

The Press Conference

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: What if Samantha hadn't dropped her camera and ruined the film in the episode "Sex, Lies and Videotape"?

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Lois Lane's throat was dry and she knew she was already way more flushed than she wanted to be. She would be shining like a fire engine in the photos. Was it too much to hope they would stick with black and white?

Clark wasn't here yet. He'd received a phone call from an older lady and had gone to see if it could develop into a story.

The lady had been adamant — come alone.

Lois sighed. She was still very much out of favour with most of the people of Metropolis.

Clark would be here soon. He wouldn't leave his wife to face the pack of tabloid wolves by herself any longer than was absolutely necessary.

But, if he were delayed, they were going to have to postpone the press conference and that would mean more speculation. More detailed and desperate analysis of the photos. More abusive calls. More righteous indignation. More innuendo. More accusations. More stories that plummeted Superman further into the putrid sludge of scandal.

It had been nine days since the first photo had hit the front page of just about every disreputable paper on the east coast.

And eight days, twenty-three hours, fifty-nine and one half minutes since everyone had decided they knew exactly what Superman did with Clark Kent's wife at the Chateau Roberge.

Clark had wanted to reveal The Secret. The carnage to Superman's reputation had wounded him deeply. He had felt cornered. He had felt as if he'd let down the people who believed in him.

He was so distraught, he was ready to tell the world that Superman couldn't be having an affair with Clark Kent's wife because Clark Kent and Superman were the same person.

But Lois had argued.

She had argued that once the secret was told, it could never be recalled. Once it was public knowledge, their lives would change irrevocably.

Clark had insisted. He couldn't allow Superman's reputation — nor Lois's for that matter — to be dragged through the squalor of scandal and suspicion.

Lois had pleaded for a stay of one day - to get through one day with the secret intact. If they got through one day, he would still have the choice — the choice to tell, or the choice to keep his life as Clark Kent.

And if they got through that day, they could consider if they could get through one more day.

The previous International Peace Prize winner had stepped into the breach and brokered an agreement between the leaders of Latislan and Podansk.

Clark had been relieved about that, but it hadn't done anything to restore Superman's standing as a man of integrity.

Lois had shared his agony of indecision. She'd held him and soothed him and reminded him that unfed rumours had a shelf-life measured in hours not weeks.

But they both knew this was something that would never be completely washed away.

People would stop talking about it. They would see Clark Kent's absolute happiness with his wife. They would see his trust in her faithfulness. They would see that while this photograph had rocked the world, it hadn't even scratched the surface of their marriage.

The tongues would stop, but the memories would linger.

There would be a little asterisk next to 'Superman — Superhero' and the note below would say that there had been an unexplained and damning photo of Superman inappropriately tangled with Lois Lane, a married woman.

Clark knew it. Lois knew it.

Superman knew it every time people turned away from him with reproach in their eyes.

Then, it had all faded to insignificance, for them anyway, when Tempus had re-entered their lives as John Doe and pushed Clark through a time window.

Clark from the other dimension had come and with his help and that of HG Wells, Lois had found her Clark and brought him home.

John Doe was arrested. Superman had given a press conference. And as Lois had walked hand-in-hand with Clark, the idea had hit her.

They needed to have a press conference of their own.

From where she sat, Lois looked anxiously behind her, hoping to see Clark. She could sense the gathered press were losing their limited patience. She knew there was nothing worse than the creeping realisation that the story you were chasing had less substance than cotton candy.

She glanced around the room of about thirty assembled reporters and photographers. She knew most of the faces. There was Jane Barker from The Global Inquirer. Next to her was Peter Hendrie from The National Inquisitor. Then Stan Gilham from the Metropolis Star. Then ... Lois felt her anger rise ... then Samantha Scat, from The Dirt Digger Weekly.

The double-crossing, muckraking, opportunistic, sniping scumball who had gone undercover to get a job in research at the Planet and used that as a launching pad to ask Lois to set up a date with Superman.

And who, according to Lois and Clark's investigation, had gone from wanting a date with Superman to taking incriminating photographs of him and publishing them in her rag.

Lois met Samantha's eyes and the other woman stared back - hard, cold, undaunted and with a small smile of satisfaction hovering around her lips.

Lois was saved from the temptation to slap the smugness from Samantha's face when all the heads lifted expectantly and focussed behind her. She turned and saw Clark. He smiled an apology and sat beside her.

Together, they faced their Inquisition.

Clark cleared his throat. "Thank you for coming," he said. "Better give us good reason for coming," Gilham growled.

"We're here to rectify a misconception, not spoon-feed you a story," Lois snarled.

Under the table, she felt Clark's hand close around hers.

