

Collateral Damage

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Summary: In the conclusion to the "What the Hey" series, Lois and Clark go head to head with a mysterious new enemy as an unknown superhero makes her way to Metropolis. Is everything as it seems or is there more to the story?(Part 3 of 3)

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One Month Later...

Penelope Barnes sat in the secretary pool at Grady Technologies once again explaining her fascination with the Man of Steel to her friend, Doris. She didn't understand Penny's obsession with pursuing Superman when there were so many eligible suitors out there. The problem was Penny didn't want just any man; she wanted Superman.

"Penny, look at you; you're a beautiful girl. Smart. Educated. You bowl two-eighty. You could have your pick of guys. Why waste your time with some fantasy?" Doris asked.

"Superman is not just some fantasy, Doris. Under all that spandex, beats the heart of a man."

Doris rolled her eyes. "You're still laboring on this idea that Superman has some sort of secret identity?"

"Well, doesn't it make sense? How else would someone like him ever hope to lead any kind of normal life?" Penny remarked.

Again, Doris rolled her eyes. "If that's true, I don't know how you expect to find out what it is. He probably has a secret identity for a reason, you know."

Penny ignored Doris' comment. "I can keep a secret."

"Sure, but how do you plan to discover his secret?"

"By using modern criminology techniques... First, I've constructed a psychological profile of the Man of Steel. I've taken that profile and factored my theory of a secret identity. He's early to mid-twenties – possibly thirties. Probably, a professional connected to mass communication. I've fed all this information into the computer and cross-referenced them with everything we know about Superman. At this point, it simply becomes about numbers. The computer takes over, digests the information and arrives at the most likely result." Penny's computer began sifting through various photographs and articles of Superman as she began to run the program.

Doris just shook her head. "I still think you'd have a better time at Club L7 with us, but whatever makes you happy. Just be careful." Doris went to leave, leaving Penny to her thoughts as the system began blinking. A match was found. Ninety-seven percent match: James B. Olsen.

Penny smiled as she looked at the picture on her screen. "Well, let's see if we can make it a hundred." She kissed her index finger and placed it over the image of Jimmy on her screen.

"Isn't this incredible, Steve?" Garrett Grady asked, motioning to the display he had set up in his office. He had just demonstrated the destruction his annihilator could perform.

"Uh, yeah," Steve McBride managed. He wasn't too keen on this idea anymore. When he had previously been offered the opportunity to make a few extra bucks, he had been desperate. His wife had just left him, and he saw no other way to dig himself out of the financial hole that a potential divorce would leave him in. Now, however, he and Lisa had worked things out, and they were

trying to move towards reconciliation. He couldn't live with himself if he was responsible for the destruction of millions. "Listen, Mr. Grady, about that. I've been thinking..."

"You're having second thoughts? It's only natural," Grady assured, "but Steve, remember our dream. With this satellite, we can keep countries from declaring war..."

"By threatening to blow them up," Steve McBride retorted in anguish. "Mr. Grady, that's un-American."

"No, Steve-o, un-American would be to allow the world to annihilate itself. Once my pulse converter has been installed on its platform nations will beat their swords into plowshares! Mankind will live in perfect, blessed brotherhood! Or I'll blast them all to hell!"

"Right. I've decided to go along with the mission as planned. I can't be a part of this."

"But Steve-o, want to tear down my satellite platform!" Grady watched Steve McBride exit his office and turned to his assistant. "Peters?"

"Yes, Mr. Grady?"

"We need to test the pulse converter to make sure it's in working order. I know the perfect test subject." A look of hatred poured over his face as he stared at the empty space Steve McBride had just vacated.

Lois and Clark sat across from Martha and Jonathan at the breakfast table. Lois was drumming her fingers lightly on the table, unsure of how to bring up the subject of her pregnancy. Martha and Jonathan looked up at them expectantly whenever Clark cleared his throat nervously. He didn't seem to be able to form the words, so they would then continue reading the newspaper. The pattern had continued at least half a dozen times now, and Lois was slowly losing her patience with the situation.

Martha watched Lois and Clark – bemused. She knew they had something they needed to tell them, but Clark seemed tongue-tied, and Lois obviously wasn't very forthcoming with the information either. She sighed as she read the paper. Perhaps they needed a shove in the right direction? "Are you alright, Clark?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm fine. I just... we need to tell you something."

"What is it, son?" Jonathan asked, placing the paper down. He always found it amusing whenever Clark was nervous about something, and this had to be big because Lois wasn't her usual forthcoming self with the information either.

"Well, we have some news," Clark edged cautiously.

Martha nodded. "Is everything alright? You said your powers had returned..."

Clark took a deep breath and decided to blurt it out. "No, mom. Nothing like that. I'm sorry if we've worried you. I guess there's no other way to put it. You see..." he cut himself off. His super hearing picked up the sounds of a bank alarm. "I gotta go. Bank alarm. We'll finish this as soon as I get back." He stood up and spun into his Superman suit. Within a blink of the eye, he was gone, leaving a perturbed wife and mother behind as Jonathan continued to read the paper.

Martha stared at the empty seat Clark had vacated.

"Sometimes I think he does that on purpose."

Outside of Metropolis Bank was a shoot-out. Two men ran out of the bank, carrying bags of money. They raced to their getaway car and cranked the engine. Once the car had started, they pressed the accelerator only to find they weren't moving. They tried once more and found no movement again. They looked behind them and found Superman sitting behind the car; his foot was propped up on the rear bumper, keeping the car from moving. He just waved.

The men looked at one another for a moment.

FLASH.

A moment later, they found themselves sitting in the backseat

of a patrol car without their weapons or the money they had stolen. They looked around in surprise. A woman stood in black leather with a gold 'V' over her chest. She handed the weapons and the money to a nearby officer. "Is there anything else I can do for you, officers?"

The surrounding officers shook their heads 'no,' and in a flash, she was gone, leaving a bewildered Superman and Metropolis P. D. in her wake.

Clark returned a half an hour later and found Martha and Jonathan in the living room with Lois laughing together. "He did not..." Lois laughed.

"Yes, he was determined that Santa was living in the fireplace; every time we went to light it, he would scream bloody murder: 'STOP! You're going to kill Santa!' We finally had to set him straight on the myth of Santa," Martha laughed.

Clark wrapped his arms around Lois from behind as he entered the room. "What mischief are you all up to?"

"Mischief???" Lois scoffed, "I've been entertaining while you have been off saving the world. You better have an exclusive for me. You leave your poor parents here on the edge of their seat like that and..." She was cut off by her mouth being captured by his.

He slowly broke off the kiss. "I apologize from the bottom of my heart. Yes, I have an exclusive for you, but I'll tell you about it later. Now, before anyone else needs saving let me get this out. Lois seems to have developed some complications with the pregnancy..."

At Martha and Jonathan's concerned look, Lois continued speaking for Clark. "I have something called preeclampsia. It's a pregnancy disorder."

"How serious is it?"

"It's very serious," Clark replied solemnly. "Lois has to avoid stressful situations at all costs. She had a close-call during the venture with Tempus. We aren't sure what prompted her bout with nausea a few months earlier either. She hadn't been having morning sickness for a while and then it was back full force. It could be the preeclampsia, or it could be just normal pregnancy symptoms. We don't know."

"We also have a lot of unknown factors in regard to Clark's heritage as well. We don't know if this pregnancy is absolutely normal, or if it may differ due to the Kryptonian genes," Lois replied.

"Oh, my... What are you going to do? Have you seen a doctor yet?" Martha asked.

"We have a doctor picked out. She's the best in her field. My dad recommended her," Lois explained.

"Is that safe? What if your doctor detects something?" Jonathan asked, concerned.

"We'll have Dr. Klein take a look over Lois since he's the only one that is specialized in my physiology. We need to make sure the pregnancy itself will be normal," Clark replied.

"My biggest concern right now is Lois and the health of our child. I'm sorry we didn't tell you guys sooner. It's just been one thing after another, so we just haven't had the time to think let alone tell everyone properly."

"We understand," Martha replied. She moved to embrace them both. "It'll be okay. I just know it. I don't care what any doctor says. I know you and this baby will be fine." She couldn't hide the smile on her face. The tears in her eyes were evident, but she brushed them away. She refused to allow herself to believe that Lois would be allowed to carry a child as special as this and have it snatched away as quickly as it came. She was going to be a grandmother. She wouldn't allow her mind to dwell on these negative thoughts.

Lois and Clark smiled sadly at her, hoping her excitement would not soon be dampened with the news of the passing of her grandchild and/or daughter-in-law. Neither of them wanted to go

into the details of how lethal preeclampsia was to Lois.

The Daily Planet was usually filled with a frenzy of activity: reporters scurrying about, Perry White bellowing across the newsroom, and the sound of phones ringing off the hook. This was not the case on the weekend; although, many worked half days. One of those devoted employees happened to be Jimmy Olsen.

He was working on research orders that had backed up over the past few weeks. The phone rang on his desk, and he looked at it suspiciously. Who could be calling him? He picked up the phone. "James Olsen."

Penny smiled over the phone as she spoke. "Mr. Olsen? My name is Penny Barnebeedian. I'm a student at Metropolis University. Journalism Major. One of our assignments is to interview a working journalist, and I was wondering..."

"Lane and Kent are off today, Ms. Barnebeedian. Would you rather leave a number?"

"Oh, no, not them: You. I want to interview you."

"Me? Uh, do you know what it is I do here?"

"I thought you would tell me about it over lunch."

"Lunch?"

"You do eat lunch, don't you?"

"Uh, yeah," he began uncertainly.

"Good. The Roma Café has a great menu; meet me there at one o'clock."

"Okay."

"Great. See you then." Penny hung up the phone and smiled to herself.

Back at the Daily Planet, Jimmy hung up the phone, shaking his head to himself. "Wow..." he murmured.

Martha and Jonathan went out for a movie, leaving Lois and Clark by themselves. Lois lay in bed with Clark, lazily tracing random patterns on his arm. It had been mind-boggling to listen to the list of things they needed to do to prepare for their child. It was hard because, in the back of their minds, they were wondering if they should even get their hopes up.

Once his parents had left they had taken full advantage of the empty house and made love in a frenzy, blocking out the pain of possibly losing their unborn child, and finding solace in one another's arms. "Mmmm... I love Sundays." She laid her head on his chest, listening to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

"Yeah, things are definitely a lot quieter on the weekend."

"Well, Sunday is supposed to be the day of rest."

Clark laughed. "Tell that to the criminals that broke into that bank earlier. Who robs a bank on a Sunday?"

"Well, no one's there except the manager," Lois commented then remembered his statement from earlier. "What happened? You mentioned something about an exclusive."

Clark immediately recalled the incident. "Yeah... uh, it was weird. I got there and stopped the bank robbers, then I went to get them out of the getaway car, and the next thing I knew they were sitting in the patrol cars."

"What? How did that happen?"

"A mysterious... woman..."

"A woman? Did you get a name?"

"No. She stayed long enough to make sure the criminals were taken care of then left. I tried to keep up with her but..."

"But what?"

"She's fast."

"Fast?"

"Superman fast."

"How is that even possible?"

"I don't know. As far as I know all the New Kryptonians went back to New Krypton with Ching and Zara. I have no idea where she came from or who she is."

"Hmmm... I guess we'll put that on the agenda for tomorrow,"

she murmured sleepily, nuzzling against his chest.

“Oh? And what about today?”

“Enough stress for today. I just want to lay here with you.”

“What stress?” he teased.

“We told your parents about the preeclampsia. That’s enough stress for today.” She nuzzled his neck lightly.

“So, no chasing down criminals or this mysterious woman?”

Lois shook her head ‘no’ and smiled up at him. “We can pound the pavement tomorrow. After the chaos these past few months, I need to relax a bit.”

“Mmmm.” He kissed the top of her head. “Relax?? I didn’t know that word was a part of ‘Mad Dog’ Lane’s vocabulary.”

“It’s not. I’m not ‘Mad Dog’ Lane.” She curled up tightly against his chest, listening to the rhythm of his heartbeat. “‘Mad Dog’ Lane took the day off. You’re just stuck with Lois Lane Kent.”

He smiled against her cheek. “Well, I happen to think Lois Lane Kent is very sexy...” He placed a kiss on her cheek. “And beautiful...” He planted a lingering kiss on the opposite cheek. “And gorgeous.” He kissed her lightly on the mouth.

“Mmmm... I guess it’s a good thing I’m Mrs. Kent, or else I’d be jealous.” He laughed at her remark and kissed her once more. She kissed him back enthusiastically, linking her arms around his neck as she slowly broke off the kiss. She snuggled against his chest and sighed. “I don’t know why I’m so tired lately.”

“Could be nerves, or it could just be the pregnancy. Mmmm, we have that appointment this week with Dr. Pierce. She can answer all these questions then.”

“Mmmm hmm... When do you want to talk to Dr. Klein?”

“Uh, we should probably talk to him before we go to that appointment, huh?”

“Yeah.” He smiled at her. “That would be wise.”

She was quiet for a moment as she contemplated a good time to discuss the preeclampsia and the pregnancy with Dr. Klein. “How about we try to see him tomorrow?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Clark leaned down to kiss her.

She enthusiastically returned the kiss and began to deepen it when he pulled away slightly. She immediately recognized the look. “What?”

“There’s a car on fire in front of the Roma Café. I gotta go.” He pulled away from her embrace and spun into the Superman suit. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. Get some rest.” He kissed her on the forehead and was out the window before she could blink an eye.

“Love you,” she murmured. She lovingly caressed her abdomen; the small swelling had grown to a very noticeable and prominent baby bump. “Daddy does that a lot. You’ll get used to it, though.”

At the café, Jimmy stood outside waiting for Penny. He wasn’t sure what to expect from this journalism student. Who would want to interview him for an assignment? He was just a gopher and sometimes, a photographer. What information would he have to offer for a journalism assignment?

“James Olsen?” Penny asked as she approached Jimmy.

Jimmy turned around and saw Penny standing behind him with her hand extended out for him to shake. He did a double-take as he absorbed her beauty. He had never seen a woman so beautiful in his life. She had blonde hair and the most gorgeous blue eyes he had ever seen.

“Uh, Jimmy. Just Jimmy.” He took her hand in his and held it a moment longer than necessary. He noticed her gaze on him.

“I thought you’d be taller,” she remarked.

“I can be taller,” he teased, dazzling her with a smile and standing on his toes.

“Right. Boots,” she murmured, smiling.

The hostess called them to their table, and they made their

way to their seats. He was nervous. He wasn’t accustomed to being in the company of such a beautiful woman. It had taken him three years to get used to being around Lois and even then, he still had his moments...

He watched as several men passed by their table admiring Penny, but she paid them no mind. He felt like he was on cloud nine. He was the envy of all the men in this restaurant. By all appearances, it seemed he was on a date with this beautiful woman. He knew she was only here in a professional capacity, but he could always dream. He knew that he would never have a chance with a woman as beautiful as Penny.

Penny sat across from him, notepad in hand as she began to ask him a few questions. “So, when did you start working for the Daily Planet?”

“A little over four years ago; I started as an office-grunt... moved up to photo assistant. Of course, over the years, I’ve worked up the ranks. So, now I’m... Junior Assistant City Editor.”

Penny nodded at his answer and checked an item from a list she had made in her notebook. ‘Superman appeared four years ago.’ She then turned her attention back to Jimmy. “Uh-huh. You and Lois Lane... you get along?”

“Lois? Oh, yeah, Lois and I are total buds. I always seem to get the exclusives from following her and CK around. She has got a nose for trouble... I tell you...”

“CK?”

“Oh, Clark Kent. He’s one of my best friends.”

Penny nodded. “Of course. You two are friends?”

“Yeah. CK just... He’s something else really. I mean, he’s always got my back no matter what; even when I stick my foot in my mouth, which I seem to do a lot, he’s there for me. I think he’s the only reason Lois hasn’t killed me yet... that or CK’s rubbed off on her.” He shrugged. “I’m sorry. It’s been a stressful few months... I just... I’m really grateful for my friendship with him and Lois, you know?”

“So it would seem. So, you’re close friends with Lois Lane and Clark Kent. What about Superman?”

“What about him?” Jimmy asked, confused.

“You and he close?” Penny asked.

Jimmy grinned and intertwined his fingers for emphasis. “Like that.”

“At least...” Penny murmured under her breath.

“Well, I mean, he and CK are best friends...”

“Friends? Tell me, Jimmy, do you have a lot of friends?”

“Well, there’s Lois and CK... like I said. We’re pretty tight, and the Chief’s been there for me like a father.”

“The Chief?”

“Oh, Perry White. He’s the Editor of the Daily Planet. We call him the Chief... kind of a nickname.”

“What about other relationships?”

“Pardon?” The conversation was directed to a lot more personal aspects of his life. He wasn’t sure, but he could swear she was flirting with him.

“I imagine in your line of work it’s tough to maintain a... romance.” Her fingers lightly caressed his hand from across the table as she gazed into his eyes.

Jimmy took in a deep breath before looking away. “Romance? Well, funny you should mention that. This last year alone there’ve been a lot... I mean, not a lot... Several... the wrong word.” He raked a hand through his hair as he struggled to come up with the right words. “It’s just my schedule is so unpredictable than most women. My social life’s in the pits, to be honest.”

He caught her gaze for a moment. Those eyes... He could drown in them. He had no idea what had come over him. How had he ended up pouring his heart out to this woman without a second thought? He didn’t even know her, but he didn’t care.

The sound of squealing tires and the impact of two cars interrupted them. He looked across the street and saw that a car

had crashed into a fire hydrant. The car's front end burst into flames. "Oh, my God! Excuse me, I'd better call 911." He ran for the nearest phone and was gone.

Penny watched as Superman descended on the scene. He used his super-breath to put out the fire, he removed the door to the car, and safely removed the driver from the wreckage. At this point, the police and ambulance arrived, and Superman laid the driver on the gurney. Two ambulatory workers carried the injured driver to the ambulance. After making sure everything was alright, Superman left the scene.

Jimmy ran back to Penny. "Sorry that took so long. I didn't mean to run off like that," he apologized. I just..."

He couldn't speak anymore. Penny's lips descended upon his. He had never experienced a kiss with such passion behind it. She slowly broke the kiss off and looked at him with heated desire. "I'll confess, Jimmy... I don't have much of a social life myself, but that's because I've been waiting for that certain someone." She pulled out her card and winked at him. "Here's my number. You were wonderful. I can't wait to see you in your blue suit again." Penny walked away, and Jimmy watched her with interest. "I don't even own a blue suit. But I'll definitely get one."

LNN reports flashed across the screen. Footage from the foiled bank robbery appeared on the screen as the Chief of Police addressed the media: "One minute we're in a shoot-out, then whoosh, the perpetrators were in the back of our unit, and there she stood in all her glory – like Wonder Woman or something. Only in leather and with a gold "V" on her...you know...her chest area. Even Superman was surprised."

Angela Cross clicked off the television angrily. "Great. As if I don't have enough problems with one superhero..." She picked up the phone and dialed. "Get me Mr. Smith... Yes, tell him it's Angela Cross... What is the meaning of this? I thought you said your plan was foolproof. How are we supposed to get rid of Superman with this new superhero in Metropolis? What?" She laughed. "That is brilliant. I've misjudged you..."

At the Daily Planet, the same coverage was being broadcast throughout the newsroom, "...and there she stood in all her glory, like Wonder Woman or something. Only in leather and with a gold "V" on her...you know...her chest area. Even Superman was surprised."

Jimmy who was wearing a very sharp blue suit turned to Lois and Clark as they walked up to him. "Wow! Hey, CK, did you hear about this new super-chick?" He noticed Lois was giving him a stern look. "I mean, gal? Uh... Woman? In town?"

Clark ignored Jimmy's remark, noticing Jimmy's attire. "Nice suit, Jimmy; it's very blue."

"Oh, thanks. I'm kinda breaking it in. I got a date tonight. This girl... She made the first move. Well, she made all the moves... She's..."

Lois interrupted Jimmy's rant: "I hate to interrupt the male bonding here, but we do have work to do. Jimmy, I have some research for you to do."

"Sure. You name it."

"Two things. Steve McBride has gone missing. I need you to run a background check on him. Find out anything you can on him, such as information about any ex-spouses or friends who may have had a falling out with him. See if anyone may have wanted to harm him..."

"You got it."

"Also, the heads of three of the top corporations in Metropolis have mysteriously disappeared in the last forty-eight hours. Run a cross reference and see what connections you come up with. I have a feeling they're connected somehow."

"I'm on it." Jimmy took the files from Lois and headed to his desk.

Lois turned to Clark. "So, where do we start?"

"Hmm...new superhero or missing astronaut?" He weighed his hands back and forth in the air. "Tough choice."

"Let's start out with McBride...see what we can dig up. I have no idea how to even begin investigating this new superhero," Lois replied, taking a seat at her desk. "Maybe we can ask for some 'super' help," she whispered as Clark took a seat on the edge of her desk. "I can make it worth your while."

Clark smiled, leaning towards her with a grin. "I know you can, baby...anytime...anywhere," he whispered back.

She leaned towards him and traced the path of his tie down to the waistband of his trousers, seductively teasing him with her fingertips. "Don't make promises you can't deliver on Mr. Kent."

"Oh, I can..." He was cut off by the familiar look crossing his face. He shook his head. "Hostage situation..."

"Be careful," she murmured gently kissing his lips and pushing him toward the staircase.

"He seems like he's in a hurry," a voice from behind her said.

Lois turned around to see Leslie standing behind her. How long had he been standing there? "Uh, Mr. Luckabee...Hi!" She brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Had he heard her earlier when she had been teasing Clark?

"I wanted to stop by and check how everything was going. I had some things to take care of down under," Leslie said, taking a seat next to her desk.

"Down under?" Lois asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"Australian," he prompted.

"Right," Lois muttered, nodding. "Well, Clark is chasing a lead and I'm..."

"Lois, another CEO just disappeared," Jimmy interrupted.

"...chasing another lead," she said quickly, gathering her things. "Jimmy, why don't you come with me?"

"Really?" Jimmy asked, excitement coloring his voice.

She grabbed a pen on her desk and scribbled a note to place on Clark's desk. At Jimmy's confused expression, she said, "I'm carrying precious cargo and have a very over protective husband... No need to worry him."

"Still hard to picture you guys as parents." Jimmy grinned as Lois placed her note on Clark's keyboard then turned to head towards the elevators.

"Tell me about it." She pushed the call button and headed to the Lobby with Jimmy in tow. Neither of them noticed Leslie reach for the note that she'd left on Clark's desk.

Underneath the subway tunnels of Metropolis, a man in his late 40s – the missing bank chairman – sat tied to a chair. He began to stir, trying to take in his surroundings. "Wha...Where am I?"

A troll-like figure stood a few feet away, studying a large board showing a map of Metropolis with certain buildings marked in red. He looked over at the man in the chair and smiled. "Ah, regaining your wits I see."

"Who are you? Where am I?"

"Who I am is not nearly as relevant as who you are. Who you are is someone who betrayed the master and took full advantage of his downfall, which brings us to your second query: why you're here."

"What Master?" the bank chairman asked. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I demand you release me at once."

"I'm afraid your days of demanding are over. Your demise, of course, will leave your banks ripe for a hostile takeover which I will orchestrate in my quest to rebuild what was once Metropolis' greatest empire! An empire so powerful and so brilliantly pieced together that no one dared challenge it, until..." The Troll-like figure turned to the balding man once more. "Sorry to talk your ear off. I don't get out much you know."

He walked over to the chairman and placed two jumper cables

on the metallic chair that the chairman was currently occupying.

The chairman looked at the troll figure anxiously. “No, no, it’s okay, really. Talk all you want. I’m in no hurry.” He looked at the map and noticed the various companies that had been marked. “Wait a minute, you put all those companies together and you’d have... I know who your master is!”

The troll-shaped man smiled and simply replied, “I’m glad. He’d want you to know.” At that moment, a train ran through the subway station above and a spark ignited electrocuting the bank chairman. His cries echoed throughout the underground subway tunnels; however, the sound of the train running its course whistled loudly as well, effectively muffling the bank chairman’s cries.

Clark stepped back in the newsroom looking for Lois. He saw Leslie talking with Perry and directed his inquiry at them. “Anyone seen Lois?”

Perry looked around. “She was here a few minutes ago.”

“I’m sure she’s around here somewhere,” Leslie said with a grin then quickly turned back to Perry. “So, about this layout...”

Clark looked around the newsroom in concern. It wasn’t like Lois to just disappear without leaving an indication of where she was. Where could she be?

“Still no leads?” Lois asked Inspector Henderson as they stood outside the police line that had been marked off in front of the ATM machine.

Inspector Henderson sighed. “Nope.” Looking around, he tallied, “I’ve got plenty of witnesses but nothing to go on. Chairman takes two steps off the pavement and then literally vanishes into thin air.”

“Kinda like a Scotty beam me up, huh?” Jimmy joked. When he noticed Lois and Henderson weren’t smiling, he sighed, “...or not.”

A sonic boom resonated in the alley around the corner. Lois looked around, knowing that sound anywhere. “Clark!” she thought, grinning. She waved at him when he walked up to them. He caught her gaze and didn’t look happy.

“I have been looking everywhere for you. Don’t scare me like that,” he said as he stood alongside her and Jimmy.

“I left you a note,” Lois argued, frowning in confusion.

Clark raked a hand through his hair. “Well, I didn’t get it.”

“Probably just fell off your desk, CK,” Jimmy interrupted, hoping to calm Clark down. “She’s fine. Drug me out here with her to talk with Henderson on the latest missing CEO.”

Clark visibly relaxed and held Lois against him. “Sorry I just...”

“We’re fine,” Lois said, placing a hand on his chest with a smile.

Clark nodded. “So, what’s this about a missing CEO...?”

Later that afternoon, Lois, Clark and Jimmy sat in the conference room going over all the information that they had gathered about the missing CEOs and Steve McBride. “So, what exactly do we have on Steve McBride?” Lois asked.

“All NASA is willing to say is their official statement. He was going on a routine mission... Everybody loved this guy... Yadda Yadda Yadda... I can’t find anything on the guy... Not even a parking ticket,” Jimmy said, pointing to a stack of reports he’d gathered on the McBride disappearance.

“If everyone loved him then why did he disappear thirty-six hours before the launch?” Lois countered.

Clark shook his head. “Something about this just doesn’t feel right,” he agreed. “What’s this ashy residue they found outside his garage?”

“The Police Forensics are still trying to figure it out,” Jimmy replied. “I should be hearing from them within the hour.”

“Okay, stay on it,” Clark stated. “Now, about these missing CEOs...”

“We’ve got three CEOs of Metropolis leading corporations... What’s the connection?” Lois asked.

“Not to mention the bank chairman that just went missing earlier. You really think this could be connected to Steve McBride’s disappearance, CK?” Jimmy asked.

“It’s worth a shot,” Clark murmured. “Let’s see exactly what kind of mission Steve McBride was headed on.” He picked up the phone and dialed.

“Uh, CK, they aren’t going to let you...”

“Yes, I need to speak with Chester Paladin... Tell him it’s Clark Kent... Thank you.” Lois watched with a smile as Clark talked to NASA on the phone.

“Mr. Paladin? Hi, it’s Clark Kent. Listen, we needed to talk to you about Steve McBride’s disappearance... No, it would just be Lois and me... Yes, I promise not to reveal my source... You know me... All right... Great... We’ll see you then. Thank you.” He hung up the phone. “We’re supposed to meet him for coffee in an hour.”

Jimmy stared at Clark in dismay. “I just spent the last thirty minutes trying to get past the operator of NASA... How did you...?”

Lois smiled. “The secret to good journalism is who you know, Jimmy.”

“Chester’s a friend of Dr. Klein’s,” Clark supplied.

Jimmy just shook his head. “Just when I think I’ve figured you guys out...” He got up and headed for the door. “I’m gonna check and see if that report is in from Police Forensics.”

“All right, Jimmy,” Lois replied. “Speaking of Dr. Klein, we need to call him.”

Clark blanched slightly. “Oh, right. Almost forgot.”

He picked up the phone and began to dial. “Dr. Klein? Yes, Lois and I needed to... Dr. Klein... Dr. Klein, I’m fine... Yes, we just... We just needed to come by sometime this afternoon... You’re free now?” He looked at Lois who nodded in approval.

“Okay, great... Yeah. We’ll see you in a few... Okay, bye...” He hung up the phone, shaking his head. “I know I understand a lot of languages but I don’t think I’ve quite mastered the language of ‘mad scientist’ yet.”

Lois laughed at his remark. “Looks like it’s gonna be a busy week.”

“Yeah.” He kissed her lightly. “So much for taking it easy,” he muttered. “Are you going to be all right? I mean, I know we’ve juggled several stories before but...” He was cut off by Lois pressing her lips against his and linking her arms around his neck.

“I love it that you’re worried, honey, but you’re slipping into overprotective mode,” she whispered.

“Sorry,” he apologized.

“Looks like my plans for your birthday are all spoiled,” she whispered sadly, fingering the end of his tie against the waistband of his charcoal slacks.

His interest perked up. “Oh, really? What plans might that be?”

“If I told you it wouldn’t be a surprise now would it, Mr. Kent?” she teased, brushing her palm against his thigh.

“I thought you hated surprises, Mrs. Kent?” he whispered back.

“Maybe they’re growing on me.” She leaned in to kiss him; then she slowly broke off the kiss but held his gaze. Their faces were inches apart as she spoke. “Mmmm... Remind me why did we come into work today?” She rubbed his thigh seductively once more.

Clark laughed at her teasing, pushing her hand off his leg. He held it in his palm, tracing her fingers. He looked at her more seriously. “Honey, come on, we have a job to do. Is this your usual insatiableness or just a side effect of the pregnancy?”

“Does it matter?” she purred. Her gaze was heated and filled

with desire.

Clark smiled and shook his head ‘no.’ ‘I’m not complaining. The side effects could be worse.’

“Lois? CK? You guys better take a look at this,” Jimmy interrupted, handing the printout to them.

Lois grudgingly released Clark from her embrace and allowed him to stand up. He took the printout from Jimmy and read it. “What the...?”

“What is it?”

“You know that ashy residue found at the scene of Steve McBride’s disappearance?” Clark prompted.

“Did they find out what it was?” Lois asked.

“Yeah, Steve McBride,” Clark answered.

“What???” Lois asked in disbelief.

“Jimmy, how is that even possible?” Clark asked.

“Forensics don’t know. They transferred the case over to the FBI...special weapons division...”

“Great. And FBI usually stands for ‘forget about it’ in regard to information to the press,” Lois commented wryly.

“Yeah. I guess Steve McBride’s mission wasn’t so routine after all, huh?” Jimmy remarked.

Clark sighed. “Come on, we’re going to be late. Jimmy, take a message if anyone calls. We’ll have our phones on.”

“All right. No problem, CK.”

Garrett Grady sat in his office drumming his fingers on his desk. “What’s the status with NASA?”

Thomas Peters looked at Garrett Grady nervously before replying hesitantly, “They are going ahead with the mission as planned. They’ve already replaced McBride.”

“Which is exactly what we need to do. Who’s our man?”

“She, sir. Lt. Shirley Farnum,” Peters corrected.

“Whatever. He. She. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that when that shuttle goes up, we’ve got to make sure she’s working for us. Use the same channels you used to procure McBride. I’ve got a lot of important people invested in this project, Peters. I can’t afford not to move forward.”

“But Mr. Grady, it took time to get McBride on our team.”

“Peters, we have less than thirty-six hours. If that shuttle goes up, and we don’t have a ringer on board, our satellite’s gonna be destroyed...and **A LOT** of people are gonna be angry, Peters. Is that what you want?”

“No, Mr. Grady.”

“Dr. Klein, thank you for meeting with us on such short notice,” Lois began.

“Not a problem, Lois. What can I do for you?”

“Lois has been diagnosed with preeclampsia,” Clark added.

“Oh.” Dr. Klein’s face went sour. “Have you seen a specialist yet?”

“Not yet. We had some concerns about that,” Lois added.

“Concerns? Oh. You meant about Clark...”

“Yes.” Lois smiled at the doctor’s ability to catch on so quickly. “I need to make sure my doctor won’t be able to detect Clark’s special abilities when they’re treating me.”

