

Kill Your Heroes

By Mouserocks <mouserocksnerd@gmail.com>

Rated: PG-13 for angst and intense situations

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Summary: How could things go so wrong? How could Superman be defeated? Major WHAM warning for you sensitive souls.

Snow

The air was dank and stale around them. The room smelled like a cross between spoiled milk and body odor, likely because both were present in the little space the two men were currently sharing. At least it was cold, so instead of being cramped into a tiny area and suffocating to death because of the smells and humidity, they were freezing their buns off and had to wear gloves even to type. They weren't allowed to mess with the thermostat — for the computers, their boss told them — but Pete knew it was mostly for economy reasons. Their budget had been cut, once again, due to lack of funding. Which was why there were currently only two men on duty and numerous computers needing to be monitored.

Did no one care about space anymore?

Pete cupped his hands and raised them to his face, breathing into them in order to provide a moment's warmth. Had there been a window in the room, all he'd have seen outside was frost. December, he'd decided several years ago, had to be the most miserable month to be in Metropolis for heat lovers. Well, just outside the main city of Metropolis was no better, apparently.

He exhaled heavily and watched his breath blow through the air. It was a job. A job in his field of interest. Sort of. When he'd signed up to be involved in a scientific team working on a project where they launched stuff into space to test their new satellite, Pete had kind of thought he'd be, you know, doing stuff with space. Not sitting here making ten-fifty an hour freezing to death in an icebox, only to be monitoring the skies above for movement and debris.

Well, at least he could do his job well. The same could not be said for his coworker, Gerry. The man could barely function — he was asleep right now, Pete noted with an eye roll. And he never helped out by running any of the errands, he never paid for any of their lunches, and rarely responded to any of Pete's requests. Hell, he'd seen the man not answer calls or texts, cell phone inches away on the desk in front of him, simply because of laziness! Pete thought he'd bring that up the next time one of the head honchos came around. What if it were for something important.

Suddenly a light flashed on Pete's screen, a fast moving blip on the radar, and he sat upright in his chair. "Hey, Gerry. Look at this."

From behind him came a groan, and the older man murmured something incoherent as he shifted in his chair. Pete ignored him and, in a frenzy of movement, shuffled through his papers for the schedule for the day. He swiftly ran his finger down the page, looking for anything that might cross over this area at this time, and came up empty. He looked back at the monitor and saw that there was indeed something fast moving overhead. "Gerry, we've got a bogey heading our way, coming in fast. What are we supposed to do?"

Another groan, but this time, it came from closer. Gerry wheeled his chair over and squinted at the screen as he spoke. "How fast?"

Pete looked at the numbers tracking in at the corner of his

monitor. "Pretty darn fast, I'd say."

"Then it's Superman. Relax kid. Nothing ever goes wrong on this job. You're too high-strung."

Pete's shoulders slumped slightly at the realization that the older man was, sadly, right. "Oh." Gerry rolled back. Pete watched in less earnest than before as the little blip on the monitor suddenly came to a halting stop, somewhere close to their location and way above them. That piqued his interest once again. "He's stopped."

"Mhmm."

Pete frowned as the superhero's stillness disconcerted him. "What's he stopped out here for? There's nothing in the area but us."

"You know, I could do with a little less chatter from the peanut gallery."

Pete turned to shoot his colleague a glare before returning his gaze to the monitor. "What are you looking for, Supes?" he murmured under his breath, watching him just hover there. Suddenly, another blip came racing up towards the hero, at an even faster speed, heading straight on a collision course. Pete's eyes widened as he watched the blip get closer and closer to Superman.

Then, they collided.

Pete was out of his chair and on his feet like a shot, shouting an oath as he stared riveted to the action happening on the monitor.

Gerry scrambled to his feet at the commotion in shock. "What? What? What's going on?"

Pete just pointed to the screen, and Gerry followed his gaze to watch alongside him. The two dots were circling each other in the sky, with the second one coming in every few seconds and doing what they could only assume was attacking the hero. Superman was making no forward motion that would suggest he was fighting back, and seemed in fact to be losing ground — or air, in this case — to his mystery attacker. At first, Pete had thought perhaps that it was a missile, or some other kind of tracking device following the man of steel, but this... This was just... It was...

Human.

They stood frozen in place, unable to move even if they wanted to. The fight wore on for what seemed like eternity, but in reality was probably only a couple of minutes.

The first blip dropped.

Pete blinked. That couldn't be right. The first blip... that was Superman.

There was a slight shake as the dot connected with the ground and caused an almost seismic disturbance. Damn, they had come closer than he previously realized.

Then the second realization came. Superman had fallen to the Earth.

Pete uttered another curse and finally tore himself away from the computer screen to grab his cap and gloves and sprint out the door. Surprisingly, he heard Gerry following, not far behind him.