"Get on with it," Gilham said impatiently.

Again Clark cleared his throat. "As you are well aware, photographs were recently published showing what appeared to be my wife and Superman in a compromising position."

"It appeared to be what it was," Barker said in a bored voice that clearly proclaimed her already-formed conclusions.

"Yes, it did," Clark agreed steadily. "It was a photo of my wife with me — in what we thought was the privacy of our hotel room."

"Don't try to make this a privacy issue," Hendrie snapped. "That's your wife in the photo and she's with Superman and don't

try to make it about anything else.”

Under the table, Clark’s fingers pressed a little closer into Lois’s hand but there was nothing in his face or his posture to suggest even the slightest tension. Lois smiled to herself. Her husband was one cool dude when he needed to be.

“Having investigated thoroughly, we believe the photographs to be completely legitimate,” Clark said in his calm, pleasant voice. “They were taken through the window of our second storey room at the Chateau Roberge.”

Every head in the room shot up and Lois could feel the crackle of interest. “You’re admitting it’s legitimate?” Barker squeaked.

Clark nodded solemnly. “We delayed commenting until we were sure the photograph hadn’t been corrupted in any way.”

“You’re sure it wasn’t?” Hendrie fired at them. “And you’re admitting to it?”

“Yes.”

Barker spoke up. “Ms Lane,” she said. “Your husband has just stated that he - and now the entire world - knows you are having an affair with Superman. What do you have to say?”

“My wife has nothing to say,” Clark replied, before Lois had even opened her mouth. “I called this Press Conference. Ms Lane is here to support me. Please direct any further questions to me.”

“Mr Kent,” the woman came again. “Are you going to announce your intention to divorce your wife? Or are you willing to share her with Superman?”

“I’m certainly not going to announce a divorce,” Clark said, sounding suitably shocked. “I am totally in love with my wife and intend to remain married to her for the rest of my life. She is everything to me.”

His comment prompted at least half the room to turn on Lois with looks of disgust. Clark glanced sideways with a little smile of support.

“So you’re willing to share her with Superman?” The question came loaded with taunting disbelief.

“Not at all,” Clark said. “Both my wife and I firmly believe in the fidelity of marriage.”

“Then how do you explain the photo?” Hendrie asked. “The photo you admit is legitimate?”

“I’ve already told you,” Clark said with just a hint of surprise.

“You did?”

Clark’s eyebrows lifted. “Were you not taking notes?” he asked.

Lois hid her smile again. Clark was so darn nice he could get away with a snarky comment occasionally.

“No point taking notes until we know there’s a story.”

“What do your notes say?” Clark enquired politely.

Lois stared fixedly at the table. If she hadn’t been all too aware of the seriousness of this, she probably would have burst out laughing.

“That the photograph isn’t a fake.”

“Before that,” Clark suggested helpfully.

Hendrie scanned his notes, but came up empty.

Clark gave an almost imperceptible sigh — as if he were unused to reporters who hadn’t yet mastered the skill of note-taking. “My second comment,” he said patiently. “I said the photo in question showed my wife with me in our hotel room.”

“It wasn’t you,” Samantha blurted. “It was Superman.”

Clark head jolted to her. He contemplated her for a long moment as blotchy redness mottled her cheeks. “Were you there?” he asked cordially.

“No, no of course I wasn’t there,” she said, flustered.

“Well, I was,” Clark declared.

“Hang on,” came a voice from the back of the crowd. “Are you saying you were in the room while Lois Lane and Superman were rolling on the bed? Or are you saying you are ... Superman?”

Clark chuckled and managed to look a little bashful. “Ah ... no, I’m not saying that,” he said. “I’m saying I’m a very human man who planned a surprise for his wife on their weekend away.”

“You ... you *dressed* up as Superman?”

Clark shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. “I thought it would be a fun thing to do,” he admitted.

Lois glanced at him, marvelling that he had even managed to cultivate an uneasy blush across his cheeks. And his expression was perfect — the man who’d had what he’d thought was a good idea, only to discover it really wasn’t such a good idea after all.

“So you’re telling us that you *dressed* up in the Superman suit and looked so much like him, you fooled the entire world?”

“I didn’t *just* dress up,” Clark said indignantly. “I gelled my hair and took off my glasses too.”

“I’m not buying it,” Gilham declared flatly.

Clark released Lois’s hand and turned side-on to the press. He took his glasses from his face and let them clatter as they landed on the table. He fumbled in the interior pocket of his jacket and brought out a tube of gel. He slicked back his hair.

The cluster of gasps resonated around the room.

“He looks like Superman.”

“The resemblance is uncanny.”

“Who would have ever thought that Clark Kent could look like a superhero?”