Dr. Klein got a thoughtful look on his face. “Are you having any extensive scans done?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you having any microscopic scans? You know, where they take a sample and put you under a microscope?”

“I don’t think so. I haven’t had an appointment with the specialist yet.”

“Well, as you can see Clark appears to be a normal man at first glance. He has all the parts...It’s not until you are actually looking for the differences that you are able to find them. Tissue samples under a microscope are the only way I’ve been able to even detect his dense molecular structure at all. Ordinary scans...MRIs, cat

scans, ultrasounds...they don’t detect his...special abilities...”

“What about this preeclampsia...Is there anything you can tell us about it?” Clark asked.

Dr. Klein sighed. “Preeclampsia should only affect Lois during the pregnancy. Now, it is lethal if it’s a more serious case...It could just be a minor case in which Lois needs to watch her intake of stress. If she doesn’t she’ll risk dizzy spells, contractions, possible miscarriage, or stillbirth, and bouts of nausea.”

“Worst-case scenario?” Lois asked.

“That’s where you have seizures. Those can either kill you or just cause a lot of pain...put you into a coma...” Dr. Klein shook his head. “I’m not an expert. I don’t know everything about preeclampsia. What doctor are you seeing? Dr. Maria Pierce is an expert in the field. She’d be my recommendation personally.”

Lois smiled. “Thank you, Dr. Klein. That’s actually who we’re seeing.”

“What are the chances that this Dr. Pierce will be doing any extensive scans on Lois’ tissue?” Clark asked.

“Pretty slim to none. MRIs and cat scans are more likely. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.” Dr. Klein nodded at them. “I’m sure everything will be fine. Just stay out of trouble, Lois.”

Lois winked back at him. “We’ll try.”

The couple left his office, and Dr. Klein shook his head in dismay. “I hope so.”

“So, Mr. Paladin, your office said McBride’s mission was to repair a weather satellite, that had been malfunctioning?” Lois asked.

“Yes, Ms. Lane. One of the many aspects of the mission was to repair the satellites for weather control,” Chester Paladin remarked. “With over six thousand man-made objects floating around up there...It’s pretty crowded.”

“Tell me about it,” Clark murmured to himself.

Lois shot Clark a threatening look then turned her attention back to Paladin. “What other aspects of the mission are there Mr. Paladin?”

Chester looked around nervously. “I can’t say exactly. Back in the 80’s, a weapon was developed...During the cold war...”

“What kind of weapon?” Clark asked, intrigued.

“I can’t say...I’m sorry. All I can do is confirm or deny statements. I’ve already said too much, Clark,” he added, getting up to leave. “I’m so sorry.”

“What was that about?” Lois asked.

Clark shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

“You think bugging Bill Henderson will give us any leads?” Lois asked.

“It’s worth a shot. You ready?”

“Yeah,” Lois replied, standing and following Clark out of the restaurant.

Bill Henderson sat behind his desk, writing up the latest report on the missing bank chairman when his phone rang. “Henderson,” he barked.

The front-desk clerk shifted nervously and spoke hesitantly into the phone. “Inspector Henderson, there’s some reporters here to see you.”

“Lane and Kent? I just can’t shake them today, huh? Send them in.”

“Yes, Inspector.” The front-desk clerk hung up the phone and turned to Lois and Clark. “He says to go on in. Do you know where?”

Lois and Clark had already shut the door behind them and were making their way over to Bill Henderson’s desk. “Well, that was rude,” the clerk muttered to herself.

Clark knocked lightly and opened the door to Inspector Henderson’s office. “Hi, Bill,” he greeted as he and Lois settled into the guest chairs.

“Kent. I just saw you two earlier. Can’t get enough of me?”
 “We are following up another lead on another case, Bill,” Lois replied.

Henderson snorted. “I figured as much. McBride’s disappearance, right?”

“How did you...?” Clark began.

“Please, I know a few things too. By the way, Lane, you really think you need to be juggling two high-profile cases in your condition?”

“What is that supposed to mean???” she demanded furiously.

“Hey, don’t take it personally. Congratulations by the way. I just meant you should be careful taking on too much when you’re expecting. You could burn out more easily. Marilyn did with our first.” Henderson watched Lois calm down and then continued. “So, what can I do for you?”

“These missing CEOs... We’ve heard the ‘official story.’ So, what’s the real story?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know, Henderson? You’ve got to do better than that,” Lois retorted.

“Look, I wish we did know. All I know is CEOs are going missing everywhere. No one knows where they’re going. No bodies are turning up. No explanation... But hey, I’ve got plenty of witnesses that tell me the guy withdraws some cash from the ATM, turns around, and takes a few steps then POOF – he’s gone.”

“So, you guys don’t have any leads? No ace in your pocket?” Lois asked, becoming concerned.

“No. Just like we don’t have any leads on McBride’s disappearance.” Henderson shrugged. “I wish I could be of more help. I’m stumped.”

“Is there any way they could be connected?” Lois asked.

“Sure. I’ve begun to open my mind a bit in investigations ever since that whole invisible man fiasco.” Henderson shook his head. “I mean, anything is possible. We live in Metropolis where a man flies under his own power. If that doesn’t open your mind a bit I don’t know what will.” He paused for a moment, letting out a long breath. “I just keep getting the feeling like I’m missing something... something big.”

“Inspector, we were speaking with NASA earlier, and they mentioned the missile launch as routine,” Lois began.

“Yeah, something about fixing a weather satellite... I don’t buy it. The government isn’t going to worry about a weather satellite so much they send an entire crew into space...”

“Inspector, one of my contacts at NASA had mentioned a weapon that had been developed in the 80s by the government. Do you have any idea what he could be talking about?” Clark asked curiously.

“The Annihilator? That’s the only weapon NASA had anything to do with during the 80s. Who was your contact?” He glanced at Lois and Clark, who were giving him the ‘we can’t reveal our source’ look. “Oh, right, Shield Law. My bad... Yeah, the Annihilator was a defense satellite; I believe President Borman initiated the design.”

“But I thought it was never built,” Lois remarked, recalling the story behind the Annihilator as well.

“No, the pulse converter – that’s the satellite’s power source – was never built.” Henderson shook his head in dismay. “The platform for the pulse converter was built, however, and put into orbit...”

“What???” Lois and Clark asked in unison.

“You mean to tell me the government built that thing... and put it into orbit? What happened to the plans for the pulse converter?” Lois asked.

“They were all destroyed,” Henderson replied with a wink, “As far as I know.”

Lois and Clark looked at one another. This news was not good.

“Thank you, Bill.”

“Keep me posted and if you find anything else out about the missing CEOs let me know,” Henderson added.

“We will and thank you for the information,” Clark added before leaving.

“No problem,” Henderson muttered, under his breath. “How do they do that?”

Lois and Clark stampeded through the newsroom on a mission. “Jimmy!” They made their way through the shuffle of desks, spotting their target as they did so.

“Hey, did you hear? That Superwoman did it again! She stopped a carjacking over on Main then bagged a purse snatcher a minute later. She’s taking out bad guys left and right,” Jimmy reported, grinning at the duo.

“Has anyone had a chance to talk to her; find out who she is?” Clark asked.

“No, she just took off,” Jimmy replied. “Leslie thinks she may be related to Ultra Woman. Remember her?” He winked at Clark.

“Rings a bell or two,” Lois replied airily.

“Rings a bell or two? What are you talking about? She was a total babe!” Jimmy remarked, remembering the few days Ultra Woman had visited Metropolis.

Lois gave Jimmy a sweet smile. “Don’t you have a date to get ready for tonight?”

Jimmy’s smile widened at the memory of Penny. “Yeah. I still can’t believe she wants to go out with me. I mean, she is like *way* out of my league.”

“Don’t cut yourself short, Jimmy. You’re a good catch,” Lois replied warmly, sitting down at her desk.

“Thanks,” Jimmy said, smiling at Lois’ compliment.

“Jimmy, I want you to find me everything you can on a weapon called the Annihilator,” Lois demanded, getting back down to business.

“The Annihilator? What – is that a video game?”

“No, it’s a weapon the government developed about ten years ago,” Clark replied. “Find out who had the contract for the plans to the pulse converter of the Annihilator.”

Jimmy nodded. “You got it. Annihilator... The weapon not the video game... Anything else?”

“Have you found anything to connect the CEOs yet?” Clark asked.

“Um, yeah. It turns out, they were all being investigated for embezzlement.”

“Embezzlement? Maybe they embezzled from the wrong guy, and he’s getting even,” Lois remarked.

“Hmm, Jimmy, why don’t you contact the FBI and see if you can get them to give us a copy of the bank’s ATM. If we’re lucky, the bank chairman’s disappearance was caught on tape,” Clark said, “and maybe we’ll be able to see something the police didn’t.”

“The F.B.I.?” Jimmy cringed.

“If they give you any problems let me know. We’ll have Bill Henderson threaten them a bit. He’s as anxious to get to the bottom of this as we are.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know what I find out,” Jimmy said, heading for the elevator to start sifting through the archives.

“A video game???” Lois asked dumbfounded. “I don’t even want to know. Okay, so I think our next step is...” She noticed the faraway look on Clark’s face and stopped herself, instead saying, “For you to go save the day while I go at this alone.”

Clark chuckled lightly. “I’m sorry, honey, armored car heist. What is going on out there today?”

Lois kissed him softly. “Be careful.”

“Always. No adventures while I’m gone.” He gave her another peck before heading for the stairwell, tugging at his tie.

“Hot lead?” Leslie asked, approaching Lois’ desk.

“I’m sorry?” Lois asked.

“Clark. He looks like he’s in a hurry.” Leslie pointed to Clark’s retreating figure.

“Oh, well, he’s just Johnny on the spot all right,” Lois commented; she stood up and walked over to the copier and picked up a printout. Leslie followed close behind.

“Well, that’s what makes him such a great reporter; I suppose. Worthy of all those accolades,” Leslie remarked, standing alongside Lois. She was engrossed in the material she was reading and felt a kick against her abdomen. She grimaced, rubbing the bump where her son was growing. Leslie noticed the gesture. “How far along are you?” he asked.

“Huh?” Lois looked around, trying to figure out what Leslie was referring to. He pointed to her bump. “Oh, almost six months,” she revealed.

“Is this your first?” he pressed, curiously.

She smiled, patting her bump. “Yes, he’s our little miracle. Came as a bit of a surprise since we’d just gotten married almost a year ago, but we wouldn’t have it any other way. Who knows? Maybe we’ll be good at it,” she joked.

“Well, it’s better to take your time in starting a family. When I was born, my father was just beginning to build his business. I hardly got to see him growing up.” He then looked at his watch. “Anyway, I’m off to meet the Board of Directors. Please tell me they’re not a bunch of stuffed shirts; I beg you.”

Lois laughed. “No comment.”

“Maybe you, Clark and I could have a bite together sometime, help me figure out what I’ve gotten myself into here,” Leslie suggested.

Lois nodded. “Sure. We’d have to check our schedules of course.”

“Of course,” Leslie agreed. “Wish me luck?”

“Good luck.” Lois smiled and watched him leave. She wasn’t sure what to think of Leslie.

Clark arrived at the scene of the armored car heist. Two men shot at him and the officers had the area surrounded. Just as Clark was about to capture the men, a blur of gold surrounded the area. The two men disappeared for a moment and reappeared, falling on the armored car that they had been trying to escape in.

Clark moved to check on them and then scanned the area. He was stunned to find the mysterious woman he had met earlier, standing at the scene before him. She stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the scene. The would-be-car-thieves lay on the ground in pain as officers took them into custody. “Nice Cape,” the woman commented.

“What happened here?” Clark asked.

“These men were trying to steal. I stopped them,” the mysterious woman replied.

“Who are you?”

“I am Vixen. You’re the one they call Superman, right?”

“That’s right.”

“They say you’re faster than a speeding bullet. Is that true?”

“I’m much more interested in who you are and what you’re doing here?”

“I eradicate evil just like you.”

“I don’t exactly eradicate evil,” Clark replied.

“Interesting... If you don’t eradicate evil, then what do you do?”

“I turn them over to the proper authorities for prosecution. That’s the way the system works.”

Vixen laughed. “The system is flawed That’s why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?” Clark asked.

“I want to bring peace to your violent world,” Vixen insisted.

“Okay...” Clark began.

He was interrupted by Vixen. “Wanna race?”

“What?”

“Race you to London.”

“No.”

“What’s the matter? Afraid you’re gonna lose to a girl?”

“No, I don’t want to race you; I just want to...” Vixen cut him off by disappearing once more. “Talk to you.” He turned to the officers surrounding him. “Make sure these men get arrested,” he ordered. The officers nodded, and Clark was gone once more.

Clark landed in London and found Vixen standing there waiting for him. “What took you so long?” she asked.

“How did you...?”

“I ran.”

“Ran? Across the Atlantic?”

“I ran very fast.” Vixen gazed up and down Clark’s profile a moment. “What’s the point of the suit? It’s not very intimidating.”

“I’m not trying to intimidate. All I try to do is keep order.”

“That’s all I’m trying to do as well, Superman.”

“And I appreciate the help, but you cannot go around hurting people...not even the bad guys.”

“Why not? They chose the path of wrong, and they should suffer; it is my job to eradicate them.”

“No, it is your job to stop them...not eradicate them. Let the courts decide their punishment.”

“Whatever. Nice speech. See you around.”

“Wait.” Before he could say another word, she was gone.

“Great,” Clark muttered to himself. Within moments, he was in the air once more.

“Hey, Lois, I got that list you and CK wanted,” Jimmy said, handing her a stack of paperwork.

“The Annihilator. Founded by President Borman. After his term ended Congress pulled the plug,” Lois mumbled as she scanned the stack of paperwork.

“Yeah, this weapon is totally cool, Lois. It obliterates its target to ashes,” Jimmy said.

“Ashes? As in the ashes that were found outside of Steve McBride’s residence?”

“Bingo.” Jimmy gave her a 100-watt smile. “Oh, and here’s the information on the contract for the pulse converter.”

“Honeybraun Industries? Didn’t they go belly-up around the same time?”

“Yeah, after Congress pulled the plug. The company was sold off piece by piece about eight years ago,” Jimmy confirmed.

“So, whoever had the plans for the pulse converter had to of been one of the several buyers...” Lois stated, trailing off as she contemplated the many possibilities.

“And here’s the list,” Jimmy said. “Good luck.”

“Where are you going?” she asked when he headed for the elevator.

“I’ve got a date tonight. I got to get ready,” Jimmy reminded her, beaming. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good luck, Jimmy. Have fun.”

“I will.”

Lois turned her attention to the list Jimmy had given her.

“Hey, honey,” Clark snuck up behind her, planting a light kiss on her cheek. “How’s it going?”

“Jimmy, just gave me this list of buyers for Honeybraun Industries. They’re the company that had the contract for the Annihilator...”

“Anything jumping out at you?” Clark asked.

“Afraid not,” Lois replied. “How’d everything go?”

“Well, I...”

He was interrupted by Perry bellowing through the newsroom, “All right, everyone, listen up! Those of you not working on something concrete are now working on this new superhero! I want photos...where she came from... is she friend of foe? Let’s show our new owner what we can do... Shake some tail!!”

Lois watched the other reporters scurrying about. “The suits

upstairs breathing down your neck again?”

Perry smiled at her. “I’m just trying to give everyone a run for their money. So, what have you two got?”

“Her name is Vixen,” Clark replied.

“What?” Perry asked.

“I just spoke to Superman a few minutes ago. He got her to stop long enough to talk for a few minutes...”

“Really???” That’s great. I want you and Lois on this like nobody’s business...Page one! This could be the biggest story since Superman came to town,” Perry exclaimed.

Clark just laughed lightly. “I wrote up my interview with Superman already. It should be in your inbox. I just sent it to you a few minutes ago.”

Perry turned to Leslie, who had been standing behind him. “Now do you see why they’re the best? All right, do you have enough for any follow-ups?”

“Not yet. Superman said he wasn’t really sure what to make of her. She seems to have a very distorted view of justice,” Clark said.

“Hmm, well, one could argue Superman’s views, or Metropolis’ views on justice are distorted. It’s all a matter of perception,” Leslie remarked.

“Somehow, I don’t think dropping the criminals from 50 feet in the air is justice,” Clark remarked.

“True,” Leslie stated.

Clark held Leslie’s gaze for a moment then turned away. Perry broke the silence once more. “How are you two coming on that missing astronaut?”

“He’s not missing, Perry; he was murdered,” Lois stated.

“WHAT???” Perry shook his head. “This piece just keeps getting better and better. Do you have any leads?”

“We’re following up a few leads, but I think it’ll have to wait until tomorrow,” Lois assured, standing up from her desk.

“I’m sorry, did I seriously just hear you say you’re leaving early?” Perry was dumbfounded at the thought. Lois had always been a workaholic ever since he had met her. “Clark, are you sure we’re talking to the real Lois Lane here?”

Clark laughed. “Positive, Chief. We’ll see you tomorrow.” He grabbed his coat from his desk then helped Lois with her own.

Lois chuckled as well. “Good night, Perry.”

“Night, Chief.” Clark nodded in the direction of Leslie. “Good night, Leslie.”

Leslie nodded. “Goodnight, you two. See you tomorrow.”

Leslie watched the couple leave and gazed at Lois’ recently vacated desk. “They really are something aren’t they, Perry?”

“Yeah, I love ‘em like they were my own,” Perry admitted, beaming.

“I had a good time tonight,” Penny commented as they walked to her apartment.

“Me too,” Jimmy replied. “I still can’t believe you ordered in French. I mean, it was just the steak house.”

“Well, not having a social life allows you the luxury to study up on foreign languages,” Penny joked. “Do you want to come in for some coffee?”

“Uh, sure,” Jimmy agreed, nodding. He was unsure if things were moving too fast, but he pushed that thought to the back of his mind. He followed her inside her apartment. She quietly closed the door.

“Nice place,” he commented. “You know; I don’t really understand why you don’t have a social life. I mean, I would think a girl like you would get asked out a lot.”

“Well, it’s not that I don’t get asked out,” Penny admitted as she started brewing the coffee. “I do. A lot. Some of them are real jerks; others are really nice...”

“But?”

“But they just weren’t what I was looking for. They weren’t

you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, Jimmy Olsen – Mr. Junior Assistant Editor...”

Jimmy closed his eyes as the guilt of lying to her began to eat at him. “Uh, listen, Penny, that’s not exactly my real job.”

“I know.” She nodded, moving closer to him. She sat down on the loveseat and patted the seat next to her. “I haven’t exactly been honest with you either, Jimmy.”

“You haven’t?” Jimmy asked in confusion.

“No, I’m not a Journalism major. I’m not a student.”

“Then why did you call me? Why did you interview me?”

“I wanted to meet you. I’m a secretary at Diticom Technologies,” Penny began. “I promise I won’t tell anyone. I know how important it is to you that no one finds out.”

“What? Find out what?”

“I mean, look at all the trouble you’ve gone to. It’s brilliant. What better disguise than some newspaper *schmoe*? Who would ever guess that *nobody-office-grunt*-Jimmy-Olsen was really the Man of Steel?” Penny asked as she reached out to caress his face.

Jimmy backed away from her, completely taken aback by her statement. “Wait a minute, you think I’m a *schmoe*?” He thought she liked him.

She leaned into him and began to nuzzle his neck, rubbing up and down his chest. “All that searching. All that waiting. All those times I said ‘no.’ It was worth it.”

“Uh, Penny,” Jimmy muttered, retreating from her embrace once more. “I probably heard you wrong, but you seem to think that I’m...” He gave a light laugh before continuing, “Superman.”

“Honey, it’s okay. I won’t tell a soul,” Penny promised, leaning in to kiss him.

“You won’t need to because I’m not Superman,” Jimmy argued. His heart was breaking. She didn’t like him. She had hit on him because she thought he was Superman. He swallowed the bitter bile that rose in his throat.

“But I saw you... you changed into... him.”

“What are you talking about?” Jimmy asked.

“You left and then changed into Superman to help those people...the wreck in front of the restaurant.”

“I left to call ‘911’ like any other responsible person would have done,” Jimmy insisted.

“Honey, there’s no sense in denying it. It’s okay. You can trust me.”

Jimmy pushed her away once more. “I need to go.”

“Go? Why? Superman, wait,” Penny begged.

“I am *not* Superman. My name is James Bartholomew Olsen. I have worked at the Daily Planet for almost five years. My best friends are Lois Lane and Clark Kent. The first photograph I ever took that got printed in the Daily Planet was of Superman bringing Lois back from EPRAD back in 1993. Do not call me unless you’re interested in me. Do NOT pursue Superman. He has better things to do than to deal with a moony-eyed cheerleader chasing after him.”

“Jimmy...”

“No, on second thought...”

Don’t call me. This *schmoe* can do better. I don’t think we should see each other anymore.” Jimmy left her apartment without another word. Penny sat there dumbfounded with tears in her eyes.

Penny sat in her apartment crying. She didn’t understand. She knew he was Superman. What had she done wrong? Maybe it was too soon for him to reveal himself to her? That had to be it. She had an idea. She would call for help, then explain how sorry she was. That had to work.

Lois stepped out of the shower and came downstairs in her robe where she found Clark going through a huge bag of mail marked U.S. Postal Service. “Clark?”

He stopped mid super-speed and placed an envelope down. He smiled up at her. “Hey, honey, how was your shower?”

“It was fine. I feel a little better.” Lois gestured towards the bag of mail. “What is all this?”

“Uh, fan mail for Superman... It just takes me a few minutes to go through it all,” he apologized, pulling her onto his lap.

“I never realized you had fan-mail.” She winked at him, leaning in to brush a kiss against his lips.

“Mmmm...” He kissed her back. “Yeah, the post office holds anything addressed to Superman and every couple of months I fly by to pick it up.”

Lois smiled at him and stroked his cheek lovingly. “I learn more about you every day.”

He smiled in response, taking her hand in his, and intertwining his fingers with hers. “Well, a lot of people want to hear from Superman. Sick kids, lonely folks...”

Lois peeked into one of the packages and pulled out a pair of lace underwear hesitantly. “Is this from the sick or the lonely... or both?” She put it back in the package.

Clark cringed. “Uh, yeah; I get a little of that too.”

Lois smiled up at him. “Well, I’m sure it must be a kick... to be adored like that.”

Clark smiled shyly at her. “It’s not really that... It’s just... Well, you know how much bad stuff I see as Superman... that you and I see as reporters?” She nodded, silently urging him to continue. “Well, seeing the good in people... reading the letters... going to charities and public events... It kinda restores my faith in humanity, you know? It kinda recharges that part of me.”

“It recharges you, huh?” she challenged.

“You know what I mean,” he whispered against her neck. He lightly nuzzled the side of her neck. “You sustain me... and recharge my heart... body and soul.”

Lois laughed when his breath hit a tender spot against his neck. “Mmmm... Well, then...” She stopped cold when she felt him stiffen. “What is it?”

“Someone’s calling for help. I’ll be back.” He kissed her lightly.

He spun into his suit and left, causing several letters to scatter and flutter to the ground. She knelt to pick them up and found a picture of a young boy in a wheelchair. She read the letter attached to it and felt tears well up in her eyes. It was from a six-year-old who had been diagnosed with leukemia. To make matters worse, he had been in a car accident the past year and had been paralyzed from the waist down. His wish was to meet Superman. “Oh, Clark...” she murmured as she read the letter. She was beginning to understand the side of Superman that Clark was previously trying to explain.

Outside of Metropolis, Penny waited on the corner of an alleyway as she cried for help. “Help Superman!”

Superman landed in front of her. “What seems to be the trouble...” He was cut off by Penny throwing herself into his arms and landing a big wet one on his mouth. He pushed her off him, “Miss, please... What...”

“I’m sorry to bother you like this, and I promise I won’t ever cry wolf again, but I needed to talk to you. I couldn’t leave things the way we left them.”

“Things? I think you have me confused with someone else... Now, you seem fine. Strong and healthy... I gotta go.” He flew off, unsure of what had just happened. He wiped his mouth and tried to remove the lipstick stain on his lips. He looked down at his suit. “Great. Lois is gonna love this.” He had a huge lipstick stain on his chest.

Back in the alleyway, Peters who had been watching Penny phoned his boss. Mr. Grady. “Hey, Mr. Grady, I’ve got an idea for you...”

Clark landed back at the townhome and spun out of his suit. He took the suit to the kitchen to begin washing it when he heard a news report on a fire in Detroit. “Great,” he muttered. He scanned the townhome for Lois and found her upstairs. He quickly darted up the stairs. “Honey...”

“Clark, you’re back already? That was fast,” Lois began.

Clark shook his head. “False alarm, but I’ve got to go. There’s a fire in...”

“Detroit. I know. It just came on the news. Be careful.” She kissed him lightly on the mouth.

“Better not wait up. I don’t know how long I’ll be.” He kissed her back; then he was gone in a blur.

“Another long night,” she murmured to herself.

Clark returned around dawn to find Lois asleep in bed. He changed out of his suit and took a quick shower before climbing into bed with her. He kissed her lightly on the forehead, holding her close. She snuggled up against his chest, murmuring his name in her sleep.

He sighed peacefully as he felt her relax in his embrace. It had been a long night. He had not been able to save many precious lives. On nights like this he wondered how he had ever coped without Lois. Just holding her in his arms seemed to recharge him.

“Clark?” Lois lifted her head sleepily against his chest. “What time is it?” she mumbled.

“Shh... go back to sleep... It’s about four thirty. We can still catch a couple of hours of sleep.”

“Mmmm... did everything okay?” she asked, caressing his chest lightly.

“Yeah. Honey, please try to get some rest,” he pleaded. He didn’t hear any protests from her. Curiously, he looked down and smiled as he watched the sleeping figure of his wife. “I love you,” he whispered, holding her tightly. His hands glided gently across her abdomen, finally coming to rest on their unborn child. “Both of you.”

The next morning, Lois awoke to the sharp chirping of the alarm clock. She reached out to turn it off only to find her arms were hindered from movement. She eased her arm out of her husband’s strong grasp and turned it off. She looked up at his sleeping figure and smiled. “Happy Birthday, Sweetheart,” she whispered, caressing his cheek.

He still didn’t move. He must have been exhausted when he returned home last night. She lightly brushed a stray hair off his forehead. She inched up his body, leaning in to kiss him. She lightly brushed her lips against his. He was still asleep. She stroked his head lightly, running her fingers through his hair. She knew the fire must have been hard on him last night. She had tried her best to wait up for him but had finally fallen asleep around one.

She lazily traced patterns on his chest as she watched him sleep. Usually, he was awake before her, so she rarely had the opportunity to just study him while he slept. She smiled, simply enjoying the view as he continued to sleep peacefully. She brushed her lips against his, and he began to stir. She smiled and leaned in to kiss him once more. “Happy Birthday, Sweetheart.”

“Mmmm... Thank you. I almost forgot,” he murmured in response.

Lois lay on his chest happily tracing patterns around his pectorals. “You almost forgot? How?”

“I guess I have been a bit sidetracked lately,” he admitted.

“You got home late last night. How did everything go?”

“Uh, fine. I still can’t believe that crazy lady last night...” At her questioning look, he elaborated. “When I got called away the first time – remember? I told you it was a false alarm? Some lady was standing on the corner of an alleyway yelling ‘Help Superman!’ Anyway, I landed and then she launched herself at me.

I pushed her away and flew away. She was rambling something about not crying wolf and leaving things the way they were... I thought she had me confused with someone else... That or she's just nuts."

Lois sighed against his chest. "Well, she can be nuts, but she needs to keep her lips off my husband," Lois sniffed.

"Lois, there's always gonna be a few crazies out there. It comes with the territory."

"I guess so," she relented. "I still don't have to like it."

"Who said anything about liking it? I'm perfectly happy with my beautiful..." He placed a kiss on her head. "And sexy..." He kissed her cheek. "And gorgeous wife." He nuzzled her neck. "I'm the luckiest man alive," he whispered huskily.

"Mmmm, a girl could get used to this." She laughed. She pulled away from him slightly and looked at him more seriously. "What about the fire?"

"What about it?" Clark continued nuzzling her neck, ignoring her question.

"Clark?"

He pulled away, recognizing her tone. "The fire was... hard. It was an oil fire, so I got most of everyone out okay. A few were injured... There were a few that didn't make it," he replied softly.

"Oh, Clark, I'm sorry." She stroked his cheek lovingly.

"I'm fine." He kissed her hand. He glanced at the clock and winced. "We need to get going, or we're going to be late."

Lois groaned. "Sometimes I hate our jobs," she grumbled.

Garrett Grady just laughed as he shifted casually in his office chair. "Her? She's Superman's girlfriend? Peggy?"

"Penny, sir, and yes. I saw her throw herself at him; it was just shameful."

Grady just shook his head in amusement. "Okay, so what does this have to do with my pulse converter?"

"Well, sir, it's a tradition. You hold his woman hostage unless he does our bidding."

Grady just smiled at Peters. "I don't think it will come to that, Peters. When Superman sees what we're about—world peace—he'll gladly help us."

"Perhaps, sir," Peters agreed, "But we still need to be able to make good on our threat."

"Of course," Grady concurred. "Funny, I thought he'd have better taste." He shook his head and shamefully eyed the photo of Penny.

Jimmy was not in the best mood. He felt like someone had ripped his heart out of his chest. He had really liked Penny and had been hurt when she had revealed herself to him. She had only been seeing him because she thought he was Superman.

The elevator dinged and announced the arrival of Lois and Clark. As usual, they were in a clinch when the elevator doors opened. He couldn't help but smile at the two of them. Today was Clark's birthday, and Lois was most likely making sure it would be one he wouldn't forget seeing as how this was his first birthday as a married man. The couple reluctantly parted and made their way down the steps leading into the newsroom.

"Morning, Jimmy," Lois said happily.

"Hey, Jimmy, how was your date last night?" Clark asked.

"Uh, not like I expected," Jimmy said a bit hurriedly.

"What do you mean? What happened?" Clark asked his friend in concern.

"Let me ask you guys something... Do you think I'm a schmoe?"

"No," they answered in unison.

"How would you describe me then?"

"Well, you're Jimmy... you're like my kid brother," Lois began.

"Gee thanks," Jimmy grumbled, feeling a little insulted.

"Hey, I didn't mean it like that," Lois argued.

"What Lois means is you're like family," Clark corrected.

"Exactly! You're smart, you're funny..." Lois listed off every attribute she could think to describe him.

"You're a whiz when it comes to computers, you're loyal... a great friend," Clark continued, finishing where Lois had left off.

Jimmy's spirits perked up at that. "You really think I'm a good friend?"

"Of course, Jimmy, what is all this about?" Lois asked, concerned.

"Uh, just something my date said last night," Jimmy said a bit shamefully.

"Well, don't you dare listen to her, Jimmy, you are a great guy and if she can't see that then it's her loss."

"Lois, Clark, what have you two got on those missing CEO's?" Perry asked, making his way over to them.

"Uh, we haven't gotten anywhere yet. We're still waiting to hear back from the FBI about getting a copy of that ATM tape," Clark explained.

"Yeah, I've been getting the runaround from them since yesterday," Jimmy added.

"Well, keep on it," Perry replied gruffly. "You two still looking into the disappearance of that astronaut?"

"Murder," Lois corrected firmly. "And yes, we're still on it, Perry."

"We're trying to figure out who might want to resurrect the Annihilator," Clark explained.

"The Annihilator? I thought Congress pulled the plug on that ten years ago," Perry drawled.

"Maybe not quickly enough," Lois replied.

In the dark subway tunnels, the mysterious trolled figure sat at his desk, pruning a small plant. His phone rang beside him, and he jumped. "Hello?" he barked.

"Everything is set to go according to plan, Mr. Smith. Grady still thinks this whole operation is about world peace."

"Excellent," he replied. "Expect your payment at the end of the week, Mr. Peters."

"Of course," Peters replied. "Uh, Mr. Smith?"

"Yes, Peters?"

"Mr. Grady, he isn't going to really destroy..."

"That's what we have Superman for, Mr. Peters," Mr. Smith replied, annoyed. "Is there anything else?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Smith hung up the phone. "Idiot."