He tore into the direction in which the hero had fallen, hoping, praying that what he'd seen hadn't been what he thought it was. Perhaps they'd gotten it backwards, perhaps the first blip wasn't Superman and the second one was. Maybe his falling hadn't meant what Pete thought it did.

They came upon an area where a lot of snow had been displaced, piled high in a ring, and with a churning in his stomach, Pete knew this was it. He swallowed thickly and trudged his way up and through the small snowdrift to the place where he hoped Superman wasn't. Or at least, if he was, he hoped the hero would just be sitting there, dusting himself off, and give them a cheery wave as he flew off once again.

Pete closed his eyes on sight of the slightly askew red cape, unable and unwilling to look any further. He heard Gerry come

up beside him and swear violently, and he knew without a doubt that his suspicions were true. Pete tried to keep from shaking, to little avail. How was he supposed to act? Superman, the man of steel, the man of tomorrow, was dead. Would live to see no more tomorrows. What was the protocol here?

Slowly, he brought himself to open his eyes once more. He knew he'd have to face it again at some point. It was now or later, when the cops came to investigate or to drag off the body. He shivered again at that thought, before finally dragging his gaze up from his feet buried in snow to the man he'd believed to be invincible.

His body was at a sickening angle, twisted out of shape unnaturally. His neck was definitely broken, Pete realized, and had to fight back the urge to gag as he also noticed his arm was bent backwards, and a piece of bone was showing through. His hair was all out of place, not slicked down as it always had been. Blood was spattered lightly over the iconic red, yellow and blue of his uniform, marring the 'S' symbol that, in the past thirty years, the world had come to associate with truth, and justice. His face was abnormally pale, with some bruises already forming under his near translucent skin. And softly covering him all across his body was a light dusting of snow; a stark contrast to his vibrant suit and dark locks.

Pete felt his stomach sink and clench painfully at the same time. Superman was dead. Superman was *dead*. It was inconceivable. He couldn't die. Superman was always around — he had been a staple to the world for Pete's entire life, in fact. He didn't exist in the times before Superman. It was as though his whole world was being stood on its end.

Somewhere in the distant part of his mind, he heard Gerry talking on his cell phone, trying to explain to an ignorant 911 operator what happened and that this was not a prank call. Pete couldn't tear his attention away from the body before him as he stepped closer and knelt besides his hero's lifeless form. "Who did this to you," Pete whispered to himself, his mind completely in shambles. As he looked closely at his face, he noticed a few differences in the Man of Steel that he hadn't picked up on before. There was some light grey spattering his thick, dark hair, and some slight wrinkles around his eyes. Smile lines, his mother had always reminded him. Though he never really thought of Superman doing much smiling, come to think of it. Here and there, of course, but usually he remained stoic.

A large raindrop fell and landed on Superman's crest, and Pete watched it disinterestedly as it sat there and the liquid started to freeze. Suddenly a frown crossed his features. Pete looked around him and took note of the light little snowflakes that were falling everywhere else, before looking back to the raindrop where it had come to rest on the body. His frown deepened. That couldn't be right. Curiously, he glanced up.

His eyes just barely alighted on a small, dark form, extremely high up in the sky. The moment it registered just what he was seeing, there was a loud sonic boom and the figure was gone.

Pete's eyes went wide and he turned back to face Gerry, who had a similar look of surprise on his face at hearing the sonic boom — something else typically associated with Superman. Then he went back to yelling at whoever was on the other end of the line, demanding to speak to the lead detective.

Pete turned back haunted eyes to the hero that lay broken before him and came to grips with one crucial fact.

He had set eyes on Superman's killer.

Blood

The snow was stained red.

There had been more blood than the young man had led them to believe. Will swore to himself and ran a hand down his face. Never in his life, not once, had he expected to come across Superman in an investigation where he wasn't the hero, but the

victim. He, like most people his age and younger, pretty much grew up with Superman around. Perhaps he even more so than most people, having grown up around a police station and seeing Superman frequently in passing. To come face to face with the man's lifeless body...

It was more than a little frightening. In fact, it had him quite shaken.

A cab rolled up, and out stumbled a sloppily dressed Lois Lane Kent. Will couldn't help but groan. This would be just his luck. Though in her early sixties now, he knew from all his experience with her that she was still a force to be reckoned with. Still, he was a little surprised to see her out here. They hadn't leaked anything to the news outlets yet — and even so, she retired a few months ago. So how had she figured it out so quickly?

She definitely didn't waste any time on trying to get to him, practically barreling over all the other officers trying to stop her. They didn't know what the Mad Dog on a warpath was like, and clearly underestimated her. Will jogged up to her, holding out his arm to try to keep her back. "Mrs. Kent, please, we need you to —"

"Get the hell out of my way, Willy."

