he said. And he really looked as if he understood as he took the 'classified' stamped sheet while leaving the rest of the folder's contents for her to read through later.

"But call me later," she said as they both stepped from the room in what she would describe as a whirlwind.

"Of course," he said.

"Again, I'm so sorry!" she said before quickly dashing out of the newsroom.

Clark sighed to himself. Well, it was bound to happen to him eventually—someone running out on him instead of him running out on them. He only wished it had been at a different moment. He had been so close! He had wanted to tell her today. Invite her over to his place and go from there.

He combed his fingers through his hair.

Maybe it's better he didn't tell her just yet, but

He didn't want to dance around her, and she seemed to get along well with all sides of him. It wouldn't be fair to keep this secret from her, not when she had done so much for him. Besides, how would she feel if he kept it from her long after she really got to know Clark? Wouldn't she feel hurt, betrayed even? She already knew Kal-El grew up on Earth, she just didn't know the full extent of it. Her learning that he grew up as Clark Kent and was in fact Clark Kent wouldn't really be that hard of a step, especially considering his occupation and history. But how should he tell her?

Nodding to himself, he decided to try to invite her to his place the next time he saw her. Hopefully, then he would be able to tell her.

Walking out of the Daily Planet, he decided to follow Lois from above, just in case. He didn't feel like her contact sent a 911 page that often, not with the way her heart rate had spiked upon recognizing the author of the page.

He followed her for a few minutes, hidden in the clouds, until she went to a secluded section of a park where a thin man in a leather jacket stood. The typical wise-guy look.

Peering down, he focused on the scene and zeroed in on their conversation.

"Lois, French cheese? It better not be the stinky kind," he complained.

"I got the ones highly recommended, Bobby," Lois retorted. "Now tell me what you wanted to tell me. You sent a 911 page. You never do that."

"Right, right. Sorry, the shock of the cheese, you understand. Anyway, Intergang. Something huge is happening. They're fighting. There's internal fighting. The leadership is in upheaval and the orders coming down the chain are very, very different from a few months ago," he explained after looking around to

make sure they weren't being watched.

"Okay. Do you know who's fighting, exactly?" Lois asked.

"The Churches. Church Senior and Church Junior is the rumor," he said.

"The son?" Lois asked, intrigued.

Bobby nodded.

"How bad is the fighting?" Lois asked.

"I expect bodies to be found in Hobb's Bay soon," Bobby stated bluntly.

"Any info on why they're fighting?" she asked.

"Conflicting goals. If I had to guess from the rumors, it sounds like Senior has gotten tired of crime and wants to be more legitimate."

"And Junior wants to maintain the status quo," Lois whispered.

"Something like that."

"Okay, but why the 911? This info isn't all that earth shattering," Lois complained. "Important, yes, but not too surprising considering other things you've shared with me."

"Yes, well," he said, looking a little uneasy. "Word is that Senior doesn't need to worry about Big Blue."

Lois raised an eyebrow. "Superman? You mean he's been paid off?"

"Apparently," he said, carefully prying the corner of the cheese package open.

Lois started laughing. "Oh, Bobby. I appreciate your concern, but believe me, Superman hasn't been bought. He's merely biding his time and influencing things behind the scenes. I mean, listen to what you just told me. Senior moving away from crime? My instincts also tell me Junior was behind the Sound Gang, it'd explain Senior's hospital stay too."

Bobby sagged in relief and took a sniff of the exposed cheese. "Well, I suppose you would know. I'll admit, that's a relief. Almost as much of a relief to learn this is not the stinky cheese."

"I get it," Lois agreed, ignoring his food commentary. "Just imagining a Superman without morals is frightening. But fortunately Superman holds himself to high moral standards."

Bobby nodded and the conversation soon became less serious. Seeing there was nothing else, Clark pulled back from the clouds.

He needed to update Mayson and Henderson, as well as discuss current options. The current situation was very delicate and they needed to approach it with care.

Chapter 5: Friends?

Mayson sighed. A second body had been pulled from Hobb's Bay that day. If Clark was right (which he most likely was), Intergang's infighting had only just started.

She checked the time before returning back to the case file she was working through. She had less than an hour before she could expect Superman. The Foundation had contacted her that morning to arrange it. As strange as it was to work with the alien, she had to give it to him. He was efficient and professional. And she could respect that.

But she was still trying to wrap her head around what had happened the week before. While she wasn't exactly upset that he had spoken in her head—grief, whenever she tried to put it into words it just became more bizarre!—she couldn't help but feel disturbed that he had the ability to speak into her head. Surely that wasn't normal for him? After all, that whole situation had been far from the norm, even to him, but who knows?

She turned the page, scanning the witness accounts and police notes as she became fully immersed in her work.

A knock on her office door broke her from her thoughts. She straightened, instantly knowing who it was considering the time.

"Come in," she said, looking up.

"Ms. Drake," Superman greeted, stepping in lightly. "Would

you like me to close the door?" he asked, his eyes passing over the bookshelves against the far wall full of neatly lined books and folders.

"Please. Henderson was just called to a scene but I'll update him the next time I see him," she said, setting the folder aside while leaving it open.

"We can reschedule if you prefer," Superman offered.

"No, no. We both have busy schedules," she said as he closed the door. "And it actually allows me to discuss something with you," she continued, forcing herself to forge ahead. If she stopped now, it would be harder to bring it up later, and she couldn't stand having this unknown factor hang over her any longer than necessary. She wanted answers.

Superman tilted his head thoughtfully, before walking further into the room and taking a seat at the chair across from her desk. "I admit I have something I wish to say to you in private as well. I have not had the chance to thank you properly after you stopped Stoke and then took me to the Foundation. So thank you, Ms. Drake, I have no doubt that you saved my life," he said sincerely.

"You're welcome," she said, now a little stumped on how to continue. "I'm glad I was able to help, and, actually ... something that happened that day is what I wanted to discuss. Getting straight to the point, you're telepathic, aren't you?"

Superman's eyebrows shot up in sharp surprise at the question. "Well, I know my people could communicate that way, but I've never been able to do it," he answered before continuing more slowly, "Why do you ask?"

"When you were hurt, I heard your voice in my head. It's why I took you to your Foundation. You had, er, thought to me that you needed to get there."

"Oh." Superman eased back, clearly disconcerted. "I apologize if I startled you. I hadn't realized I had done that. I've never done it before, at least to my knowledge." He frowned. "Was it just that one thought?"

"No. You mentioned wishing you knew why it hurt so much in the car and, just before I left the Foundation, you, uh, said—"

"Thanks, Mayson," he recalled softly.

"Right," she said, noting how uncertain he had become.

"Well, I just wanted to let you know what had happened, and I wanted to know if, well, I think I can say now with confidence that it was unintentional and not normal for you."

Superman surprised her by releasing a short, uneasy chuckle before looking at her. "Yeah, definitely not normal." He sighed. "I wonder if it was due to my aura getting distorted. I'd like to think if my thoughts were entering people's minds after I've recovered that they would speak up and let me know."

"Well, if you want to try to think something to me now, go ahead. I'll admit I'd like to know if you can still do it," Mayson offered.

Superman blinked. "Alright," he said, taking a slow breath. "Anything?"

Mayson raised an eyebrow. "Nothing."

"Now?" he inquired after a brief expression of concentration.

"No. Still just my thoughts," she said, more than a little relieved.

"Well, I guess that answers that," he said, looking just as relieved.

Mayson nodded, sliding the case folder between them, ready to move on to business.

"What was learned from the recent victim found in Hobb's Bay?" Superman asked, no doubt sensing her desire to move on.

"Jason Marks. A real piece of work with a rap sheet a mile long, suspected intimidator for Intergang. Cause of death: shot in the back of the head, execution style," she replied grimly.

"How long had he likely been with Intergang?" Superman asked.

Looking down at the file, she said, "I'd estimate ten to twelve

years.”

“So a veteran member. This may be the slow beginnings of Intergang cleaning house or this man knew something they couldn’t risk getting out. Or both,” Superman murmured. “How is Church Sr. doing right now? I heard about a donation but haven’t had a chance to look into it.”

“He gave a statement yesterday that CostMart would be donating a million dollars to two local hospitals, but other than that ...” she said with a shrug. “He’s been pretty tight-lipped on his injury and recovery. Although it seems that he’s back to normal — other than the bout of charity, but that may be due to the hospital saving his life.”

“Why two hospitals though? He was only seen at one.”

“Not sure. Maybe he heard a few of the doctors bounce between those two hospitals? But whatever the reason, Bill Sr. is making decisions now and appears in control,” Mayson said.

“Who in Intergang could be a threat to him?” Superman asked. “Just his son?”

“I’d wager his son. No one else has enough clout,” Mayson stated. “Which might be why things are moving slower than anticipated—assuming the existence of an internal struggle.”

“Junior is trying to outmaneuver his dad who’s been running things for far longer.”