It had been a long day. Lois and Clark had been working on getting to the bottom of McBride's murder. "I just don't get it. Why would someone pay McBride to put this... pulse converter up and then kill him?" Lois asked as they walked to the front desk of their favorite Chinese Restaurant: Hong Kong Palace.

"Well, maybe he was trying to back out of the deal," Clark suggested. "I just... I can't but feel bad for his wife. I mean she has to raise her daughter all alone now because someone killed McBride; it's so sad."

"I know, honey. Any story regarding children just tugs at my heartstrings too." Lois pecked him on the cheek and then turned back to the list. "Who all do we have on that list?"

"LemCo, Farber Industries, MacNamn Systems and Diticom," Clark answered, reading the list.

Lois backed into someone. She turned around and found Jimmy staring at her apologetically. "Jimmy, what are you doing here?"

"Hi, guys, I just wanted to kinda get out," Jimmy explained sheepishly.

"I thought you were supposed to be covering the launch this evening."

"I am. I just wanted to grab something to eat. I've still got a few hours," Jimmy insisted.

"Well, why don't you sit with us?" Lois asked.

"Well, they're kinda booked. They said it'd be half an hour," Jimmy began.

"Oh, nonsense." Lois motioned to the hostess and mouthed 'three people.' She nodded at them and motioned for them to follow.

They sat at the table and ordered their food. Clark noticed Jimmy's distraught look. "Jimmy, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just really disappointed I guess, CK."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lois asked.

"Uh, not right now," Jimmy explained. "I just... I need some time to sort stuff out in my head. So, you guys have any luck on the investigation into McBride's murder?"

"We've narrowed it down to a couple of the buyers, but nothing concrete has shown up yet," Lois revealed.

"Jimmy?" a female voice interrupted their conversation. The trio looked up and saw Penny Barnes standing there.

"What are you doing here, Penny? How did you know I was here?"

"I... I followed you. Listen, I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... you have no idea."

"Uh, should we leave?" Clark asked hesitantly. He recognized Penny as the crazy woman that had attacked him last night.

"No, CK, stay. Penny was just leaving," he remarked bitterly.

"Jimmy..." Penny began.

"Lois, come on, let's give them some privacy," Clark urged. He needed to tell her in private about Penny.

"Go? This is just getting good!" Lois exclaimed. At his look of disapproval, she relented, "Oh, all right. You know this is so unfair. Jimmy listens in on our conversations all the time. Then, the one-time his personal life gets interesting, we have to do the decent thing and give him privacy."

Penny stared at Lois and Clark's retreating figures. "Your friends are lovely."

"At least they know how to be friends," Jimmy replied coldly.

"Jimmy..."

Lois followed Clark over to the bar. "What?"

"Lois, you remember that crazy woman from last night?" he asked, nodding his head towards Penny.

"Yeah, you said some crazy woman attacked you." She noticed his gesture and her eyes widened. "*Jimmy's date?? HER???* She's the one that... Oh, just wait until I get my hands on her! I'll show her."

Clark grabbed her by the shoulders and tried to get her to calm down. "Lois, I'm sure it was nothing personal."

"Nothing personal? She lures *my* husband out of my house in the middle of the night like some sidewalk siren, and you're telling me it's nothing personal?" Lois challenged.

Clark sighed. "Let's just give Jimmy a chance to talk to her. He's obviously very hurt about what happened between them last night."

"Fine. We'll get dinner to go... again," Lois relented. She headed over to the table and found Jimmy giving Penny the silent treatment. "Jimmy? We've got to head out... uh..."

"Birthday plans," Clark interjected when she looked at him for help.

"Right. Birthday plans!" Lois said nervously.

"No, you guys don't have to do that," Jimmy interjected, staring at Penny. "You need to go. My friends are making up lame excuses to leave because they think we need a moment. The moment is done. As I said before, I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Penny looked at Jimmy tearfully before turning to leave. Lois and Clark watched uncomfortably as Jimmy grabbed a menu. "I'm

feeling Kung Pao Chicken. What about you guys?"

Penny rounded the corner outside the restaurant and came face to face with three armed men. "Wha...?" She reached in her purse for her own gun but stopped when a familiar face appeared.

"Mister...Pe...Peters...?"

"Oooh, I wouldn't recommend using that," he said, cocking the trigger of a 9mm and aiming it at her. "Don't even scream."

"Follow us," a man ordered.

"Was that really necessary?" Clark began hesitantly as he handed the check and his card to the server. Dinner had been awkward at the very least. Something had happened on Jimmy's date with Penny, but he had no idea what.

"She called me a *schmoe*," Jimmy said quietly.

"What?" Lois softened, looking at her friend in sympathy.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy," Clark said, patting his shoulder. The server returned with Clark's card, and he took the check and card, signing as he spoke. "Sometimes people say the wrong things at the wrong time."

"It wasn't a slip-up. She had this crazy idea..." Jimmy shook his head. "Never mind, you guys would think it's nuts. I think it's nuts."

"What's nuts?" Lois asked.

Jimmy's phone rang and he looked at the caller ID. "Diticom Technologies?"

"Who do you know there?" Lois asked.

"Penny?" Jimmy shrugged. He was about to reject the call but Lois stopped him. "Jimmy don't. It could be important."

"Fine." He put the phone on speaker and heard sobbing in the background.

"Jimmy, please help! Jimmy, I'm so sorry. Help. Superman has to fly to the roof of Diticom Towers and wait for further instructions or you'll never see me again. Please help me, Jimmy..."

Lois looked at Clark anxiously. He nodded. "Jimmy stay with Lois. I'm gonna see if I can find Superman."

Jimmy nodded. "No sweat," he said, calling after him. Lois grabbed her purse and headed for the door. "Where are we going?"

"Diticom Technologies," Lois said firmly.

"*What???*" Jimmy shook his head adamantly. "No way. CK will *KILL* me..."

"Your girlfriend is in trouble. I'm not going in, but I thought maybe you would want to," Lois said.

Jimmy looked at her, unable to hide his anguish. How he felt about Penny was so confusing. He cared about her, but the things she'd said. Lois was right. He wanted to do something to help. There was no telling why they wanted Superman on that roof.

"Oh, don't try to struggle; it'll only tighten your restraints," Peters replied smugly. Penny was on the floor of a plush office at Diticom Technologies with her hands and feet tied up. Peters pressed a button on a remote and grinned. "Go ahead and scream. You can yell, 'Help Superman,' all day long, but he won't hear you."

"Why are you doing this?" Penny sobbed. "I'm just a secretary..."

"Oh, from what I saw the other night. You're much more," Peters retorted, grinning.

Penny looked at him in shock. "I...don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure," he agreed, nodding condescendingly. "Whatever helps you sleep at night." Then, he left, locking the door behind him. Penny hung her head in dismay. What had she gotten herself into?

In front of Diticom Technologies, Jimmy and Lois stepped out of the cab and looked around. "So, any sign of Superman?"

"I don't see him," Lois said, gazing at the roof. "But it doesn't mean he's not here."

"Right," Jimmy agreed, nodding. "Where do you think they've got Penny?"

"I don't know," Lois admitted, shaking her head. "Why don't you take a look around? I'll stay here and keep a look out."

"But..." Jimmy began to argue.

"Jimmy, I'll be fine. If I run into any trouble I'll yell for help. I promise."

Jimmy nodded. "I'll call you when I find Penny."

Lois nodded, watching Jimmy run through the lobby of Diticom Technologies. She looked around skeptically. Why in the world did they want Superman?

She watched Jimmy step on the elevator then turned around to find somewhere to sit down. Her back was killing her. She still wasn't showing as much as she thought was typical for six months pregnant, but she could definitely feel the aches and pains. "Don't worry little one. Once daddy and Jimmy finish here, we'll go home and take a nice hot bath."

A cold hard object pressed against her back as a hand wrapped around her throat. "Don't even think about making a peep," a sinister voice hissed in her ear.

Jimmy hid behind a cubicle as he watched two men roughly pushed Lois through the corridor. "Man, CK is going to *kill* me," he muttered to himself.

"Let go of me!" Lois screamed as she fought against the two men.

Jimmy steadied himself, looking around the room for something he could use as a weapon. He watched as the two men took Lois into an office and closed the door behind them. He scanned the rows of cubicles for a sign that anyone was working with the other two men but saw nothing. "Here goes nothing..."

"Miss Lane!" Penny saw Lois being shoved into the room.

"Well, celebrated reporter, and close friend of the Man of Steel." Garrett Grady grinned as Peters tied Lois up, connecting her ties to Penny's to help prevent her from escaping.

Peters grinned, pushing a few buttons on the sliver remote. "Go ahead and yell all day for your boyfriend. No one will hear you scream."

"Peters, let's not get cocky," Garrett Grady admonished. "Ms. Lane, I do apologize for my assistant's behavior. He lacks the charisma to entertain guests. I'm sorry for the inconvenience of being kidnapped, but I need Superman's cooperation." Lois and Penny watched as Peters left the room, leaving them with Garrett Grady.

"Superman? What does he have to do with this?" Lois asked curiously.

"I need him to install my pulse converter," Grady replied, grinning.

"So, you were the one that killed McBride," Lois accused.

"Of course," Grady acknowledged. "I needed a test subject, and McBride wasn't willing to keep with the plan... something about morals and ethics. Who needs him?"

"I don't understand what we have to do with all this," Penny argued.

"Ah, well you will," Grady mocked. "Ms. Lane, have you two met? This is Peggy."

"Penny," Penny hissed angrily.

"Superman's girlfriend." Grady grinned impishly.

"Excuse me?" Lois asked dubiously.

"Well, I'm sure you two have a lot to catch up on. I'd love to stay and chat but I have a world to save." Grady shut the door behind him, leaving Lois and alone with Penny.

Penny began to cry. "He made me do it..."

"Do what?" Lois asked.

"Made me call Superman," Penny cried. "I just got his machine."

"Pardon me???" Lois asked in exasperation. What could she possibly be referring to? There was no way Clark would... No, not a chance.

"Nothing. I'm sorry. Nothing..." Penny continued to cry.

"Penny, this is no time to panic. Now, what did they want you to tell Superman?" Lois asked.

"Something about installing a pulse converter... meeting Mr. Grady on the roof," Penny mumbled. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"Okay, now is a good time to panic," Lois said as she began to try and form a plan.

On the roof, Garrett Grady sat awaiting Superman's arrival. "Superman, what took you so long?" He yanked a tarp off a machine that looked like a medium-sized satellite. "If you'll just install my pulse converter..."

"Where is she?" Clark asked sternly.

"She?" Grady asked then grinned. "Oh, your girlfriend..."

Clark did his best not to react. Obviously, Grady was seriously uninformed. His super hearing picked up a familiar sound. "Let go of me!"

'Lois...'

Before he could even finish his sentence, Clark grabbed Grady by the collar and lifted him off the ground. "You killed an innocent man..."

"Innocent? Oh, you mean, McBride. Superman, he was far from innocent."

"He had a family," Clark continued. "You left his child without a father... for what?"

"World peace," Grady stammered. "Superman I want what you want... peace on Earth."

"Not at the price you are asking for."

"My man has been instructed to do away with your girlfriend and Ms. Lane if you don't do as I say," Grady warned. "You have to decide if your price for world peace is worth it..."

Penny was still sobbing. "Jimmy hates me." She was having a self-pity party. "He probably won't even come."

"What are you talking about?" Lois asked.

"Nothing... It's nothing..."

"Look, we've got to get out of here. I need you to work with me Penny. I'm six months pregnant and not nearly as limber as I used to be," Lois explained.

"Okay, what do you need me to do?"

"We're going to stand up together and push up together; then we're going to get that remote." Lois looked over her shoulder. "Are you with me?"

"Yes, Ms. Lane." Penny nodded. "Let's do this."

"Okay, on three... One... Two..." They stood up, backs against each other. "Three." Lois smiled back at Penny. "Okay, good. We're standing. That's half the battle."

Penny nodded. "How are we going to untie these?" Penny wiggled her arm, tugging on Lois' arm that was connected.

"Okay, the remote is over on that table so we're going to have to jump to it," Lois explained. "Here's the rhythm. Na, na, na, na, duh, duh, duh," she hummed. "Are you ready?"

Penny nodded. "Let's do this!"

"Na, na, na, na, duh, duh, duh," Lois hummed as they jumped to the table. "Good, good. Now, let's get the remote. Turn the soundproofing off and give a few healthy 'Help Superman's' and get out of this mess."

"I don't know Ms. Lane. After the way, I treated him I don't think he's coming," Penny whimpered.

Lois shook her head. What was she talking about? "Penny, I told you before... no panicking. There'll be plenty of time for that

later.” Lois attempted to tug at the rope as she fumbled with the remote. “Now, which button did he press?”

“I think I can.” Penny tugged on the rope on her end as Lois pressed her end against the edge of the table.

Lois sighed in relief when she felt the tight knots loosen. “Oh, Thank God!” she exclaimed as she slipped her wrist out of the binds and began to work on her feet. “See? A piece of cake.” She turned to grab the remote but was interrupted by the loud banging against the glass. They looked up and saw Jimmy standing outside the office. Lois smiled at the young man. “Jimmy to the rescue.”

Penny smiled happily. “He came!”

Lois nodded. “Jimmy, can you open the door?” she asked.

Jimmy motioned that he couldn’t hear. Lois began pressing random buttons on the remote as she motioned for Jimmy to look at the circuit breaker. “That’s it Jimmy...Just turn the whole thing off!”

“I can’t believe he came!” Penny squealed happily.

Lois looked at her incredulously. “Penny, we are not out of this yet!” She saw a dark figure walk up behind Jimmy. “Oh, no, Jimmy!!!”

The echoes of Lois and Penny’s voices reached Clark’s ears and he sighed in relief. “Jimmy!!” It seemed Jimmy had come to the rescue.

Confident his wife and child would be safe in Jimmy’s hands, he stared Grady down. “I suggest you make a decision, Superman,” Grady warned.

“I already have!” He grabbed Grady by the neck and hoisted him up in the air.

Grady reached for his phone and began to dial. “Wrong decision!”

Clark grabbed the phone and crushed it. “I don’t think so!” Grabbing Grady by the waist, he flew him into the sky and disappeared. He would return later for Lois and Jimmy, but he needed to take care of Grady now.

Jimmy ducked and weaved as he tried to dodge Peters’ unrelenting punches. He looked around the room for anything he could use to his advantage. He spotted Penny’s board of Superman and threw it at him, and he jumped across the room to land on another desk.

He needed an advantage. This guy was bigger and stronger than him. He looked over to the wall in the office and saw that the circuit breaker was still open. He headed towards it.

Penny and Lois watched from the window of the office. “Something on here has to help,” Lois mumbled, pressing random buttons. A miniature satellite popped out of the wall and Lois panicked. “Duck!!”

A beam shot across the room and hit the door, breaking it in half. Lois looked back at Penny. “I guess that’ll work.” The lights all went dark, and Lois struggled to find her bearings. “Penny?”

“I knew he would do it,” Penny gushed. She headed toward the hallway where Jimmy stood. She moved to hug him. “You came!” The emergency lights illuminated the office.

Lois watched the couple with a smile. Maybe there was hope for Jimmy after all. She saw the man that had been after Jimmy before heading towards them. “Jimmy look out!!”

Jimmy pushed Penny out of the way as Peters headed towards them with a gun. “It’s been fun kid.”

“No!!!” Penny cried.

Peters aimed the gun at Jimmy as he held his hands up in defeat. Peters cocked the trigger and then was knocked to the ground by Clark. Peters reached for the gun, but Clark kicked it out of the way, stepping on his hand. “Don’t even think about it!”

“CK!!” Jimmy cheered happily before backpedaling, realizing he hadn’t been able to do the one thing his friend had asked him to

do: keep Lois safe. “I can...totally explain.”

Clark held up a hand and looked around the room. “We can talk about it later. Where’s Lois?”

“Right here,” Lois said, stepping out of the office as she hung up her cell phone. “The police are on their way.”

Clark nodded. “Superman already took Garrett Grady to the police station.” Peters hung his head in defeat, realizing he had been unable to fulfill his responsibilities. “I guess they can add another person to his cell.”

“Everyone freeze!” the officers called out with their guns raised.

“That’s him!” Detective Ryder instructed, pointing at Peters who was still pinned down with Clark’s foot on his hand. “Put the guns down. Everyone else is okay.”

As the officers approached, Clark hoisted Peters up and turned to Lois, wrapping her in his arms. “Are you all right? Is the baby...?”

Lois met his gaze and smiled, placing a hand on his chest. “We’re fine.” She leaned up to kiss him.

“Don’t ever scare me like that again,” he warned, holding her close.

Jimmy and Penny who had been watching Lois and Clark quietly turned towards one another. “They seem to really love each other,” Penny observed solemnly. “I guess those rumors weren’t true.”

“Penny, for the last time I am *not*...”

Penny held up her hand and nodded. “I get it. I’m sorry...for everything. I’m just glad you came.”

He couldn’t hide his surprise at her remark. He wrestled with his feelings towards her. “Of course I came. I had to. I couldn’t let anything happen to you...”

“Oh, Jimmy...” Penny kissed him passionately.

Jimmy pushed her away. “I still haven’t forgiven you, Penny. I don’t know if I ever will.” He walked away from her and turned to Lois and Clark as they watched the officers survey the scene. “Lois, next time you’re staying with me. Only you could end up kidnapped trying to stay *out* of trouble.”

Lois grinned back at him. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

“I’m going to head out of here,” Jimmy said, pointing to the door. “See you guys later.”

“Good night, Jimmy,” Clark replied, patting him on the shoulder, “and thank you.”

Jimmy nodded. “No thank *YOU*. You saved my butt.”

“You saved my family,” he responded softly, holding Lois close. “Thank you.”

Angela Cross watched the news report of Garrett Grady’s arrest with a smile. She pulled out her phone and dialed an all too familiar number. After brief niceties, she got down to business. “Everything is going according to plan, Mr. Smith,” she gushed. “Do you think Mr. Grady realized he had been duped at the end?”

“I’m sure the thought will cross his mind from time to time, Mrs. Cross, but not to worry. He will be silenced. No one can be left alive that will link us to Caribbean Imports,” Mr. Smith remarked.

“Good. Keep me posted on the rest of the plan. I want to be there to watch Superman fall,” Angela stated.

“Of course,” Mr. Smith replied.

“Well, that was one of the more interesting birthdays I’ve had.” Clark laughed as they made their way through the corridors of their townhome.

“You sure you didn’t want a big birthday party... everyone singing happy birthday... blowing out candles,” she teased as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Clark laughed as he struggled to unlock the door. She was nuzzling his neck. “No, I like this much better. You all to myself...”

no distractions.” He kissed her lightly.

“Wow, I’m your birthday present... That’s a lot of pressure for a girl, Mr. Kent,” she teased.

“I’m sure you’re up to the task, Mrs. Kent,” he replied, capturing her mouth in a fiery kiss.

“Oh, Clark, right there,” she urged as he began caressing her body. He struggled to remain focused on unlocking the door.

“Clark, we need to unlock the door, honey.”

“Why?” he complained.

“Because you can’t unwrap your gift in the middle of the hallway,” she murmured as she molded her body against his.

A moment later they were inside. He rolled them gently across the floor and kicked the door closed. “Lois,” he moaned in pleasure as he felt her tug at his dress shirt to remove it from its neatly tucked home. “God, you’re so beautiful,” he murmured against her lips.

“Oh, yes, Clark,” she moaned, wrapping her legs around his waist.

“*SURPRISE!!*” Lois and Clark were broken from their reverie by the presence of the entire Daily Planet staff. A banner displaying, ‘Happy Birthday, Clark,’ hung from the ceiling, and Perry stood in the middle of the living room along with Jimmy, Martha, and Jonathan. They all wore an amused look on their faces.

Clark lifted them up from their position on the floor. He stood, helped Lois to her feet, and hurriedly moved to cover his wife from being seen in a state of undress. She worked quickly to button her blouse, while he adjusted his dress shirt.

“I figured the only way I would be able to throw a surprise party for you would be to surprise both of you,” Perry said with a glint in his eyes. “So, did it work? Are you surprised?” he teased, winking at the couple.

Lois and Clark wore embarrassed expressions as they struggled to find the nerve to speak. “Uh, yeah.”

“Stunned!” Lois added.

“Good. Let’s have some cake.” Perry grinned at the couple. “Don’t worry. We’ll only be here for an hour. Then, you two can pick up where you left off.” He winked at them, causing Lois and Clark to turn even more red with embarrassment. It was going to be a long night.

Lois and Clark sat at the counter in the kitchen, trying to avoid the rest of the staff. They were embarrassed about being caught in the act by their co-workers. The party was in full swing with music and dancing in the living room. “I cannot believe Perry did this,” Lois groaned. “I mean, if he was going to plan a surprise party for you, he could have at least included me.”

“Well, we have been pretty busy lately,” Clark acknowledged.

“Do you think if we hide in here long enough they’ll just forget about us?” Lois asked, yawning. It had been three hours. Perry had promised they’d only be here for an hour, but that had turned into three.

“I don’t know. Are you okay, honey?”

“Yeah, I guess I’m just getting tired,” Lois admitted.

“Hey, you two, what are you doing in here?” Perry asked, poking his head through the double doors. “The party’s out here!”

“We’re coming, Chief.” Clark sighed. “So much for hiding,” he muttered under his breath.

They reluctantly followed Perry into the living room. Everyone was dancing and having a good time. They tried to join in with the festivities, but it was a bit hard. Lois was exhausted; she didn’t look good. None of this was lost on Clark.

“Honey, you okay?” Clark asked, pulling Lois into his arms.

She sleepily glanced at him and nodded. “I think I’m just tired. I guess you’ll have to take a rain check on your birthday present,” she apologized.

“Honey, I’m not worried about that. You just look like you’re

kinda out of it. Do you want to go lie down?”

“Hey, Lois, CK, great party!” Jimmy slapped Clark on the back, “Sorry about the timing. I guess it could have been better, huh?”

“Yeah.” Lois began to feel a bit dizzy; she tightened her grip around Clark’s waist.

“Honey?”

“Hey, Lois, wait until everyone leaves before you start canoodling with your husband, would ya? We see enough at the office,” Ralph said, walking up to the couple.

The room began to spin. She felt tightness in her throat as she struggled to breathe.

“Hey, Lois, are you okay?” Jimmy asked, his voice echoing.

“Lois... Hey, honey, look at me.” Clark held her as the room spun. She could barely hear the voices around her. She wasn’t sure what was happening. The colors continued to spin; she felt her knees give out and fell into her husband’s arms. “Lois?” The echo of Clark’s voice penetrated through the chaos swarming through her mind before everything went black.

The pain; it was everywhere. She felt like her insides were on fire. The echo of a monotonous beeping penetrated her unconscious mind. Where was she? In a bed... Okay, she knew that much. She slowly opened her eyes and looked around. She spotted her husband, sitting in a chair next to her. There were monitors everywhere. She was in a hospital. “Clark?” she croaked. Her throat was dry. Why was her throat dry? It hurt to talk.

“Lois?” Clark moved closer to the bed and took her hand.

“Honey, are you okay?”

“What happened?” she asked.

“You don’t remember?”

“I remember that you were holding me and then the room began to spin.” She paused. “I’m really thirsty.”

“Here.” He poured her a cup of water and handed it to her. She gratefully drank it then took a deep breath. “Better?” Clark asked. She nodded mutely. “Yeah, the doctor should be in here any minute.”

“What happened?”

“You passed out; I brought you to the hospital. Honey, are you sure you’re okay? You really scared me.”

“I’m fine. It was weird. I was tired and I started getting blurry vision. The room began to spin; then everything went black. Next thing I knew I had woken up here.”

A knock at the door interrupted them; they turned their attention to the tall man in a white coat. He was about six foot; he had light brown hair and a short goatee. He looked like he wasn’t a day over twenty-five. “Mrs. Kent? I’m Dr. Patel.” The man extended his hand to Lois. “You must be going for a record,” he muttered as he looked through her chart and checked her vitals.

“What do you mean?”

“Tempting fate? Your blood pressure was off the charts, Mrs. Kent. You have to slow down. You can’t be chasing after criminals the way you’re used to.”

“We weren’t chasing after criminals, doctor,” Clark argued.

“Well, something has to change or your baby is going to suffer for it. I’m keeping you here overnight until Dr. Pierce is able to make it over here. No visitors – except your husband of course.”

“I can’t stay here overnight,” Lois argued. “I hate hospitals.”

“Could have fooled me... No work. Bed rest.” Dr. Patel left the room and closed the door behind him.

“This is insane.” Lois defiantly crossed her arms over her chest. “They’re keeping me here against my will until Dr. Pierce arrives. Who knows when that will be?”

“Well, that will give you a chance to practice something you need to work on,” Clark said, gently squeezing her hand.

“What’s that?” she asked curiously.

“Patience,” he replied solemnly.

“Mr. Peters, it’s a pleasure.” Leslie extended his hand to the man before him.

“Mr. Luckabee. Thank you for taking care of my bond,” Peters said graciously.

“Not a problem,” Leslie said. “So, I assume you took care of everything?”

“Yes, Mr. Grady’s books read of deposits from the Cayman Islands. All the business dealings he made with O’Neal are marked and tagged. I placed them in plain sight.”

“Excellent. So, O’Neal’s holdings will go under investigation.” Leslie puffed on his cigar lightly. He turned to his assistant. “Mr. Smith, why don’t you get Mr. Peters a cigar?”

“Of course, sir.” Mr. Smith returned with a box of Cuban cigars. “Anything else?”

“Yes, Mr. Peters looks a bit tired. Why don’t you take care of him?” Leslie suggested.

“Of course.” Mr. Smith opened the box of cigars and pulled out a gun. He aimed it at Peters.

“What is this? I thought we were a team?”

“I’m not much of a team player,” Leslie remarked. Mr. Smith fired the weapon and the echo of the gunshot rang through the tunnels.

Peters body slumped over, and Mr. Smith kicked his body into the sewer water behind him. “I’m sure the rats will feast tonight.”

“Lois, come on, try and get some sleep, please?” Clark begged.

“No. I am not going to sleep here,” Lois said defiantly. “I’ll go to sleep when I am in my own bed.”

“Lois,” Clark warned.

“Mrs. Kent?” There was a knock at the door. Lois and Clark were both relieved to see the familiar face of the obstetrician. She had a large machine with her that she was wheeling into the room. “I understand you’ve had a bit of a problem lately with your preeclampsia?”

“I had a problem with my blood pressure going up a little bit. I had a dizzy spell and passed out,” Lois explained. “I was not chasing criminals or running marathons.”

Dr. Pierce smiled. “Dr. Patel doesn’t have the best bedside manner, but he means well.”

“Is he this charming with all his patients or am I just special?” Lois asked.

“This is, after all, your second visit to the emergency room during your pregnancy,” Dr. Pierce pointed out.

“Yeah, but it’s not like Lois is out looking for trouble, Doctor; she and I just seem to be targeted for drawing out Superman, I guess,” Clark interjected.

“Understood,” Dr. Pierce said, making a note in the chart that she was holding. “Did you have any pain when you fainted?”

“No.” Lois shook her head. “Just very dizzy...”

“Any recent nausea?”

“Not recently. I had it about a month ago though.”

“But it’s passed since?”

“Yeah, it seems to have,” Lois said.

“And then tonight you just passed out?” Dr. Pierce asked.

“Yeah. I got dizzy; then I just blacked out.”

“But no nausea?”

“No.”

“Hmmm, what had you been doing earlier this evening?”

“Um, we went out to dinner... met up with our friend Jimmy. Then Jimmy and I left. That’s when I got held up at gunpoint,” Lois said, mumbling the last part.

“Pardon?” Dr. Pierce asked.

“Jimmy and I went to help a friend of his that was in trouble; then while I was waiting outside, minding my own business and TRYING to stay out of danger, I had a gun pulled on me. Just

another day of being held hostage as bait for Superman.”

“Did it work?”

Lois shook her head. “No. We were able to break free and get out of there thanks to our friend Jimmy giving them a bit of a distraction.”

Dr. Pierce just shook her head as she wrote in her notebook.

“Okay, anything else that was stressful tonight?”

“Um, the entire staff of the Daily Planet decided to surprise us with a party. That was... unexpected.” Lois blushed at the memory.

“It was a few hours later that Lois began to get really tired, and she then started having the dizzy spell,” Clark explained.

“Mmmm hmm. Okay, why don’t you lie back and lift up your gown,” Dr. Pierce instructed. “We’re going to do an ultrasound.” She squeezed the gel onto Lois’ abdomen, prompting a squeal of surprise from her. “Sorry. This stuff is a bit cold.”

“No kidding,” Lois muttered.

“Okay, let’s see here.” She pulled out a small round device that was attached to the ultrasound machine and placed it on Lois’ abdomen. Immediately, a quick thumping could be heard throughout the room.

Clark smiled at Lois. “Nice and strong.”

“Yes, baby boy Kent is raring to go in there,” Dr. Pierce agreed. She turned her attention to the monitors in front of her. “Let’s see, your measurements look to be about twenty-five weeks along. So right on target. Baby seems to be growing at a normal rate. No signs of any problems in the placenta. Honestly, I think you should be okay. The preeclampsia appears to be in the mild range. Your blood pressure is very high, but there are no signs of any damage to the placenta.”

“So, how do we keep the blood pressure down? I am going out of my way to stay out of danger but it just keeps finding me. I don’t know what to do. I had no idea I was pregnant for twelve weeks. For twelve weeks, I still took birth control. What if that hurt him? What if that’s what’s causing the preeclampsia,” Lois rambled as all of her inner insecurities poured out.

Dr. Pierce held up a hand for her to calm down. “Easy. It is nothing you have done. Sometimes it just happens. Usually, in more serious cases of preeclampsia, there are signs of placenta abruption. Your blood pressure is high, but it’s not dangerously high. You can reduce the amount of stress – both physically and mentally. When you’re trying to do work, and you feel like you’re getting stressed, do breathing exercises or yoga. There are some great prenatal yoga exercises that you can do. There is Lamaze to help prepare you for birth.” She turned to the printer and removed a roll of black and white pictures. “Here are your baby pictures. You’ve only got a few months left. Just try and relax. Everything will be fine. I’ve delivered babies at 28 weeks that have lived to be healthy, but I’d prefer not to. Everyone seems to make things out a lot worse than they are. Take care of yourself and keep your stress level down as much as possible. That’s all you can do.”

She handed Lois a few wipes. Lois quickly removed the gunk from her abdomen and sat up. “Okay. Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to put you on a common prescription: Magnesium Sulfate. It’s supposed to help level out both your hormone levels and your blood pressure. We’re going to have to do constant fetal monitoring. That means every week without fail you need to be in my office. No excuses.” Dr. Pierce handed them the prescription, along with a few fliers from her briefcase. “These are some classes for Lamaze and other stress relief techniques that may help as well. The key is to reduce the stress level. When possible, prop your feet up and reduce the amount of time you’re on your feet. You should not be on your feet for more than 1 hour at a time. Gravity is not your friend. Especially when the baby gets bigger.”

“Okay, thank you.” Clark took the brochures.

“When can I get out of here?” Lois asked impatiently.

“As soon as I sign your discharge papers, which will be after I

get a blood and urine sample from you. The nurse will be back in just a few minutes.” Dr. Pierce smiled. “I’ll see you next week.” She checked her BlackBerry. “Wednesday at six?”

“Sounds good,” Lois replied. “When can we leave?”

Dr. Pierce just laughed and headed towards the door. “Don’t worry; you’ll be home within the hour.”

The next day, Clark browsed through his laptop, studying the information he had regarding the missing CEOs. Lois was still asleep, and his mom had gone shopping for baby clothes to surprise her when she woke up. Meanwhile, he was trying to make some headway on the missing CEOs. Another one had disappeared last night during the fiasco with Grady. He knew they had to be connected. He was on the phone with Jimmy, discussing the investigation. “Where have you gotten with that ATM tape, Jimmy?”

“Uh, I’ve got a call into Inspector Henderson. The FBI keeps giving me the runaround,” Jimmy explained.

“Okay, let me know what you turn up.”

“Sure. Hey, CK, how’s Lois doing?”

Clark smiled. “She’s fine,” he reassured his friend. “She’s still asleep. We didn’t get back until late.