"Mrs. Kent, please. It's Inspector Henderson, now."

She snorted derisively, turning up her face to look at him. "Just like your daddy. You know, he always knew when to get out of my way. You should take a play out of his book and back off."

"Lois, you're going to have to stay back," his tone was forceful. "This is an active crime scene, and no press is allowed. You're not even a reporter any more."

He could tell by the flash of challenge in her eyes that he'd said the wrong thing. "Oh, so that's how you're going to be, is it? Well, *Inspector*, need I remind you that I've known you for your whole life — I've changed your *diapers* — and I'm pulling rank here."

Will squirmed uncomfortably for a moment as some of the other officers were giving him funny looks, before he once again spoke, this time with a modicum more of respect. "Listen, Mrs. Kent. I don't mean any disrespect. It has nothing to do with that. I just... I don't want you to see what's happened here. I know how close you and your husband are with Superman, and I really don't think you should see him... in this condition."

He could see the impact this information had on her, her eyes growing wide and visibly swallowing. Will tried changing the subject. "Where's Clark today, by the way? I haven't seen him in a while."

Lois' eyes began to water, and for the first time since she showed up here today, William Henderson Jr. was seriously concerned about Lois Lane Kent. He hesitantly put a hand on her shoulder. "Mrs. Ke — Lois? Is everything all right?"

She sniffed loudly and wiped a hand across her face to brush away her stray tears. "I heard... The police scanner..."

"You have a police scanner?"

She didn't even give him a glare, that's how upset she was. Will's stomach churned as Lois continued. "Clark hasn't been home in eighteen hours. I thought that maybe... but then... and now Superman!" She took a shuddering breath to collect herself, not bothering to wipe away her tears. "Tell me, Will. Is it true? The scanner said Superman was seen falling from the sky and that all units were to come right away. How's his condition?"

Will looked to the ground. He was at a moral dilemma here. He didn't know how he could tell her. How was he supposed to tell anyone this sort of news? Let alone the first woman to have met him, and who befriended him. But, on the other hand, she was bound to find out somehow. Perhaps it would be best if she heard it from him first. The pain of having to hear it on the television or through someone else would be too traumatic, particularly if she were alone at the time. Compound that with the

knowledge that she seemed to believe her husband was missing... On an impulse, he decided she needed to know, and he had to be the one to tell her. "Lois, I'm sorry. I can't let you see him."

"And why not?" The defiance was back full force, as she pushed aside her pain and tears. She sure hadn't changed a bit over the years.

"Because. Superman... He's not here anymore."

"Then where is he?"

Will sighed and squirmed uncomfortably. He had to swallow past the lump in his throat in order to get the words out. "No, I mean, he's gone. He's... he's dead, Lois."

The series of expressions on Lois' face were heart wrenching to watch. First came confusion, then anger, followed closely by realization and a hollow sadness. Her eyes welled up instantly and she put her hand to her mouth. Lois searched his eyes for any hint that he was lying, messing with her, or just plain wrong. "What?" she barely whispered, a coldness that had nothing to do with the snow settling into her bones.

Will's expression only held great sadness.

Lois started trembling and her tears started streaming. "Oh my god. Oh... oh..." She pressed her hand firmly against her open mouth in a silent but devastated cry. She sank to her knees, not caring that there was snow on the ground or an audience around her. Her entire body was shaking violently with her overflowing emotions.

Will watched her features, contorted with pain, and felt a stab of pain at his heart. How was he not reacting in a similar fashion to the news? He'd known Superman his whole life, almost as well as the Kents. And yet Lois' emotions rendered him speechless. Perhaps they were closer than he'd thought. There was just something Will felt was missing from this puzzle, but that was a thought for later. Carefully, he reached out a hand to put on her shaking shoulder, in a gesture of comfort. "Lois, are you —"

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" she shouted and swatted his hand away. Will looked taken aback as she turned on him so quickly. "HOW DARE YOU?! How could you tell me such a thing? You're lying to me. You're *lying* to me! He's not dead. He can't be dead."

"Lo —"

"He's probably been exposed to Kryptonite. You don't know what he gets like after that. Sometimes he's passed out before. Did you even check him?!"

Her words were tumbling out of her so fast that it was all Will could do to keep up with them. When she suddenly shot upright and bolted past him presumably towards where Superman was lying, he didn't even think to stop her until she had already made her way past him. His eyes widened as he spun to chase after her. "Mrs. Kent, NO!"

She froze in place at the crest of the pile of snow, but Will knew it had nothing to do with his order.

Lois looked down into the small crater of snow created by her husband, looked down at his lifeless, unnaturally bent body. He hadn't been moved, obviously. There were some medics surrounding him, who looked up at her where she stood. She was frozen in this moment, completely and utterly motionless, dead inside.