“Yeah,” Mayson agreed.

“The next time I see Senior, I don’t think I’ll feign ignorance. If his son is trying to take over as we suspect, I think we’d be better off keeping Senior in power than allow his son to take over the family business. I might even be able to begin having him help us taper the crime rate a bit. It’d be a nice test to see if he’s serious about turning over a new leaf,” Superman proposed.

“We do have enough to take the case to a judge now, but I think we’d be better off waiting to gather more evidence and prevent Junior from taking over. To be honest, Junior has always made me uncomfortable. I’m not sure why, he just seems” She shivered.

Her thoughts strayed to the few instances she had spoken to him, one-on-one. He always seemed fake, superfluous. As if he was playing a role to hide who he was. It certainly made sense now.

“I understand. Has there been anything on the individual who killed Stoke?” Superman asked.

“No. She made a clean getaway,” she said, frustrated.

“Someone from Intergang?” he asked.

“Likely. She was definitely professional. She injured one of the security guards before she got away. Broke his collarbone after disarming him.”

Superman’s eyebrows rose.

“Yeah. Now the question is, who ordered her to kill Stoke?” she asked. “Senior or Junior?”

“Would you like me to ask?” Superman asked seriously.

“You might be the only person who can get away with asking,” she said, as amused as she was bewildered by that realization.

“Alright. I’ll update you when I learn anything new,” Superman said with a smile.

“Thank you.” She watched him leave through the door, wondering at the tentative sort of friendship she felt was developing.

A month ago, she never would have thought she would feel as comfortable as she did around the Kryptonian, especially after what had happened with Stoke, but now interacting with him felt almost ... normal.

Life was certainly interesting.

Clark stretched as he got up from his bed, levitating slightly as he did so. The weeks had flown by, and unfortunately the investigation into Intergang had slowed to a crawl as so many

random and frankly bizarre things kept cropping up. Such as a prankster who took things way too far and, later, a doctor bringing dead gang members back to life. Some people had way too much time on their hands. Thankfully, each of those had been resolved without too much fuss, but they were annoying because of how many things they disrupted.

Thanks to recent events, he still hadn’t been able to discuss what he wanted with Lois, but he would be meeting with Church Sr. as Superman in fifteen minutes.

Church Sr. had begun making public humanitarian moves with prison projects, giving the newly released a second chance by employing them at CostMart, and he had just officially contacted the Foundation to discuss a possible partnership in certain community programs.

He reviewed the letter CostMart had sent the Foundation, admittedly impressed by Church Sr.’s approach. If he was truthful, Clark could no longer honestly say putting Bill Church Sr. in prison was the best course. He still wanted justice to be served, but it was hard to discount the good a changed man could do—assuming he had truly changed.

And that was the question. One he would hopefully have by the end of the day.

Lois was frustrated and many unfortunate souls who worked with her quickly found this out. She had very little patience on a good day, but for the past few weeks it had been non-existent.

Sure, she continued to get stories, but she was tired of being stonewalled when it came to Intergang, especially when the stories taking her time away from the vital investigation had continued to be so utterly ridiculous and outrageous. If yet another nutjob came out of the woodwork to create another few days of chaos for no other reason than just for the heck of it, Heaven help *them*, the Law would be the least of their worries.

“Lois?” Jimmy tentatively asked, approaching her desk.

“Yes?” she asked levelly.

“I got the police report you asked for. Looks like another hit job,” he said.

She smiled. Finally, back to Intergang. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

She opened up the report and he hurried off, no doubt happy to leave before something made her mood sour.

She reread the report, hoping for something to pop out at her, but nothing did. The poor sap, Derrick Marks, was just another generic and ruthless career criminal who met his demise with a bullet to the head. Maybe she needed to approach this differently. She needed to get inside, or maybe find an insider.

“Okay,” she told herself, pulling out the list she made of the other likely Intergang members recently dumped into Hobbs Bay.

Her eyes spotted a last name that matched the newest victim. Marks. Jason Marks. Eureka! Lois gave a satisfied grin.

“Jimmy!” she called.

“Yes?” he asked, not sure if he should be happy or not with her grin.

“We need to see if any of these people have siblings or family members who we can talk to who has a criminal record.”

“Will do, Lois!” he said.

“Kal, it is good to see you again,” Bill Sr. greeted as the Man of Steel was escorted in, using the name the Kryptonian had said to use.

“It is good to see you as well. I trust your recovery from the attack has been uneventful?” Superman returned kindly.

“Yes, thank you. I use a hearing aid in my right ear now, but other than that I have fully recovered. Thank you for stopping Stoke. He was a dangerous man.”

Superman nodded in agreement as he followed him.

They were meeting at the Church mansion, and it was clear Bill Sr. was doing his best to impress him with his very personal

approach. Where before Church Sr. was testing the waters and trying to intimidate with his empire's power, now he was more concerned with building an alliance and not offending. A great deal had changed. Having been touched by his own mortality and the need to leave a proper legacy, a great deal had changed.

"Shall we eat now or would you prefer we talk in the lounge before we dine?" Bill Sr. asked, pausing at the edge of the entryway.

"I would prefer we discuss things over a meal, but I don't mind either," Superman said.

"Very good. Red or white wine? We also of course have virgin drinks if you require?" he asked, motioning to the butler to inform the kitchen.

"Red, please," Superman said. "I don't drink often, but I feel this is a special occasion."

Bill smiled as Superman came to his side and they began walking. "Indeed, it is."

They went down a hall and turned into a well furnished room that opened up into an elegant dining room. The table could fit a dozen individuals, but tonight only two seats were set. Two at the end closest to the quaint wood-burning fireplace with the head chair removed.

"My chef will be making roast duck with sweet potato slices tonight," Bill said.

"Looking forward to it," he said as they sat down.

"I apologize for not contacting you sooner, but I had a few things to take care of as I recovered. However, considering the news, it seems you have been busy as well," Bill said as his butler served them the full-bodied red wine in delicate, tapered crystal glasses that allowed the liquid to breathe and release its enticing aroma.

"Yes. Admittedly, I wish I had as much free time as the recent trouble maker had—essentially bringing the dead back to life by cloning them ... why not cure the common cold instead?" Superman asked, a little exasperated.

Bill chuckled. "Yes, I'll admit I nearly choked on my coffee when I read the headline."

"Speaking of headlines, I've noticed a number catching my eye lately as well," Kal said pointedly. "What's going on?"

It wasn't a leap to assume he was referring to the dead individuals being pulled from Hobb's Bay of late.

Bill swirled the wine in his glass, suddenly solemn. "So you are going the direct route. I respect that." He sighed. "To put it simply, my son is fighting to take control. I won't cover for either my son or myself. We're both giving orders to eliminate one another's soldiers, but I'm ordering it all to remain away from the public and non-combatants." He stopped turning his glass, staring into Superman's chocolate brown eyes. "But you already knew that."

"Yes. I did," Kal said. "However, I'd like to know who ordered the hit on Stoke."

"That was my son. No doubt to prevent Stoke from ratting him out," Bill Sr. said with no hesitation.

"What can you tell me about the assassin?" he asked.

"Most likely Diana Stride, if you can believe it."

"The lead reporter for Top Copy?" Superman asked, surprised.

"I'm surprised you know of the show, let alone her name," Bill returned.

"Heard about her once. Eidetic memory. I can't help it," Superman said with a shrug.

"Nothing about you isn't super, I see," Bill commented with a smirk before growing serious once more. "You don't seem too bothered by what's been happening."

"It's not about what I'm bothered with or not but what can be proven in the Court of Law. There is also the knowledge of what will follow if things are not done a certain way," Kal said frankly.

"Ah, the dreaded power vacuum."

"Yes. And as I assume we both are aiming to prevent that, the work in the meantime can go a long way for you when, not if, things unavoidably do come to light."

"Hm, yes. I have admittedly been thinking about that," Bill sighed, straightening up in his chair slightly. "Were you able to completely read CostMart's proposal to your Foundation?"

"Yes. It is a very ambitious but worthwhile endeavour. I think if both of our organizations pull together faithfully we could change many lives for the better," Superman said. "I have some minor requests, but our two organizations can work those out when it comes time."

"Of course," Bill said as the butler returned with their dinner.

They shifted their discussion into more generic subjects that slipped into being more personal than either had intended or anticipated.

"I never thought I would be a single father, but when Catherine passed from cancer ..." Bill sighed. "I focused all my attention on ensuring my son's future was secure by expanding my businesses as much as possible. Even still he is my focus, although now I wish I had been more principled when he was young—for his sake. Perhaps I would have changed my course sooner and things would be better now if Catherine hadn't gotten sick, but I'd like to think she's happy that I've finally begun to see the world the way she did—despite everything."

"When did she pass?" Kal-El asked gently.

"Sixteen years ago now. My son was eight. He took it like you'd expect," Bill said, before taking a big sip from his glass.