“Yeah, well, I guess this will be one birthday you won’t forget,” Jimmy said. “Tell Lois to take it easy. We’ll see you guys later.”

“All right. Call me as soon as you hear something about that tape.”

“You got it.”

Clark hung up the phone and then turned his attention to the background of the missing CEOs. What was he missing?

“Hey, son, where’s Lois?” Jonathan asked, clambering in the room with several shopping bags.

“She’s still asleep.” Clark stood and moved to help his father with the bags. “Here. Let me.” He looked at all the bags and laughed. “Is there anything left at the store?”

“Well, you know your mother likes to stock up on everything while we’re in Metropolis.”

“Clark, you have got to see some of the stuff we found.” Martha pulled out some of the items she had bought. “Isn’t it adorable?” She pulled out a yellow blanket with a white bunny rabbit’s head on it. Clark smiled sadly. “It’s a security blanket. I was reading this book, and they said it’s important for the mother to sleep with it while she’s pregnant. Then, when the baby is born, it will have her scent on it and help comfort the baby when he or she’s asleep.”

“It’s adorable, Mom. Thanks.” Clark smiled at his mother. Only she would consider everything but the preeclampsia. She was convinced the baby would be fine. He just hoped she was right.

“What’s adorable?” Lois asked as she approached them. Clark noticed that she was dressed casually. He hoped that she didn’t try to go into work today.

“This.” Martha handed her the security blanket.

“Oh, Martha,” Lois cooed, stroking the blanket.

“I figured you would like it. It’s a neutral color so it can be for a boy or a girl. That way it can be passed down from one child to the next.” She winked at them.

Lois laughed as Martha went into a full ramble about baby clothes and feedings. She could ramble just as well as Lois could when she got going. “Did Clark show you the latest sonogram pictures?”

“Oh, they’re right here.” Clark retrieved the sonogram from the coffee table.

Martha and Jonathan crowded around Lois and Clark to see the picture. “Oh, my,” Martha remarked.

“It’s hard to believe that in just a few months this will be our little boy.” Lois gestured to the sonogram.

“How are you feeling?” Martha asked gently.

“I’m better... I feel a lot better,” Lois reasoned.

“You gave everyone quite a scare last night,” Jonathan chimed in.

“Sorry.” Lois shrugged her shoulders, unsure of what else to say.

Martha gave her a brief hug. “You need to just relax and take care of yourself. Everything else will work itself out.”

Lois smiled back at her mother-in-law. This woman had so much faith. She wished she felt as confident as she did. “It’s just hard.”

“Anything worth having usually is,” Jonathan interjected. “Any word on why that Grady fella was trying to use that satellite?”

Clark shook his head. “No, he claims it was for ‘world peace,’ but I’m not buying it.”

“Well, you two will figure it out,” Martha added. “We’re gonna get out of your hair so you can get some work done.”

Martha looked at Lois. “Get some rest. We’ve got an afternoon flight back to Smallville.”

“Mom, you don’t have to do that,” Clark argued.

“We’ve got to head back,” Jonathan stated, “and you need to stay with Lois. We’ll be back to visit in a few weeks.” He patted Lois on the shoulder. “Take care of yourself and that grandson of ours.”

Lois smiled. “I will.”

Inspector Henderson cautiously walked down the dock on Hobbs Bay. The stench was intolerable; he covered his face with a handkerchief. “What have we got here?”

The officer on scene had a grim look on his face. “Four dead bodies. The fourth one looks like it’s been here only a few hours. We should be able to get an easy ID on him.”

“And the others?”

“They’re gonna be a bit longer. They’ve already begun to decompose, and there are pieces missing from where the fish had begun to...eat away at them.”

“Okay...Get ‘em down to forensics...”

“Will do, Inspector.”

After seeing the Kents off, Clark updated Lois on everything he’d been working on while she’d been resting. “Jimmy’s got a call into Bill Henderson about that tape. Hopefully, we can get a copy by tomorrow.”

“More and more CEOs are coming up missing,” Lois muttered, shaking her head. “Any word on that missing assistant of Garret Grady’s?”

“No,” Clark sighed. “It’s weird. It’s like he just disappeared after he was bonded out. I’ve scanned the entire city, nothing.”

“Well, who got him out?” Lois asked.

“A company called Caribbean Imports.”

Jimmy was on the phone with Metropolis P.D., holding for Inspector Henderson. “Yes, this is Jimmy Olsen. I’m still holding for Inspector Henderson. No, please don’t put me on hold...I just want to...” The music began to play in his ear once more. “Why do they hate me?” he muttered to himself. “I hate this job!”

“Better not say that too loud. The owner might overhear you.” Leslie Luckabee smiled at Jimmy as he perched himself on Jimmy’s desk.

“Mr. Luckabee, I didn’t see you coming or else I wouldn’t have stuck my foot in my mouth,” he admitted, smiling sheepishly.

“Don’t worry about it. Sometimes I’m not that crazy about my job either.”

“Really?” Jimmy asked in disbelief.

“Someone giving you a hard time?” Leslie asked, changing the subject.

"I've been trying to get a copy of the ATM tape from the Metropolis Bank for the past few days. I've called the FBI; now I'm trying to get a hold of Inspector Henderson. It's insane how many times they can transfer you to the operator on accident."

"What do you need a copy of the ATM tape for?"

"Oh, it's for Lois and CK. They need it for their investigation into those missing CEOs. Normally, I wouldn't have a problem, but in investigations like this FBI usually stands for 'forget about it.'"

"I see," Leslie mumbled, nodding. "So, tell me, what's it like working with such a celebrated reporter like Lois Lane day in and day out?"

"Lois? She's great! I'm the luckiest guy I know. Well except for CK. He's uh... WAY luckier than me if you know what I mean."

Leslie smiled. "Yes, I think I do. They must have a very special relationship, being married and working together."

"Yeah, no kidding. It took 'em long enough to get together. People were placing bets the first couple months the Chief partnered them up."

"Bets?" Leslie asked, momentarily confused.

"Well, you see it was extremely evident that Lois liked CK; she just wouldn't admit it. Then, if you just looked at CK and the way he looked at Lois, you could tell he liked her too. We were just betting on how long it would take for the two of them to get together."

"Ah... Well, I sure hope their relationship lasts. Anyway, carry on Jimmy."

"Okay, see you around, Mr. Luckabee."

Jimmy turned his attention to the phone that was still against his ear. "This is Metropolis P.D. – where can I direct your call?"

Clark watched Lois as she fixed a cup of coffee and walked back into the living room. "So, how are you really feeling?"

"I'm better. I still feel a little sore from where baby boy has been kicking my ribs, but I'm okay," Lois acknowledged. She sat down on the couch and began sifting through the papers Clark had been studying.

Clark sat next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Honey, we don't have to do this right now. I already called Perry and told him we were working from home today."

"I just wanted to go through this once more. I keep hoping I'll spot something I didn't before... a clue maybe?" Lois began sifting through the papers once more. "Has Jimmy gotten a copy of that ATM tape yet?"

"No, he's still trying to get a hold of Inspector Henderson, but he hasn't been able to touch base with him."

"So, we're still at clue zero," Lois summarized.

"Unless clue one is somewhere in here." Clark motioned to the stack of papers on the table. "Are you hungry? Do you want me to make you something?"

"I'm fine." Lois sighed and leaned back into his embrace. "This is all just so frustrating."

"Tell me about it."

"There's got to be something we're missing here, Clark."

The doorbell rang, interrupting her train of thought. They got up and answered the door. "Bill?" Clark was surprised to see Inspector Henderson on the other side of the door.

"Can I come in?" Inspector Henderson asked hesitantly.

"Yeah." Clark motioned for him to enter.

"What's going on?" Lois asked.

"We pulled out four bodies from Hobbs Bay this morning."

"What?" Lois and Clark asked in unison.

"Three of them were the missing CEOs. The other one was our missing guy from Diticom." He tossed the police file to them. "We just got an ID on him a few minutes ago."

"Okay, why are you telling us?" Lois asked curiously. "I

usually have to pry information out of you."

"I knew you two were covering the investigation, and since you two helped bag this guy last night, I figured you'd want to know." Lois gave him an 'I don't believe you' look and he continued, "And maybe I'm hoping you two can help me find what my guys can't." At Lois' dubious look, he retorted, "Don't look at me like that. I may be a cop, but I also know you two are damn good at finding the skunk in the rose garden so to speak."

"Thank you," Clark replied sincerely, sifting through the file. "This says the bodies were already decomposing?"

"Yeah, it kinda happens when fish begin eating at you," Inspector Henderson remarked, smiling humorlessly. "Anyway, the cause of death is still undetermined except on that Peters guy. He was shot. Kinda makes you wonder where that new superhero was."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked.

"She's been stopping crime all over the place; then, yesterday, no one had seen or heard from her. It's like she just vanished. Right around the same time, this Grady guy decides to put the Annihilator into orbit."

"Hmmm." Clark glanced at Lois warily then turned his attention back to Henderson. "Anything else?"

"We've got Forensics going over the scene right now. I should have something later this afternoon."

"Bill, is there any way you could help us out with something?" Lois asked.

"Depends on what it is."

"The FBI has been giving us a hard time about getting a copy of that ATM tape from the bank chairman's disappearance; can you see if you can get us a copy of that tape? It would really help with our investigation." Lois smiled warmly, placing a hand on her abdomen for emphasis, knowing it would tug just hard enough on Henderson's heart strings to help them.

He just snorted. "You've been trying to get a copy of the tape from the FBI?" He shook his head and picked up his phone that was vibrating in his pocket. "We have a copy of the tape down at the precinct. I'll have it couriered over to you by this afternoon," he assured.

"Great; thanks, Bill," Clark said.

"No problem." He noticed a text of '911' on the screen.

"Listen, I gotta go. I'll see you later."

Lois and Clark watched him leave then stared at the file in their hands. "Well, now we have clue one."

"Lois? CK? I thought you guys were working from home today," Jimmy said when he saw the duo exit the elevator.

"Yeah, so did I," Clark muttered, throwing a look at Lois.

Lois ignored her and turned her attention to Jimmy. "Jimmy, get me everything you can on Diticom Technologies, Garrett Grady, and this Thomas Peters. I need anything you can find on them, on my desk asap!"

"You got it!" Jimmy headed towards the research department before Lois could think of anything else to add to the list.

"Lois, what in the Sam Hill are you doing here?" Perry hollered across the newsroom. "Kent, I thought I told you to make sure she takes it easy!"

"Easier said than done, Chief," Clark remarked.

"Aw, hells bells, Lois, can't you take it easy just one day?"

Lois just glared at Perry. "Perry, I am fine."

"Fine is not going to cut it, Lois."

"Perry, we got a break in the story," Lois began.

Clark interjected, "And 'Mad Dog' Lane here is grounded to her desk." Lois shot him a dirty look, but he ignored it. "Whether she likes it or not."

Perry's interest perked up. "What kind of break in the story?"

"The missing CEOs showed up in Hobbs Bay, along with our missing guy from Diticom," Lois explained. "Henderson was nice

enough to drop by with the information.”

“Do they have any leads?”

“Well, the CEOs bodies are still being examined, but Peters was killed by a gunshot wound. Forensics is still going through everything,” Clark clarified.

“CK? There’s a Detective Wolf on line one for you,” Jimmy interrupted.

Clark nodded and picked up the phone on Lois’ desk. “Clark Kent... What? But that’s impossible! No, Superman scanned the whole building... Okay... Thanks.” He hung up the phone.

“What is it?” Lois asked.

“The Pulse Converter Grady had was a dummy.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it’s a plastic replica of the real pulse converter.”

“But... how? Why?”

“My guess is that Grady thought it was the real deal, which means the real thing is out there somewhere.”

“Couldn’t it just be a coincidence? I mean, how do we know this thing was even really built?” Perry interjected.

“Steve McBride was disintegrated into ashes, Chief. That’s the kind of destruction that NASA was predicting this Annihilator would be capable of.”

“Which means someone already built it and is possibly using Grady as a fall guy?” Lois added.

“Exactly.”

“All right, well stay on it, you two.” Perry then turned to Lois. “I don’t want to see you leaving this newsroom without your husband; is that clear?”

“But Perry,” Lois began to argue.

“No buts, Lois. That’s an order!” With that, Perry walked back into his office.

Clark just laughed. “I don’t know why he has to be so over protective all the time,” Lois muttered. She turned to the file on her desk. “So, you want to take CEOs or Diticom?”

“Hmmm, I’ll take CEOs for fifty,” Clark joked, taking the file from her.

“His name is Leslie Luckabee.” Mr. Smith handed a newspaper to the two men standing in front of him. “He’s the new owner of the Daily Planet.”

“Do you want him brought here, or do we take him out ourselves?” one of the men asked.

Mr. Smith continued pruning the plant before him. “The Master wishes to have certain witnesses to Mr. Luckabee’s unfortunate demise.” He smiled at the men. “Therefore, you should take care of the situation above ground, and then forget you ever saw this place.”

The man nodded. “No problem. First, the *MONEY!*”

Mr. Smith was preoccupied with the task of trimming the bonsai. “In a moment, I’m almost done.”

“Doing what? Pruning that weed?” He and the other man laughed.

Mr. Smith looked up at the two men with disgust. “This weed, as you call it, is actually a two-hundred-year-old specimen tree: a bonsai.”

The man just scoffed. “Really?”

“Yes, really. It’s a living art form. Connoisseurs admire them for their heroic struggle to survive against external adversities. They actually consider them quite beautiful, despite their gnarled and twisted... and unsightly appearance.”

The man just scoffed again. “Still looks like a weed to me.” He then shouted, “The *MONEY!*”

Mr. Smith stood, slightly angered by the man’s outburst. “Of course.” He pulled out a briefcase and placed it on the table before him. “Forgive me; I do go on.” He then sat back down and turned his attention back to the bonsai. The two men opened the briefcase, sifting through the money. “A hundred thousand dollars

in bearer bonds was the agreed upon price, I believe?”

“When do you want the hit made?”

“Tonight.” Mr. Smith watched as the two men left. “Idiots,” he muttered under his breath. His phone rang, and he turned his attention to the incoming phone call. “Mr. Rankin? Should I assume Vixen is ready? Of course. The money will be transferred to your account within the hour. Excellent.” He hung up the phone and then continued trimming the bonsai.

Lois and Clark sat huddled together at Lois’ desk, pouring over the files. Lois had her feet propped up on Clark’s lap as he massaged her calves while reading over the files in his hand. Lois had a file of her own in her hands. Clark shook his head. “I feel like I’m getting a sense of déjà vu here,” headmitted as he scanned through the file in his hand.

“What do you mean?” Lois asked.

“These guys remind me of Lex Luthor.”

“Lex? How?”

“Well, they were all successful businessmen – a cut throat in the business world. Plus, a lot of them have taken over businesses that used to be owned by Luthor.”

“Coincidence?” Lois suggested.

“I don’t know.”

“Lois, CK, this package just came in for you.” Jimmy handed them an envelope.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Lois called.

“What is it?”

“That ATM tape from Inspector Henderson.” Clark opened the package and headed towards the conference room. “Come on, we’ll watch it in the conference room.”

In the conference room, Lois and Clark watched the tape. The image showed the bank chairman taking a few steps and then vanishing a millisecond later. “Did you see that? He literally did vanish!” Lois gasped.

“No.” Clark shook his head and lowered his glasses as he rewound the tape. He froze the frame where the chairman disappeared. “There. You see that?”

“What?”

“Look at the frame where the chairman disappears.” He pointed at the screen. “These blue pixels turn a goldish hue, but only in the one frame where the chairman disappears.”

“Gold?”

“As in Vixen.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Clark sighed. “I’ve got to stop her.”

“Do you think she’s behind the CEOs murders as well?”

“I don’t know,” Clark repeated. “She seems to be treating all criminals the same; I guess embezzlers aren’t even safe from her wrath.” He cupped her cheek. “Please don’t do anything adventurous while I’m gone.”

“I’ll be fine.” Lois kissed him. “Don’t be gone too long. I’m not allowed to leave without you, or don’t you remember Perry’s orders?”

“I know. If I can’t find her within the hour, I’ll come back here and take you home.”

“Okay, be careful.” She kissed him once more. She watched him leave and headed for her desk to continue working on the Diticom file.

“The evil Hitman will be attacking Mr. Luckabee,” Mr. Smith told Vixen. “You must stop them from attacking him. Is that clear?”

“Completely.” Vixen was quiet a moment; then she spoke once more. “I want to kill Superman.”

“A noble desire, Vixen.”

“He is interfering with my mission to eradicate evil. He must

be destroyed.”

“But he is not evil, Vixen.”

“But he is interfering with my work.”

“Very well, if he tries to stop you, you may kill him.”

Perry walked into the bullpen with Leslie in tow. “All right, everybody! I want everything you’ve got on Vixen! Photographs! Editorials! The works!” Perry then stopped in front of Lois’ desk. “Have you gotten any more on Vixen yet? What does Superman think of her actions?”

“We haven’t spoken with him since yesterday, Chief. We’re still trying to figure out where she even came from. She doesn’t seem to want to disclose that information to anyone... not even Superman,” Lois explained.

“Hmm, kinda suspicious. Okay, I want you two to stay on this.”

“What about the missing CEOs?” Lois asked.

“Oh, honey, I’ll reassign it. We’ve got a new superhero in Metropolis. This is much bigger than missing CEOs.” Perry then looked around. “By the way, where is that husband of yours?”

“Oh, he went to... try and find Superman... so we can find out what he plans to do about Vixen,” Lois mumbled.

“Good. Let me know what you two have when he gets back. I want our front page to read, ‘Vixen: Superfriend or Superfoe?’ We just need to fill in the gaps.”

“Hmm, looks like we’re all going to be here awhile. Maybe we should order something in?” Leslie suggested.

“Sounds great. I’m starved,” Lois replied.

“What about you, Perry?”

“Oh, well, I just had a T-bone,” Perry acknowledged, patting his stomach for emphasis. He then turned away towards his office, leaving Leslie and Lois alone.

“Well, I guess it’s just you and me,” Leslie observed cheerfully. “Say, how about we just go out? It’ll be faster. We can have that dinner we talked about.”

“Now?” Lois asked uncertainly.

“Why not? I was hoping you could show me a good Mexican restaurant. Not many in Brisbane, I’m afraid.”

“I’d probably better take a rain check, Leslie.” Lois smiled apologetically at him. “Clark’s trying to find Superman, and I’m still trying to work on this story.”

“It’s just that I’m really anxious to learn everything I can as fast as I can. And, as far as I’m concerned, the only way to do that is to learn from the best, and that’s you. At least that’s what Perry keeps telling me. What do you say?” Leslie shot her a mega-watt smile.

“I’m flattered, Leslie, but I really should get on this story. Besides, Clark’s not back yet.”

“So, just leave him a note and tell him where to meet us. As far as the story is concerned—I’ll talk to the owner myself and make sure you don’t get in any trouble.”

Lois debated for a moment. She had promised she would wait here for him, but she really was hungry, and it was just dinner. She’d probably be back before he returned. She looked at her watch and grimaced. He’d been gone almost an hour now. He would be back soon. Then, she turned her attention back to Leslie, studying his warm smile. “Leslie, is it okay if we wait for Clark? He should be back any minute.”

Lois watched his smile falter a bit, but he quickly concealed it. “Not a problem. How long do you think he’ll be?”

“Um, I’m not...” Suddenly, she noticed Clark stepping off the elevators. She smiled warmly at him and then turned her attention back to Leslie. “Speaking of which...” Clark made his way down the steps towards Lois and kissed her, ignoring Leslie who was left as an awkward observer. She slowly broke off the kiss. “Miss me?”

Clark smiled. “Always,” he vowed, cupping her cheek gently.

Leslie cleared his throat, reminding them of his presence. The couple reluctantly pulled away. Clark kept a hand on Lois’ abdomen, a gesture that had not gone unnoticed by Leslie. “Ah, Clark, there you are mate. We were just about to head out and grab a bite to eat.”

“We were thinking Mexican,” Lois interjected. “Were you able to get in touch with Superman? Find out if he had been able to track down Vixen?”

“Uh, yeah, I spoke with him briefly. He’s looking for her as we speak.”

“Well, hopefully, Superman will be able to find her. We still don’t know if she’s friend or foe,” Leslie said. “Shall we?” He gestured towards the elevators. Lois and Clark followed Leslie into the elevators hand-in-hand. “I’m really looking forward to picking your brains a bit. I want to know everything there is to know about the newspaper business.” They stepped off the elevator and into the lobby.

“Why did you buy the paper if you don’t know anything about running it?” Clark asked curiously, opening the door for Lois and Leslie. He followed them out of the Planet.

“Well, I’ve always enjoyed a challenge. Makes life interesting.”

“Hey **LUCKABEE!!!**” a shout from a black sedan interrupted them. They all turned to look and saw a man aiming a gun at Leslie.

Clark pushed Leslie and Lois to the ground, behind one of the columns outside the Planet. “Get down!” The echo of a sonic boom could be heard in the distance as he moved to shield them from the rain of bullets that poured over them. He felt a few stray bullets ricochet off his back. He held Lois against him tightly, assuring that she was close enough that his aura would protect her as well. He continued to hear the gunfire but didn’t feel any more bullets contacting their surroundings.

Concerned, Clark looked up and watched in horror as Vixen approached the sedan. The gunshots stopped, and the sedan began to drive off. Vixen lowered her arms and aimed them towards the escaping sedan. A large ball of fire appeared, floating above her arms; she narrowed her eyes and then released the ball. The retreating sedan exploded on impact, disintegrating the car as well as the drive-by shooters.

Clark slowly stood up, helping Lois to her feet. He looked at Leslie who was still crouched on the ground. “You okay?”

Leslie slowly stood. “Yeah, I think so... Friendly town you’ve got here.”

Jimmy emerged from the Daily Planet building, psyched about the scene he had just witnessed. “Whoa! That was totally cool! Did you guys see that?”

“Yeah, I-I’m gonna call the police.” Clark moved at super speed, changing into Superman to confront Vixen. “Vixen, what are you doing? You just killed them!”

“I don’t understand. They tried to kill him,” she retorted, pointing to Leslie.

“But with your super speed and strength, you could have easily arrested them instead.”

“Why would I have done that? They would have just gotten out to kill again.”

“Because it would’ve been the right thing to do; that’s why! You can’t go around hurting people... not even the bad guys! You have to use your powers responsibly!”

“I did. I eradicated evil.”

“Is that what you did to those CEOs?”

“I was following orders of a higher authority!”

“What authority?”

“The Master.”

“Master?”

“He has taught me well. You have much to learn Superman. Violence is the only answer!”

“No, violence should be used only as a last resort!”

“Whatever. You do it your way, I’ll do it mine!”

“No, you’ll do it the right way, or you won’t do it at all!” he warned. She locked gazes with him for a moment and then jerked her arm away.

“I don’t take orders from you!” She pushed Clark back a few feet. Clark was surprised by her behavior.

“Then who do you take orders from, Vixen?”

“My job is to eradicate evil, Superman, and you’re in my way!” She approached him with a menacing look in her eyes.

“You can’t destroy people just because they make the wrong choice,” Clark declared, trying to reason with her.

“They made their choice.” She aimed her arms at him and a ball of fire began to form once more. “Just as you made yours.”

Lois watched in horror as Vixen began to create a fireball and aimed it at Clark. “Oh, my God!”

“Now, Superman is invulnerable; isn’t he?” Leslie asked uncertainly.

Lois just nodded mutely and watched the scene unfold.

“Vixen,” Clark began but was interrupted by the impact of the energy ball. It struck him with such force that he found himself pushed back several hundred feet. He stood and approached Vixen once more at super speed. “Enough of the games, Vixen!”

“You want more where that came from?” Vixen sneered, aiming her arms at him once more.

This time, Clark didn’t give her a chance. He moved at super speed and knocked her back a couple hundred feet. He moved towards her and noticed mechanical parts on her shoulder. “What? You’re a machine?”

She stood up, angered by his discovery and aimed another energy ball in his direction. He moved at super speed, transforming the energy ball into a whirlwind until it vanished. He then landed in front of Vixen again. “Two out of three?”

Angered, she grabbed him by the neck, attempting to lift him from the ground. “Two can play this game!”

“It’s time you and I had a little chat, Vixen; you’re going about this the wrong way.” He grabbed her hands and removed them from his neck. She stretched her arms out once more, again allowing an energy ball to form. He also allowed the fiery ball to strike him; however, this time he was prepared. The energy from his aura acted as a shield, causing Vixen’s energy ball to ricochet. He watched in horror as she disintegrated before his eyes.

Clark glanced at Lois, unsure of what to do. He approached everyone who had gathered around the Daily Planet. “Everyone alright?”

“I think so,” Lois whispered, nodding.

“Man, that was so cool! Superman, you kicked some major butt!” Jimmy noticed the look that Superman was giving him and backpedaled. “Which I don’t necessarily approve of in most cases, but this was definitely an exception.”

Lois focused on a young girl who was crying and holding onto her mother for dear life. She was shaking and unable to stop the tears from coming down her face. Lois turned to the mother. “Is she going to be okay?”

“I... I... I’m sure she’ll be okay,” the mother replied.

“Superman, that- that Vixen was out of control! If you hadn’t of stopped her...” The tears overtook the young woman as she held her daughter close.

Clark gazed at Lois hesitantly unsure of what to say or do. Lois placed a supportive hand on the young woman’s shoulder and offered the young girl a reassuring smile. “Everything’s gonna be okay.”

“Mr. Luckabee, did you recognize those men that tried to attack you?” Clark asked.

“Uh, I only caught a glimpse, but I didn’t recognize them,”

Leslie responded.

“And since Vixen disintegrated them I don’t think we’ll be able to figure that out either,” Lois interjected. “Why would someone want to kill you, Leslie?”

“I don’t know,” Leslie replied solemnly.

“Incredible. Who would have thought Vixen would give Superman such a fight?” Leslie joked.

“Yes, best five hundred million dollars we’ve ever spent as far as I’m concerned. Now those traitorous CEOs have been eliminated, and we can move on to the next stage of our plan,” Mr. Smith said as he put the finishing touches on the bonsai before him.

“Yes, how long do you think it will take everyone to figure out the Pulse Converter the police have in their custody is a dummy?”

“Not long, but holding the world hostage is only a small part of the plan.” He lifted a glass of wine in the air to toast with Leslie. “Lex would be proud.”

“Yes, too bad he didn’t live long enough to watch his son follow in his footsteps.” Leslie hesitated a moment before continuing, “Are you sure this Angela Cross can be trusted?”

“Her support is crucial. We merge LexCorp with Intergang, and we become an unbeatable criminal organization. No one will dare threaten us... not even Superman.”

“What’s wrong?” Lois asked as she slipped into bed. She wrapped her arms around Clark, holding him close.

“Do you trust Leslie?” he asked.

Lois was a bit taken aback by his question. “What?”

“Do you trust him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know the guy. He seems nice I guess,” Lois began. She noticed that look on Clark’s face. “I’m guessing you don’t?”

Clark shook his head. “No. There’s something off about the guy. I mean, he buys the Daily Planet; then, ‘poof,’ he’s insinuated himself into everyone’s lives. He’s following Perry around like a lost puppy, and he’s constantly sucking up. Why? He owns the paper. Why does he need our approval? Why does he need to know how the newsroom is run? He doesn’t. He has to know how to manage it and hire the right people... that sort of thing. The entire time Franklin Stern owned the Daily Planet we’ve seen him in the newsroom maybe about thirty percent of the time that we’ve seen Leslie, and Leslie’s only owned the paper for a few months.”

“When you put it like that; it is a bit suspicious,” Lois acknowledged.

“And then there’s Vixen. I mean, she was at least partially robotic. Albeit, a highly sophisticated one with superpowers, but that still means someone had to of built her.”

Lois snuggled closer to him. “Begging the question who and why...”

“Exactly, plus there’s the whole attack on Leslie tonight.” Clark continued to ramble as Lois lazily curled up to him, tracing patterns on his arm. “There were no warning shots, but there Vixen was... It’s almost like she knew it was going to happen. Why would someone build a super-powered robot?”

“I don’t know. Someone wouldn’t go to all that trouble just to build a vigilante,” Lois agreed.

“Yeah, there’s got to be something more to it than that.”

“Honey, I think ridding the world of the evil Vixen is enough for one night,” Lois whispered, slipping her arms around his neck and leaning up to kiss him. “We can worry about the ‘who’ and ‘why’ tomorrow.” She moved to straddle him, pressing her body against his as she deepened the kiss.

“Mmmmm, honey.” He pulled her close, enjoying the feel of her body’s heat against his skin. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked.

Lois pulled back a little. “Clark, I’m fine.” She smiled at him,

a wicked gleam filling her eyes. “Now, enough talk.” She pushed him back against the pillows and continued their embrace.

She let her hands roam up and down his expansive chest, exploring his taut muscles as she explored his mouth with her own. She smiled against his kiss as she felt his hands caress her back, bunching her negligee up around her bottom as he did so.

Angela Cross read through the reports on her desk. “Excellent. I want these plans implemented as soon as possible. It’s time Metropolis realized who was in charge.”

“Yes, Mrs. Church,” the young man replied.

She slapped him across the face in anger. “Do not ever call me Mrs. Church again. My name is Angela Cross. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Ms. Cross, it won’t happen again. I swear.”

“See that it doesn’t.”

The next day, Lois and Clark were hard at work, trying to research all the information they had on Vixen and the CEOs. She had been linked to their deaths. The police had declared the businessmen’s deaths to all be caused by electrocution, but Clark was still unsure of how culpable Vixen was for their deaths. Also, Lois and Clark had Jimmy working on the research into Diticom and all its competitors and partners over the past few years. They were looking for clues that would lead them to the real Pulse Converter and help them discover who was behind it. Suddenly, they received an unusual call from Dr. Martinelli. “He’s going to kill me!”

“Who’s going to kill you?” Lois asked, cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder.

“The people that made Vixen. They’re going to kill me. I’m not safe. You’ve got to help me.”

“Where are you right now?” Clark asked.

“In my office. The door is locked.” An echo of a scream could be heard. A short blast followed it, and the line went dead.

“What just happened?” Lois asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“I’ll be right back.” Clark moved to change into Superman. He was in the sky within moments, zeroing in on Dr. Martinelli’s office. He approached the office in record time and knocked on the door. “Dr. Martinelli?” He received no answer. He scanned the room and was stunned by what he found. The remnants of the room had been disintegrated into ashes.

“Ashes?” Lois asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. The whole room had been destroyed. Forensics is going through everything right now, but my guess is that the ashes are—”

“Dr. Martinelli?” Lois guessed.

“Exactly. It’s the same thing we saw with Steve McBride’s disappearance.” Clark raked a hand through his hair. “We need to find out who had access to this Pulse Converter that Grady had built.”

“And who would want to use it,” Lois added. She spotted Jimmy approaching them with a file. “Jimmy, what did you find out on Dr. Martinelli?”

Jimmy scanned the information. “Dr. Martinelli is an expert in bioelectronics, specializing in fiber optics.” He handed Lois the file.

“He said the people who made Vixen were going to kill him,” Lois recalled.

“Maybe Martinelli had something to do with building her... or it,” Clark offered.

Lois nodded. “And now he’s dead, along with the heads of the four biggest corporations in Metropolis.”

“A bit suspicious, don’t you think?” Clark asked.

“Guys? I found something else on Martinelli,” Jimmy interrupted. “He received over two hundred thousand dollars in the

past year from a company called the Caribbean Imports in the Cayman Islands.”

“The Cayman Islands? I’ll bet that money’s been washed so often you can’t see the faces of the dead presidents,” Lois joked.

“Yeah, but here’s the interesting part. About a month ago, he got a deposit from another corporation called Cross Incorporated.”

“Let me guess; they’re from the Cayman Islands as well?”

Clark asked.

“Bingo!”

“Jimmy, dig up what you can on those two companies and cross reference them. See if there are any similar transactions between the two,” Clark ordered.

“And while you’re at it, see if there have been any other deaths where the victims have been reduced to ashes,” Lois added.

“You got it,” Jimmy said, scurrying off to his desk to get started.