“He looks like Superman.”

“He looks *just* like Superman.”

“He *is* Superman!”

Clark turned abruptly and repositioned his glasses on his face. “Excuse me?” he said.

“You are Superman.”

“Are you saying that you believe the man in photograph — the man that many people thought was Superman, could in fact be me?”

“Of course it’s you. It’s obvious.”

Clark leant back in his chair as one whose job is done. “I trust this will put an end to the speculation regarding an illicit affair,” he said pleasantly.

Jane Barker stepped forward. “I think you’ve just spawned more speculation than you realise,” she said ominously.

Clark drew his eyebrows together. “Surely ... you don’t think ... you couldn’t possibly believe ... ”

Lois took his hand, this time above the table, so all could see. “It’s all right, honey,” she said, loud enough that all could hear. “I think I can fix this.”

Clark slowly turned his head to his wife. “They ... they ... think *I’m* ... ”

“Spare us the theatrics, Kent,” Hendrie said sharply. “We’re not stupid. It’s obvious — you are Superman.”

“Help!” Lois screamed, taking a measure of gratification in their startled reactions. “Superman! Help!”

With a blur of red and blue, Superman appeared. “Ms Lane,” he said. “Are you all right?”

“Thank you for coming, Superman,” Lois said. “These people ... ” she gestured around the room. “These people seem to have come to the conclusion that Clark is actually you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“No,” Superman said plaintively. “He’s Clark.”

“Well, *I* know he’s Clark,” Lois said. “And you know he’s Clark and despite his little stunt at the Chateau Roberge, even Clark knows he’s Clark, but it seems there are some people who don’t know he’s Clark.”

Superman scanned the room as if searching for anyone who could possibly be so misinformed. “Who thinks Clark Kent is Superman?” he challenged.

Eyes dropped and heads shook.

“No one?” Superman looked back to Lois. “It seems we have

straightened out that little misunderstanding, Ms Lane,” he said.

“Anything else I can do for you and Mr Kent?”

“No. Thank you.” Superman lifted an arm as if to fly away.

“Hold on! Superman!”

Superman stalled three feet from the ground and looked down at Jane Barker. “Yes?”

“As you’re here,” Barker said. “Would you mind answering a few questions?”

Superman paused before slowly descending to the floor.

“Have you ever been intimate with Ms Lane?” Barker asked.

Superman crossed his arms, leant back and faced the woman with the full force of his steely eyes. “I have *never* been intimate with Ms Lane,” he said in a quiet tone of absolute sincerity. “She is a married woman and a woman who is clearly in love with her husband — who also happens to be a good friend of mine.”

“Have you ever been to the Chateau Roberge?”

“Never.”

Gilham held up the poster-sized photo of Lois and Superman.

“Is this you in this photograph?”

“No,” Superman declared. “It is not.”

“You are sure?”

“Totally sure. I have never ... would never ... be in a position like that with Ms Lane.”

“You are willing to swear that this is *not* you?”

“Absolutely,” Superman said. “I am *not* in that photograph.”

“If it’s not you, who do you think it is?”

Superman released a breath and some of his patience visibly drained away. “If you knew Ms Lane, you wouldn’t have to ask that question,” he said. “Clearly the man in that photo is her husband, Mr Kent.”

“Did you know he stole your Suit?”

Superman repositioned his arms across his chest in a further gesture of eroding tolerance. “Clark Kent is my friend,” he said in a tone that said he had explained this before. “The Suits are kept in his closet because he is kind enough to see to their cleaning. He didn’t need to steal it.”

“Do you think it’s tacky that your friend took your Suit to seduce his -?”

“I don’t think about what my friend does in the privacy of his bedroom,” Superman said coolly. “Neither should you.”

The Press Conference slumped to an awkward silence.

Clark cleared his throat again. “Any further questions?” he asked.

There were none.

Superman flew away.

Clark Kent and Lois Lane walked away — hand-in-hand.

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Lois Lane swung into her dining room and stopped.

Her husband sat, unmoving, at the table — the table that was almost completely covered by a sprawl of envelopes and letters. Five bulging sacks were lined up on the floor, awaiting his attention.

Lois crossed to him and smiled. “Fan mail?” she guessed.

“Superman’s been exonerated?”

Clark slowly lifted his face to her and nodded.

“The usual fare of herostruck children and luststruck women?” Lois asked.

Clark shook his head in bewilderment. “No,” he said.

“They’re all from men.”

“Men?”

“Married men.”

Lois’s eyes travelled across the bulk of letters. “What do they want?” she asked.

“The Suit,” Clark said weakly. “They all want to borrow the Superman Suit.”

THE END