They ate in silence for a bit, and Superman finished his last potato slice. Dessert was brought out.

"I hope one day to have a family of my own, a wife and children. Although I don't know if that is possible for me," Kal said after taking the small fudge cake.

Bill Sr. blinked, taken aback for a second before his expression quickly softened.

"I understand. No one wants to be alone," Bill said certainly as his tone became curious. "Would you be willing to adopt?" he asked, avoiding the more personal question of fertility.

"Yes. Although circumstances would need to be, well, I don't think it would be wise for me to adopt as Kal-El or Superman, let alone marry or even date. And, forgoing marriage, adopting as a single parent is another matter."

Bill nodded understandingly. "Well, I know some good judges in Family Court. So if you ever need, I can give you their names."

Kal's eyebrows rose, suddenly struck by how far this conversation had gone. Bill glanced at the clock and blinked at the time.

"I believe we shall call it a night unless you have anything you feel we should discuss now?" Bill said, silently noting their empty dessert plates.

"No. Thank you for the perfect meal," Kal said as they both stood up.

"I will contact my people to begin moving forward with your Foundation. We have over a dozen people I feel would be a good fit for the first stage," Bill said.

"I look forward to it. Good night, Bill," Superman said.

Bill bid him farewell after escorting him out.

Lois was exhausted as she struggled with her front door while juggling several groceries bags.

"Why on earth do I have so many locks again?" she asked herself, finally turning the handle and stepping forward.

"Ooofff!"

Someone shoved her into her apartment, causing all of her groceries to scatter all over the floor, before slamming and locking the door behind them.

“I’m sorry, miss—” he stated.

“Who do you think you’re pushing?!” she shouted while twisting around, ready to swing a punch, but instantly fell still and silent as the man shined a bright beam of light right into her eyes.

“—But I don’t have time to explain.”

.
.
.

“Miss, are you alright?”

Lois blinked to find a police officer staring at her with concern.

“What the heck?!” she gasped, quickly looking around.

There were several officers just entering her apartment as if it was a ... crime scene?! Her eyes suddenly fell upon the man who had barged into her apartment, only now he was very clearly dead.

“That man pushed his way in and then shined a light in my eyes while saying, ‘Sorry, miss!’ How is he dead?!” she asked, alarmed.

“Ma’am?” the officer asked again. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I don’t think so. He just flashed light in my eyes. When did you get here?” she asked, confused.

“Why don’t you sit down and we’ll go over what happened,” he assured, guiding her to a chair in the other room.

Lois didn’t fight him, not enthused about staying in a room with a dead man.

Clark entered Henderson’s office with barely a knock.

“You sent for me, Bill? What’s happened? I heard Lois’ place is a crime scene. Is she okay?” he asked. His normally calm voice was tinged with anxiety and a fair amount of concern.

“She’s alright, but a Dr. Neal Faraday forced his way into her apartment last night and somehow dazed her with, according to her, a flashlight. Afterwards, we believe Faraday was followed by two individuals and murdered,” Henderson quickly summarized.

“Any clues?” Clark asked.

“The power was cut from the building, but some of Ms. Lane’s neighbors said two men came into her apartment. One of them claimed to be a doctor.”

“Descriptions?” Clark asked.

“We tried but since the whole building was dark until the emergency generator was turned on, we only got that they were definitely male, and the one who spoke had an odd accent.”

“Better than nothing.”

“I know you normally deal with cold cases, but since Ms. Lane is a friend...”

“Thank you, I appreciate it. Granted, knowing her, she’s likely already investigating,” Clark said.

“Without a doubt,” Henderson said with a chuckle, before sliding an envelope over. “Here is the preliminary report of the scene. I’ll let you know when the autopsy is complete, but it’s looking like the cause of death was blunt force trauma to the back of the head.”

“Object?”

“Windowsill.”

“Could it have been accidental, like a fall?”

“Would be the most awkward accidental fall I’ve ever seen. And the impact seems too severe to be a simple fall. I think Faraday was backing away from at least one of the men and they shoved him.”

“Finger prints?”

“Nothing yet. We’re hoping there might be some on the breaker, but I fear the perps might have been smart and worn gloves.”

“The bad guys do seem to be getting smarter,” Clark sighed. Henderson hummed in agreement.

“Do you know where Lois is now?”

“Hotel. She refused to go to the hospital and is going in for

work tomorrow.”

“Sounds like Lois,” Clark said while skimming the report. He paused. “She was motionless for over ten minutes after the officers got there?”

“Yeah. And doesn’t remember anything that occurred during that time.”

“That’s ... concerning.”

“Agreed. It’s a frightening piece of tech, and we didn’t find it at the scene or on Faraday either.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll see what I can find and keep you posted,” Clark promised.

“Thanks.”

Chapter 6: Unseen

Lois did her best not to let her eyes glaze over as she tried to understand the abstract of a research paper Faraday recently wrote on light. From what little she could comprehend, she never felt more galactically stupid.

She grabbed the silver ballpoint pen from her suitcase (hastily put together when she left her place) and tried to jot down a note in the margin. Unfortunately, no ink came out.

“Figures,” she huffed before tossing it into the metal trash can.

She shifted gears, getting back on her computer and away from the papers by Faraday that Jimmy had managed to gather up for her.

Punching the keys and working the limited search engine, she sighed.

“There’s just no record of where this guy’s been for the past three years,” she said, talking to herself. “A brilliant scientist gives up his teaching post, cuts himself off from his family and friends, and disappears. Why would he do that? What was he working on?”

“No luck?” Jimmy asked, coming beside her.

“Ugh, no!”

“Any clue on how that light did what it did?” Jimmy asked.

“No, but maybe I should have taken that officer’s offer and gone to the hospital...”

Jimmy startled. “Are you feeling okay? Headache or anything?”

“I feel fine, but that light must have done something to my brain. Maybe an MRI or whatever will detect something,” she reasoned. “Tell Perry I’m okay but getting an MRI or whatever else the doctors want. Until another lead comes up, this is the only one I’ve got.”

“Will do, Lois,” Jimmy said, a little reassured.

Lois drove to the hospital after calling her doctor and telling him what had occurred the previous night. He swiftly arranged an MRI for her and an EEG.

Unfortunately, after four hours of prompt testing (her doctor didn’t want any more time to pass and was a little annoyed with her that she hadn’t called him right away), her results were normal. However, one odd thing occurred. For no reason at all, she’d quoted the technical method used to form MRI images. She had no clue how she knew it, but she did.

“Well, as much as I don’t want to say that was a waste of time, it was a waste of time,” she complained to herself as she got out of her car.

The sun was already setting and she had no leads as to why Faraday came to her home and flashed a bizarre light in her eyes before being killed. Trudging back up to the Daily Planet, she didn’t acknowledge anyone on her way to her desk.

“Dead-end!” she preemptively declared to Jimmy who paused by her desk, as if about to tell her something.

“Oh. But isn’t that sort of good news? I mean, the MRI didn’t find anything different.”

“That’s good for me, but not good for my story,” she

grumbled as her phone suddenly rang.

“Lois Lane,” she said as Jimmy fell quiet and watched. “Who is this?”

“Never mind who I am. If you want to know about Dr. Faraday, come to Metropolitan Park. Come now, and come alone. If you bring anybody with you, you will learn nothing.”

Click.

“Jimmy, I’m going to Metropolitan Park. Someone just called about Faraday,” she said, gathering her stuff and throwing it into the briefcase.

“Should someone go with you? Oh! And that PI called while you were gone, he’s looking into Faraday too,” Jimmy explained. “Was wondering if you’d like to pool resources.”

Lois paused. “Oh, yes. If he calls again, let him know I’ll call him as soon as I get back from meeting this source, okay?”

“Sure thing, Ms. Lane,” Jimmy assured, happy she was suddenly in a much better mood as she rushed back out.

It was colder and darker than she would have expected the park to be, but she had a good heavy wool jacket on and had never been afraid of the dark. However, The lack of seeing anyone else around was a bit eerie.

“Hello? Hello?” she called.

Suddenly, a bright light glared out from the blackness and Lois quickly shielded her eyes.

“I’m Lois Lane,” she stated, hoping and assuming this was the person who called her.

“We know who you are, Miss Lane. Where’s the device?” the man asked.

“Excuse me?” she asked, suddenly on her guard as she picked up on his odd accent. She maneuvered her free hand into her purse and closed around a canister of pepper spray. She knew her neighbors had said one of the men that entered her apartment after the power was cut had an accent.

“Dr. Faraday’s device. Where is it?” the man reiterated.

“If you’re talking about the flashlight Faraday shined in my face, I have no idea where it is now. It disappeared. Who are you?”

The man began whispering to a form she could barely make out beside him, and unfortunately she couldn’t understand what was being said.

She dared to step closer.

“Come no closer, Miss Lane!” the man warned.

Deciding not to risk it, Lois stopped as he suddenly asked, “Where is Superman?”