Perry’s guffaw could be heard through the newsroom as he and Leslie approached Lois and Clark. Leslie smiled and extended his hand towards Clark. “Clark, there you are! I didn’t get a chance to thank you last night for saving my life!”

Clark just shook his head. “It was nothing, really. How’s your head?” he asked, trying to divert the attention away from his heroic actions. He really didn’t want too much attention drawn to his alter-ego.

Leslie smiled. “It still aches, but thanks to you I still have one. You took a big risk for me, Clark, I won’t forget that.” He then winked at Perry. “Which brings me to my news.”

“News?” Lois asked curiously.

“Yes, yesterday Perry told me about a convention in Atlantic City,” Leslie began.

Lois and Clark nodded in recognition. “The Association of International News Writers?” Lois asked.

“That’s the one.”

Perry smiled. “Very big deal.”

“Anyway, I called the organizers and raised hell that none of my people were invited.”

Clark looked at Leslie a bit skeptically. “Well, only a couple U.S. Papers are invited every year...”

“It’ll be three this year. I’d like you two to represent us.”

Lois and Clark looked at one another, a bit taken aback. Perry interjected, “It’s a fantastic opportunity. What do you say?”

Lois was at a loss. “I... We appreciate the offer, but we’re in the middle of a pretty big story here.”

Perry continued to push, “Come on, Lois, I’ve seen you and Clark juggle four or five assignments at a time.” Lois and Clark shared another uncomfortable glance. “Besides, it’ll be a chance for you two to stay out of trouble.” Perry wagged his finger at Lois. “You need to take it easy. This is the perfect opportunity for both of you.”

Leslie cheerfully interjected, “And it’s not like you’re going to be out of touch. There are such things as telephones, email, fax machines.”

“He does have a point,” Lois acknowledged. She turned to Clark. “What do you think?”

“It’s up to you,” he replied. The look of concern was evident upon his face. Lois contemplated the situation a moment and nodded at Clark. At her approval, he turned to Perry and Leslie. “Okay, we’re in.”

“Wonderful! I’ll let them know.” Leslie headed towards the conference room. “Oh, if anyone needs me, I’m holed up in here ‘till they have my office ready upstairs.”

“Leslie, thanks for using your clout to muscle us in,” Perry remarked.

Leslie smiled modestly. “Well, I’m just the new kid from down under, but I try.” He closed the door behind him.

“He is such a great guy.” Perry smiled and headed towards his office.

“Yeah,” Clark muttered skeptically.

Leslie entered the conference room only to find Mr. Smith waiting for him with a file in his hands. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, clearly you have their trust, Master, but are you ready to move forward with the next stage in our plan?”

“Of course,” Leslie remarked, adjusting his jacket. “I’ve never been more ready in my life.”

Mr. Smith looked out the window, glaring at the retreating forms of Lois and Clark. “Don’t mess this up. It’s a crucial part of our plan.”

“I know what the plan is,” Leslie snapped.

Jimmy knocked on the door. “Mr. Luckabee?” He noticed Mr. Smith in the conference room and backed away. “Oh, you’re busy. Sorry.” He cringed at his habitual bad timing.

Leslie smiled warmly at the young man. “Not a problem, Jimmy. “What can I do for you?”

“Uh, Lois wanted me to get the flight information from you.”

“Ah, right.” Leslie retrieved the flight itinerary from his briefcase and handed it to Jimmy. Then, he introduced Mr. Smith to the young man. “Jimmy, this is my assistant, Mr. Smith.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, politely offering his hand. However, Mr. Smith just stared back coldly. “Right,” he muttered under his breath.

“Mr. Smith isn’t really a people person,” Leslie explained. “A bad childhood. You understand?”

“Yeah.” Jimmy nodded, backing away from the man. “Well, I gotta get this to Lois, so... I’ll... I’ll see you around.” Jimmy left the office, shaking his head. “Weird,” he mumbled.

Leslie watched him leave. “That was close.”

“Clearly. It’s no matter. Soon, we will be able to drop this ridiculous charade,” Mr. Smith retorted. “I’m getting quite tired of carting you everywhere.”

“Well, Lex Luthor Jr. doesn’t drive himself,” Leslie responded with a smile.

Outside the conference room, Jimmy stood in shock from what he had just overheard. He hurried back to his desk, unsure of what to make of this new revelation.

Across town, Professor Rankin sat in his office, reviewing his notes. He heard a rustling sound outside his window and looked up. Nothing. He turned back to his work. Then, a light buzzing sound filled the room. A moment later, Professor Rankin and the desk disappeared, along with the notes he had been examining. All that remained was a pile of ashes.

Later that afternoon, Lois and Clark sat on the bed, packing for their trip. Lois had six different outfits picked out. “Honey, it’s just for a few nights,” Clark admonished as Lois laid a stack of clothes on the bed and prepared to pack.

“This coming from the man who brings a change of clothes with him everywhere he goes?” Lois teased.

“Guilty as charged,” he relented.

Lois smiled seductively at him and pulled out a piece of lingerie, teasing him with it. “I could leave this home.”

Clark spotted the ensemble and his knees almost buckled. “You know what? If there’s no room for it in your suitcase, there should be...” He looked in his suitcase and found an empty space. “Yep! Plenty of room for it in mine.”

“I hope you don’t plan on getting much sleep,” Lois teased.

Clark folded the ensemble carefully and placed it in his suitcase. “Furthest thing from my mind.” Just the thought of Lois in any ensemble like that was enough to make him sweat. He personally didn’t care what she wore, especially if he got to take it off at the end of the night. He was enjoying the climb in her sexual drive lately. He couldn’t wait to see what other interesting side

effects came with the pregnancy.

“Well, enjoy it while you can, Farmboy. Pretty soon I’ll be as big as a whale and be lucky if I can even fit into *your* shirts.”

Clark sensed her mood changing and sat down on the bed next to her. “Honey...”

“What? None of my pant suits fit me anymore. All I can wear are skirts and dresses.”

Clark wiggled his eyebrows at her. “I know...”

“I’m blowing up like a balloon,” she continued. She was quickly slipping into Lane babble mode. Clark decided the best solution was to cease her babbling the most effective way he knew how.

He leaned in and kissed her, pressing her back into the mattress. She moaned in approval as she felt his hand cup her face, tracing the outline of her jaw. She loved kissing Clark. She lightly traced a path through his hair with her fingertips, enjoying the feel of his hair against her hands. What had started as an innocent kiss had turned into a passionate embrace. The inferno burning between them had ignited and showed no signs of slowing down.

He moaned in pleasure, feeling her lightly tug on his bottom lip, the tip of her tongue teasing him, inviting him to explore the inner sanctum in between her lips. “Clark,” she moaned against his mouth as he allowed his hands to explore her body more thoroughly.

He gently hiked up her skirt, exploring the skin beneath the soft cotton material. “Lois,” he murmured, whispering soft kisses against her skin.

“Mmmm... We still have to pack,” she argued half-heartedly, moaning as his hands inched higher and higher up her thighs, massaging them.

“I can have it done in two seconds,” he whispered. “We have more important things to concentrate on,” he remarked huskily, massaging her inner thighs.

“Clark...” She arched her back into his embrace. “Oh, God,” she moaned as he lazily traced patterns up and down her chest with his tongue. He unbuttoned her blouse and spread the fabric open as he continued exploring her body with his mouth. “Yes,” she pleaded with him as he tugged at the clasp to the front of her bra. “Please.”

The ringing of the phone interrupted the moment. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” Clark muttered, rolling off Lois slightly, so he could answer the phone. “Hello?” He allowed Lois to pull him back into her arms, teasing him as he finished the phone conversation that had rudely interrupted them. “Hi, Bill...” He pulled away from Lois for a moment and held a hand up, motioning for her to stop. “Murdered?”

The mention of a murder perked Lois’ interest out of her passion filled daze. “Who was murdered?”

“Okay, thanks.” Clark hung up the phone. He then lay back down next to Lois. “Professor Rankin was just murdered.”

“Let me guess: ashes?”

“Mmmm hmm...” Clark nodded, resting his forehead against hers. “We’ll pick this back up in Atlantic City I guess.” The disappointment was evident on his face.

Lois nodded. “The sooner we check out this Professor Rankin; the better.” She gently pushed him off her.

He groaned not wanting to lose contact with her just yet, but he released her. “When we get to Atlantic City, I’m disconnecting the phone line,” Clark muttered under his breath.

Lois laughed as she began buttoning her blouse. “Well, think of it this way. It just gives you something to look forward to.”

“Henderson? What’s going on here?” Lois asked, getting the Inspector’s attention.

“Char-grilled Professor.” Inspector Henderson gestured to the room behind him which had been destroyed. “Someone’s out there turning their victims into ashes left and right, and we haven’t a

clue as to who is behind it. Grady isn't talking and Peters, the only other person that had access to the Pulse Converter, is gone."

Clark scanned the room and spotted a file on the floor. He x-rayed the contents and noted it included plans for the design of a super-powered robot.

Inspector Henderson walked away and headed towards his Forensics team. Lois grimaced at the sight of the room. "What is going on? This is the third murder this week that's resulted in a cremated victim."

"I don't know, but something tells me this is all connected. It's too coincidental. Let's go. We've got a plane to catch," Clark said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

Leslie slammed the phone down in irritation. He had worked so hard to arrange an interview with Peter Massey for Clark Kent, but now he couldn't get a hold of him. He needed to change his approach and do something they wouldn't expect.

Jimmy watched Leslie leave the conference room in a huff. He wasn't sure what to make of the man. Leslie Luckabee was Lex Luthor's son? He had a hard time wrapping his mind around that concept. He needed to talk to Lois and Clark when they returned. Meanwhile, he was going to find out everything he could about Mr. Luckabee.

"Clark!" Lois shrieked as Clark scooped her into his arms, carrying her into their room. He carried her to the bed, gently laid her down, and dropped their luggage by the bed. Lois sat on her knees and linked her arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

She found his mouth on hers a moment later. The gentle tug on her lip elicited a moan of approval from her. She linked her arms around his neck, encouraging their embrace to continue. "We're supposed to be working," she argued half-heartedly as she worked on the task of unbuckling his belt and loosening his tie.

"We are." He grinned at her in-between kisses. "We're working on perfecting our communication skills."

Lois laughed with delight as he pushed her back onto the bed and covered her body with his. He shrugged off his jacket and vest. His shirt was soon to follow. Her blouse also found its way to the floor. "Clark, yes," she murmured against his lips. He moaned in approval, tightening his arms around her as they concentrated thoroughly on their communication skills, forgetting the world around them.

"Good afternoon, sir, how may I help you?" the front desk receptionist asked as a tall man in his mid-thirties approached the desk.

"I'd like to get a room."

"Certainly, any special requests?"

"Yes, I'd like to near a friend of mine that's in town for the convention."

"Who is your friend?"

"Lois Lane."

"I don't see a Lois Lane here, sir."

"It might be under her husband's name. Clark Kent."

"Okay, and your name, sir?"

"Leslie Luckabee."

"I'm sorry, sir, but that entire floor is booked solid. I could get you something in our Presidential suite?" she suggested.

"Are you sure there isn't any way you could move some people around?" He shot her a megawatt smile causing her to blush.

"Um, maybe there's *something* I can do," she began.

"Thank you."

"Okay, you're all set. Enjoy your stay." She handed him the keys to his room.

"I will." He took the key and headed towards the elevator.

"That was almost too easy," he muttered to himself.

Jimmy stared at his screen in disbelief. "Oh, my God, I've got to get this to Lois and CK. I've got to warn them."

"Hey, Jimmy, have you seen Leslie? I've been trying to find him all day. He said he'd help me improve my writing approach," Ralph said, walking up to his desk.

"Uh, no, Ralph, sorry. Listen, have you seen Lois and CK? I need to talk to them."

"No." Ralph took a bite out of an apple as he spoke. "They left like a couple hours ago for Atlantic City to attend some big convention."

Perry walked by the two of them and scolded them gruffly, "What is this social hour? Get to work!"

"Sorry, Perry, I'm just looking for Leslie," Ralph responded.

"He went up to Atlantic City; he said he wanted to meet the movers and shakers of the media industry," Perry remarked nonchalantly.

"Oh, no," Jimmy muttered. "Chief, I've got to go."

"Go? Where?" Perry asked, puzzled.

"I've got to warn Lois and Clark; this can't wait."

"What the Sam Hill is going on?" Perry asked, noticing the look of distress on Jimmy's face.

"I don't have time to explain. Please just trust me. I have to get to Atlantic City," Jimmy pleaded.

Perry had always maintained a soft spot for Jimmy. He saw the desperation in Jimmy's eyes and conceded, "All right. I don't know what this is about, but you're going to tell me when you get back. I'll have Lori in Travel get your itinerary arranged. Go pack!"

"Thanks, Chief." Jimmy hugged Perry and headed towards the elevator.

"Jimmy, I thought I told you never to hug me!" Perry warned.

"Right, Chief." Jimmy entered the elevator and disappeared behind the doors. He just hoped he wasn't too late.

"Mmmm... I don't want to move," Lois murmured against Clark's chest.

"I know what you mean," Clark chuckled.

"You know, it's weird. Whenever we make love, I feel fine. I don't feel rundown or tired or anything, but whenever we go a few days without making love, I start to feel really tired and weak." Lois lazily traced patterns on his chest as she thought out loud. "Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," Clark admitted, kissing her head lightly. "It could be because of hormones or it could be a side effect of the preeclampsia or even a part of a Kryptonian pregnancy. We don't know what we're dealing with here."

"So, I guess it was a waste of time to bring that negligee," Lois teased.

"No, we can try that later," he promised, wrapping his arms around her.

"What time does the first lecture begin?" Lois asked.

Clark looked at his clock. "In about half an hour," he replied, grimacing. "I guess we should get ready."

Lois groaned. "Come on, not every one of us moves at super-speed."

Clark wiggled his eyebrows at her. "I don't do everything at super-speed," he argued. Then, to prove his point, he pulled her into his arms once more and kissed her.

"Mmmm," Lois moaned. "I have to get dressed," she argued as she felt his hands wander up and down her body.

He sighed, making his disappointment evident. "I know."

"You can take a shower first. Since it only takes you..." Clark disappeared before her eyes and was back a few seconds later fully dressed and his hair slightly damp from the shower... "a few seconds," she finished. "I'll be out in a few," she called over her shoulder as she headed for the bathroom.

"I'll be right here," he replied with a smile. He proceeded to tidy the room up a bit and unpack their luggage. He was interrupted by a knock at the door. He got up and answered the door. On the other side of the door, he found Leslie Luckabee. "Mr. Luckabee? What are you doing here?"

Jimmy sat on the plane, nervously tapping the tray next to him. Lex Luthor had a son. He still had a hard time wrapping his mind around the concept. Leslie seemed like an all right guy from the outside, but he wasn't who he appeared to be. He didn't exist. Leslie Luckabee didn't exist. Lex Luthor Jr. existed.

He had to warn Lois and Clark. He didn't know if they suspected anything was off with Leslie – err, Lex. He had to figure out what to do. He had to find Lois and Clark and tell them about Lex Luthor's son. He knew the Chief had taken a liking to Leslie; they all had, but he wasn't what he appeared to be. Why would someone change their name and pretend to be something they weren't – unless they had something to hide?

"Hello, Clark, I decided to come down to the convention myself as well. I wanted to meet some of the movers and shakers of the media industry. I was hoping you and Lois would be able to introduce me to more of your contacts."

"Uh, sure." Clark was a bit uneasy with the fact that Leslie had just approached their hotel room rather than calling the room. He still couldn't shake the uneasy feeling he had about the man. He had a charisma about him, but there was something off about him – something untrustworthy or rather fictitious about him.

"Have you and Lois settled in okay?" Leslie asked.

"Uh, yeah, we're just unpacking," Clark explained hesitantly.

Leslie noticed Clark still hadn't opened the door all the way, and he obviously wasn't going to invite him inside. "Well, I'm across the hall if you need anything. I'll meet you both downstairs in a few?"

"Sure." Clark nodded hesitantly. He still wasn't letting Leslie into their hotel room. He didn't care who the man was. His ownership of the Daily Planet didn't give him the right to come inside their private dwelling. He watched Leslie leave; then he shut the door behind him.

"Who was that?" Lois asked, stepping out of the bathroom in her towel. He smiled at the sight before him. Lois' figure was still pretty slender, but the medium sized bump on her abdomen bore evidence of the life growing inside of her. She had her qualms about the weight gain, but he thought she was beautiful. She was carrying his child. The very idea of it made her even more sexy to him.

"Leslie," Clark responded hesitantly. "He said he wanted us to introduce him to some of our contacts."

Lois crinkled her nose. "That's odd."

"Yeah. Oh, and get this. He's across the hall from us," Clark added, annoyed.

"What?" Lois asked in disbelief.

"It could be a coincidence," Clark began, giving Leslie the benefit of the doubt.

"Yeah right," Lois muttered under her breath. "Something isn't right here," she remarked. She could feel a chill run down her spine as she spoke. "This convention is normally allowing only two U.S. Papers a year, yet now it's allowing three. Then they're allowing Leslie to come along as well, and how did he end up in a room across the hall from us?"

"I don't know, but we've got to meet him downstairs in a few minutes, so let's paste on a smile and introduce him to a few key people. Hopefully, he'll be on his way and leave us alone the rest of the time."

"Yeah right," Lois mumbled.

"Here's the plan. We're going to hit Metropolis hard and all at

once. It's time they realized who was in charge," Angela ordered as she paced around the room. "Remember, if you fail; don't come back here, and you better forget you ever saw this place."

"Excuse me, sir? Sir? Are you a member of the convention?" the clerk asked as Jimmy tried to push his way past the hostess.

"I'm looking for Lois Lane and Clark Kent. They're friends of mine. I have important information for them regarding... a story they're working on," Jimmy recited frantically.

"Sir, this is a black-tie event. You can't go in there without a tuxedo."

"But it will just take me one minute. Please?"

"The tuxedo rentals can be found across the street." She pointed towards the main entrance of the shop parallel to the hotel.

"I will be so glad when this guy shuts up," Lois whispered to Clark. They had been listening to Randal Scavo discuss how great American news was compared to the European news. The crowd was getting anxious, and many individuals were offended by his statements.

"Where does this guy get off?" Clark whispered.

"I don't know."

The movement on stage distracted them from their conversation. "I'd like to introduce you all to a new member of our board, Mr. Leslie Luckabee."

"Thank you, Mr. Scavo. I feel privileged to be welcomed into your community so graciously," Leslie began. "It is a true honor."

"Don't listen to him! He's a **FAKE!!!**" Everyone's heads turned to see Jimmy Olsen, standing at the entrance and pointing at Leslie Luckabee. His hair was disheveled; he wore a cheap tuxedo, and two guards stood behind him with angry looks on their faces. He had apparently slipped past security.

"Get him out of here!" one of the hotel managers ordered. Lois and Clark ran towards Jimmy, trying to diffuse the situation. Jimmy continued screaming hysterically as he fought the guards.

"He's a fake! He's not who you think he is!"

"Let him go!" Clark demanded, focusing on one of the burly men.

"Turn around, son. You're coming with me," the security guard commanded, pulling Jimmy out of the room. Lois and Clark watched in horror as two police officers approached them and took Jimmy into custody.

Leslie watched the scene unfold with a smile. It couldn't have gone better. Jimmy had apparently figured him out, but he wouldn't be causing him any more grief. He'd make sure of that. The manager of the hotel approached the stage. "I apologize for this outburst, ladies, and gentlemen; it won't happen again. Please proceed to our ballroom where you will find a full buffet, along with music and dancing. We will pick up with the lectures tomorrow."

Everyone made their way toward the ballroom, leaving Lois and Clark behind to think. "What do you think Jimmy meant by that outburst?" Clark asked.

"He said 'He's a fake' and he kept pointing at Leslie," Lois remarked.

"I think we need to look into Leslie Luckabee's background ASAP," Clark muttered as they headed to the ballroom.

"How long before we can make an exit without being too obvious?" Lois whispered in his ear.

"An hour?" Clark responded breathlessly. "But you need to eat." Clark pointed at the line. "I know how you get when you get hot on the trail of something, but remember: you *have* to keep your strength up."

"I know," Lois conceded, sighing. "We've got to find out what Jimmy knows."

"I'll see if I can find him..." He was about to say something, but his super-hearing picked up several sirens.

“What is it?” Lois asked, recognizing the expression on his face.

“I gotta go,” Clark whispered. He kissed her lightly and then sprinted to the exit. Lois sighed as she approached the buffet. She contemplated just skipping dinner and starting the investigation into Leslie’s background, but the growling of her stomach made her think better of that choice.

“Hello, Lois,” a voice uttered from behind her, interrupting her thoughts. She turned to see Leslie Luckabee looking at her. “Where is Clark?”

“Oh, he went to go check on Jimmy,” Lois replied sweetly.

“Well, maybe I can take advantage of his absence,” Leslie replied, eying her critically. “I could use this time to take advantage of you.”

“Excuse me?” she squeaked, stepping away from him hesitantly.

“Your contacts and good name. Clark did promise me you two would introduce me to some of the movers and shakers of the media.”

“Oh, right,” Lois responded. She eyed him warily as they got their food. She wasn’t sure what Leslie was up to, but she knew she had to keep an eye on him.

Clark followed the sirens and found the source of the alarms. Metropolis was in a chaotic state. The police were everywhere. Bank alarm after bank alarm rang in his head. He sighed; this was going to take a while to get under control.

Later that evening, Lois and Leslie made their way to the lobby, returning to their respective rooms. “So, tell me, Lois, what’s it like working at the Planet with your husband day in and day out?” Leslie asked as they approached the elevators.

“It’s fine. Clark and I are partners in everything we do,” Lois responded. The elevator came and they stepped into the cramped area. Lois kept as much distance as possible between them. She had a feeling in the pit of her stomach that something wasn’t right. All evening her stomach had been in knots. She hoped Clark had already returned.

“He’s a very lucky man,” Leslie stated with a smile. “An intelligent and beautiful woman with a child on its way. It’s quite an extraordinary feeling when you find that special person.”

“Well, I’m a lucky woman to have found such a wonderful man,” Lois countered, unsure of what Leslie’s motives were.

“Yes,” he agreed. “You’re both very lucky,” he whispered.

They stepped off the elevator, and Lois hurried to her room. She noticed Leslie standing behind her when she opened the door. “What are you doing?”

Leslie smiled. “My mother taught me to always walk a lady to her door.”

“Mr. Luckabee, you might want to lay off the liquor. If I didn’t know better I’d say you were trying to come onto me.” Lois narrowed her eyes, laughing lightly as she spoke.

“What if I am?”

“What?” she asked, anger piercing through her as she realized his true intentions. Before she could respond further, she felt his arm tighten around her as he leaned towards her. She could smell the booze on his breath. She struggled to push him off, but she found her arms restrained. He pushed her back against the door as she struggled against him, attempting to push him away. She struggled against him. “Get OFF OF ME!!” she screamed.

“Now is that any way to talk to your boss?” he asked. He moved his hand up her thigh, and Lois took advantage of the movement and proceeded to knee him in the groin. He rolled over in pain.

“Don’t you *ever* touch me *again!*” She ran into the room, locked the door behind her, and leaned against the door in relief. She listened carefully to make sure he wasn’t going to try anything

else; then, she sank to the floor in tears.

“You’re okay... You’re okay... You’re okay... Lois, pull yourself together,” she whispered to herself as she began practicing the breathing exercises Dr. Pierce had taught her.

“I’ve found it,” Mr. Smith exclaimed into the phone.

“Really? Any idea what the secret Lex had spoken about is?” Leslie asked.

“No, I’m trying to restore the recording as we speak.”

“Very well. Let me know once you find out.”

“Of course, Master.” Mr. Smith hung up the phone. He stared at the wall before him. A photograph of Lois Lane and Clark Kent was posted on the wall along with a publicity shot of Superman. “You will pay,” he muttered. He threw a dart at the pictures and smiled when it struck the face of Lois Lane.

“Superman!” Jimmy was surprised to find the Man of Steel in his holding cell.

“Hi, Jimmy, how are you doing?”

“Terrible,” Jimmy muttered. “I was trying to warn Lois and CK about Leslie Luckabee.”

“What about him?” Clark asked in concern.

“Leslie Luckabee doesn’t really exist. His real name is Lex Luthor Jr.”

“WHAT???”

“Superman, you’ve got to get me out of here. I only found this information out by hacking into some of the government sites in Australia. Lois and CK won’t be able to find this out until it’s too late. Something about this doesn’t feel right.”

“Anything that has to do with Lex Luthor doesn’t feel right, Jimmy. I’ve already explained to the police that you were wrongfully arrested. You didn’t break any laws. I think the owner of the hotel was just trying to save face.”

“That or Mr. Luckabee set him up to it.”

“That too.”

“Clark,” Lois murmured in her sleep as he slipped into bed.

“Shhh... go back to sleep,” he whispered.

Lois sleepily nodded as she curled up into his embrace, sighing contentedly. “Missed you,” she whispered before falling asleep.

Clark gazed at her and saw that her face was tear-stained. What on Earth could she have been crying about? Clark tightened his arms around her. He hadn’t meant to be gone that long, but the criminal element wasn’t taking any breaks tonight. There had been heist after heist, along with about a dozen hostage situations as well as several hundred minor crimes. It was exhausting. He had been able to catch a majority of the criminals; only a few had gotten away. He hoped this was just a coincidence. He didn’t look forward to a repeat of this occurrence.

“I love you,” he whispered to his sleeping wife. He gazed lovingly at the sleeping figure in his arms. She looked so peaceful. He slid his hands down her body to rest on her abdomen. How quickly their lives had changed in the last few months still amazed him. Lois and he were going to be parents. Their child was growing inside the woman he loved. It was a dream come true. From the moment he had met Lois Lane, he had fallen completely in love with her.

He couldn’t imagine his life without her. It scared him to think that carrying their child could be dangerous to his wife. Despite the risks, she had decided to take the risk. They had found out that the preeclampsia wasn’t something that his biology had caused, but something that just ‘was.’ He wasn’t used to feeling this helpless. He kissed Lois good night once more and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Lois lazily stretched her arms as she

awoke. She smiled at the sleeping figure of her husband. He held her body close to his; his hands rested on her abdomen where their child was growing. She placed a hand over his. “Good morning,” he whispered in her ear. The soft breath against her neck sent a shiver down her spine.

“Morning.” She turned in his embrace to face him and gently reached out to caress his cheek. “I missed you last night.” She knew she needed to tell Clark about Leslie.

“I’m sorry, baby; I don’t know what was going on out there. Every time I turned around there was another hostage situation or another bank robbery. I was going nonstop for several hours. It was after two when I finally got back,” he explained.

“That’s okay. I know you would have been here if you could have.” Lois sighed and rested her chin against his chest.

“What’s wrong?” Clark asked, noticing the tone in her voice.

Lois wasn’t even sure how to tell Clark what Leslie had done last night. She had been so upset. The very idea that he had kissed her – let alone tried to touch her – made her skin crawl. Clark was the only man allowed to touch her like that.

Clark sensed her hesitation; he wasn’t sure what was wrong, but he knew Lois would tell him when she was ready. He pulled her closer and felt her sigh in relief as his arms tightened around her waist.

She leaned up against his frame and kissed him lightly. “I missed you last night,” she reiterated gently, before capturing his mouth once more. A moan escaped from his throat as she deepened the kiss, running her hands up and down his chest in anticipation.

“Lois,” he moaned. His earlier concerns about her behavior had vanished as he concentrated on the motion of her hands against his skin.

A moan escaped her lips; the feeling of his hard frame pressed up against her body sent chills down her spine. Her arms linked themselves around his neck as she explored his body more thoroughly. She cherished the sensation of his hard muscles against her skin, the warmth of his breath against the nape of her neck, and the unmistakable feeling of his muscles pressed against her. “Clark.”

“When are we going to get rid of him?” Angela hissed over the phone. “I have been dealing with that overgrown boy scout for years. I am sick of him flashing his cape where it doesn’t belong. I want him taken care of!”

“Patience is a virtue, Ms. Cross. We can’t be sloppy about this. Superman will have his day,” Mr. Smith replied coolly. “Soon Metropolis will feel the wrath of revenge upon them. They will regret turning their backs on Lex Luthor.”

“Well, it can’t happen soon enough as far as I’m concerned,” Angela muttered. She hung up the phone, not giving Mr. Smith a chance to retort. She then turned to one of her henchmen. “We need to head back to Metropolis. Intergang’s resurrection will require a hands-on approach. I can’t very well manage everything from here, now can I?”

“Very well, Ms. Cross. Your plane will be ready within the hour.”

As Lois and Clark headed toward the lecture hall, they spotted Jimmy in the lobby. “Jimmy, are you okay?” Lois hugged her friend fiercely.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Lois,” Jimmy replied. “Superman got me out of there real quick.”

Lois shot Clark a glare for not telling her about Jimmy. He returned her glare with an apologetic look. “Lois, CK, have you guys talked to Superman yet?”

“Uh, no, not yet,” Clark began.

“Lois, Clark, good to see you!” Leslie exclaimed, interrupting the trio’s reunion. Lois shot Leslie a hesitant glare; a look that was

not lost on Leslie or Clark. “I hope you all are ready for my big announcement.”

“Announcement?” Clark asked coolly.

“Yes, haven’t you heard? Walter O’Neal was found guilty as a co-conspirator with Garrett Grady. I can smell the headline now.”

Jimmy shot Leslie a cold glare. Leslie turned to Jimmy.

“Jimmy, I do hope your experience yesterday has taught you a valuable lesson.”

“Yeah.” Jimmy pasted on a polite smile, but it was clear to anyone who knew him that he was inwardly seething.

“Good.” Leslie turned to Clark. “Clark, could I have a word?”

“Uh, sure.” Clark followed Leslie, leaving Lois and Jimmy alone.

Lois watched them hesitantly, unsure of what to make of the encounter. “What was that about?”

“Superman didn’t tell you guys yet, huh?” Jimmy asked.

“What?” Lois demanded, watching Clark and Leslie leave the lobby.

“Leslie Luckabee doesn’t really exist, Lois. His real name is Lex.”

“**WHAT??**” Lois asked, aghast.

“Lex Luthor Jr.”

“I just wanted to apologize for what happened last night.”

“What?”

“I’m sure Lois told you all about it, and I don’t want to beat a dead horse to death, but I want to assure you that nothing like this will **EVER** happen again.”

“Nothing like what?” Clark took a step towards Leslie.

“I assure you Lois put me in my place. I apologize profusely for my behavior. It was uncalled for.”

“What behavior was that?? What exactly happened between you and my wife last night, Leslie??” Clark demanded, sending him a steely gaze. He couldn’t help but smile to himself when he saw Leslie take a step backward, trying to add some distance between them.

The blood drained from her face as the name registered in her mind. Lex. Lex Luthor. No, not the Lex she knew. A different one. His son. How many children had the man had? Was Leslie like his father? He certainly seemed to prove that he was last night. She had fought him tooth and nail when he had tried to come on to her.

“Lois? Did you hear what I just said?” Jimmy’s voice echoed around her. She looked at him and was surprised to see his face blurring in and out of focus. Oh, no, not now. She needed to calm down. She had to control this. She couldn’t let this beat her. She had to focus.

“Lois???” Jimmy’s voice reached her again as she began to practice the Lamaze breathing exercises she had been taught. Why was she having such a hard time? Did she forget to take her medicine last night? She couldn’t remember. Last night was a blur. The only thing she remembered right now was Clark and their incredible lovemaking from earlier.

“Lois, I’m going to go get Clark,” Jimmy said when he couldn’t get a response from her.

“No, I’m fine,” Lois reassured, stopping him. “Just give me a minute.”

Jimmy nodded and sat next to her. “Do you need some water?”

Lois shook her head. “No.” She closed her eyes and continued to practice the breathing techniques. “I have to learn to do this. That just was pretty shocking news.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” Jimmy apologized.

“Lois.” Clark took a seat next to Lois and Jimmy. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Lois breathed. “Just trying to calm my nerves.”

“I told her about Leslie... er... Lex,” Jimmy explained. “She

said she just needs a minute.”

Clark remembered, but he wasn't supposed to know yet. “Lex?” he asked, feigning confusion.