Then something in her snapped.

Lois rushed forward, tears streaking down her face, and threw herself atop his body. She sobbed violently, murmuring his name over and over again, completely oblivious to the world around her. Will found himself standing over her, unsure of what to do. Heart breaking, he watched on as she stained his uniform with her tears. With a pit forming in his stomach, he listened as she blubbered and stuttered out the name Clark over and over again, just barely quiet enough so that few could hear it. And with a cold

grip on his heart, Will realized just why Lois was so torn up over Superman's death.

Clark. Superman.

Clark Kent was Superman.

Suddenly everything seemed so much more painful.

Lois jerked upright and began frantically running her hands up and down his body — mixing her tears with his blood, smearing it across his uniform and all over her hands. She was searching him, scrambling to find something, some sort of purchase.

"Lois?" Will's voice came out gravelly and broken as it all began to sink in with him.

"It's gotta be here," she murmured.

"Lois," he reached out a hand once more, only to be brushed away again.

"No! It's gotta be here somewhere. Maybe it's in his skin, or he ingested it, or swallowed it..." her movements grew increasingly erratic as her search continued to be fruitless.

"What, Lois?"

"Kryptonite! God dammit, it's here somewhere. All he needs is to get rid of it, and get some sunlight, and... and then, he'll be okay. Everything will be okay again. He's gonna be okay. Right, Clark? You're okay. You'll be okay." She brushed away a tear, leaving a stain of blood in its place on her cheek, drawn across her slightly wrinkled skin.

Will knelt to her level and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her away from her husband slightly. "Lois. Lois," he repeated, trying to get her attention focused on him and not the corpse in front of her. "The medics have looked over him multiple times already. They haven't found any Kryptonite."

"Then they missed something!" She shouted.

"No, Lois. They didn't."

"Yes they did! They had to have!"

"Lois, try to understand. I'm sorry. I cared for him too. But why did they have to have found Kryptonite?"

She whirled on him, tears flowing unchecked once more. "Because! Because if it's Kryptonite, then there might be ways to save him. Because... because if it isn't Kryptonite, then... then that means..."

Her voice trailed off and she turned back to her prone husband. She pounded her fist on his chest, directly on the emblem. "You've gotta be okay, d'you hear me? You have to. You can't die like this. You can't!"

"LOIS!"

"He always listens to me, Will. He always listens." She finally quit hammering on his chest, and just laid her hand there to rest on the bloodied crest. She smoothed her hand over the fabric gently, in a soothing motion. "He's gonna come back," Lois whispered mostly to herself.

Will remained silent this time, unwilling and unable to deny her that one last hope, at least not yet. He could barely keep it together himself. If there was any way he could hold out hope that Superman — that Clark Kent — was going to rise from the dead, he would cling to that hope for as long as he possibly could, too. The fact that this was also Lois' husband... he couldn't take that away from her just yet.

He gave her a close inspection as she leaned over and cried herself out onto the superhero's chest. She really hadn't changed a whole lot from what he remembered when he last saw her — at his wedding, a little over two years ago now. She had a little bit of grey showing in at her roots, but kept her hair dyed to its regular dark brown color. He'd noticed a few more wrinkles than before — but then again, that could just as likely be attributed to her sloppy appearance and the fact that she most likely ran here in haste. She had, perhaps, put on a few extra pounds, though nothing unhealthy. On a whole, nothing about Lois Lane Kent had really changed over the years. Excepting her now

heartbroken appearance.

Will then turned his attention back to the body lying in front of him, somewhat hidden by Lois' form draped across his chest. He examined him too, but this time with the knowledge that this man was Clark Kent.

Clark looked much the same as well. He'd aged a little bit better than his wife — not that he would ever contemplate telling Lois that — but he supposed that made sense, considering his alien DNA and such. Still, there was a light dusting of grey to his hair, and a slight crease to his now pale features. He tried to picture his hero with glasses on, and was surprised to realize that — from what he could recall — he looked younger now as Superman than he had two years ago as Clark Kent. Perhaps, in addition to the glasses, he had begun to disguise himself with some slight enhancements — additional wrinkles here, a little more grey there. A different pair of glasses, not at all in with the current fad and looking more like they belonged on his grandfather than his dad's friend.

Clark Kent was a grandfather, he realized. Superman had grandchildren. And children, of course, by extension.

That knowledge, although logically he should have realized, nearly knocked William off his feet.

He grew up with the Kent kids. Sure, they had been a little younger than him, so they hadn't been all that close — but whenever they came to visit, they were there. He'd never had the slightest inclination that anything was amiss. Surely he'd have seen one of them, at least once, lift something just a little too heavy, or run just a little too fast when playing tag. And he had somehow made Inspector? He hadn't even considered these possibilities until now!