“I don’t know. You said you’d tell me about Dr. Faraday. If you’re not going to tell me anything, I’ll just be on my way,” she said, turning.

“Tell me this, Miss Lane ... does Superman always appear when you find yourself in mortal danger?”

“I’m not sure that’s a question I want to hear when I’m standing out in the open with a light shining in my face talking to somebody I don’t know and can’t see,” she stated, tightening her grip on the pepper spray.

“Perhaps you’d be good enough to answer it anyway,” the man said as a gun appeared beside the light.

Surprised, she responded, “Well, yes, he does, or he has so far, but if you want to talk to him, he has his Foundation for a reason. Don’t do anything either of us will regret—”

The man pulled the trigger, causing a loud bang and a violent flash from the end of the barrel, but it was suddenly obscured by a form she would know anywhere.

Lois stared, relieved, but was suddenly confused when a glow of purple light followed the shot and seemed to be purposely directed right at Superman’s face.

“Superman?!” she shouted as the men rushed around him and toward her.

She yanked out her pepper spray and doused the closest one

as Superman suddenly *moved*.

From what little light there was, Lois strained to see, but she was certain she had never seen Superman handle bad guys as roughly before.

A smack of two metallic things hitting the ground came as both men were hoisted up by their clothing at or near their shoulders, resulting in their feet dangling a foot above the ground.

“Ms. Lane, please call the police and ask for Inspector Henderson to come if possible. Men, do not move,” Superman flatly stated, facing away from Lois.

Lois hurried to the nearest payphone.

“911 emergency,” the operator stated.

“This is Lois Lane from the Daily Planet. I need the police and Inspector Henderson at Metropolitan Park, south end, as soon as possible. Two men just tried to shoot me and Superman saved me. He’s holding them now and asked me to call the police and specifically requested for Henderson to come too,” she explained, trying to talk calmly through her adrenaline.

The person on the other end swiftly responded. “Units are on their way. Description of the two men?”

“Uh, white, middle-aged men, and the man who shot the gun has an accent. Greek maybe. I think they may be the two men involved in the murder of Faraday last night. Henderson will know what I’m talking about,” she said.

“Thank you, Ms. Lane. Henderson will be told.”

Lois turned to look back at Superman and could just make out his form still holding up the men as police sirens approached.

Henderson pulled behind the first police cruiser and parked his car before quickly getting out.

Superman had never asked for anyone specifically to come to an emergency or crime scene before, but considering the involvement of Lois and the likelihood of the two men being involved with last night’s incident, this was a sensible approach.

Looking out at the park that their cruises’ headlights completely illuminated, Henderson hid his amusement at the sight of two grown men being suspended in midair by a less than amused Superman.

“Thanks, Superman. Just the one weapon?” Henderson asked, indicating the gun in the grass two yards away as the Kryptonian set them down.

“Two things fell into the grass, Inspector, but please make sure they’re not carrying anything else,” he said, his gaze slipping from Henderson’s direction as Lois returned.

“Of course.”

The officers accompanying Henderson quickly took the two men into custody, maintaining their professionalism despite being excited about being so close to Superman.

“So which one fired at Ms. Lane?” Henderson asked, motioning the officers on.

“The one I had held to my right. Ms. Lane pepper sprayed him,” Superman said as Lois stopped beside him.

Lois was clearly proud about that, and Henderson would have commented on her reflexes, but something about Superman pulled at Henderson’s inner alarm system.

Superman wasn’t looking at him, just in his direction. He seemed extremely stiff, as if he was on edge or expecting something to jump out at him. Bill had never seen Superman so uneasy.

Quietly, Henderson moved forward, trusting the officers behind him to take care of the suspects.

“Kal?” he asked.

Hearing the concern in his voice and the use of Superman’s birth name, Lois frowned and looked up at Superman, but Kal continued to stare out into the parking lot over Henderson’s shoulder.

“Inspector, other than the gun, there should be a small,

metallic flashlight. Please bring it to the Foundation as soon as you can. I believe I'm going to need it. Lois, please escort me to your car and take me to the Foundation."

"What's wrong?" Lois asked, placing her hand on his forearm.

The strongest man on Earth took a deep breath before softly answering. "I can't see. As soon as I saw that violet light, everything went black. The only reason I got them was because I could still hear them."

Henderson turned back to the officers who were now a fair distance away. "Gray, McCay, don't wait up for me. Take those two in and process them. I'll be in shortly," he called.

"Sure thing," Gray answered.

With the first patrol car pulling out of the parking lot, Henderson retrieved some evidence bags and carefully gathered up the gun, bullet casing, and odd flashlight after taking a few pictures with the criminal investigators who had just arrived.

"This way, Kal-El," Lois said, biting her bottom lip in nervousness as Kal placed his hand on her shoulder and she took his other hand to direct him away.

"Here," Henderson said, coming up to Lois and handing her the bag with the offending penlight-looking device. "I'll pick it up later. Shall I call the Foundation ahead of you?"

"Yes, and tell them to get Dr. Klein," Kal said, looking a little more at ease.

"Alright. I'll let you know anything I learn after I interrogate those two," Henderson promised.

"Thank you," Kal said.

Henderson nodded even though Kal couldn't see and watched in silent concern as Lois guided him to her vehicle's passenger side.

Lois buckled herself in, glancing over at Kal, whose gaze remained unfocused.

"Does it hurt at all?" she asked.

"No, I just can't see," he said gently.

"Thanks for saving me again," she said, starting the Jeep. "And I'm sorry. I should have been more careful."

"You can't control what other people do."

"Sure, but that doesn't mean I should be stupid," she countered, growing upset with herself.

Because of her, Kal had been blinded. Was this permanent? Oh Lord, what if it was?!

"Lois, try not to worry. Dr. Klein is pretty smart. He'll figure this out. Besides, the bad guys affected my hearing last month, it makes sense they'd target my sight next," he assured good-naturedly before continuing more softly, "And, you weren't stupid. You told Jimmy Olsen where you were going and he told Kent who happened to tell me."

"Shouldn't I be the one helping you feel better right now?"

He shrugged. "I just can't help hearing the change in your heart rate," Kal said apologetically.

Lois frowned, suddenly remembering a previous conversation they had had about him being able to identify anyone he was familiar with by their heartbeat alone.

She was sure her heart was fluttering even more now, and not merely because she was upset.

"Okay, let's get you to Dr. Klein," she said, refocusing.

She drove them to the Foundation, stopping behind the building where two security guards and another man were already waiting for them. No one else was on the street and it was a relief to know no news stations would be covering this any time soon.

"Dr. Klein is already upstairs, Kal," Mav said as a guard opened the passenger door.

"Thanks," Kal said.

"Ms. Lane, if you would go in with them, I will park your car," the other guard said, holding out his hand.

"Oh, okay," she said as he helped her out.

Following Kal and the others in, Lois tried to look calm and collected. She even held herself back when Mav and the first security guard led Kal ahead of her. Which was just as well when he clipped and damaged a table halfway to the stairwell.

He really couldn't see where he was going at all.

She remained silent as they finally made it to the third floor where she saw all of Superman's medical equipment and a door to what she assumed was his bedroom. The mess after Nightfall had certainly enticed them to take precautions for every possible injury or event, however unlikely.

"Kal-El, I was told something blinded you. Could you tell me everything that happened?" a man Lois quickly identified as Dr. Klein asked as Mav stepped back once Superman was seated on the bench.

Lois stood awkwardly beside Mav, wishing she knew what to do as Superman gave a pretty accurate summation of what had occurred. As he explained, Klein used his otoscope to examine his eyes. First the right and then the left.

"A violet light?" Klein asked, finished with the initial eye exam.

"Yes, from this," Lois put in, quickly holding out the evidence bag with the harmless looking metal rod.

"And these people wanted something of Faraday's?" Klein asked her.

"Yeah, I think they wanted whatever Faraday had used on me," Lois clarified.

"Used on you?" Klein asked, bewildered.

Lois nodded and quickly told them what had happened the previous night.

"My, that is frightening, as well as enlightening, despite the horrid circumstances. I have read a little of Faraday's research, and he had a theory involving information and light. Ultimately, he theorized that if carried on the correct wavelength, one would be able to transfer knowledge directly into a person's mind. Perhaps that is the device they were looking for," Klein stated while handling the evidence bag. "May I?" he asked, indicating the unused seal.

"Of course, Henderson will need it for his case later, though," Lois said.

Klein removed the device and aimed it at the floor as he pressed a small switch he found on the side. A violet beam of light poured out.

"Hm," he said, turning the pen over in his hand and flipping an opposing toggle.

A red cone took the place of the violet.

"Kal-El, I think I have a solution. After looking at your eyes, your lenses have turned opaque, I think because of the concentrated ray of ultraviolet light. If I'm right, this equally strong beam of infra-red light should counter it," he said.

"Great!" Kal said, overjoyed. "Can we try it now?"