Jimmy nodded. “I hacked into Australia's database and found out there is no Leslie Luckabee, but there is a Lex Luthor Jr.”

“What?” Clark tried to feign surprise as he turned his attention back to Lois. “How are you doing?”

It was weird. The same exercises that had failed to work earlier seemed to have a calming effect on her now that Clark was holding her.

After a few minutes, Clark looked at her hesitantly. “Better?” She nodded mutely. “Can you stand up?” He helped her to her feet. “What happened?”

“Jimmy told me,” Lois began slowly, “about Leslie or...Lex.” Clark raked a hand through his hair shamefully.

“I'm sorry, Lois,” Jimmy apologized. “I had no idea I was going to upset you this much.”

“It's not your fault Jimmy,” Clark explained. “Lois has a high-risk pregnancy. She has to keep her stress level at a minimum. You couldn't have known.”

“I'm so sorry,” Jimmy repeated. “Do you need anything? I'm gonna get you some water.” He got up and rushed out of the room towards the dining room.

Lois watched Jimmy leave; then she hit Clark across the chest. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I was going to, but we kinda got distracted. I was worried about you. You were obviously upset about something that had happened last night, and I didn't want to upset you any further.”

“He came onto me,” Lois mumbled against his chest.

“What?” Clark wasn't sure he heard her right despite his super-hearing. He felt his body tense up as she repeated herself.

“Leslie came onto me last night. He tried to kiss me. I pushed him off. Then he grabbed my arms and did it again. I finally was able to knee him and get away, but...” The tears fell down her cheeks as she spoke.

Clark pulled her into his arms once more as she recalled her encounter with Leslie. “Sweetheart, I am SO sorry. I should have been here,” he whispered, holding her close.

“No, you had to help in Metropolis,” she reasoned in between her hysteria. “Clark, what are we going to do?”

“Stop him,” Clark muttered, tightening his arms protectively around her.

Jimmy hesitantly returned with the bottle of water. He wasn't sure what had transpired, but Lois seemed to be feeling better. “Lois, are you okay?”

Lois pulled herself out of Clark's arms reluctantly. “Yeah, Jimmy, I'm fine. Thank you.”

“Yeah, no sweat,” Jimmy said.

“Any word on that recording?” Leslie asked over the phone as he cleaned himself up in his hotel room. He peered at his disheveled reflection. Clark had shaken him up a little bit, but he was certain the next part of the plan would be the perfect revenge.

“It's choppy at best but I'm working on restoring the recording,” Mr. Smith responded. “Are you ready for the next phase of the plan?”

“Yes.” Leslie straightened his tie. “They won't know what hit them.”

Penny Barnes held a manila envelope in her arms as she stepped off the bus. She had to find Superman. She had to show him what she had found. He may not want to be with her, but she had to show him the information that she had uncovered at Diticom. He would know what to do.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Lex Luthor Jr. I am the new owner of the Daily Planet, along

with many of your utility companies throughout Metropolis and the North and South East. I would like to welcome you to a new era of Lex Corp. Where the name 'Lex' is no longer connected with greed.”

The crowd stood still as the information began to sink in. Leslie Luckabee was Lex Luthor Jr.

Perry watched the revelation from the newsroom in shock. “Oh, my God!”

“Hey, I guess you know how to pick 'em, huh, Perry?” Ralph asked, patting the elderly man on the back.

Perry felt a wave of pain run through his body. Something wasn't right. The slighttinge increased in intensity and spread throughout his arm. He looked at Ralph and said hoarsely, “Ralph, I never thought I'd have to say this to you, but get my car and pull it around.”

“Why???”

“I think I'm about to have a *heart attack!*”

The room was filled with chaos. “I don't believe it. He just came out and admitted it!” Jimmy exclaimed. He looked around the room skeptically. “Something isn't right here.”

“I smell a rat with the last name Luthor,” Clark muttered bitterly.

“There has to be more to it than this,” Lois whispered. “We're dealing with a Luthor here. Nothing is as it seems.”

“You got that right.”

They watched as Leslie stood calmly at the podium and began to address the crowd once more. “I'm sure you all have many questions, and I can assure you that I will do my best to answer all your concerns. I know it's a bit hard to take in. The name Lex Luthor has not earned any brownie points over the years, but rest assured I will do everything in my power to rectify that point.” He turned to a small man that was standing next to him. “Mr. Chairman?”

“It is with great honor that we rename our Ocean Avenue Resort, Lexor Resorts. Mr. Luthor has just purchased the entire chain.”

“All of the rooms will come with free amenities. The cost will not fall on the consumer any longer.” Leslie smiled at the crowd. Everyone, except for Lois and Clark, cheered. Jimmy was still in shock over the entire ordeal with Lois to respond.

“Well, he's obviously got something the crowd likes,” Lois muttered.

“Yeah, money. He's throwing it at them,” Clark responded dryly. He watched as Leslie made his way into the crowd. “I think it's time I had a chat with Mr. *Luthor*.”

“Clark, please don't do anything rash,” Lois pleaded with him. Clark smiled and kissed her. “Remember who you're talking to.”

Jimmy sat on the steps of the hotel in shock. The name, Lex Luthor Jr., still sent chills down his spine. Though he hadn't endured personal hardships with Lex Sr., he still was unnerved by the name.

“Jimmy???” A young female voice interrupted his thoughts. He looked up and saw Penny standing before him.

“Penny? Wha-What are you doing here?”

“I needed to talk to you. It's important. I called the Planet, and they said you were in Atlantic City; so here I am.”

“You flew all the way over here just to talk to me?” he asked skeptically.

“I came across some information regarding my old boss. I thought you could use it,” Penny replied shyly. “And I wanted to see you.”

“Penny, I appreciate your help, but you do understand that I'm not Superman, right?”

Penny stared at him, completely dumbfounded. He was still

denying his alter-ego. She would play along. Maybe one day he would be ready to admit the truth to her. She had to regain his trust. She had come on to him too hard, and now he was gun-shy. That was understandable. “Of course, Jimmy. I came to see you.”

Jimmy sighed in relief. He really did like Penny. He just needed to know she cared about him – Jimmy Olsen – not Superman. “What have you got?”

“The books that were found by the police? The ones that implicated Walter O’Neal in that embezzlement scheme with all those other CEOs and connected him to the Annihilator? They aren’t in the Diticom system.”

“What?”

“I was the one in charge of those books, Jimmy. Someone created a false document implicating Walter O’Neal.”

“But why would someone want to do something like that?”

“Because they wanted to cover their own tracks?” Penny offered.

“Do you have proof of this?”

“I printed everything off my computer then headed over here.” She patted the envelope in her hands.

“We gotta show this to Lois and CK. If this is true, then whoever is behind this might also be behind those deaths with the Pulse Converter.”

“But I thought the police confiscated the Pulse Converter when Mr. Grady was arrested.”

“The one they have in lock up turned out to be a fake. Lois and CK know more about it than I do. Come on.” He grabbed her hand and urged her to follow him inside.

Leslie stepped off the elevator and headed towards his room. He was mildly surprised to find Clark waiting for him outside his hotel room. “Ah, Clark, what can I do for you?”

“I wanted to finish our conversation from earlier.” There was a chill in his voice that Leslie had not heard before. “*Luthor*.”

“Ah, yes.” He unlocked the door and opened it. Clark stepped inside. “Won’t you come in,” Leslie muttered under his breath.

Clark ignored the remark, keeping his gaze on Leslie as he closed the door. “You said earlier that Lois put you in your place.”

“Yes.”

“You forgot to mention the part where you decided to manhandle her while she screamed for you to **STOP**,” he hissed as he approached Leslie. “Who the *hell* do you think you *are*?”

“Clark, as I said beforehand, I am truly apologetic. I don’t know what came over me. It will never happen again.” Leslie unconsciously took a step backward as Clark advanced forward.

“Let’s be clear with one another so this *mistake* never happens again, shall we?” Clark was right in Leslie’s face. They were a few inches apart as Clark grabbed Leslie by the collar. “If you so much as breathe the wrong way in Lois’ direction, or my child’s for that matter, I will snap your neck like a twig. Are we clear? I don’t care who the hell you are or who your damn father is, or was. No one, and I mean **NO ONE**, hurts Lois.”

Clark threw Leslie to the ground and left the room. He had certainly underestimated Clark Kent in his plan. His eyes narrowed as he watched the reporter walk down the hall through his room’s peephole. He wouldn’t make that mistake again. Clark Kent was protective of his wife. This much was evident. How could he use this knowledge to his advantage?

“Mr. White?” a soft voice called, echoing through the room. The lights were bright. Where was he? “Mr. White?”

“What?” Perry muttered, looking around uncertainly.

“Your wife is here to see you,” the nurse replied. Once he nodded, she left. Perry faded in and out of consciousness.

“Perry?”

“Alice?” he mumbled incoherently.

“You lunthead! I told you one day this job was going to kill

you!”

“Huh?”

“Do you even know what’s going on?”

“I love you, Alice,” he mumbled, surrendering to unconsciousness once more.

Lois sat in the dining hall, staring at the plate of food in front of her, unable to convince herself to eat. She wasn’t sure what had made her do it. She had called the office to check in. It was a perfectly normal thing to do. Ralph had answered the phone. After his usual snide remarks, he had told her something she had never thought she’d hear. Perry was in the hospital. She didn’t even hear the rest of the conversation. She had just hung up, unable to say or do anything. She hadn’t even heard Clark when he had sat down next to her. “Lois?”

Perry was in the hospital. He had had a heart attack. Perry had always seemed so invincible. He was always in control. He seemed to monitor his health okay but obviously not enough. “Lois, honey, what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.” Clark’s worried voice interrupted her thoughts.

Lois couldn’t hold it in any longer. The tears fell down her face at their own accord. “Honey, what’s wrong?” He pulled her into his arms, trying to soothe her the best he knew how.

“I called the office; Perry’s in the hospital,” she said in-between tears.

“What?” His body stiffened against her cheek. She looked up at him and saw his face go pale. “When? How?” Perry had always been a good friend to both, acting as a surrogate father in some instances.

“Ralph said he had a heart attack in the middle of the newsroom when Leslie – Lex – was revealing himself to the world.” Lois shuddered; the mere mention of the name Lex still sent chills down her spine. “Clark, I’m so worried about Perry. We need to get back.”

“Our flight doesn’t leave until this afternoon.” Clark sighed, pulling her into his arms. “All that’s left is your basic mingling stuff. We can just skip that if you’re not up to it.”

“Lois, CK, we’ve got something.” Jimmy walked up to their table with Penny in tow.

“Jimmy, hi, sit down.” Lois swiped at the few tears that had escaped during her plea to Clark. “Hi, Penny.”

“Lois, are you okay? What’s wrong? Is it the baby? Oh, my God!” Jimmy began imagining all the worst-case scenarios in his head before Lois and Clark could respond.

“No, no, Jimmy, it’s nothing like that,” Clark reassured him.

“It’s just hormones. You know us, crazy pregnant women.” Lois gave a watery smile, trying to cover. She really didn’t want to tell Jimmy about Perry right now. She’d prefer to tell him when they got to Metropolis.

“What’s wrong?” Jimmy asked; she wasn’t fooling anyone.

“I really don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“What did you find out?” Clark asked, trying to steer the conversation to a more neutral subject.

“Oh, it’s actually what Penny found out.” He gestured to the blonde sitting next to him. “Go ahead.”

“As you both know, I was working in the secretary pool at Diticom. I was in charge of the books. The supposed evidence they found implicating Mr. Grady and Walter O’Neal in embezzlement was faked. Those numbers were never in the original documents,” Penny explained.

“How can you be sure?” Lois asked. “I mean, what if the numbers you had were fakes?”

“Diticom has never worked with O’Neal Industries. Then, when Mr. Grady was arrested, Walter O’Neal’s name magically appeared in all the books in Mr. Grady’s office. Nothing from our system shows where those books came from.” Penny watched as Lois and Clark exchanged a look, seemingly saying something to

one another.

“Sounds like a definite cover-up,” Lois stated matter-of-factly. “Jimmy, call Inspector Henderson and see what you can find out about their case against Walter O’Neal. Also, I want you to dig up everything you can on Leslie Luckabee, Luckabee Enterprises, Lex Luthor Jr, Lex Corp, Walter O’Neal, and O’Neal Industries.”

Jimmy quickly jotted down the names as Lois shot them out. “Anything else?”

“Make sure you’re on the same flight as us this afternoon,” Lois added. “I’ll explain later.” She watched them leave and sighed with relief. “I don’t know how we’re going to tell him.”

“I’m sure, Perry will be fine,” Clark whispered, kissing her cheek.

“Perry?” Alice watched as Perry slowly opened his eyes.

“Alice? What are you doing here? Where-where am I?” He tried to sit up but found himself tangled in wires and tubes. He seemed to register the fact that he was in a hospital, but he didn’t know why.

“A guy named Ralph called me. He said you had a heart attack and would need someone here,” Alice explained. “I told you this job was going to kill you,” she shot out bitterly, unable to hide her tears. It was evident that she had been crying for quite some time.

“I remember watching that newscast on Luckabee... err... Luthor and then I got this pain in my arm,” Perry recalled. “I had a heart attack?”

“Yeah. They did a triple bypass; between the food you put away and your blood pressure, it was just too much.” Alice wanted to cry again, but she couldn’t find any more tears. She let out a muffled sob instead.

Perry looked at the clock. “Lois and Clark will... be back from... Atlantic City soon.”

“Perry, for God’s sake you can worry about the stupid paper some other time! You just had a heart attack!”

“I’m not talking about the paper, Alice. I’m talking about Lois and Clark. They just found out Lex Luthor Jr is their boss; that can’t exactly be easy for them. You remember everything they went through.” Perry’s eyes were pleading with her. He didn’t want to fight with her. It had been over a year since they had seen one another.

Alice grew quiet for a moment. “I’m sorry, Perry. Of course, I remember. I’m sure they’re fine; I didn’t mean to go off on you. With everything that’s happened, my emotions are just running pretty high right now.”

“I know.” Perry placed a supportive hand on hers. She looked up at him and smiled.

“Honey, I’m home!” Leslie called as he stepped down the staircase, looking for Mr. Smith.

“Oh, great. We have a comedian in the house,” Mr. Smith muttered dryly. “Excellent job on Lois Lane. Lex Luthor would have been proud.”

“Yes, well, I don’t think he would approve of our plan to destroy her.”

“She was a part of his downfall. She must pay.” Mr. Smith’s anger was evident.

Leslie laughed. “Yes, Clark wasn’t very happy with me ‘hurting’ his wife.”

“Oh, but why should he be? Of course, none of that will matter when we’re done with Metropolis. Lex Luthor will have his revenge on those that betrayed him and those responsible for his downfall.”

“If you listen closely, you can hear Lex laughing from his grave,” Leslie remarked amusedly.

“If you listen closer, you can hear him actually speak.”

“You restored the recording?”

“When have I ever failed you, Master?” Mr. Smith pressed

play and Lex Luthor’s voice echoed throughout the room.

“Think of it, son. A secret that could make us the most powerful men on Earth. The only thing that’s ever rivaled our power is Superman. But what better way to neutralize him than to possess his deepest secret... that of his true identity...”

“He knew?” Leslie asked, somewhat shocked.

“Listen,” Mr. Smith instructed.

“After all these years, I was shocked but somewhat amused to discover Superman had been masquerading as my other nemesis, the beloved of my dear Lois. None other than Clark Kent.”

“Oh, this is perfect!” Leslie exclaimed. “Clark Kent is Superman?”

“Indeed. What better form of revenge than to attack what Superman holds most dear?”

“I was born for this!” Leslie exclaimed, pumping his fists in the air.

“**YOU?** I put all of this in your hands.”

“And don’t think for a moment that I’m not grateful.”

“You forget your place.” They stood staring one another down. “You’re a lucky man! Lucky I found you bussing tables in that cafe, hoping for an acting break. Lucky I educated and trained you. Lucky I handed you the world’s most powerful corporation.” Mr. Smith had Leslie by the collar at this point, daring him to make one wrong move.

“All right, take it easy...”

“Let us be clear with one another, so the lines of truth and fiction don’t blur and cause your luck to change. You **PLAY** Lex Luthor, Jr. – the neglected child of the world’s most notorious businessman and criminal of our time. I **AM** Lex Luthor Jr.” He threw Leslie to the ground. “Never forget *that!*”

“So, I kinda did something I probably shouldn’t have,” Clark began as they took their seats on the plane.

“What?” Lois asked suspiciously, unsure if she wanted to know the answer.

“I kinda... Well, I kinda threatened Lex,” Clark confessed. He wasn’t proud of what he had done. Clark had let his emotions get the better of him, and now he was worried about how this might come back to them.

“What exactly did you say?” Lois asked.

“I threatened to snap his neck like a twig if he even breathed the wrong way in your direction,” Clark admitted sheepishly.

Lois fought to keep the laughter out of her voice. Her Clark was anything but violent. However, when it came to her and the baby’s safety, she knew he would do anything to make sure they were safe. “You didn’t...”

Clark hung his head and winced as he looked up.

“Unfortunately, I did.”

“Well, did you scare him?”

“I think so.”

“Good.” Lois gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I’m sure everything will be fine. After what he tried last night, he needed to have someone push him around a bit.” She winked at him and rested her head on his shoulder, preparing to catch a nap on the flight back to Metropolis.

Clark still wasn’t convinced, but he decided to let it go for now. He had bigger problems to solve than his bullying of Lex Luthor Jr.

Dr. Klein sat at Lois Lane’s desk impatiently tapping his fingers against the wood grain. He had to warn Lois and Clark...

“Can I help you?” A young man approached him, curious as to why Dr. Klein was sitting at Lois Lane’s desk.

“I’m waiting for Lois Lane. I need to get a hold of Superman,” Dr. Klein explained.

“Well, they should be in within the hour.” The young man raked a hand through his hair, unsure of what to do with the

scientist. “Can I get you something?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“All right, everyone, I want to know where Mr. *Luckabee* aka **LUTHOR** is, or should I call him the biggest liar on the face of this planet. Where is he?” Franklin Stern demanded, his deep voice echoing throughout the bullpen. All motion stopped as everyone turned to look at the former owner of the Daily Planet.

“What are we doing here?” Jimmy asked when they stopped in front of the Metropolis General Hospital.

“Jimmy, we need to tell you something... in private,” Lois began hesitantly.

“Penny, could you give us a minute?” Jimmy requested.

“Sure.” Penny stepped a few feet away from the trio, allowing them some privacy.

“We’re sorry we didn’t tell you earlier; we just didn’t think it was the right time. Lois and I were still in shock.”

“In shock?” Jimmy echoed. “What are you talking about, CK? You’re starting to scare me. Why are we not at the Planet? Why are we at the hospital?”

“Perry had a heart attack earlier today,” Lois explained slowly.

“What?” Jimmy’s face fell; the pain was evident upon his face as he struggled to accept the severity of the information. “No.”

“Jimmy...” Lois placed a supportive hand on his shoulder, attempting to comfort him.

“No. This is just some sick joke. Perry’s fine. He... He...” The tears fell at their own avail. He slumped to the floor of the hospital lobby, unable to remain standing.

Lois and Clark stared at one another, unsure of what to do.

“Imagine the look on Superman’s face when he realizes everything he holds dear is being ripped away from him little by little,” Mr. Smith proclaimed giddily. “LexCorp is slowly regaining its hold on Metropolis; soon, we will be as powerful as Lex was before his demise in ‘94.”

“How exactly do you plan to infect Superman with Kryptonite? It’s not like he won’t be able to see it coming,” Leslie remarked flatly as he watched Mr. Smith spray green liquid on the various bouquets of roses and assorted flowers that now occupied their hideout. After he finished, he tossed the bottle to Leslie, smirking triumphantly as he caught it.

Mr. Smith laughed. “Every woman loves to feel appreciated. Flowers are always a sure way to her heart.” Leslie wasn’t sure what he was talking about but decided to just ignore him. The man was obviously unhinged.

“Hey, kids, come on in here.” Perry opened his arms and motioned for them to enter the room. “I guess I’m long overdue for a vacation, huh?” he joked weakly. Nobody laughed. It broke his heart to see people he thought of as family on the verge of tears at his expense. Lois and Clark were expecting their first child; this was no time for them to be worried about him. Lois took the seat next to Perry’s bed. Clark stood next to her, resting his hands on her shoulders.

“How are you doing, Chief?” Clark asked.

“I’m okay. They did a triple bypass on me, and the doctors said I’d be as good as new in a few weeks... Well, not exactly a few weeks, but you get what I’m saying. I just got to watch my blood pressure and my diet I guess.” He shuddered. “I guess I should go back to eating those pavva leaves, huh?”

Clark couldn’t help but laugh. The first thing he had said to Perry during his first interview with the man was for him to try pavva leaves for blood pressure. He never knew Perry had listened to him.

“Perry, you didn’t really *eat* those leaves, did you?” Lois managed in-between giggles.

“Of course.” Perry smiled back at her. “But those things tasted so awful I could only stomach it for a week.”

“Chief, even I didn’t *eat* those things. You’re supposed to grind them up into a paste and put them in a tea,” Clark reprimanded lightly, laughing.

Perry chuckled. “What can I say? You never told me *that* part.” He noticed the looks of concern Lois and Clark were giving him. “I don’t want you and Lois fretting over me. I’m an old man. These things happen. You two need to focus on that baby.” Perry’s face lit up as he spoke of the upcoming arrival of his reporting duo. “I know there’ll be some changes at the paper after the little one is born, but we’ll work it out.” He watched Lois and Clark exchange a worried glance; the look spoke volumes. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

They looked at one another, unsure of whether to share their news with Perry or not. “Don’t you dare start trying to coddle me, or I’m going to stick you both on Dog Shows for the rest of the year!”

“Perry, we can’t right now,” Clark explained. “It’s just... it’s not the right time.”

“But I promise we will tell you... just not right now,” Lois explained.

Perry relented. He knew when not to push. “Where’s Jimmy?”

Jimmy sat in the waiting room, staring at the ground. Penny sat next to him unsure of how to comfort him. “Jimmy, aren’t you going to go see Mr. White?”

“I can’t... I just... I can’t see him that way.” Jimmy’s voice was hoarse as he fought to compose himself, not wanting anyone to see him like this.

“Is there anything I can do?” Penny asked.

“No.” He shook his head. He was quiet for a moment before he found his voice again. “Perry... He’s always been like a father to me; my dad wasn’t... Well, let’s just say he wasn’t around much.”

Penny nodded. “I’m really sorry, Jimmy.” It unnerved her to see him so distraught. Could she be wrong? He sure didn’t look like Superman now...

“Excuse me, I’m looking for my daughter, Lois Lane,” Sam Lane stated as he approached a balding man that was seated at her desk. “Who are you?”

“Oh, Bernard Klein. I’m sure she and Clark will be back shortly. I’m waiting to speak with them as well.”

“Bernard Klein? Dr. Klein? You’re the one that’s specialized in the study of Superman; aren’t you?”

“Uh, yes.” Dr. Klein blushed modestly.

“I’m Dr. Sam Lane.” He held a hand out for Dr. Klein to shake.

“Pleased to meet you. It’s an honor. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Good things I hope.”

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Lois Lane?” A young man in his mid-twenties interrupted their exchange, carrying a large basket of flowers.

“Um, she isn’t here yet,” Dr. Klein responded.

“Could one of you just sign for these please?” The young boy obviously had several deliveries on his route and didn’t have time to wait.

“Certainly.” Dr. Klein signed the paper and gave the young man a smile as he left. He looked at the flowers. Strange. He’d never seen flowers with a green hue like that before. Maybe it was a new breed?

“Interesting breed,” Sam commented.

“Yes,” Dr. Klein muttered. The hue of the flowers was so familiar to him, but he just couldn’t place it...

“That’s the one. LexCorp just merged with them.”

“What?” Lois and Clark asked in unison.

“Cross Industries... I did some digging. Turns out they’ve only existed for about a few months.” Jimmy handed them a file. “I ran the companies they do business with to see what popped up. Guess what name came back from the dead... err... so to speak?”

“What?” Clark asked.

“Church.”

“Church? As in... Mindy Church?” Clark asked.

“As in Intergang?” Lois added.

“Yeah...” Jimmy nodded.

“Lois?” Sam Lane approached Lois as she and Clark made their way to her desk.

“Oh, yeah, Dr. Klein and your father want to see you,” Jimmy announced sheepishly.

“Daddy, what are you doing here?” Lois asked.

“I saw the news and wanted to make sure you were all right,” Sam said, giving her a hug.

“I’m fine,” she assured. Lois nodded, looking back up at Clark. “We’re fine.”

“You have to be careful. This on top of the preeclampsia isn’t good for you or the baby,” Sam warned.

“I know,” Lois stated softly. “I’m doing the breathing exercises...and...”

“Where did these come from?” Clark asked, gesturing to the basket of flowers on her desk.

“A courier brought them by earlier,” Dr. Klein replied. “They have a strange hue to them. I’ve never seen anything like it...”

Clark sniffed at the flowers. They did have a strange... almost glow to them. He felt a tickle in his nose. “Ah-choo!”

“Bless you, son. I guess you must have allergies, huh?” Sam asked.

“Uh, yeah.” Clark shook his head, unsure of what had just happened. He didn’t normally sneeze.

“Allergies?” Dr. Klein eyed Clark hesitantly.

Across town, an entire block of restaurants and businesses exploded. The cries for help echoed throughout the streets. “What a mess! We should clean up for Mr. Smith; don’t you think, Pookie?” Angela turned to the man standing beside her and winked at him.

Leslie smiled and lifted the handheld satellite and aimed it towards the burning buildings. A white beam shone across the entire block. What had been chaos a moment ago had now been replaced with a street filled with ashes.

“Let’s get out of here before the authorities show up. I wouldn’t want anyone to recognize me.”

“Of course, Ms. Cross,” Leslie responded with a smile.

Back at the Planet, Clark’s super-hearing picked up the explosion. He shot Lois a look and she nodded. “Clark, could you pick up some Chinese? I’m starving!” She patted her abdomen for emphasis.

“Right.” He headed towards the stairwell, disappearing a moment later into the sky. He zeroed in on the source of the explosion and was shocked to find the block covered in ashes. “What happened?”

“Superman!” Inspector Henderson motioned for him to approach him. “They’re all dead.”

“Who? What?”

“From what we’ve been able to gather; this entire block exploded – then a white beam disintegrated the burning buildings. One of the witnesses said there was a meeting concerning LexCorp and a possible union going on in here. I guess someone didn’t like that idea.” Henderson pulled out a burnt explosive device that looked pretty advanced. “We found this in the debris. It looks like some sort of radio controlled explosive device.”

Clark nodded in agreement as he looked at the device. He tried to use his enhanced vision to get a better look but was rewarded with a searing pain coursing through his head. He winced in pain.

Henderson looked at him in concern. “Are you okay, Superman?”

“I’m fine, Inspector, I just...” He fell to the ground with a thud.

“Oh, my God! Superman? Hey, get me someone from STAR Labs. We need help! Superman’s in trouble!” he yelled at the surrounding officers.

Lois took a seat at her desk, readjusting everything on her desk. Dr. Klein sat next to her and whispered, “Where did Clark go?”

“Superman,” she mouthed.

Dr. Klein’s eyes widened. “He sneezed...”

“I know,” she whispered.

Dr. Klein noticed Sam looking at them and continued a little louder. “Lois, the string of robberies that took place yesterday? The Kryptonite vault was broken into.”

Lois’ face fell. “What?”

“These flowers really are interesting. They almost have a glow to them.” Sam Lane took a sniff of the basket of flowers on Lois’ desk.

“Yes.” Lois stroked the petal of a leaf.

Dr. Klein’s eyebrows shot up in recognition. “LOIS, NO!! Don’t touch those!!!” He moved to push the flowers as far from her as possible.

“Dr. Klein? What are you doing??” Lois asked in confusion.

“**KRYPTONITE!** The flowers have been laced with Kryptonite. That’s why they’re glowing,” Dr. Klein explained.

“Oh, my God!” Lois couldn’t believe she had been so close to... She laid a protective hand over her abdomen.

Her phone rang at that moment. “Lois Lane,” she answered.

“Lois, it’s Bill. Listen, Superman’s in trouble.” Henderson’s voice echoed on the other end of the phone.

“What do you mean?”

“He came to the site of one of the explosions from earlier and I was showing him the explosive device we found... Lois, he just collapsed.”

“Oh, my God!”

“Lois??” He was speaking to dead air now.

“Hello, Pookie!” Ms. Cross approached Mr. Smith and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“I see you cleaned up after me. How kind of you,” Mr. Smith replied.

“Yes, you’ve been a naughty boy. Making a mess like that...” She pulled out a cigar and lit it as she spoke.

“Well, I can always count on you.” He lifted a glass of wine, signaling a toast. “To our partnership.”

“Yes.” She raised her own glass to toast as well. “To partnership.” Her gaze hardened as she got down to business. “Has the call been made?”

“The White House has been issued our demands.”

“Good.”

STAR Labs was a frenzy of activity. Superman was brought in on a gurney via trusted ambulatory workers that were friends of Inspector Henderson. “How long has he been unconscious?” Dr. Klein asked when he entered the lab.

“Approximately thirty minutes,” Inspector Henderson replied.

Dr. Klein cut open the front of the Superman shield, exposing his expansive chest to the surrounding staff. He concentrated on hooking Clark up to the various devices in his lab, checking his blood pressure, breathing, and heart rate. “This isn’t good,” he muttered, studying the readouts in front of him.

“Dr. Klein?” Lois’ voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Lois! No, you have to get out of here! You can’t—” He stopped himself short when he noticed Sam Lane standing behind her. He didn’t want to expose Clark’s secret to her father unless necessary. That wasn’t his decision to make. Lois and Clark had trusted him with this secret, and he would prove his trustworthiness.

“Lois, Superman has been exposed to Kryptonite – a **RADIOACTIVE** substance. *YOU* can’t be IN here.” He hoped his subtle message would be received. Lois had a knack for ignoring instructions, but he doubted she would risk the welfare of her unborn child.

“I just wanted to see how he is,” Lois managed, her voice cracking from the tears she was holding back.

“I don’t know yet, but please... just wait in my office?”

She obediently left the lab and headed towards Dr. Klein’s office. Sam followed behind in a short pursuit. “Lois, are you sure you want to be here? Where’s Clark? This can’t be good for your baby.”

“Daddy, I... I really just need some quiet right now,” she began in-between tears. “Please if you’re going to wait with me... just please don’t talk right now.”

Sam was about to argue, but the determination in her eyes made him reconsider. There was something more going on than what met the eye. “Okay.” He took a seat next to her and waited.

Leslie stepped off the elevator with a spring in his step. Everything was coming together without a hitch. Soon, he, Ms. Cross, and Luthor Jr. would be richer beyond their wildest dreams, and they could finally successfully execute Lex Luthor’s ultimate goal: World Conquest.

The voice of Franklin Stern interrupted his thoughts. “Well if it isn’t the new owner of the Daily Planet... Lex Luthor Jr. The rat that decided to crawl out from the sewer and finally make an appearance!” Stern stood a few inches away from Leslie and had a look of anger on his face.

“Franklin, pleasure to see you here.” Leslie held out his hand for the man to shake.

POW!

Leslie fell to the ground from the impact of Franklin Stern’s fist. “I warned you not to mess with the Daily Planet. You think you’re going to pull the wool over everyone’s eyes? Think again! You’ll be hearing from my lawyer!”

“Hey someone, call the police; Leslie’s bleeding!” Ralph called.

“Yes, call the police for your fallen owner to explain why he lied on official documents regarding his name! I’m not an expert or anything, but I think that makes our contract void,” Stern sneered.

“Wow!” Ralph watched in awe as Stern disappeared behind the elevator doors. “Talk about your bedside manner, huh?” He looked around for someone to laugh with him but found no willing participants.

“Lois?” Dr. Klein sat down next to Lois; he wrung his hands nervously, unable to voice his concerns.

“What is it, Dr. Klein? Please, tell me he’s going to be okay.”

“I don’t know what to do. I’ve tried sun lamps. I can’t extract the Kryptonite from his body because it’s still invulnerable; the kryptonite is just slowly eating away at him from the nasal passage down.”