An image flashed through his mind of his father and Clark Kent, standing in his dad's study, talking quietly to one of the Kent kids.

Did he know?

"What?" Lois' broken voice brought him back to the present, and her inquisitive eyes led him to realize that he had accidentally spoken his question aloud.

"My da — uh, nothing."

But Lois understood immediately. She sat back on her haunches and planted her hands in the snow for balance. She sniffed a few times and once again briefly raised her hand to brush away the moisture from her face before gathering herself enough to speak.

"Yes," she breathed shakily. "He's one of the few who did."

Will found his gaze once again staring at the corpse before him as they drifted off back towards silence and crying once again.

"Will?"

Once again, it was Lois' voice that drew him out of it. He turned his eyes to meet hers.

Lois' bottom lip quivered and she adjusted so that she was sitting in the snow, limbs loosely sprawled out in front of her. "If... if there isn't... I mean, if it's not... Kryptonite... Then I don't — I mean, I do — but I might..." she trailed off once again, unsure of how to phrase her words any more. It was just as well that she had retired. If she lost Clark before, she didn't know how she would be able to craft any sort of articles. She could hardly form words without him.

Will swallowed, suddenly nervous of where this conversation might be heading. He kept his gaze steadily on the blood red hand print she had left in the white blanket of snow. "Yes?"

She took in one more shuddering breath and locked her sights on the face of her husband. "I-I don't know who... but I might know what killed him."

Tears

Lois walked through the front door to her brownstone,

mentally and physically exhausted beyond belief. She couldn't bring herself to think anymore, let alone cry. The world's worst headache had descended upon her, and she just felt so numb and dried up that there was nothing... There were no words — no thoughts — worth thinking any more.

She flipped on the lights as she led the way in, an officer following closely behind her. "Are you going to be all right here alone tonight, Mrs. Kent?" he asked.

Lois nodded mutely.

"If you need anything, Officer Brinkley and myself will be in our car right outside. Inspector Henderson demanded that we stay all night, just in case. All right?"

Lois didn't give any other response except to put her purse and keys down on the counter.

"Are you sure you don't want us staying in the house? You will be okay, right? Maybe we should do a quick sweep of the house —"

"I'm fine, Officer," she finally managed to force out. "Thank you."

He gave her a curt nod in response before turning and walking back out the front door. Lois watched him to make sure the door was closed before slumping to her knees. She didn't know how, what with how exhausted she felt and how dry her eyes were, but she started to cry again. She took in breath after shuddering breath, not even able to contemplate what it would take to stop the tears. She couldn't imagine how she would ever stop.

But eventually, her tears dried, and Lois sat there shaking convulsively as she stared at the dark grain of the hardwood floor. The house was silent around her — everything so quiet that she could hear the blood rushing through her head, echoing in her ears. Part of her — the part that could somewhat manage thought — wished something would happen, that something would come and take her away from this, or at least give her some sort of distraction. She couldn't live like this. She couldn't just sit here, bruising her knees, crying and sobbing the rest of her life. But at the same time, she couldn't imagine ever being able to do anything else. Not without Clark.

Lois stuck by her earlier statements to Will. If there was no Kryptonite involved, then it could mean only one thing — another Kryptonian. Some being that was more powerful than Superman, someone that could beat him without contest. Lois didn't personally know of anybody like that, but she was sure that there had to have been a New Kryptonian or two who stayed behind and made a life for themselves on Earth. The why connecting them to Superman was the mind boggling part.

Will had seemed a little more reluctant to latch onto that idea, but Lois refused to back down. Will still hadn't been sure, even when she'd left, that there hadn't been small doses of Kryptonite involved, perhaps so small they hadn't caught it. Or he'd ingested it. Both plausible explanations, on their own, and Lois had agreed. But they didn't fit with the way Superman was killed. Poisoned by Kryptonite was a completely different M.O. than beating him to death — one was cold and calculating while the other was a crime of passion. Eventually, she had turned Will to see her side was right, but they were no further than that. He had demanded she go home and get some rest, before she said or did anything else compromising to her own or Clark's true identities. With armed escort, just in case this was personal. Lois had tried her best to brush him off, reassure him that if whoever had killed Superman knew that he was also Clark Kent, they surely wouldn't have found his body this way.

Lois had gotten him to see some reason, but he still demanded that officers be posted outside her residence all night long, just in case. Lois was torn between relief and terror at staying alone in her house — not separated by a rescue, as it usually was, like it was this morning with that train wreck, but by

a force greater than Superman. This was finally it. Lois and Clark were separated by death. Lois had always assumed she would go first. She was still shaking, despite the fact that her tears had long since dried.