"I have no reason to believe it will make things worse, so go ahead and look this way. I'm going to try your right eye first," Klein said.

Lois held her breath and watched as Klein delicately shined the red light, passing it back and forth twice before Superman flinched back and quickly began rubbing his eye.

"Are you okay?" Klein asked, concerned.

Superman put his hand down and blinked several times. "Yeah! It worked!"

Beaming, Klein grabbed his otoscope again and checked Kal's eye with it. "Excellent! The lens is clear again. Okay, let's get the left now."

Lois breathed a huge sigh of relief when Superman looked at them all unwaveringly a moment later, clearly just as thrilled as they were.

"Well, here you are, Ms. Lane," Klein said exuberantly,

handing her the troublesome penlight back in the evidence bag.

It was the strangest dinner Lois had had in a long time, perhaps ever, but it was definitely going to go down as one of her favorite evenings.

After Klein had carried out a complete eye exam on Superman (verifying all of his visual powers were intact), Mav insisted on celebrating by picking up pizza from the nearby pizzeria for all of them. So Superman, Dr. Klein, two of the four security guards, Mav, and Lois gathered around the large table on the second floor with several two liters of root beer.

"I didn't take you for a pineapple kind of person," Lois couldn't help but comment as Superman took another slice of Hawaiian pizza.

"I'm a pizza kind of person," Kal said. "I've only found a few pizzas I don't like and that's because of the type of cheese on them."

"Cheese?" Klein asked curiously.

"Bleu cheese, for example. I think it's my sense of smell. It's just not appetizing," Superman explained. "There's an aspect of it that tastes extremely medical to me, if that makes any sense."

"Bleu cheese on pizza?" Lois asked, horrified.

"I don't like feta either," he added.

"Fascinating. Do you have a favorite food?" Klein asked, mentally considering a study.

"Single dish, ingredient, or a meal?" Superman asked.

"Ingredient."

"Hm. Well, for a single ingredient, tomato is up there because the range of flavor is huge, but for the depth an ingredient can add to a dish, I'd have to go with olive oil."

"Olive oil?" Lois asked, surprised.

"If I take my time tasting, I can tell you where they were grown and what time of year they were harvested. Granted, the finer the grade, the easier it is to tell. Basic olive oil from your average grocery store stored in a plastic bottle isn't as easy to determine."

"Do you like to cook?" Klein asked, taking a pepperoni slice.

"Occasionally," Kal admitted. "But I'm little more than a novice."

"Have you considered hosting a cook off or a bake sale? I bet you'd make a ton from everyone wanting a super cookie or whatever you make," Lois suggested.

"A super cookie?" Kal asked, amused.

"Well, yeah. What else would you call it?" she countered.

"That's not a bad idea, Kal-El," Mav said, quickly warming up to the idea. "Shall I get Julie on it?"

Kal laughed. "Sure, why not? We can partner up with one of the hospitals or school districts."

Lois inwardly smiled, suddenly wondering what Perry would say if she brought him a story entitled 'Superman Holds Bake Sale.' He had told her she needed to do some more puff pieces....

Dinner concluded with some more banter and what Superman would sell at a now scheduled bake sale. Would there just be cookies, or would pies and cakes be included? And what about bread?

"Kneading is important. If you want a good loaf, you can't just slap the ingredients together, let it rest, and then throw it in the oven," Kal said. "The yeast needs to be stretched and encouraged."

"Can you smell when the dough is ready?" Klein asked, unashamedly taking notes over his half eaten pizza.

"It's more a touch thing, but I can smell it too, though I probably would be better off looking at the yeast directly if I really wanted to be sure."

"Like microscopically?" Lois asked, once again reminded how different Kal could view the world.

"Yeah, though I don't really like to do it while cooking. It

feels like I'm cheating."

"You're using your natural abilities. Why would that be cheating? You can be sure I don't hesitate to use every advantage I have to do everything I do—not that that really helps me in the kitchen," Lois said.

"Hm, I suppose when you put it that way ..." Kal said thoughtfully.

Dinner concluded not long after, and after Dr. Klein and Mav had taken their leave, Kal was walking her to her car.

"I'm really glad you're okay," Lois said half way through the parking lot. "I don't know what I would have done if you had been..." She trailed off with a deep breath.

"Well, it all turned out alright, and I'll drop off the penlight to Henderson soon. I'm really glad he let us take it the way he had," he said.

"Me too," she said as they made it to her car.

"Well, now that it's just us," Kal said, subtly glancing around to make sure no one could hear them. "I wanted to ask a favor of sorts. Could you come by this address tomorrow at 7:00 pm if you're not busy?"

He handed her a small sheet of paper with a hand written address on it.

"Sure, I shouldn't be busy tomorrow. Is this important? I mean, I imagine it's important, otherwise you wouldn't be asking, but if something comes up . . . I suppose I'm wondering how critical this is, like if Perry puts me on assignment," she began, a little frazzled by the sudden and frankly mysterious request.

"No, it's not like that, and I suppose if I'm at a rescue we'll have to reschedule. I just want to talk to you about something."

"Oh, okay," she said, both relieved and worried at the same time.

"It's nothing bad. Or at least I don't think it's bad," he tried to reassure, but he himself began to look a little nervous. "Anyway, it's just something I'd like you to know."

"Oh, alright. I'll see you tomorrow then," she said, trying not to let her imagination run too wild. She failed.

"Goodnight, Lois," he said.

"Goodnight, Kal."

Chapter 7: Identity

Clark returned to his apartment after a day of investigative work and super rescues. He was grateful for the simple day since he had enough on his mind concerning his upcoming meeting with Lois at 7:00. Why on earth did he schedule it so late?

While waiting for 7:00 o'clock to come around, he cleaned and prepared his apartment, not that there was much to do. He actually spent more effort mentally going over what he would say for the hundredth time while hoping and praying that Lois would respond positively, or at least not badly.

His parents had been supportive, though in different ways. His mom was excited that he was *finally* going to tell Lois while his dad was simply happy he had met someone who he could trust enough with the secret. Both of them were also unashamedly cheering him on to take the next step with Lois. It was embarrassing but what could he do? At least they weren't outright asking for grandkids. Yet anyway.

He shrugged those thoughts away and suddenly remembered he needed to schedule a meeting with Mayson and Henderson to tell them about Diana Stride. Even though there was no hard evidence yet, the fact Church Sr. named her was enough for him to begin investigating her. Henderson and Mayson would certainly want to know what he had already found.

But that would be done later as, finally, the time arrived and the knock on the door came. He barely restrained himself from using super speed while opening the door.

Lois submitted the article on the arrest of Dr. Leit and Munch,

happy to exclude the temporary blindness Superman had suffered. Henderson was pleased and was certain they had plenty of evidence to have the two locked up for a very long time for the murder of Dr. Faraday, and that was before they included the assault on Lois.

Perry was ecstatic, since it meant they had a front page worthy article and a set of future articles they could draw upon as Leit and Munch went to trial. It was just unfortunate that Lois was personally involved again, but there was no use in complaining.

Lois looked at the clock, wondering once again what Kal-El wanted to talk to her about.

She wished time would go faster.

She glanced at the television screen. It was a slow news day and she hoped it would stay that way.

Thankfully, it did, and she soon found herself walking up the steps to the address Kal-El had given her. She had forced herself not to research the location or even determine who owned it for fear of drawing attention to a place that likely had a connection to the Man of Steel. Why else would he shroud it with such secrecy? But now her curiosity was killing her and she could hardly wait to talk to him.

"344 Clinton Street, 3D," she muttered to herself, going up the stairs.

Reaching the top floor, she quickly realized this apartment had a loft, as desired as that may or may not be, considering the taller buildings surrounding it. There couldn't be much of a view. Still, not a bad place to live. Why did Kal send her here to talk?

Coming to the door, she took a moment to straighten her clothing and hair. She assumed this was informal, but it never hurt to look nice, especially when around Kal-El. So with that done, she took a deep breath and knocked.

The door opened and instantly her excitement was sidelined by confusion.

"Clark?" she asked.

"Hi, Lois!" Clark said, beaming as he stepped aside. "Please, come in."

She entered and went down the three steps from the entry landing. A full wall of bookcases was to her left, filled with books and a variety of keepsakes she could only assume came from all around the world. Clark closed the door behind her. Her eyes quickly scanned beyond the front room, to his living room and kitchen where the wonderful scent of freshly baked brownies touched her nose . . . pure, sweet chocolate heaven. She hoped Clark could not hear the insistent growls of an empty stomach.

Pushing her hunger aside, she didn't see or hear anyone else in the apartment, which only baffled her more as she turned to face him.

"So, uh, I assume Superman asked you to come too?" she asked.

She knew Clark was working with Kal-El on the Intergang case. Was this about that? She was investigating one of the new police officers, Peter Jones. She suspected he might be a spy for Intergang.