“Nasal passage?” Sam asked, intrigued. “How did that happen?”

“He, uh, inhaled something coated with kryptonite,” Dr. Klein explained hesitantly.

“Uh-huh.” Sam was quiet a moment. “What is kryptonite? Is there anything that can counter react its effects?” Sam asked.

“Kryptonite is the nuclear core of Superman’s home planet, Krypton,” Dr. Klein explained. “It’s the only substance that can kill him. Well, the green variation can kill him. The red variation seems to have an alternate effect on him.”

“What do you mean?” Sam inquired.

“Well, the red affects him in various ways, such as mentally or emotionally. The last time he was exposed to it; his powers went out of whack...” Dr. Klein’s eyes lit up. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?” Lois asked, confused.

“Red kryptonite!” Dr. Klein exclaimed. “The green counter-reacted the red, a so why wouldn’t it work in reverse?”

“What?” Lois wasn’t sure she was following, “Are you suggesting we purposefully expose Superman to red kryptonite?”

“Sort of. I’m suggesting we create an inhalant, laced with red kryptonite. It’s the only guaranteed way to make sure all surfaces the green kryptonite has harmed will be covered by the red as well.”

“Hold on. I’m not going to let you just experiment like this, especially with kryptonite,” Lois argued.

“Lois, this is the only way I know of to fight this. The sun lamps aren’t working. He still hasn’t even woken up,” Dr. Klein admitted.

“What?” Lois asked.

“It is worth a shot, Lois,” Sam reasoned. “Do you need an extra hand?”

“I could use all the help I can get,” Dr. Klein acknowledged.

Lois paced around Dr. Klein’s office nervously. He and her father had left a few hours ago to begin creating their Red Kryptonite inhalant for Clark. She hated that they were resorting to using Kryptonite, but she also knew it was the best shot they had right now.

The office door opened and Sam stepped inside. “Lois, can we talk?” Sam asked, pulling up a chair next to her.

“I’m trying to avoid as much stress as I can right now, Daddy,” Lois remarked quietly.

“I know and I’m sorry for that, but Clark isn’t the reason I wanted to talk to you.”

Lois did a double take. “Clark?”

“It doesn’t take a rocket science to put two and two together,” Sam said tightly. “Did you really think I wouldn’t figure it out?”

“I don’t know,” Lois said softly. “How did you figure it out?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Sam narrowed his eyes at her. “Superman is attacked with kryptonite through the nose at the same time you are delivered kryptonite coated flowers? Do you really think I’m that stupid, Lois?”

“Daddy...”

“Are you okay?” Sam asked cautiously, placing a hesitant hand on her abdomen.

“I don’t know,” Lois confessed, shaking her head. “I don’t know what I am anymore.”

“Lois, this isn’t like a cold or flu. It’s not something you can just take a pill and be fine. You have to be careful.”

“I know that. Don’t you think I know that?” Lois asked, aghast.

“If you’re not careful you could...” Sam sighed. “You can’t just run into every scenario like you always do. You have to be more careful.”

“I am careful. I’m doing everything I can to keep this baby safe. You’re always pulling out the doctor card; aren’t you? Will you please just **BACK** off??”

“Back off? No, I’m not going to just back off,” Sam retorted angrily. “You have a serious condition, Lois; you could **DIE!**” Sam was near tears at this point as he tried to relay his feelings to her. “What good would your story or... or... awards... and accolades be then?? Hmm, won’t do your son or Clark any good either...”

Lois shot back vehemently, “I might take a few risks now and then, but I do not put my job over my family. I refuse to allow my job to dictate my life to the point where I’ve given up on my family.”

Sam’s face fell when her words hit home. “Lois, I never gave up on you.”

“No? You just, what? Took a vacation and never came back? Why? Why would you do something like that to me... to Lucy... to Mom?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said quietly, “I can’t explain my actions that well. Your mom and I got married young and we weren’t prepared for a family.” Lois just scoffed at him. “We weren’t expecting... complications.”

“Oh? Now, I’m a complication? Nice to know you think so much of me,” Lois snapped.

“Not you, Lois. The pregnancy.”

“What are you talking about?” Lois asked.

“Lois I’ve already watched one woman I love go through preeclampsia at its worst. I am not going to watch my daughter go through the same thing if I can help it. You have got to listen to me!” Lois glanced at him curiously, unable to speak. “Your mother had preeclampsia during your pregnancy. It nearly killed her.”

“What? Why didn’t either of you tell me?”

“We didn’t want to burden you. Lois, I know you’re a grown woman, and you can make your own choices, but understand where I’m coming from. We drifted apart after you graduated high school; we’re just now starting to reconnect. I know it sounds selfish, but I don’t want to lose you.” The tears rapidly fell down his cheeks. He didn’t even bother to wipe them away. “Every time I hear another news story about a close call you’re involved in, I remember how close I came to losing your mother. If something happened to you, I don’t think I could survive it.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Lois murmured softly.

“You don’t have to say anything. I just want you to know where I’m coming from. Please don’t shut me out.”

Dr. Klein poked his head into the office. “Lois, he’s waking up!”

Penny stared in horror at the screen. The newscaster narrated through the scenes of Superman collapsing on the ground and officers and medical teams surrounding him. “The scene before you is shocking. Superman collapsed at the scene of the destruction of the lower half of downtown Metropolis where LexCorp union leaders were meeting to bring about a union in LexCorp. This dream seems to have died a tragic end. The condition of the Man of Steel is still unknown.”

“Where’s Jimmy?” Penny looked around the newsroom but couldn’t find him. She spotted Ralph, one of Jimmy’s co-workers. “Excuse me. Have you seen Jimmy?”

“Yeah, he’s taking a leak.” Ralph pointed towards the men’s room.

“Are you sure?” Penny asked. A feeling of instant relief overwhelmed her. He was okay! Jimmy stepped back into the newsroom, and Penny engulfed him in a huge hug. “Jimmy, thank God you’re all right.”

“Penny, what’s wrong?” Jimmy asked, confused.

“I don’t know. She started freaking out when they showed that footage of Superman collapsing earlier,” Ralph replied, taking a bite from an apple as he spoke.

“What?” Jimmy’s face went pale. “Superman collapsed?”

“Jimmy, you okay? You don’t look so good...” Ralph noticed Jimmy’s face was turning white, and he seemed to be having trouble balancing.

“Jimmy, I was so relieved,” Penny cried.

Jimmy sighed. “Penny, I’ve told you a million times. I’m NOT Superman.”

“I know. I guess it was just. I don’t know what it was. I saw

those images and it scared me,” she replied sheepishly.

“Ralph, where’s Lois and CK??”

“Don’t know. They left out of here in a hurry with that doctor and her father, though,” Ralph remarked.

“Hey, check it out!” a voice called from across the newsroom.

“Turn that up!” another voice demanded.

The image on the television showed President Garner, surrounded by his Secret Service detail. “It has come to this office’s attention that a threat has been made against the safety of both this country and the planet. A threat was issued this morning demanding payment of one-hundred billion dollars and the transfer of power over to Lex Luthor Jr. I’m here to assure the American people as well as our allies that we are not giving into these terroristic threats. We are doing everything in our power to assure the safety of everyone.”

“Oh, my God!” Jimmy wasn’t sure what to think of this newest development.

“How exactly do your friends get a hold of Superman?” Penny asked apprehensively.

“Clark, you can’t,” Lois pleaded.

Clark ignored her pleas and turned to Dr. Klein. “Dr. Klein, that explosive device that Henderson gave you. Were you able to make any sense out of it?”

“I was able to trace the source of the signal,” Dr. Klein began hesitantly.

“Great.” Clark stood – ready for action. “Where is it?”

“I have to say something, Clark, as your friend. I don’t think you should be doing this. I have to agree with Lois. You’re still recovering from your exposure to that kryptonite...”

“Dr. Klein, where is it?” Clark asked a bit more forcefully.

“Clark...” Lois begged.

“I have to stop him, Lois,” he explained. “Dr. Klein?”

“Under the Daily Planet. The abandoned subway...”

“Isn’t that the same place where Luthor died?” Clark asked.

“The same,” Dr. Klein confirmed.

“Clark, don’t,” Lois urged. “He already attacked you with kryptonite once; what’s going to stop him from doing it again?”

“Lois, I have to. You know I have to.” He kissed her, silencing any more protests. “I’ll be back.” Before she could voice any more concerns, he was gone.

Lois’ eyes narrowed, and she headed towards the exit. “Lois, where are you going?” Dr. Klein asked when she brushed past him.

“I need to help Clark. He can’t do this himself.” With that, she left a concerned Dr. Klein in her wake. He picked up the phone and dialed. “Yes, get me Metropolis P.D.,” he demanded.

“I’m not exactly sure what you want me to do here,”

Henderson admitted as he watched Lois pace in front of his desk.

“Superman went to the abandoned subway tunnel where Lex died to find the person responsible for the explosions earlier. I **NEED** you to go down there and help him. He’s still really weak,” Lois clarified.

Henderson looked at her with a dubious expression. “I know that. Dr. Klein already called me. What I’m trying to figure out is why you actually came to ME? You didn’t decide to go chasing after him and throw yourself in danger like you usually do...”

Lois narrowed her eyes. “I can’t.”

Henderson smiled. “I’ll get a team together. You,” he began, pointing at her with his finger, “stay out of trouble. Don’t worry I’ll tell you everything once we catch the guy.”

Lois nodded. “Thank you.”

Henderson patted her on the shoulder. “I’m proud of you. I know sitting on the sidelines isn’t easy. Keep your cell phone on,” he hollered as he left the office to organize a team of officers.

Lois sighed in relief. It was true. This was hard for her to do.

Knowing Clark was in danger and there was nothing she could do to help him was driving her insane, but she had to do what was best for her son. She would do everything she could to protect him. She glanced around the station, noticing Henderson's team suiting up in their SWAT gear. There wasn't much else she could do here. She decided to head back to the Planet and wait to hear from Henderson. Maybe digging into some research would help distract her.

"Be careful," she shouted over her shoulder as she left. Henderson nodded and turned back to his team.

Lois raced down the steps to the Metropolis P.D. and headed to her Jeep. As she reached for her keys from her purse, she felt a slight pain in her right side and winced. She began to practice the breathing exercises her doctor had taught her. A hard metal object pressed itself against her temple. She whimpered in pain.

"Shhh... Don't even breathe the word Superman, or you're dead."

Her eyes widened as a hand grabbed her by the throat and pushed her against the Jeep. She glanced at the police station that she'd just left, cursing her luck. She couldn't see any officers leaving. Lois winced as she felt another pain shoot through her abdomen.

Clark zeroed in on the familiar subway tunnels below the Daily Planet. The area was lead lined, so he was going to have a hard time finding Lex Luthor Jr. Although, since he was following in his father's footsteps, maybe his best bet would be to examine the area Luthor had died in. He flew down and landed in the abandoned subway where he and Luthor had fought so long ago. He still remembered the strength of Lex's hate for him, which was proven by his willingness to kill himself to make sure Superman died. He turned the corner and came face to face with a troll-like man dressed in black.

"Superman! This is a surprise. Last I heard you were having breathing problems," Mr. Smith remarked slyly.

"You sick, disgusting sociopath..." Clark took a few cautious steps towards the man. "It was you!"

"Yes. You thought maybe it was someone else?" Mr. Smith smiled humorlessly. "Maybe Lex Luthor Jr? What if it was?"

"What are you talking about?"

"He's a very good actor. He should get an Oscar for his performance," Smith remarked as he approached Clark. "Wouldn't you agree, Clark?" Clark was unable to hide his surprise at the man's knowledge of his alter ego. "Don't act so shocked, Clark. WE know all about you. Daddy made sure he left that information for me."

"Daddy?" Clark was even more confused.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You know him as Luthor... Lex Luthor. He paused before simply stating, "My father."

"You tried to kill my wife and child." Clark crossed his arms against his chest in the infamous Superman pose that many criminals had come to know.

"Yes, it's a pity you took the bait before she did. It would have been much more delightful to watch you suffer through a life without her than to just kill you."

"You sick son of a..." Clark reached towards Luthor to grab him, but Luthor moved out of his grasp at the last minute.

Luthor smiled. "Ah, ah, ah," he scolded. "Temper... temper, Clark. Yes, that wouldn't be a good example for the baby. Your child will suffer the same fate I suffered. To live a life as an orphan, raised in seclusion..."

"You stay the hell away from my family!" Clark warned.

"Or what? You and Lois Lane killed my only family. Now, it's time you both feel what that's like."

"Yes, look what I found." Leslie appeared from behind one of the pillars, holding Lois against him with a gun to her temple.

"Lois!" Clark's face went pale as his wife stiffened within

Leslie's clutches.

"Ah, yes, intrepid reporter Lois Lane... always finding herself in danger." Clark moved to approach Leslie and Lois; however, a searing pain coursed throughout his body, stopping him. Only one thing could cause this kind of pain... Kryptonite. "Not so fast, Clark. We're just getting started."

"Clark!" Lois shrieked as he slumped to the ground. She watched in horror as Luthor pulled a chunk of kryptonite out of a lead lined box and set it down just out of Clark's reach.

Leslie tightened his grasp on Lois' arms. She winced in pain. "What's wrong, Lois? Too much green in the room?"

Lois struggled to control her emotions. The pain began to course throughout her body. She felt like her body was on fire. The baby... She couldn't let something happen to the baby. "No, please, the baby," she pleaded when Leslie brought her closer to the kryptonite's radiation.

Leslie smiled. "Yes, the baby," he mocked.

"Yes, you haven't done a very good job of staying out of trouble for your baby's sake; have you, Lois? The stress of new management, a big investigation into missing CEOs, and Kryptonite aren't good for the baby, are they?"

"Get... away... from... her," Clark hoarsely ordered between ragged breaths.

"You're not giving out on me yet; are you, Clark?" Luthor leaned towards Clark so that he was inches away from him. "Because I want to make sure you remember this for the rest of your life. The death of your wife and child." He stood up and walked towards Lois, forcefully grabbing Lois by the arm and taking the gun from Leslie. "You could have been my mother... pity."

"Go to hell!" she spat.

Leslie took the opportunity to approach Clark who was obviously having difficulty breathing and remaining conscious. "Not so tough now, are you, Clark? How does it feel to know your family is going to die right before your eyes, and there's nothing you can do to stop it?" He was a few inches away from Clark, enjoying the game he and Luthor were playing. "Perhaps, we should torture her a bit, hmmm? Kill the child with the kryptonite and then put her out of her misery after she watches her baby die, hmmm?"

Kill her baby? What was wrong with these people? Why were they so bent on seeking revenge for Lex's death? Didn't they know he had done this to himself? He had destroyed that pillar; then he had shot Clark while he had strived to hold it up...

She struggled in Luthor's grasp as he pushed her towards the Kryptonite. "A perfect plan. I'm ashamed I didn't think of it first." Luthor's menacing tone echoed through her mind. She had to act fast. The pain... It was so much. Why hadn't Clark told her how much it burned?

She studied her surroundings. Nothing. Luthor was standing over her. Leslie was over by Clark, taunting him. The kryptonite lay in the middle of the room. The smell of the sewers reached her nostrils, causing her to blanch.

Wait a minute, sewers? She was near the sewer line. She looked around and sure enough – the underground storm drain for the city's water system was a few feet behind Luthor and Luckabee. Maybe she could just push one of them over and get the kryptonite away from Clark?

"Here goes *nothing*," she thought to herself before giving Luthor one swift kick...

Clark's eyes narrowed as Luckabee's words began to sink in. They wanted to kill his child and Lois. They wanted to torture her. They knew how everything they had planned would affect their baby...

He pushed through all the pain coursing through him and tackled Leslie to the ground. He heard a shot ring-out but was too focused on keeping Leslie within his grasp to pay it any attention. He heard a splash from behind him and felt the absence of the kryptonite. He continued to wrestle with Leslie, valiantly trying to subdue the man...

Luthor bowed over in pain when Lois kicked him. She gave him no time to react. Using her martial arts' skills, she delivered several blows to his abdomen and knee caps. She had never been in so much pain in her life, but she had to keep fighting. For the baby... for Clark...

Luthor aimed his gun at her; she rolled out of its aim at the last moment. She took advantage of his distraction with the weapon to deliver one more blow to his side, causing him to fall into the water behind him. The kryptonite remained in the middle of the room. She inched her way toward it and kicked it as hard as she could. She sighed with relief when she heard the small splash of the kryptonite falling into the water.

She was numb from the pain...

Leslie raised his arm to strike a blow against Clark's face. He was met with a piercing pain as his fist contacted the Man of Steel's dense molecular structure. Clark smiled to himself. His powers were returning. He gave a small push to Leslie and watched him tumble into the water.

"Help! I can't swim!" Luthor cried.

Clark approached him apprehensively. The man had just tried to kill him. Did he want to risk another attack by trying to save him? He silently cursed himself. No matter what evil this man had done, he couldn't with good conscience allow him to drown. He reached out to pull Luthor up and was met by a blow to the head. Kryptonite...

Clark fell to the ground in pain. Luthor rose from the water and hovered over him. "Do you really think you're going to get rid of me that easy?" He aimed his gun at Clark's head. "Say goodbye, Superman!"

A shot echoed throughout the room and darkness overtook Clark. Lois was his last thought before he lost consciousness...

'Clark...' Lois' mind cried out to him. She had to wake up, but it hurt so bad. The pain was excruciating. Was kryptonite still in the room? She tried to focus on the sounds around her.

Leslie's voice penetrated her thoughts. "He's not moving? Do you still want to shoot him?"

"I still have to take care of one last loose end," Luthor's menacing voice insisted. She turned to see Luthor pointing the barrel of the gun at Leslie.

Leslie backed away from him. "What are you doing?"

"Never underestimate the need to tie up loose ends – Daddy always said." He fired his weapon, and Leslie's body fell into the murky water. Lois watched Luthor kneel and aim the gun at Clark's motionless body. 'No!' her mind cried. She struggled to move, but her body felt like lead plates. The pain was excruciating.

Clark... She had to get to Clark. A gun shot fired and she cried out in pain. "No!" her voice screamed hoarsely, the words escaping her lips in a mere whisper.

Inspector Henderson watched in horror as Luthor struck the Man of Steel with a large glowing rock. Superman fell to the ground; blood was everywhere. He couldn't help but get a sense of déjà vu from when Randy Goode had attacked Lois and Clark with Kryptonite as well. That's when he began to put the pieces together. Clark was hurt, and Superman was missing. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out.

He continued to watch the scene unfold before his eyes. Leslie

had crawled out of the water as well and stood behind Luthor who held the gun's barrel to Clark's temple. He had the perfect shot. All he had to do was raise his gun and shoot. He hadn't fired his weapon in over five years. He just hoped he would be able to save Clark.

He prepared to line up his shot when Luthor turned to shoot Leslie. Leslie fell backwards into the water. Luthor then turned to the motionless body of the Man of Steel and cocked the trigger. It was now or never. He lined up his shot and fired twice. Luthor fell to the ground. He moved towards the scene. "Henderson? Are you all clear?" his radio squawked.

"Yeah, we're all clear. The suspects are down, but we're going to need a medic." Henderson approached the motionless body of Superman and gasped at the sight before him. There was blood everywhere. The floor was covered with it. He knelt next to Clark and rolled him over to get a better look at the wound.

"Superman?" There was no response. He surveyed the scene around him and spotted the menacing green glow coming from a rock in the middle of the room. He got up and hesitantly approached the meteorite. He sighed in relief when he felt no adverse effects from holding it.

He heard a soft moan from across the room. He looked towards the source and found Lois wincing in pain as she struggled to a sitting position. Kryptonite. The baby... He had to get this away from her and Clark, but how? He scanned the room and found a small metal box by one of the computer screens. He deposited the rock inside the box and slammed the lid closed.

"Clark?" Lois' voice penetrated through the silence in the room. He studied her and realized that she was still lying on her back, striving to raise her weak body off the ground.

"Lois, don't move... Help is on its way," he responded, approaching her slowly.

"Bill?" she rasped questionably.

"You're going to be fine," he reassured her.

"My baby," she cried.

"Please don't move." He pleaded, kneeling next to her. He lay a hesitant hand on her abdomen – a gesture of reassurance. He was a bit taken aback to see tears in her eyes. Lois Lane had always seemed invincible to him. She had never shown emotion.

"I want... my... husband," she rasped between tears. "I... want... Clark."

"I know." He stood and walked away from her, continuing to survey the scene. He knelt next to Clark and noticed the wound he had seen on him earlier was rapidly healing itself. He sighed in relief. He was going to be okay. A moment later the room was filled with chaos as police and ambulatory workers swarmed through the scene. He stood on the sidelines as he watched the EMTs tend to the two people he had come to know as friends. Unnoticed to anyone else, he slipped the small metal box in his pocket as he left the scene.

"Where is Smith?" Angela spat as she dialed the number once more. "So much for a partnership – he can't even hold his end of the bargain when the President won't cooperate."

"Do you want me to pay him a visit, Ms. Cross?" one of her goons asked.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, "I want you to launch the satellite and blow the President of the United States out of the water! Nobody and I mean, NOBODY rejects me!"

"You got it." He left to attend to his business.

Bill Henderson hesitantly entered the Daily Planet. He scarcely came into this building. The last time he had been here was when Lex Luthor Sr. had destroyed it. Police weren't supposed to work with the press, but he had found Lois and Clark to be an exception to the rule. He spotted Jimmy Olsen sitting at his desk with a young blonde. He approached them hesitantly.

“Jimmy?”

“Inspector Henderson? What are you doing here?” Jimmy asked, standing up to greet the man.

“I – I have some news.” His face was grim.

“What’s wrong? Why do you got that face?”

“What face?”

“That face that cops get whenever they’re about to break some horrible news,” Jimmy shot back. “Oh, God... it’s bad, isn’t it? You never come in here.”

“Jimmy, something happened earlier... to Superman... and Lois.”

“What?” Jimmy’s face went pale as Henderson continued to relay the events that had transpired earlier.

“Superman was exposed to a lethal substance.” He wasn’t sure how much this young man knew about Kryptonite, but he didn’t want to divulge too much information with his girlfriend sitting right next to him. “He’s going to be okay, but he’s still unconscious.”

“What happened to Lois? She’s okay, right? The baby? She and the baby are okay? You know she had this high-risk pregnancy... It’s lethal? Oh, God... please don’t tell me. She’s not dead, right?” His desperate expression pleaded with Henderson as tears fell from his eyes. He looked around the room in a panic. “Where’s CK?”

“He’s at the hospital with Lois,” Henderson replied hesitantly. He still wasn’t sure how much Jimmy knew about Lois and Clark.

“What happened?”

“Luthor. When the newscast had broadcast about the ransom and transfer of power, Superman went looking for him, knowing he was behind it. Lois came and found me to help then got herself kidnapped.”

“What? Why can’t she stay out of trouble?”

“Jimmy, she did the best she could, but you and I both know it doesn’t matter how good her intentions are. She’s a magnet for trouble. She said she was worried about Superman going after Luthor right after an attack from...” He trailed off, unsure of Jimmy’s knowledge of kryptonite once more. Jimmy nodded and he continued, “Anyway, after I got my team together I got a bit lost in those subway tunnels. So, when I finally caught up to where Superman was Leslie had grabbed Lois and was...” He paused, unable to finish. “I’m sorry. I’m trying. I really am; it’s just really hard.”

Jimmy nodded and grabbed his coat. “Why don’t we go for a walk, Inspector?” He turned to Penny. “Can you stay here for me? Take a message if anyone calls? Let me know what comes back on that research into Cross Industries?”

“Sure,” Penny agreed, nodding.

Jimmy left with Henderson, and they made their way toward the hospital. “Bill, how much do you know about CK?” he asked.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“I know a lot of things that people don’t realize I know,” he began. “I kinda feel like I’m invisible sometimes. I hear things I’m not supposed to hear, and I see things I’m not supposed to see. I know CK has a lot of talents that keep him pretty busy. Do you?” The question was subtle and to the point, but evasive enough to not give away any information if Henderson was out of the loop.

“How long have you known?” He smirked at the young man.

“Since that news story came out claiming CK was Superman. I know Lois and CK have dabbled in time travel and alternate dimensions. I did my own research on Tempus when everything went down. CK looks exactly like Superman.” Jimmy raked a hand through his hair as he spoke. His apprehension of discussing this topic was evident.

“Do they know you know?” he asked.

“No,” Jimmy replied coldly. “And you’re not going to tell them either. It’s safer this way. I pretend to be clueless, and no one

realizes I’m Superman’s best friend. It’s a win-win situation.”

“Don’t you think you should tell them, though?”

“They’re not ready to tell me,” Jimmy replied flatly. “CK is one of my best friends. I don’t want to push him or Lois away by bringing this up before they’re ready.” Jimmy sighed then turned to face Henderson. “Now, what happened in the subway station?”

“You don’t give up, do you?”

“I was trained by the best.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Henderson sighed. “Like I said, Leslie had kidnapped Lois and was taunting Superman. They had... Kryptonite,” he whispered. “They were threatening to kill the baby then kill Lois in front of him... as revenge for Lex Luthor’s death.”

“What?” Jimmy demanded, outraged. “Where the hell is that son of a... I’ll kill him myself,” he muttered bitterly.

“Clark fought them with everything he had. Even with the kryptonite right there, it was evident he was in pain, but his good nature got the better of him. Luthor pretended to be drowning...”

“Oh, no.” Jimmy shook his head.

“And he tried to help him up. He was met with a blow to the head... with a chunk of Kryptonite. Luthor then turned the gun on Leslie and shot him. He’s dead. I ended up shooting Luthor before he could shoot Clark. The kryptonite is back at STAR Labs now. They said exposure to sunlight should help Clark heal. Dr. Klein is with him right now.”

“What about Lois?”

“She’s in ICU,” Henderson replied remorsefully. “I figured since her husband couldn’t be here; it might help to have a friendly face with her.”

“Yeah.” Jimmy pushed open the doors to the hospital entrance. “I hate hospitals. I couldn’t even visit Perry when he had his heart attack, because I couldn’t see him like that, but I’ll deal with it. Like I said, CK’s my best friend; I’d do anything for him.”

“What is all of this?” Detective Wolf studied the data that they had retrieved from Luthor’s hideout. There were plans for creating a super-powered robot, along with a satellite weapon of some sort that had been converted to a handheld form. He wasn’t sure what all this meant, but he was certain Inspector Henderson would be interested in this.

“Ms. Cross? There’s police all over the place. What do you want me to do?” the goon asked over the phone, hesitantly.

“Get back over here! I need to get out of town before anyone begins to put the pieces together,” she replied. She hung up the phone and headed towards her office; she had to pack.

“Lois? **NO! LOIS!**” Clark cried, sitting upright with a jolt. He looked around the room; it was familiar but not. He looked down at himself and found he had been stripped to a hospital gown; a monitor stood next to his bed, beeping. He felt his face for his glasses and found none. He wasn’t sure, but it looked like he was in a hospital of some sort. The question was: was he here as Clark or Superman?

“Clark?” Dr. Klein’s voice penetrated his thoughts. “Clark, how are you feeling?”

He sighed with relief, immediately recognizing Dr. Klein as he entered the room. “Where’s Lois?” he asked.

“She’s at the hospital,” Dr. Klein began.

“What?” He climbed off the bed and stood shakily. The monitors began beeping in protest, but he ignored the sound. Instead, he removed the monitor tags one by one.

“Whoa!” Dr. Klein pushed him back on the bed. “Not so fast!”

“Dr. Klein, I have to see Lois,” he argued, standing up once more. This time, however, his action was met with a slight case of dizziness.

“Clark, you’ve just had two very close calls with kryptonite

back to back; you need to rest.”

Clark paced around the room, searching for his clothes. “I need to get out of here; I need to see Lois. The baby? Is the baby okay? Why is she in the hospital?”

“Clark, please, can’t you just rest for a minute? You’ve been unconscious for hours!”

“Dr. Klein, I need to see Lois now! I don’t care how long I’ve been unconscious, or how many times I’ve been exposed to kryptonite. Please, I need to see my wife. I need to make sure she’s okay,” he pleaded.

Dr. Klein saw the intensity behind Clark’s gaze and relented. He knew no one would be able to keep him from leaving. In times like this, he realized that Superman was often more stubborn than Lois Lane. “Fine, but no flying. I’ll drive,” he insisted, sighing.

“I never thought I’d see this day: Perry White confined to a hospital bed. This is why you need to watch your stress level, old man,” Franklin Stern joked, entering Perry’s room.

Perry laughed, happy to see his old friend. “Who are you calling an old man?”

“The ugly guy sitting on the hospital bed.” Mr. Stern smiled, letting Perry know he was just kidding.

“You’re no prize yourself,” Perry retorted.

“How are you doing?” He was concerned for Perry’s health. Over the years, he and Perry had become good friends; he didn’t want to lose that.

“I’m good. I’d be even better if I could get out of this darn hospital bed.” Perry winked at Mr. Stern. “It gives me an excuse not to deal with Luthor though.”

“Oh, you won’t be dealing with him anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Perry asked curiously.

“He lied on those contracts when he purchased the Planet. That makes the contract void. I’m still the owner.” Mr. Stern couldn’t hide the grin on his face. He looked like the cat that had just swallowed the canary.

“You mean...”

“I’m still the owner of the Planet. I was so mad when I found out Luthor had tricked me. I decked him one!”

Perry laughed. “You didn’t!”

“Afraid so...” He rubbed his knuckles gently, recalling the incident.

“Oh, man, I would have paid money to see that!” Perry teased, chuckling.

“See what?” Alice asked, entering the room with two cups of coffee.

“Hello, Alice, how are you?” Franklin asked.

“I’m doing well,” Alice acknowledged. She looked at Mr. Stern apprehensively. She hoped he wasn’t going to try and drag Perry back to work.

“I wanted to talk to you about something, Perry,” Mr. Stern began. He glanced warily between Alice and Perry. It had saddened him to hear of their separation. He hoped this idea would help make things easier between the two of them. “I’m hiring an assistant editor.”

“WHAT?!” Perry exclaimed in outrage.

“Hear me out.”

“Oh, no... The last time someone tried to make me share my job was when Lex Luthor hired that featherbrained, snot-nosed, pimply-faced, under-aged cow, Chip! I don’t need help. I’m doing just fine running the bullpen how it is.”

“Really? You could have fooled me!” Mr. Stern retorted.

“Perry, you’re not a young man anymore. You can’t keep working these kinds of hours without it taking a toll on you. You got lucky this time. I’m cutting your load a bit. I know it’ll be hard, but it’ll be worth it.” He nodded towards Alice. “Besides, this way you can find other ways to fill your time that are more... fulfilling. We’ll talk about this later.” Before Perry could protest further, he was

gone.

Perry scowled after the man. He knew Franklin Stern was right, but he wasn’t sure if he was ready to let go. He had lived and breathed the Daily Planet for so long; it was like second nature to pull an all-nighter. He didn’t know if he could work regular hours and handle a lighter load.

“I think you should do it,” Alice insisted, interrupting his thoughts.

“What?”

“I think you should take on an assistant editor, Perry.” At his dubious look, she continued. “You just had a heart attack. You’re not going to be able to do everything you used to do. You’re going to need help.”

Perry was quiet a moment; then he nodded. “I know. I just don’t know how I’m going to adjust.”

“Well, maybe I can help.” Alice smiled at him warmly.

Perry returned the smile. “I don’t know. It might be a full-time job.”

“We’ll take it a day at a time,” Alice promised.

“Jimmy?” Penny knocked lightly on the STAR labs door. Lois was sleeping on the bed motionless. The only sound in the room was the monotonous beeping of the many monitors attached to Lois.

Jimmy looked up, slightly dazed. “Hi, Penny,” he croaked. He smiled lightly at her.

“I thought you could use some company,” Penny said as she took a seat next to him.

Jimmy smiled. “I’m fine. I’m just worried about everyone,” Jimmy admitted.

“No change?”

“Nah. The doctors said... the exposure to the kryptonite could affect the baby. It’s not good to be exposed to radioactive substances when you’re pregnant. That along with the abdominal pains... They’re keeping her under observation to be safe.”

“She’s a really good friend of yours, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, Lois has always been a good friend of mine. Everyone always saw me as this big nobody, but she took me under her wing and taught me everything she knew... her and CK both.”