There was a faint click that echoed in the recess of her mind. Lois sprung to high alert, spine straightening and ears straining. It was eerily quiet, so it could have just been in her head, but it sounded like it came from inside the house somewhere. Although she really wouldn't put it past her imagination to conjure up different noises and nightmares the second that Clark wasn't there to defend her.

Wait — there. So it wasn't in her head. There it was again. Had the noise been there the whole time and she just didn't hear it? A few more seconds and there was another click. It was an odd noise, not something she could easily identify. It wasn't the click of a gun cocking, or a light flicking on, or any of the other various noises she had grown accustomed to in their brownstone. It almost sounded like a latch, locking and unlocking. A frown creased her brow as Lois slowly rose to her feet. She listened a few more moments, deciding that it definitely had to be a person inside the house causing the noise. She wiped her face with the corner of her shirt sleeve and cast a quick glance at the front door. Officers Krاندall and Brinkley were right outside. Maybe she should go and get them right now and have them investigate... But something inside her told Lois that she shouldn't do that just yet — be it intuition or a simple death wish. If it was truly a threat, she would scream and they would come running, she was sure. And it's not like she was entirely helpless. Sure, she had relied on Clark a lot over the years, but Lois knew how to handle herself in a fight.

Not that Lois was entirely sure she wanted to fight, even if the situation called for it. She hadn't yet decided on whether or not Clark was worth more than what was left of her life.

Lois forced herself to focus on the threat at hand. Looking about her, she grabbed the nearest object to her — which happened to be a soup ladle off her kitchen counter — and held it at the ready. Carefully, she tiptoed her way through the house, following the oddly patterned clicking noise as it got louder and louder, straight into Clark's study — or what used to be, anyway.

The door was slightly ajar. Lois leaned forward and peeked through the doorway, surprised to find the room lit only by a few slats of moonlight streaking through the closed blinds — it was quite dark if someone was indeed there. There was a figure seated at the desk, facing away from her. But the silhouette felt so familiar, so much like... "Clark?"

The figure stiffened and froze, and the clicking noise came to a halt.

Lois swallowed and took a step through the doorway, towards the desk, a desperate hope rising in her chest and her heart thrashing and raging about against her ribcage. "Clark, is... is that you?"

The figure remained silent for a beat before slowly turning the chair to face her. Lois felt her hope as it was dashed away and replaced with a sadness worse than before. A pit formed in her stomach as he spoke, voice broken and hoarse and somehow sounding *wrong*.

"Mom?"

Lois started shaking as her tears caught up to her once more. "James," she stuttered out. Her mind had played a cruel trick on her. James did look a lot like his father, but certainly not mistakably so. But she had been so sure... It was almost like she had lost him all over again. She took in a shuddering breath and started to walk towards her son. "James, what are you doing — ?"

"Stay where you are."

His voice was so cold and distant all of the sudden, commanding. Lois froze in place automatically. Fear suddenly

gripped at her heart, and she started to play the what-if game in her mind. What if someone else was here — Clark's mystery attacker? What if the room was booby trapped? What if he was trying to protect her from some unnamed evil she was not aware of yet? "James? Why? What is it?"

He didn't respond. But the clicking began again.

Lois swallowed as the pit in her stomach continued to grow. Something did not feel right here. "Did... did you hear the news?"

James swallowed thickly. He knew what news she was talking about. It wasn't the news he wanted to share with her, the one he wanted her to know. He wanted her to see him and run into his arms, apologizing and telling him it was all okay, she would take care of him — even though he would know deep down that nothing was okay anymore. He wanted her to look into his eyes with tears, and hold him, and let him sob it all out until the pain went away. He wanted her to be his Mommy right then. But she couldn't be that for him anymore. She was broken.

He had broken her.

Lois took his silence as confirmation. She choked back her sobs. "I... I am so sorry, baby —"

"Don't."

Lois swallowed hard, knowing something was very wrong now indeed. "James, what's going on? Are you all right?"

A sharp, pained laugh burst out from his throat. "Oh, Mom. You have no idea." The clicking had stopped once again and Lois glanced down to see just what the noise that led her here was.

A glint of silver reflected back at her in the pale moonlight. A shiver raced down her spine instantaneously, a gut reaction to what looked to be a lead box. Her mind jumped to the worst, though she tried fruitlessly to reassure herself that she could be wrong. But she remembered earlier when Willy got a call from Star Labs about some missing Kryptonite... *Oh, dear God, please let me be wrong about this...* She swallowed past the lump in her throat as best she could but still couldn't voice her question, except to whisper her youngest son's name once more.