"Uh, kind of," he said, suddenly looking nervous. "This is my apartment."

"Oh," she said, growing interested but more confused.

"Here, why don't you sit down. Would you like anything to drink? I was about to have a brownie and a glass of milk. Care to join me?" he asked, hurrying to the kitchen.

"Sure. That sounds good," she said as he grabbed two cups and a plate from the pantry. He put four brownies from the cooling rack onto the plate and then poured some milk into the cups. "So is Superman on his way? Did he tell you what this is about? Did he learn something more about Intergang?" she asked, unable to stop her stream of questions.

"It's not about Intergang," he said, before joining her on the couch and putting the plate on the coffee table before holding her

cup out for her.

She slowly took it, trying to read the expression on his face. He looked anxious and hopeful, but also . . . afraid? It was the most bizarre combination of emotions she had ever seen on someone.

"Is . . . is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, I'm just not sure how to go about this. Even after thinking about it for so long." He took a deep breath as she looked at him quizzically.

"Okay. . ." she said.

"Okay. Lois, when you investigated me, how far did you go? I mean, what do you know about me?" he asked.

Now utterly bewildered, she set her cup down on the nearest coaster and looked at him.

"Well, I read up on your military career, of course. You were one of the first to lead and train members of a new division in the Air Force that would serve as specialty guides of sorts for ground units, allowing for better engagement with locals and such, particularly when providing aid after natural disasters," she said, recalling the files she had gone through. "You received a number of impressive service medals for your service but left the Air Force after your four years were up."

He nodded as she continued.

"I know you were a private investigator before that, traveling the world. You solved well over a hundred cold cases in over a dozen countries and are known in certain circles to be able to find any missing person. You know several languages and grew up in Smallville, Kansas. You were raised by Martha and Jonathan Kent, and they run a farm that's been in the family for five generations. You played football in high school but didn't go to college immediately after. A few years after traveling the world, you got a degree in Astrophysics from ETH Zurich, which allowed you to go to Officer Training School when you joined the Air Force. I do not understand why you chose astrophysics, but it seems to have worked for you. You also have no speeding or parking tickets, nor any other violations. You're annoyingly squeaky clean, and—" she said after taking a bite of the brownie, "—an excellent baker," she rattled on, inwardly very pleased by how impressed he appeared to be by her report on himself.

"Very thorough, as I'd expect," he said with a smile.

"Thanks," she said, proud.

"Did you determine where I was born?" he asked.

"Uh, no," she said, suddenly uncertain, since she knew the topic was likely sensitive. "Some paperwork I came across mentioned you . . . were a foundling." She narrowed her eyes, suspicious. "I get the feeling you're doing this for a reason, but..."

She leaned back, staring at him as she took a moment to process everything that this could mean.

"Are you serious?" she slowly asked, squinting her eyes at him while not quite allowing herself to take the full jump in logic just yet.

Clark slowly began to smile as he took off his glasses and silently looked at her.

"Kal?!" she gasped, leaping to her feet.

"Hi, Lois," he said, looking up at her with a grin.

"You're—! Oh my G-d!" She had no clue what to do, but she found herself reaching out to him.

He laughed, though intense relief was in his eyes as he let her place her hands on either side of his face.

"I've wanted to tell you for a while now, but things just kept coming up," he said. "I couldn't let the opportunity I saw last night pass by. Especially after what had happened."

"I don't know what to say, other than I'm glad you decided to tell me," she said, slowly sitting back down and removing her hands.

He took her right hand in his.

"Other than my parents, I've only discussed this with one

other person, and they had figured out the big portion of the secret on their own first.”

“Who was that?” she asked.

“General Newcomb.”

“General?” she asked, concerned for a split second before concluding there was no problem.

“He’s been a family friend for a long time. He’s like an uncle or grandfather to me in some regards now,” Kal admitted.

“So did he figure it out when you joined the Air Force?” she asked.

“I actually joined to help him out on a case. At the end of that case is when he figured it out. After that, he made some arrangements to allow me to stay on to complete the rest of my time in a way where I could sometimes use my abilities in secret. We both agreed to keep me out of combat for obvious reasons, so it all worked out pretty well.”

“I’ll say it did,” Lois agreed while still digesting the truth.

Clark, or Kal, leaned back, sensing her turbulent mental state.

“What do I call you?” she asked.

“I suppose that’s a good question. Well, I’ve been called Clark for as long as I can remember, so I suppose the easiest way moving forward is to call me Clark when I have my glasses on and call me Kal when I . . . don’t? Sorry, I haven’t ever really thought about this before,” Clark said apologetically.

“That makes sense. I wouldn’t want to reveal your secret by accident or something,” Lois said.

Clark nodded. “So, uh, what are you thinking?”

“I don’t know. The only thing I can think of right now is, how did I not see it?”

Clark shrugged before she suddenly laughed at herself.

“Or maybe the better question is, how long would it have taken me to figure it out if you hadn’t told me?” she said as he chuckled with her. “No-no, can you imagine me knowing you both separately as Clark and Kal for *years* and me not knowing? Oh man, I think I would have been **ticked** if that had happened and I learned later!” she said, laughing more.

“Oh gosh! I don’t want to imagine. Doing that would have driven me nuts! These past months were hard enough: with being Clark and then Kal around you and not being able to say anything that only Kal would know or vice versa. . . . I can’t imagine doing that for *years*! But the scary thing is that I can actually see how it could have happened,” Clark said, torn between laughing more or groaning. “If it had gone on for so long that I knew you’d be upset with the truth . . . it would have been harder to tell you.”

“Yeah, but then there’d be the growing risk of me figuring it out, and that would have made things even worse,” Lois said, catching her breath.

“Urgh, you’re right! Wow, I am so glad I told you now,” he said smiling with newfound relief.

“Me too.”

They both sighed and grew quiet, looking at each other.

“I know this is weird after eating brownies, but, have you eaten dinner?” Clark asked.

“Actually, I haven’t. Pizza?” she asked.

Clark grinned. “Sure.”

The following week passed in a blur.

He and Lois had been able to have two dinners within that time but not much else due to their work schedules and his super activity.

As much as he wanted to spend more time with Lois, however, it was just as well.

He knew she needed time to get used to the knowledge of him being both Kal-El and Clark Kent and that was before they could even approach addressing where their relationship was going.

“All good there, Kent?” Henderson asked, coming up beside

him as he gazed at the missing persons wall.

“Yeah,” he assured, looking away from the faces and names.

“Good job on finding that boy yesterday. If he had been taken across state lines, there’s no telling where he would have ended up,” Henderson said.

“I’m glad I was there. I just wish I could see to them all being found,” Clark said.

Bill nodded in understanding, his eyes falling to the dozen faces of individuals still missing on the wall. The day before had been a good day, as well as a reminder of why it was so important for them to always be vigilant.

A six-year-old had Clark to thank for his life. Bill was under no delusion of what would have happened to him had the PI not recognized his young face over the shoulder of a man carrying him. A kidnapper.

This would be the seventy-eighth person he had found since moving to Metropolis.

Granted, many of those were runaways, but about a third were not. And of those found, ten of them had been reported missing from out of state.

Kent was a marvel.

“Well, I should head out,” Clark said after a moment.

“Of course. Oh, did Mayson update you on the new witness?” he asked. “He’s been put under witness protection.”

“No. Is she in?” Clark asked.

“Unfortunately she’s in court for the rest of the day, but she’ll be in tomorrow morning.”

“I can wait until then, unless you want to brief me now?”

Clark inquired.

“No, I better let her do it. She knows the ins and outs more than I do, and this is more your case and hers than mine,” Bill said. “But things are getting close to being wrapped up in preparation for arrest warrants.”

“Alright. Thanks,” Clark said before heading out.

Walking down the street, Clark was about to meander down to Suicide Slum when he heard the tall tale whine of Intergang’s special way of contacting him before he heard Mr. Church Sr.’s voice.

“*Kal, I need to speak with you urgently. My son has done something exceedingly foolish,*” he said in earnest.

Clark ducked into an alley and soon was shooting toward Mr. Church’s mansion.

“What’s going on?” Superman asked as he entered.

Church Sr. jumped but looked relieved as he faced him.

“He’s hired an assassin to kill Frank Lials, a former bodyguard of mine who is currently a witness for Mayson Drake’s case against me and Intergang.”

“Is the assassin Diana Stride again?” he asked.

Bill Sr. nodded. “After I told Frank to turn himself in—which I was going to update you on—my son heard about it. What’s more is that he got information on where the safe house is. He’s no doubt told Stride.”

“Another spy in the department?” Kal asked.

“Peter Jones, though he’s my son’s man, not mine. I only just recently learned about him thanks to *my* spy. Anyway, this is the location. I don’t know when she’ll make the attempt, but I suspect sooner rather than later. Possibly tonight.” He sighed, handing over a slip of paper. “I just want this to be over. I’m just so done.”