Penny flinched at his bitter tone as he called himself a nobody. He had used the same tone the night that she had confronted him about his supposed alter ego. “Jimmy, I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Just everything... I was too busy chasing some fantasy to realize what was right in front of me. I called you a schmo.” She noticed Jimmy wince at that description. “I’m so sorry.”

Jimmy put an arm around her and smiled. “I know.”

“Does that mean you forgive me?” Penny asked with pleading eyes.

Jimmy opened his mouth to speak, but he cut himself short when he saw Clark enter the room. He looked nothing like the Clark Kent he knew. He wore an untucked gray dress shirt, faded blue jeans, and a leather jacket. His forehead still had a shadow of a bruise from his earlier fight with Luthor Jr. and Leslie. “CK!!!” He jumped up and fiercely hugged his friend. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you. What happened to your head?”

“Uh, it’s nothing.” Clark gently returned his embrace. “It’s good to see you too, Jimmy.” He broke free of the young man’s embrace and moved toward the unconscious figure of his wife. “How is she?”

Jimmy watched as Clark took a seat next to Lois’ bed. Clark held Lois’ hand as he kissed her forehead. “She’s been unconscious since I got here. The doctor said they think her body is trying to over compensate for the trauma she’s been through. They’re surprised she didn’t have a seizure from all the stress,” Jimmy finished quietly. He knew that was the last thing Clark wanted to hear right now, but he knew Clark appreciated complete

honesty.

“What about the baby?” Clark asked in concern, gently pushing a strand of hair out of Lois’ eyes.

“Everything seems to be normal, but it’s too soon to tell,” Jimmy explained remorsefully.

“Thank you for being here, Jimmy.”

“No problem.” He gently patted Clark on the shoulder. “Hey, you guys will pull through this. You always do.”

“I hope so.”

Jimmy’s phone vibrated and he turned to read it. “It’s the office. CK, I’ll be back later. I’ve got to get back to the Planet.”

“Sure,” Clark agreed, nodding.

“Keep me posted. Let me know if you need anything?”

“I will; thanks, Jimmy.” Clark nodded as Jimmy and Penny left. He sighed with relief once he finally found himself alone with Lois. “I almost lost you,” he whispered hoarsely, holding back tears. “I can’t believe I almost lost everything.”

“What’s the big emergency, Wolf?” Henderson asked, approaching the detective’s desk.

“This.” Detective Wolf retrieved the files that he had found in Luthor’s hideout. “Everything from this Pulse Converter to Vixen is all here.”

“So, Luthor was behind this the whole time?” Henderson mused. “Doesn’t surprise me.”

“There’s more.” Wolf pulled out a contract.

“What?”

“Cross Industries was footing the bill for most of this stuff.”

“Who runs Cross Industries?” Henderson asked, confused.

“Jimmy! I’ve been paging and texting you for over an hour!” Brian exclaimed as Jimmy and Penny stepped off the elevator.

“I can only move so fast, Brian. What’s up?” Jimmy asked.

“Here’s that research you wanted on Cross Industries.” Brian shoved the box of files in Jimmy’s direction. “Have fun.”

Clark lay on the bed with Lois, holding her close to him. “I love you so much,” he whispered, kissing her lightly. He hadn’t been able to sleep after he had woken up. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Luthor and Leslie with the kryptonite. It had unnerved him; the lengths at which they had been willing to go to seek revenge for Lex Luthor’s death.

His family had nearly been destroyed tonight. If it hadn’t been for Inspector Henderson, both he and Lois could have easily been killed. He lightly stroked the small bump on her abdomen – the home enabling their child to grow. He had dreamed of this for many nights, having a family of his own... a child of his own. In one split second, he had nearly lost all everything. He couldn’t understand why Lois had followed him into the subway tunnels. If she had just stayed out of danger...

“Cla...” The whisper that escaped her lips was barely audible for him to hear.

“Lois?” He turned to face her, gently stroking her cheek as he did so. “Lois, honey?”

“Clark,” she whispered hoarsely, slightly louder than the last time.

He saw her eyelashes flutter as she opened her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. “Lois...” He pulled her closer to him. “I was so afraid...”

“You’re hurt.” She reached up to touch the light bruise on his forehead that remained after his encounter with the kryptonite.

“It’s nothing...” Clark shrugged it off, leaning in to capture her mouth. She smiled against his mouth. He slowly broke off the kiss, reveling in the fact that she was okay. They were both going to be okay.

“What happened?” Lois asked. “The last thing I remember was Bill telling me not to move.”

“Yeah, he saved both of our lives,” Clark mused.

“I still can’t believe you went after Luthor right after being exposed to kryptonite like that,” Lois scolded.

“Me? I can’t believe you followed me down there like that,” Clark retorted.

Lois smacked him lightly on the chest. “*I didn’t!* I went to Henderson to go help you then got grabbed when I was getting into my Jeep.”

Clark lowered his head and stroked her cheek. “They nearly killed you.”

“Clark, I’m *fine*.” She reached up to caress his cheek.

“Lois...” She had scared him. That much was evident in the look he gave her.

Lois tried to change the subject once more. “What about the baby? Is the baby okay?”

Clark sighed. “The doctors told Jimmy everything looked normal, but it was too soon to tell.”

“Jimmy?” Lois asked in confusion.

“He was sitting with you until I was able to make it down here. Dr. Klein said I had been unconscious for a couple hours,” Clark explained, averting her gaze. “I’m fine,” he reassured, unconvincingly. “I was so worried about you. Are you sure you’re okay? Can I get you anything?”

“Clark, I’m fine, really.” She passionately kissed him, knowing that words wouldn’t get through to him right now.

He groaned in approval when he felt her tongue lightly trace the outline of his lips. “Mmmm,” he moaned as she dipped her tongue inside his mouth. He moved to pull her closer to him. “I love you,” he whispered before recapturing her mouth. She moaned her approval, reveling in the feeling of being in his arms once more.

“This is insane,” Jimmy muttered to himself. They had been so close to exposing Intergang so many times in the past, but now they had the proof. The financial reports of Cross Industries intersected with Cost Mart, Caribbean Imports, and LexCorp. All the pieces were coming together. He picked up the phone on his desk and dialed Inspector Henderson. Mindy Church was going to see justice this time if he had anything to say about it.

“Alice, are you sure?” Perry asked, his voice deepening with concern.

“I’m positive.” Alice evaded his gaze slightly; then, releasing a shallow breath, she met his eyes with her own. “We’re only given one life, so why waste it being miserable.” She smiled at him through her tears. It had taken a long time for her to realize what she wanted. Now that she knew she wasn’t about to let Perry walk out of her life again. She wanted to make this work. She had to. She’d be miserable otherwise, and she had a feeling he would be too. Didn’t they owe it to themselves to try and be happy?

“Let me get this straight,” Bill Henderson began, eyeing Jimmy Olsen critically from across his desk. “You want me to take a team of officers down to the abandoned air strip and stake this place out for an undetermined amount of time, because you THINK Angela Cross is Mindy Church – the head of Intergang? Does that about sum it up?”

“Well, Bill, when you put it that way it does sound a bit far-fetched,” Jimmy admitted.

“A little?” Henderson snorted. He leaned back in his chair as he contemplated the idea Jimmy had just presented to him. “What you’re asking me to do is against all regulations. You don’t have any hard evidence.”

“But everything we have on Intergang matches up with Cross Industries perfectly,” Jimmy argued.

“Circumstantial,” Henderson countered.

“Can’t you just trust me on this, Inspector?” Jimmy pleaded.

Henderson searched the young man's pleading eyes. He knew there was a 50-50 chance this hunch could pan out. Was he willing to take the risk?

The silence in the room haunted Sam Lane. Several scenarios of the what-ifs ran throughout his mind. "You okay?" Dr. Klein asked, breaking Sam from his reverie, while handing him a cup of coffee. "Here. You looked like you could use this."

"Thank you," Sam replied, gratefully taking the cup. Dr. Klein once more broke the silence.

"Clark's had several bouts with kryptonite in the last few months. Lois has been exposed too. I just hope they can stay out of danger long enough for her to deliver that baby. It's a true miracle," Dr. Klein said quietly.

"Hmm." Sam snorted. "Lois has always been a danger-junkie. She seems to attract danger. Now, she'll do her best to stay out of danger, but trouble just seems to find her." He was quiet for a moment before continuing, "I wish she didn't have to go through this. Is there nothing in all your research that could get rid of this condition?"

"I'm afraid not. I've done my fair bit of research on the condition after Lois and Clark told me of the situation, but I haven't found anything—experimental or otherwise—that could cure preeclampsia."

"What if she has the more serious condition? She could die." Sam felt the tears building in the corners of his eyes. He did his best not to let his emotions show. "I've just begun to get to know her again you know. We didn't really get along that well when she was growing up. I was always working. You know how it is?"

"Not really," Dr. Klein apologized. "I don't have a family, so I can't really relate there. I'm kinda married to my work."

"I just can't believe she went after him like that." Sam shook his head. Dr. Klein patted Sam on the shoulder in support, unsure of what to say or do.

Dr. Pierce studied the blood work in front of her, confused. "I have never seen anything like this in my life. How is this even possible?" She retrieved a stack of paperwork from her desk and began filling out the forms for one more test. Preeclampsia didn't just disappear. It just didn't happen unless the mother had given birth. This, of course, hadn't happened yet, so what had happened here? She needed a second opinion.

She picked up the phone and dialed her assistant. "Angela? Could you get me in touch with Research and Development over at STAR Labs?"

"All right, Ms. Cross, everything's packed," the pilot announced. He wore all black. His dark shades hid his face well from the outside observer. His dark black and silver hair poked out from the sides of the baseball cap he wore.

"Have you got the satellite loaded up?" Angela inquired. "You have to be extremely careful with it. It was a gift." She pointed at the large cargo that sat next to the aircraft; he peered at the equipment covered with a tarp.

"Of course, Ms. Cross." The man hesitated a moment then spoke once more. "Ms. Cross? If you don't mind my asking. Who gave that to you? I've never seen anything like it in my life. Its design is... unusual. Is this a new type of satellite overseas?"

"No, hunky, I had this one made special," she replied sweetly, her voice transforming into a perfected blonde bimbo act as she spoke. "Mr. Grady had these plans that his company had inherited, and it just seemed like such a waste to let them go to waste. So, I contracted with the right people to have it built. We used it to clean up Metropolis a bit," she explained, lightly tracing the strong jaw line of the man before her.

"That's a very interesting story, Ms. Cross," the man drawled, taking his hat off and pulling out his wallet. "Or should I say, Mrs.

Church?"

"What?" She noticed the plain clothes officers that were surrounding her. "What are you talking about?"

"Mindy G. Church aka Angela Cross, you are under arrest!" A policeman slapped the handcuffs around her wrist before she could fully comprehend what was happening.

"You-you-you tricked me!" she accused angrily. "I'll have your pilot's license for this... You... you..."

"The name is Henderson. Inspector Bill Henderson, and I don't have a pilot's license, so good luck with that."

Dr. Pierce watched carefully as Allison Wise, the ultrasound technician, performed the ultrasound on Lois. She wasn't sure what she was looking for. The protein spots on her bladder were no longer there. The ultrasound appeared to be perfectly normal. How was this possible? A week ago, she had had a strong case of preeclampsia. What had happened?

"Okay, everything appears to be normal. You should be back to your normal self in a few days. Just try and relax. Take care of yourself; that sort of thing. If you have any spotting of any kind, let us know." Allison handed Lois a wipe to clean her abdomen.

She couldn't tell them yet. She had to be sure before she told the Kents that the preeclampsia had disappeared. She smiled warmly as Allison left the room. "Do you have any questions or concerns?"

"Exactly how much *rest* are we talking about?" Lois asked as soon as Dr. Pierce had closed the door behind Allison Wise.

"I'm sorry?"

"What if I'm in bed, but not resting. Is that okay or will it hurt the baby?" Lois really didn't want to come right out and ask if it was okay for her to jump her husband. It was still a bit awkward to talk about her sex life with anyone.

"Oh." She noticed the pink flush that had crept up Clark Kent's neck and immediately realized what Lois was referring to. "**OH**, yes, that's fine. Just don't overdo it. I'm going to want to get a blood sample from you, and then we'll release you to go home."

"That's great," Lois replied cheerfully.

"But I'm putting you on bed rest for a few weeks."

"**What!?!?**" Lois nearly shouted.

"Aside from the preeclampsia, your body has gone through a tremendous amount of stress..."

"Is there anything we can be doing to help Lois heal *faster*?" Clark asked.

"Just make sure you continue to take your medications. Hopefully, this baby will make it to full term. Even in a normal pregnancy, things like this can trigger premature labor."

Lois and Clark fell silent, unsure of what to say in response.

"So, you played a hunch and it panned out, huh? I'm really proud of you, Jimmy." Perry smiled at the young man; Jimmy had really grown over the past few years. The eager to please attitude was still there, but he had matured quite a bit from the days he had been able to bully the young man into cleaning his office out on a Saturday night.

"Thanks, Chief," Jimmy replied quietly. He was glad to hear the praise from Perry. He had always looked up to him. "So, when are they letting you out of here?"

"He'll be going home at the end of the week," Alice said as she entered the room with several cups of coffee.

"Alice, it's good to see you." Jimmy took the coffee from her and placed the cups on the tray by Perry's bed. "Chief, why didn't you tell me you had company. I would have come back later."

"Oh, for goodness sake, Jimmy. He's been worried about you, wondering if you'd ever come and see him." Alice winked at Jimmy. "I told him his bad habits have worn off on you."

"I told her that was something I highly doubted. I figured something big had to have happened to keep you from coming

by,” Perry replied dryly.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that, Chief. I was kinda in shock when Lois and CK told me what happened to you. I don’t really like hospitals... They make me claustrophobic. I guess I kinda took the chicken way out.”

“Hey, no hard feelings.” Perry worriedly studied the young man’s ashamed expression. “What made you change your mind about the hospital if you don’t mind my asking?”

Jimmy didn’t meet Perry’s eyes as he disclosed this information. “Seeing everything Lois and CK have been going through and then that Luthor guy trying to kill Superman. I guess I figured being there for friends is more important than anxiety about a hospital.”

“Oh, my word! Is everyone alright?” Alice asked in concern. Perry stared at the wall solemnly, unable to voice the emotions running through him.

“Lois and CK are fine. Superman’s okay. He’s just sore from what Dr. Klein said.”

“But they’re okay?” Perry asked.

“For the most part; yeah,” Jimmy replied solemnly. “This has been a tough week. CK said Lois’ pregnancy is high risk so...” He sighed.

Alice let the news register. “Lois is pregnant?”

Jimmy smiled broadly. “Yeah. She’s pregnant.”

Alice’s face lit up. She and Perry both had always thought of Lois as the daughter they never had. Lois was going to have a baby. That was hard to imagine with how hectic her and Clark’s lives were, but she was sure they would make it work.

“It’ll be a miracle if she’s able to deliver the baby full term with the way things have been going lately,” Jimmy remarked sadly. “It’s just been one thing after another.”

“She’ll be fine, Jimmy. Lois is the most stubborn woman I have ever met.” Perry grinned. “I think Clark’s the male equal to her in that regard.” Jimmy couldn’t help but laugh. He and Perry had watched the courtship of Lane and Kent from a distance, speculating the outcome. Clark was a perfect match for Lois.

“Once Lois puts her mind to something, there is no talking her out of it. She won’t let anything happen to her or that baby if she can help it. You know how pig-headed she can be.”

Jimmy nodded. “Yeah, I hope you’re right, Chief.”

“Of course, I’m right,” Perry drawled, beaming. “I’m the Chief ain’t I?”

“I just don’t understand,” Dr. Pierce remarked as Dr. Klein examined the blood sample through a microscope. “I’ve never seen any case like this before.”

“Well, Ms. Lane has always had a tendency to test the laws of nature. She and her husband have always found themselves in impossible situations usually by impossible means,” Dr. Klein responded dryly. “She was exposed to that meteorite, kryptonite; maybe that could explain it. We still don’t know all the effects it has on the human body,” he explained. Dr. Pierce continued to look at him apprehensively.

“Should I tell them that the preeclampsia is gone?” she asked nervously. “What if it comes back?”

Dr. Klein smiled. “I want to run a few more tests before we get ahead of ourselves.”

“I just... I’ve never seen anything like this in my life. The fetus is growing normally. It’s almost like her body is healing itself. There should have been scarring. There should have been bruising on her uterus. There’s nothing.” Dr. Pierce nervously ran a hand through her hair. “What in the world could explain such a *phenomenon*?”

“Lois, honey...” Clark mumbled as Lois showered his face with kisses. “Let me close the door.”

Lois pulled away for a moment and allowed him to close the

door; then once the front door of their brownstone shut securely, she launched herself into his arms once more. “No excuses. Dr. Pierce said it was perfectly acceptable for us to make love... No harm to the baby.” She tugged at his dress shirt as they made their way towards the couch, tangling themselves in one another’s arms.

Clark allowed Lois to push him back on the couch. She moved to straddle him, while continuing her assault on his body. Her lips only left his for a few seconds as she caught her breath. She swiftly stripped herself of her blouse, tossing it across the room and marveling at the feel of his skin against her own. “Mmmm... too much drama,” she whispered, unbuttoning the last button on his dress shirt.

“Tell me about it,” he whispered back, shedding himself out of his dress shirt and tossing it to the ground. She moaned in pleasure as she felt his hands explore her body. The warmth from his hands created a heated path up and down her back as he trailed his mouth up her chest.

“Oh, God. Clark,” she moaned in pleasure, arching her back into his supportive arms. The heat radiating from his mouth sent shivers of pleasure down her spine.

Dr. Klein stared at the results in front of him. His focus alternated between the sonogram in front of him and the blood tests he had been examining for the past hour. This was good news. Lois was no longer at risk, but how could he explain this to Dr. Pierce without giving away Clark’s secret? He didn’t know what to do. He sighed to himself. He now understood the chaos Lois and Clark had to deal with every day.

Their willingness to share their secret with him was commendable. He knew it must have been a hard decision for the couple. He felt honored to have such good friends. He would talk to Lois and Clark in the morning – a conversation between confidants would likely provide the most effective solution. Surely, they would have a better idea of how to explain this than he did.

The next morning, Jimmy entered the newsroom and found everyone waiting patiently by the elevator doors. “What’s going on?” he asked Brian, one of his co-workers.

“Franklin Stern said he had an announcement to make. He wants everyone here.”

“Everyone? Lois and CK aren’t going to be able to make it here.”

“I’m sure they’re the exception along with Perry,” Brian reassured, smiling.

The elevator door opened. The owner, Franklin Stern, exited the elevator swiftly, making his way to the edge of the balcony. “Can I have everyone’s attention?”

“Thank you all for taking the time out of your busy schedules to meet with me,” Mr. Stern began. “I’m sure you all have heard of the circumstances surrounding Mr. White’s condition. If you haven’t, then shame on you. You’re obviously in the wrong profession.” Everyone laughed at the man’s joke. “I’m making some changes to the way things are run in the newsroom to help Mr. White and you all. I’d like to introduce you to your new assistant editor-in-chief, Mr. James Olsen.”

There was a murmur of both protest and approval at this announcement. Jimmy wasn’t sure how to feel about the news. Was this what the Chief wanted? He grew thoughtful for a moment. He had just been promoted. He would be working side by side with Perry White – his mentor. This was great news.

“Dr. Klein? You wanted to see us?” Lois asked as she and Clark entered the office hesitantly, searching for the doctor. Lois smiled when she spotted Dr. Klein sitting at his desk, jotting down various formulas as he muttered incoherently to himself.

“Dr. Klein?” Clark asked a little louder.

Dr. Klein looked up, finally noticing the couple, and stood to greet them. “Lois, Clark, how are you feeling?” he inquired warmly.

“Good. We’re still a bit sore, but you know how it is,” Lois replied, shrugging.

“Yes.” Dr. Klein couldn’t help but broaden his smile. This was big news. It wasn’t every day that he got to deliver good news to the couple. “I’ve discovered something about your pregnancy, Lois... concerning the baby.”

Lois and Clark’s faces grew apprehensive. “What is it?” Clark asked, placing a supportive arm around Lois.

“Well, Clark, you know how your body has a healing aura around itself? Anything within a few millimeters of your skin is invulnerable?” He still couldn’t wipe the grin off his face. He was trying. He really was, but this was just such good news.

“Yeah,” Clark began slowly.

“Well, your son seems to have inherited that trait,” Dr. Klein revealed. “Lois, you no longer have preeclampsia.”

Lois and Clark looked like they had just been hit with a ton of bricks. “What?” they asked in unison.

“Your child’s aura has healed your body. There’s no scarring. No protein build up. It’s as if you never had it.” Dr. Klein continued to grin as he watched the couple embrace, reveling in their relief. He cleared his throat to remind them of his presence when the clinch started to last longer than necessary. “But this is what brings me to my dilemma.”

“Dilemma?” Clark asked curiously.

“Yes, Dr. Pierce is very concerned about how Lois’ preeclampsia disappeared. I’m not sure how to explain this to her.”

“Hmmm... I don’t suppose leaving it as an unexplainable phenomenon will work?” Lois mused thoughtfully.

“I’m not sure she’ll buy that,” Dr. Klein remarked dryly.

“We can check with my father and see if he can come up with a good medical explanation,” Lois began. “I still need to talk to him about all of this.” She was still in shock slightly. The weight that had been on her and Clark’s shoulders for the past month was gone. She didn’t have preeclampsia. Their baby would be okay. She sighed in relief, reveling in the newfound freedom of being an expectant mother without a life-threatening medical condition. It felt good.

The next two weeks flew by. Lois and Clark began adjusting to life as impending parents. Mr. Stern had ordered them to not show their faces in the office for at least two weeks, so they took advantage of the free time to enjoy one another’s company in various ways. They cleared out the extra boxes that had been stored in their spare bedroom to make room for the furniture. Martha and Jonathan had sent Clark’s old bassinet to them as an addition to the new nursery.

Both sets of grandparents were relieved to discover that Lois’ condition of preeclampsia was gone. Ellen still didn’t quite understand how her body had healed, but she wasn’t pushing the issue too much. She was grateful that her daughter was healthy and her grandchild was no longer at risk.

Sam was equally grateful and had worked hard with Dr. Klein to formulate a probable reason for Lois’ miraculous recovery. Given the fact that Lois had been exposed to kryptonite, an unknown substance, he and Dr. Klein used that as an excuse. Dr. Pierce still wasn’t sure how the combination of medicine and kryptonite radiation had healed Lois’ body, but she seemed somewhat satisfied.

As Inspector Henderson began digging deeper into Mindy Church’s assets, he discovered her payroll had extended to many of the previous criminals who were arrested for attempts to take over Metropolis. Caribbean Imports went out of business and the courts froze all the company’s assets. Similarly, the legal forces dismantled Cross Industries piece by piece, leaving Mindy Church

penniless by the time of her court date. She was sent to trial with no hope of receiving a bond. In the men’s prison, both Bill Church Senior and Junior found it amusing that she was finally getting what she deserved.

“Jimmy?” Penny stood in front of Jimmy’s desk, nervously toying with a strand of her hair.

“Penny! What are you doing here?” Jimmy asked. He hadn’t seen her since the fiasco with Luthor. He wasn’t sure what to make of his relationship with her. He knew he cared about her, but he didn’t know if she cared about him in the same way.

“I-I didn’t mean to intrude on you at work, but I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“What?”

“I know we didn’t exactly start out... ‘dating’ under the best circumstances.” She flushed slightly, recalling the way she had thrown herself at him. “I guess I was just hoping or wondering, rather, do you still like me? I mean, it’s been like two weeks since I’ve heard from you. I thought we had reconciled the whole me thinking you were Superman thing, but I would completely understand if you didn’t... I just...” She stopped for a moment and laughed. “I’m sorry. I kinda ramble like crazy when I’m nervous.”

Jimmy smiled. She was nervous. It was kinda cute. He liked it. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, Penny. I’ve just been really busy here at the Planet. Everything’s changed since Mr. Stern promoted me to help the Chief out. With Lois and CK gone, everyone else has been juggling more than their fair share of the load... trying to get the paper out,” he explained, laughing nervously. “I guess we’ve been playing it hit and miss these past few weeks, huh?” She nodded shyly at him. “Listen, why don’t we go to dinner and talk? Chinese?”

“I’d like that.”

“I have to warn you though; it’ll actually be in Metropolis. I can’t fly to China to get food for you,” he joked.

Penny smiled. “Personally, I think being able to fly all over the world is overrated.”

“Good.” Jimmy was on cloud nine. She liked him. He liked her. This was always a good sign.

He was interrupted from his reverie by the sound of people cheering. He looked up and saw Perry White step off the elevator with Alice by his side. He smiled to himself, watching the happy couple. Perry and Alice had obviously worked out their differences. Ever since he had met Perry, he had been in awe of the way he loved Alice. He had always wanted to find someone he could love like that. Was Penny that person? Only time would tell. He looked around the newsroom anxiously; Lois and Clark weren’t here yet.

Lois and Clark strolled through the lobby, hand-in-hand. They were running late... again. Today, Perry would return to work. This was their first day back on the job as well. Clark had regained his powers a few days after the attack with Luthor and was back to his super self. Lois had recalled Clark’s slow recovery following Randy Goode’s kryptonite attack, and she secretly worried that he would encounter the same problem. Therefore, she had been grateful to hear that his powers had returned normally.

Her body had changed even more over the past few weeks. It was as if she had awoken and suddenly, a huge baby bump had appeared. It amazed both her and Clark to watch her shape change as their child grew.

“We’re late,” Lois muttered, pressing the call button as they stepped on the elevator.

“We’re always late,” Clark teased, wrapping his arms around her waist. He leaned down to kiss her.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish,” Lois whispered against his lips, linking her arms around his neck.

“Who says I can’t finish?” he whispered back, deepening their

kiss. Lois moaned in pleasure, reveling in the feeling of him in her arms.

The elevator's ding interrupted the heat of the moment. They reluctantly pulled away from one another once their consciousness registered that they were receiving cat calls. "Hey, haven't you two had enough alone time? You've been gone for two weeks! Sheesh!" Ralph hollered across the newsroom.

Lois and Clark ignored the statement as they walked down the ramp to the newsroom together. "Lois, CK!" Jimmy bounded up to them. "It's great to have you back!"

"It's good to be back, Jimmy," Lois replied warmly.

"So, how have things been?" Clark asked. They hadn't been at the Planet in two weeks, so he was curious how the transition back to Mr. Stern's management had affected everyone.

"It's been interesting. You two are our main city beat journalists, so everyone's been kinda juggling everything. Mr. Stern said he's looking to hire some new people for the city beat," Jimmy announced, sighing.

"Lois, Clark, it's good to see you!" Perry approached them, wearing a big smile on his face. He looked down at Lois and noticed the growth of her abdomen. His smile broadened. "Motherhood suits you, Lois."

Lois blushed. "Thank you, Perry. How are you doing?"

"I'm good. I'm very good. I'm on cloud nine." He couldn't seem to wipe the smile off his face. "I have some news for you three." He motioned for Lois, Clark, and Jimmy to follow him into his office.

Lois and Clark looked at Jimmy quizzically who just shrugged. They followed Perry to his office and closed the door behind them.

"What's up, Perry?" Lois asked.

"Lois, I'm going to take you off the actual city beat for a while," Perry began.

"What? Why?" Lois was upset; she didn't want to be stuck doing desk work all the time, especially when she had recently discovered that her pregnancy would progress normally. She was looking forward to diving into a good story with Clark.

"I'm going to have you helping Jimmy." Jimmy beamed, knowing where Perry was going with this. "He was promoted to my assistant Editor-In-Chief and I want you to help him transition. You won't be able to keep up your regular schedule the further along you get, and this way we can put your mind to good use. You'll be back on the city beat when you return from maternity leave. I promise."

"Assistant editor?" Clark and Lois asked Perry in unison. They both knew Perry well enough to know that couldn't have gone over well with him.

"Orders of Mr. Stern. He doesn't want me keeling over anytime soon, so I have to delegate."

"You? Delegate?" Lois asked.

"I didn't say it was gonna be easy," Perry admitted shyly.

"That is great news. Of course, I'll help. Jimmy, I'm so happy for you," Lois gushed.

"Well, this oughta make things interesting," Perry mused.

One Year Later...

The soft cries of a baby emanated from the brownstone on Hyperion Avenue. Clark Kent held his son close to him as he tried to calm his cries. "Shh, it's okay. Mommy's coming. See?" He positioned his son in his arms, so he could see Lois in the rocking chair, preparing herself to nurse.

"Let me see him." Lois held her arms out, and Clark handed their little boy to her mother. He smiled, watching the love in his wife's eyes as she nursed their child. They represented everything that he had ever wanted – a family of his own. Lois noticed his stare and looked up at him curiously. "What?"

"Nothing. I've just never seen anything so beautiful... so

perfect in all my life," he said, wrapping his arms around her as he continued watching them. "Can you believe everything we've been through from the time we've met up until now?"

"I know. It seems like ages ago when Perry first introduced us. If someone had told me five years ago that I'd one day be married with a baby – and happy about it – I'd have thought they were crazy. Now, I can't imagine my life without you or CJ." She smiled at the sleeping baby in her arms. "He's asleep."

Clark looked down at the sleeping figure in his wife's arms. Their child. Their miracle. It was hard to take in sometimes, but he couldn't be happier. The last year had been a struggle. He had to cut back on his Superman activities to help Lois during the end of her pregnancy. They had experienced a couple of close calls, and they had feared that the baby would come early, but he still managed to stay put until thirty-eight weeks.

Dr. Klein said that he seemed to be normal. The only thing that had appeared unusual about him was his keen awareness of his surroundings in comparison to normal babies, but they weren't worried about that. Life was changing rapidly and for the better.

After Cross Industries, LexCorp, and Caribbean Imports had been dismantled, a new businessman from Gotham City had approached Superman about merging the foundations to help more people and protect the cities against organized crime. He had been a bit skeptical at first because of the man's reputation. Bruce Wayne was a well-known playboy, but he was also an acute businessman with a strong sense of justice.

The establishments that had taken over the previous organized crime now worked with the foundations to help better both Metropolis and Gotham. It felt good to find someone willing to help without a hidden agenda. It was refreshing. After five years in Metropolis, Clark had developed a sense of skepticism towards entrepreneurs and philanthropists who claimed to be wholesome well-meaning individuals.

He had hope for the future. His son's future. Maybe one day Superman would only be needed for natural disasters. He prayed that day would come, but in the meantime, he enjoyed the sense of peace that he felt holding his family. He had come so close to losing everything. It still shook him to the core, but he had survived. He had learned who his true friends were during a time of true adversity. He would never have imagined that Jimmy was capable of such courage, or that Bill Henderson would willingly sneak kryptonite out of a crime scene. However, they had surprised him. He would forever be grateful for their help in defeating Luthor.

He watched Lois lay CJ down in his crib. She was such a natural mother. He would never understand why she had ever doubted herself. Her natural instincts had taken over the moment she had held CJ for the first time. He had fallen in love with her all over again every time he saw her with him.

"I love watching him sleep," Lois whispered.

"Yeah. He's so cute. I wish I could just hold him forever." He smiled at Lois as she walked over to him, seating herself in his lap.

"What time do we have to leave?" Lois asked.

"Uh, in about three hours," Clark said, looking at the clock. It was four thirty. Penny and Jimmy's engagement party was at seven thirty that night. Her parents were watching CJ for them while they attended. It amazed him how quickly things had changed between Jimmy and Penny once they had settled the whole 'Not being Superman' fiasco. It appeared Jimmy had found the right girl. He was happy for his friend. Everyone around them had mended their relationships. Perry and Alice had remarried about three months ago, and Jimmy was engaged.

"Well, I guess, we should start getting ready." Lois entered the bathroom and turned on the shower. It took him a moment to realize that was an invitation. They didn't need to leave for another couple of hours...

Lois poked her head out of the bathroom, "Are you coming?"

She squealed in delight when he super-spiced them into the shower stall.

'Yes, life was definitely very good,' he thought to himself as his mouth crashed against Lois' lips.

THE END