If James took any note of the way his mother's stance and features had changed, he did a good job ignoring it, instead continuing on with his own thoughts. "You know, when Dad went out... to that train crash this morning..." he hesitated, swallowing another lump that had formed in his own throat before making an effort to continue. He made sure to keep his voice even and void of any emotion — not that the task was too difficult. After his day, he was in so much shock that he could barely feel the pain. "She wasn't even supposed to be there. I don't know what possessed her to take the subway to work... Maybe it was defiance. What with the baby coming and all... I guess I'd been getting a little too overprotective of her lately. We'd had a few fights."

An icy chill raced through her veins and Lois paled even more as she struggled against the realization of what her son was telling her. "No," she whispered hoarsely.

James didn't look her way, mind still off in its own tortured world as he slowly spoke his words. "She was sitting at the front of the train. She... she got the brunt of the impact. In her condition..."

"No," Lois pressed her hands to either side of her temple, in denial. Her brain was already jumping ahead of her, way too far ahead for her own liking, taking her to a place that scared her more than anything she'd ever faced in her life. She knew where this was heading, she just wished there was some other way, some other explanation she could look to, other than the obvious.

James finally broke, shaking violently as the reality of it all started settling in for him. "He should have saved her, Mom."

"No, no, no, no..." Lois felt her tears streaming once more. It couldn't be. Her daughter-in-law and her husband, in the same day. And if her son's attitude were any indication... "James.

Please. Please tell me you didn't. Please tell me I'm thinking wrong. Please. James? Please."

James didn't respond for a while as he continued to tremble, yet no tears would come, not anymore. He stared at the lead box in his hands, absolutely unable to look his mother in the eye as he spoke. Words that would seal his fate. "He... he was crying. He apologized to me, said he didn't even know, couldn't even help her in time if he'd wanted to..."

Lois made a low keening noise as she choked on her sobs, harder than before even. This was worse, so much worse than what she'd conjectured with Henderson earlier. She never thought how much less painful it would be not knowing. "Oh, God, no. Please. Please, no..."

"He... he didn't even try to fight back." James' voice broke and he finally shed his tears, body convulsing with the strength of his emotions. "I was just so much stronger than him. I didn't even realize what was happening until... until he was gone... And then... I didn't know what else to do... I just flew..."

Lois pressed a hand to her mouth as she tried to stem the flow of her tears. The click that brought her back here sounded again, twice, as Lois watched her son unlatch the locks on the metal box. And despite all that he had just told her, fear still raced up her spine at the sudden knowledge of its purpose.

He flipped the lid open without second thought, except to eliminate the pain, and a sickly green glow reflected onto James' features and bounced slightly around the room. He groaned as a wave of pain crashed over him, and he heard his mother's shriek of fear echoing through the room and piercing his ears. She cried for him to stop, for help, for it all to go back to the way it was, despite the fact that they both knew that wasn't an option any more for either of them.

"I swear to God, James, I'll call the police this instant!! You close that damn box, you hear?! JAMES!" Tears were streaming down her face continuously as she watched her son writhe and groan in agony at the exposure to the poisonous rock. At first, she had thought maybe that he had found the Kryptonite that had been stolen, then she'd had the horrible thought that perhaps he had used it already... But this? "JAMES!" She screamed again.

The sound of the front door being broken down and forced open intruded the sounds of the room. The two officers raced in, weapons drawn and at the ready. Brinkley was already calling for backup, while Krاندall shouted at James to freeze. Lois shouted at him to stop, reaching out to grab his arm and try to pull his weapon away, but unable to explain beyond her tears. She heard Officer Brinkley relay it through the radio that the intruder had been found with a stash of Kryptonite, and all units should respond.

Everything was swimming in chaos. Somehow, Lois found it in her to finally speak up. "STOP!" Her voice was shrill and frightened. Both officers gave her a brief sidelong glance before returning their eyes to their suspect, who was looking suspiciously in pain. Lois took it upon herself to try to help him out. She took a deep, shuddering breath and stepped forward carefully. "James? Jimmy?"

"Mrs. Kent! Please, stand back —"

"You do not get to tell me what to do with my son!" she snarled back before taking another step forward. "Jimmy?"

"Mom, stop," he gritted out. "Please."

"I'm just going to close this lid, okay?"

"NO!" he roared out, slamming his fist down onto the desk.

Lois pulled back slightly frightened by his behavior. "James, please —"

With a huff of pain and irritation, James stood quickly and disarmed the officer nearest to him in a flash, though not as fast as he normally would, given his surroundings. Shouts of commotion arouse loudly as he took the gun and held it at the ready, still grinding his teeth in pain.

"Hey, hey, hey! Put the weapon down, son." Officer Brinkley backed him up and kept his own weapon in a steady grip and trained on the offender.

"Leave me alone!"

"How the hell did he get my gun so fast?"

James allowed a slight smile to pull at his lips, but it was more of a grimace. "You can thank my father for teaching me that one."