“Fortunately, a great deal of that is up to you, and I know you’ve been working toward it—hence Frank Lials. But I think it’s time for you to go all in, if you’re serious about bringing an end to Intergang,” Kal stated.

“I know. And thank you. I’m working on something and should have it ready soon. I’ll let you know once I’ve sent it to the Foundation. Should be in a few days,” he promised before looking thoughtfully at him. “I don’t know of anyone who would have done what you have for me. After everything I’ve done and

brought about....”

“You will have to answer for those things, but I know there is good in everyone and they should be given the opportunity to prove it if there’s evidence that they will,” Kal said.

Bill Sr. smiled sadly. “My wife would have liked you.”

Kal looked down at the paper, deciding not to respond to his compliment.

“Thanks for this. I won’t let anything happen to Mr. Lials,” he promised before disappearing.

Clark returned to the precinct, this time as Superman, and quickly found Henderson.

“Kal-El, I take this is not a social visit?” Henderson asked as he looked up from his desk upon hearing the knock.

Superman closed the door and did a quick scan (as he always did when about to discuss something critical). He didn’t find any listening devices.

“No. I just got back from talking with Mr. Church. An assassin will go after Ms. Drake’s witness soon, possibly tonight. I’m going to the location now and will be keeping an eye out. I just wanted to give you a heads up, but I don’t believe we should move the witness. I think we’ll be able to catch Diana Stride.”

“If it was anyone but you telling me Stride is an assassin I’d be concerned for your mental health,” Henderson said, shaking his head. “Anyway, thanks, I’ll let Mayson know.”

“Thank you,” Kal said with a smile before leaving to the safehouse.

The safe house was located in a secluded cluster of woods on the outskirts of Metropolis. It was a good place to conceal someone, but it was also a good place to be able to sneak up on a hiding person and take them out.

And so he waited. Hovering high above the clouds and out of sight, he peered down, scanning the woods and the roads, searching for any individual who did not belong.

He saw over a dozen officers and security personnel around the cabin and scattered around the perimeter of the property, but it was only after 11pm when his eyes spotted a feminine form making their way through the woods.

She was certainly good at what she did. Had he no military experience, he might have seen her too late, but he had seen. So when she leveled her weapon and took aim, he was upon her, snatching the gun and hoisting her up as he called out to the guard.

“Here! I have the assassin!” he bellowed.

Armed individuals immediately swarmed around him as Mayson Drake hurried forward.

“Thank you, Kal-El. You’ve made our job much easier,” she said, nodding to two officers who quickly searched a fuming Diana Strike and handcuffed her as one recited her rights.

“No problem,” he said, ignoring the soon-to-be-former TV host’s glare.

“With any luck, everything Intergang will be coming to an end soon,” Drake said.

“I suspect it will be,” Superman said knowingly before nodding his farewell and shooting up into the sky.

The cascade of evidence slammed in like a surge from a blasted dam, the blast being Bill Church Sr. himself.

The District Attorney’s office was swamped, but no one was complaining.

Mayson grinned.

Intergang was in shambles.

Bill Church Sr. had turned himself in after providing a crate of criminal evidence in the form of documentation, videos, and audio recordings. Along with those, he had a folder of notarized confessions from over a hundred individuals. Individuals who were found peacefully waiting in line outside their nearest county

jail for processing. Only a dozen of them operated in Metropolis.

It was unequivocally unconventional, but it certainly streamlined a few things and would likely lead to a number of plea deals. What was even more astonishing were the proposals and offers from the Superman Foundation to help those people reacclimate to society after they had served their sentences, which would likely range from a few months to twenty years depending on the individual’s crimes.

Of course, the Superman Foundation was already paired up with certain prison programs but this was by far more proactive. And while Mayson was doubtful everyone entering this new program would turn their lives around, if it helped prevent a few individuals from returning to crime, she would welcome it.

Kal-El certainly believed in it and had provided a statement that accompanied Church Sr.’s.

Within, Superman outlined his actions since the moment Church Sr. had tried to intimidate him into turning a blind eye to Intergang’s criminal activities and how he had brought in Mayson Drake before beginning a pseudo-undercover investigation of Intergang. And then he described how he had seen the potential of changing Church Sr.’s outlook on life and took a chance while continuing to gather evidence in case it failed.

But it had succeeded.

Maybe there really is good in everyone like Clark said.

Though not everyone acted on it.

Mayson watched Church Jr. march out of the courtroom in handcuffs after he was rejected bail.

He had resisted arrest, and was one of many around the world who had been rounded up over the past week because of all the evidence they had gathered and been given.

He wouldn’t be the last.

Chapter 8: Date

Clark smiled as Lois’ Uncle Mike led him to the corner table at the back of the restaurant.

“Shall I bring out the special menu?” Mike asked knowingly as he placed two drinks on the table. A root beer for Clark and a cream soda for Lois.

“Yes, thank you,” Clark said.

“Very good, and remember, desserts are on the house,” Mike said with a smile.

Clark nodded his thanks.

Clark had become a regular at the cafe after dealing with the men who had been sent by Intergang to burn the place down. As thanks, Mike had offered free meals to Clark whenever he wished but Clark had insisted on still paying. In the end, they compromised. Mike would make a portion of the meal free for him, and since Clark had a big sweet tooth, the solution was simple.

A minute later, Lois arrived. Clark quickly stood and pulled out the chair for her.

“Hi, Clark,” she said, a little more dressed up than usual.

“Hi. You look amazing,” he complimented as she sat down.

“Thanks. You too,” she said, feeling the flutter of a dozen butterflies in her stomach as she returned his smile.

This was their third date, and she knew they were nearing the next step, but she wasn’t sure what that meant exactly. How much did Clark expect? What did he want? Would he really be alright with going slow? Did she even want them to go slow?

“I read your article. It’s nice to see Intergang’s end in print,” Clark said.

“Perry was beside himself,” Lois agreed. “And getting that interview with Mr. Church.... I never imagined someone could change so much. Talk about a one-eighty. Granted, he did say his change of heart was due to Superman,” she said with a smile.

“In the end, however, the choice was still up to him,” Clark said with a shrug.

"I doubt he would have made it without Superman's prompting, though."

"True," Clark admitted, before Mike returned and took their order.

"Twin order of lasagna coming up," Mike said with a flourish as he left them alone again.

"So," she said, uncertain on how to move the conversation to what they needed to discuss. Or at least to what she did.

"So ... ?" Clark asked, shifting himself toward her, sensing her unease.

"I'm not sure why this is so hard to talk about," she managed.

"Do you mean where we should go from here?" he asked, now just as hesitant.

"Yes. I mean, this is our third official date, and I have no idea what . . . I mean, well, I assume we're going steady now, so does that mean... ?"

Clark grinned. "We're officially boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"You make it sound so simple," Lois said with a soft smile, though her eyes revealed her still present unease.

Clark gently took her hand. "I think I know what you mean. We haven't really talked about expectations or much about our pasts before," he said calmly. "Admittedly, it's been a long time since I've dated anyone. The last person had been years and years ago and it hadn't been serious at all, although at the time I thought it had been. Only later did I learn Lana was just . . . well, intense high school drama," he said with a shrug of remembered embarrassment.

"Oh. So you don't ..." Lois frowned, now really unsure of things. So he had never had an adult relationship? Did that mean he . . . was a virgin?

Clark sighed and glanced around, confirming no one was in earshot.

"Lois, I'm not from here. So I've always held myself back. I've never let..." He paused, trying to find the best words. "If you're worried about ... man, this is hard to talk about."

Lois smiled at his honesty.

"Ok, so, histories?" Lois asked, growing a little more confident after seeing she wasn't the only one uncertain.

"Alright. Well, as embarrassing as this is, I've only had two girlfriends, both in highschool. Rachel Harris and Lana Lang."

Lois blinked in genuine surprise, the information truly sinking in. "No one after? Not even a single date when you were in the Air Force or in college?"

"No one. And I didn't really go to college, I just self studied and the military took care of the rest. It was for a top secret case. Anyway, I decided not to take the risk of cultivating a relationship," he stated before smiling. "Until I met you anyway."

Lois smiled shyly. "Okay, so, high school?"

"Well, with Rachel, it lasted for about a month in my sophomore year before we both decided we were too young and broke it off. It was all very tame, I suppose. I was barely brave enough to kiss her cheek," Clark admitted, failing to hide a blush.

"And Lana?" Lois asked, trying not to enjoy his discomfort too much.

Clark sighed, suddenly not as relaxed. "I was with her for about six months. Started mid-junior year. I thought she really liked me and I began to think I could tell her about, well, everything. I'm really glad I didn't."

"What happened?" Lois asked, quickly sensing this wasn't as lighthearted as the previous relationship.

"She was going behind my back two months in, getting with other guys and gossiping with the cheerleaders. It was a competition between a group of girls, to see how many boys they could get with while hiding what they were doing from their unsuspecting boyfriends."

"That's despicable!" she gasped, disgusted.

"It was pretty humiliating. Probably the worst humiliation

I've experienced, if I'm honest. But I learned a great deal. They were very hard lessons though."

Lois brought her other hand and placed it on top of his which was still holding her other.

"What did you learn? Other than that girls can be cruel?" she asked.

"I discovered the need to verify and not just automatically trust. I learned to be vigilant and to inquire when something feels off. If I had done that, I would have discovered the truth sooner and spared myself and others some grief. It wasn't just me they were messing with, after all."

She nodded understandingly and waited for him to go on.

He softly sighed. "I also learned not to care too much about what people think of me, especially when the scale they're judging me on is skewed or broken."

"So she gossiped about you to her friends?" she asked sympathetically, easily imagining what might have been said.

"Compared my habits to the other boys with her friends, how well I kissed, what I liked to talk about with her, but ironically the thing that seemed to be their main focus where I was concerned was that..." He glanced at her, suddenly hesitant. "I wouldn't sleep with her."

Lois blinked but kept her expression steady. Somehow.

"There was plenty of opportunity, and she wasn't shy about what she wanted—at times she even became insistent—but I didn't ... it didn't feel right. So I said no, every time. And that's eventually how I learned the truth of what was going on."

"Don't tell me you learned from one of the guys she had been with," Lois breathed, horrified by the thought. How degrading that would be! Granted, no matter how he had learned the truth, it must have been horrible.

Clark shook his head, both touched by her concern and amused by how absorbed she had become in the time of his life that was now so far from him that the emotions it still managed to bring forth barely felt like a flutter to him.

Although it was a flutter of intense hurt.

"No, she did. By accident. In the barn, after I refused again, she became so frustrated that she just blurted it out. 'None of the other boys resist like you do! Even goody-two-shoes Al immediately came on hard last week!' She instantly tried to say she hadn't meant what it sounded like and tried to give a dozen excuses before saying it was **my** fault because I wouldn't please her. And then, to try to hurt me—which admittedly succeeded—she just laid it all out, saying I was a laughing stock and the whole school knew and that there must be something wrong with me since the other boys had done it, etcetera, etcetera."

Lois gaped, speechless.

"Of course, only a pocket of the school knew what was going on initially. Many of the boys she and the two other girls had been with kept quiet, afraid their unfortunate boyfriends would beat them up if they learned. It was certainly a scandal when the truth finally came out, although the teachers did a fair job of hiding details from most of the student body, but the gist of what happened couldn't be covered up. One girl had even become pregnant from the whole mess."

Lois coughed. "Wow. And I thought stuff like that only happened in city schools."

"People are people everywhere," he said lightly.

"I suppose we both learned hard lessons before we met each other," Lois said, meeting his eyes.

"Yeah," he said.

"So what happened then? I mean, did they finish high school there or what?"

"The pregnant girl moved. I heard she gave the baby up for adoption, but I don't know anything beyond that. I do wonder about her sometimes, because, of the three girls, she was the least ... manipulative. The second girl moved as well, although I think

it was more for her parents' sake than for hers. They were so ashamed of what their daughter had done, it was sad. As for Lana, she kept her head down and finished high school in Smallville before moving and starting a life far away. Florida, I think."

"And the boys?" she asked.

"The boyfriends licked their wounds and moved on, more hesitant of relationships in general. Myself included. As for the father of the child conceived, I never learned who it was, but I do hope the child was adopted into a good home and can find the answers they want if they ever do begin to wonder, which they likely will. I know what it's like to not know."

Lois stilled, suddenly realizing that she hadn't spared a thought of what had happened to the child or even if the father had been informed, not to mention what had happened to the teen mother after it all. She didn't know how to feel about that.

And then to be reminded that Clark had not always known where he had come from or why he was different. It was impossible to imagine how hard that must have been.

"Concerning the rest of the boys, they either shrugged off the event or became leery of possibly being used for the amusement of others again. Al especially was hit hard by it all. He felt so ashamed, even though his parents were pretty understanding. He's a priest now, helps out in a halfway house last I heard."

Clark eased back, releasing her hands before Mike came out with their food a moment later.

"Do either of you require anything else?" Mike asked, setting down their plates.

Each lasagna dish, rich with cheese, had two bread knots and seasoned asparagus as a side. It smelled really good.

"No, everything looks great," Lois said with a smile before Mike left them to eat.

They slowly dug in, both anticipating her turn to share.

"Well, you already know about Claude and what I learned there. He was my last ... relationship. I can't even say he was a boyfriend, which just makes what happened even worse," she huffed before moving on. "Before him was Paul Newman. I was with him for about four months. He was the editor of MU's college newspaper in my junior year of college, but then Linda King happened. That had been a blow. Never thought my best friend would steal my boyfriend. Granted, I suppose stealing isn't the right word. It's not like he went to her against his will. And when it was all said and done, he left her for some other lady a few months later. So he was just another slime ball. Taking what he wants from women before moving onto the next clueless girl."

She shook her head and took a bite before continuing. "From that experience I learned to never go out with a superior, and that even good friends can make horrible mistakes. I'm just glad Linda and I are working our way back to being friends again." Lois said before taking a few more bites and adding, "Even if he hadn't been a womanizer, looking back, that relationship hadn't been healthy. He was too controlling. But then, I was a naive college student, thrilled that a man in a position of any power was interested in me."

They ate in silence for a moment, each enjoying the layered seasoning and creamy cheese.

"My last relationship of note was with an Irishman, when I had been a foreign exchange student the summer of my Freshman year in college. Patrick Sullivan. It was very brief, but we soon knew it wouldn't work. Long distance relationships rarely do and neither of us were willing to make a life change for the other, which was telling in itself."

She took a few bites of the asparagus and shrugged.

"Everything before that was typical high school dates that were both tentative and awkward. The longest relationship then was two months that rarely went beyond the slow stretch-arm-over-the-shoulders phase. So glad I'm no longer in high school," she said with a shudder.

Clark smirked. "Me too."

"So, I suppose we're back to: what now?" Lois asked.

"What do you want now to be?" Clark asked.

Lois gave a happy sigh, deciding to be forward. "I'm torn. I want more, but I also don't want to go too fast," she said, taking his hand again.

"I don't want to go too fast either. You already know more about me than anyone else, other than my parents, so I'm fine with a steady progression, and if we want to be in a holding pattern for a time, that's fine too," he said, looking much more assured than when they had started.

"What is a steady progression to you?" Lois asked.

"Well, I don't have my heart set on this exact schedule, and I don't want to pressure you, but if everything were to work out, I imagine maybe six months to a year of dating, maybe longer, and then engagement. After that, another few months or so, and then ... marriage? Like I said, I'm not set on anything, that's just what I think when I say 'steady progression'. No moving in with one another unless we both agree, although I think it would be best to do so after marriage, if only for the sake of the legality of rent payments and stuff. Granted, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a tad traditional, although I suppose you likely already guessed that, considering, well..." He pinked up and Lois couldn't help but smirk and think it was adorable, even though her heart was still pounding over the marriage bit.

"I think that's reasonable, and leaves room for adjustment as we go," Lois said, relieved they had cleared a few things up, although now she had a lot to think about, but at least it filled her with excitement more than unease or fear.

Clark smiled and took a moment to finish his lasagna before growing still. He made sure no one was in hearing range again before speaking.

"So, uh, are you alright with me, uh, not having crossed the ... threshold before?" he asked.

The words confused her for a split second before her mind grasped their meaning. She couldn't stop herself from laughing out loud.

"I'm sorry, I've just never heard it phrased that way before," she said, forcing herself to calm down.

He continued to wait for her response and she quickly realized how important this was to him.

"Well, I'll admit I was surprised. I mean, you're very attractive and I had imagined you had, at least once. But what you said makes sense. You're ... not from here, and ... well, to put it delicately, how different are you?"

Clark sagged with relief. "I'm like any other man. Except for my ... powers," he said quietly at the end before resuming normal volume, "I'm like any other male, at least as far as I can tell."

Lois smiled, trying to continue to put him at ease, before she grew contemplative.

"I do wish I had waited though," she admitted. "Especially since my prior relationships were pretty much federal disasters."

"Well, then we will both be each other's first non-disasters," he said, beaming.

"Alright," she said, smiling.

"So, shall we have dessert?" Clark asked, now that they had finished the main course.

"Please," she said, content with where she was now confident they were heading as a couple.

"So, chocolate brownie or chocolate pie?" he asked, although by the look in his eyes, it was clear he already knew what she would say.

"Made by my uncle? How about both?" she suggested.

Clark smirked. "Alright, but remember I want to have some too."

She swatted his arm playfully.

"Alright, but only if you take me flying later," she said.

“Deal,” he said with a grin, suddenly feeling he had just agreed to begin the next stage of his life.
Maybe he had.

THE END

Of Act II

Sequel — Investigate: Keeper