"All units, beware. Suspect is now armed and considered dangerous," Officer Brinkley spoke into his radio once more, not removing his gaze even slightly away from the boy. "Stand down, James."

James had just about had enough of this. He was starting to go crazy, and he waved his newly acquired weapon through the air. "By all means, go ahead and shoot! You'd be doing everybody a favor."

"James! Please. Put the gun down and the Kryptonite away. Everything will be okay. Please. If you'd just do that, we could send these officers away and everything will be okay again. Okay?"

"No! You don't get it, Mom! *Nothing* is going to get better! You're lying to yourself. You're lying to me! I've got nothing left to live for!"

Lois was completely torn, and the pain of it all was seriously hurting her heart. On the one hand, he had killed her husband and soul mate, and along with him, the world's hero. On the other hand, he was still her son, and it was obviously a lapse in judgment. She couldn't forgive him, not in the least. It was far too soon. But she couldn't let him kill himself before she had a chance to work all this through. "Don't you talk like that! You... I don't know... y-you made a mistake. I... well, I still don't know what to make of it, but —"

"But nothing! I killed him! I killed *Superman* with my own bare hands! Do I deserve anything more than death myself?" He raised the gun to his temple and pressed the cold metal there, inciting another stirring of panic among his observers. James felt the presence of tears stinging his eyes once more. The pain of the Kryptonite was getting to him. It wouldn't be much longer now; he just had to stall.

At that moment, more cops stormed the house, led by William Henderson. When he got to the room where the commotion seemed to coming from, his eyes widened, but he did not change his defensive stance. "Jimmy?" he asked tentatively, eyeing the weapon pressed against his childhood friend's head with a bit of confusion. "What's going on here? Lois?"

"Please, stop him! Help him!"

"Inspector Henderson! I'm glad you boys finally came. Young Kent here stole Krاندall's piece and just confessed to murdering Superman."

Will whipped his head back to face James, shocked. "You did what?"

"Don't bother with me, Will. I'll be out of your hair real soon."

Lois turned to him with wild eyes, still overflowing with tears. "Willy, there's Kryptonite. He stole the Kryptonite. It's making him weak."

Will's eye caught on the open lead box sitting seemingly innocuous on the desk. The other officers didn't quite seem to notice the effect the rock was having on their suspect yet, but knowing what to look for helped him to see that Lois was right. James was doing his best to withstand the pain — possibly hoping that it would end him before he had to find out what happens next.

Will swallowed as he tried to talk him down off the ledge. As more men started swarming the room. He kept his tone quiet and calm. "Come on, Jimmy. You can't do this, all right? You know you can't. Think about Marla. Think about the baby —"

Lois was shaking her head at him, but the warning was too late. James exploded with anger. “Marla’s dead, Will!”

He swallowed, the picture starting to clear up a little bit. He allowed his anger to show through a little bit. “Dead? What, did you kill her too?”

“How dare you! I loved my wife! I would never — ”

“Oh, yeah, you would never. That’s bull, Jimmy! Why the hell would you kill Superman, then?”

“I didn’t kill Superman!”

“Oh you didn’t, did you?”

“No! I didn’t kill Superman, Will! I killed Clark Kent!”

A stunned silence suddenly enveloped the entire house, an almost fragile peace descending upon everyone for a moment. Then the murmurs began between the officers. Will turned to look at his force, realization sinking in on each of their faces.

Then there was loud groan. Will snapped his attention back to his one-time friend, in time to watch him slump to his knees and collapse to the ground.

“James!” Lois’ hoarse voice screamed at him.

Will dropped to the ground to examine him. Tears were rolling down his face as he winced and writhed in pain. Will knocked the gun out of his reach instinctively and called out to his men. “Close the box! Get a gurney in here!” People began swarming around him in chaotic motion.

The lid was closed and the box of kryptonite was sealed. James could feel the difference in levels of pain, though it was still throbbing through his veins. He let out a groan and coughed. “Will,” he spoke hoarsely.

Cautiously, he leaned in. Lois rushed to her son’s side as well. “Lois — ”

“Don’t you dare,” she threatened menacingly as she cradled her son’s head in her lap. Will nodded silently and let her stay where she was.

“I-I didn’t mean to. Mom, I’m sorry. I’m s-so sorry.” He broke down into uncontrollable sobs, his mother crying along with him. Will shed a few tears himself, but quickly reigned it in to give orders once more.

On the news the next morning, no one was quite sure what had happened yesterday — except that eight had died in the train wreck, the youngest Kent son was arrested and Superman was missing. The few who cared realized Clark Kent was gone also. The world did not yet realize the weight of everything that had happened, all because of one simple change in events. But soon, sooner than they might expect, the world would change, and it change for the worse.

Tempus sighed and stepped through the time window back into the future. He took a deep breath of pollution and gunsmoke, and smiled.

THE END